Recognizing Ecosocialization in Childhood Memories

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ABSTRACT
Western modernity has shaped people’s thought patterns and value hierarchies, relegating humans to the position of supremacy. This anthropocentric worldview has disconnected humans from the rest of nature and eventually led to the social and ecological catastrophe. This paper shows that collective memory work can help us recognize how we are always socialized within and by human communities and also already ecosocialized within and by the rest of nature. The motivation to use the ecosocialization framework to analyze childhood memories comes from our wish to problematize the anthropocentric view of life further and resituate childhood and growing up beyond exclusively social and human contexts. We draw on the memories collected in the Re-Connect / Re-Collect: Crossing the Divides through Memories of Cold War Childhoods project (2019–2021). We “think with theory” to reveal traces of ecosocialization present in childhood memories. On this basis, we suggest that including multisensory awareness practices in memory workshops to recognize our bodily belonging—as participants create their memory stories bringing into focus relations with more-than-humans—could potentialize collective biography as a form of transformative ecosocial education.

Introduction
Western modernity has shaped the thought patterns and value hierarchies of people living in industrial and post-industrial societies. Rationalism, instrumentalism, and anthropocentrism have led to many ground-breaking discoveries of modern science, but they have also caused and continue to accelerate the world toward an ecological catastrophe (Bowers, 1993, 2001, 2012; Martusewicz, Edmundson, & Lupinacci, 2015; Plumwood, 1993, 2002). The thought patterns and value hierarchies of industrial and post-industrial societies are typically passed onto the next generations through socialization as part of upbringing in families, preschools, and mass schooling. Individual and
collective remembering and forgetting play essential roles in transmitting and transforming these cultural narratives (Misztal, 2003).

Our analysis of childhood memories, first, aims to help recognize how we are always ecosocialized within and by multispecies communities despite the modern anthropocentrism that suggests otherwise. Second, we wish to point to how collective memory work (Davies & Gannon, 2006) can serve as a pedagogical means to recognize ecosocialization. By ecosocialization we refer to a conceptual extension of socialization, which includes both social and ecological integrations into human and other than human lives (Keto & Foster, 2021).

The theory of ecosocialization is informed by the widespread field of “more-than-human research” (Bastian, Jones, Moore, & Roe, 2017), which covers diverse theoretical and methodological experimentations in the social and educational sciences, humanities, and beyond, such as ecofeminism, new materialism, posthumanism, critical animal studies, environmental humanities, and multispecies research. However, ecosocialization theory combines specifically perspectives from the science of ecology and phenomenology, and it focuses on the ecological and social relations that shape our continuous becoming as ecosocial beings (Keto & Foster, 2021).

We draw on the memories collected in the Re-Connect/Re-Collect: Crossing the Divides through Memories of Cold War Childhoods research project (2019–2021). We “think with theory” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2018) to reveal traces of ecosocialization present in childhood memories by also keeping in sight the reductionist understanding of the human as purely “rational,” leading to prioritizing the mental and ignoring the sensory, emotional, and holistic bodily knowledge as ways of engaging with the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, 2008), and instrumentalism, treating all living beings only as “resources” and instruments for human welfare (Martusewicz et al., 2015; Merchant, 1980; Värri, 2018).

In narratives circulating in the West (the so-called “first” world), state socialist countries (the so-called “second” world) were commonly portrayed as peripheral to and excluded from the visions and benefits of Western modernity. Yet, while promoting different ideological agendas, both Western and socialist modernities were inherently similar in their logic (Silova, 2021; Silova, Millei & Piattoeva, 2017; Plumwood, 1993; Tlostanova, 2010). Both modernities were rooted in the narratives of unlimited development and progress and strong faith in the sciences driven by instrumental rationality. Equally, modernist discourse everywhere interpreted this spatial difference (between “first” and “second” worlds) as a difference in temporality and a stage of achieved progress. This kind of hierarchical thinking has subsequently led to the perception of socialist spaces as needing to catch up with Western modernity while categorizing uncultivated lands or territories (often inhabited by colonized peoples, minorities, or indigenous groups adhering to other than Western modernity’s ways of life) as underdeveloped (the “third world”) (Tlostanova, 2010).

The Cold War history is often told through the lens of geopolitical and cultural confrontation, mainly ignoring how “the Cold War was fought on Earth in the biosphere with repercussions that will last for perhaps a hundred thousand years” (McNeill & Unger, 2010, p. 3). Drastic interventions in the natural environment were easily justified as imperative to winning the fight over the “evil” other, further rationalizing the
overarching discourse of modernity subordinating nature to the so-called human needs (or rather the needs of those in power). The Cold War thus not only further grounded modernity’s rationalism, instrumentalism, and anthropocentrism, but in multiple ways altered the Earth itself (McNeill & Unger, 2010).

The theoretical framework of ecosocialization

Ecosocialization has been coined as an expanded concept to human-centered socialization to describe a more complete view of our ecological and social world, formed by the diverse relationships that humans have with other forms of life (Keto & Foster, 2021). By combining the perspectives of ecology and phenomenology, the conceptualization of ecosocialization aims to advance the understanding of how human socialization always takes place in broader ecosocial communities with numerous living beings intertwined with each other. Ecocrisis forces us to recognize experiences of this entwinement and understand and cultivate these diverse relations (Bannon, 2011).

By recognizing the inclusive nature of ecosocialization, we can start recuperating and healing the broken relationships with all our cohabitants on Earth. First, the theory of ecosocialization calls us to recognize that humans are interdependent members of multispecies communities, and thus our social worlds are ontologically always more-than-human and relational. Secondly, it suggests that participation in this more-than-human world happens specifically through and in sensuous bodies. Thirdly, the ecosocialization framework requires attention to how empathy, particularly its affective and embodied forms, informs us ethically and helps us to form ecosocially sustainable communities.

With the help of knowledge produced by the science of ecology, it is possible to investigate and describe how multiple different agents in the more-than-human world participate in the overall process of what makes us who we are. For example, microbial life plays a significant role in the emergence, formation, and development of a human being as a holobiont organism, which is ontologically never an individual but rather a manifestation of symbiotic life (Gilbert, Sapp, & Tauber, 2012; Margulis, 2008). In addition to microbes, the lives of humans are sustained by and intertwined with other organisms, visible to humans, such as plants and other animals, forming in cooperation one’s body and identity (Mackerron & Mourato, 2013; Nisbet, Zelenski, & Murphy, 2009). Using the words of phenomenology, there is “an ontological continuity between all beings” (Bannon, 2011, p. 348). Neither humans nor any other diverse life forms are autonomous units; instead, they are fields of relations in which “all things hang together” (Naess, 1989, p. 36). This kind of relational ontology (Naess, 1989) can be described with Merleau-Ponty (1968) phenomenological concept of flesh, “the overarching fabric of space and time that we perceive, made possible by the many fleshes occurring between bodies in a place” (Bannon, 2011, p. 349).

While acknowledging the diversity of agents in ecosocialization, it is also essential to understand how these various relational living beings—or bodies or fleshes—interact with each other, and more specifically, how humans participate with other bodies in the more-than-human world. Ecosocial participation is understood as already being and forming more direct relations by surrendering to a more vibrant co-existence of diverse lives (Abram, 1996; Bannon, 2011; Merleau-Ponty, 1968, 2008).
Nature is not an object in which a conscious human subject gains pure knowledge; it is something which we are always a part of (Merleau-Ponty, 2008). Therefore, we cannot make sense of the world just through our minds but by engaging multiple sensibilities—sensory, emotional, and cognitive. It is precisely the sensing, perceiving, and experiencing body that takes part in the world—and in reverse, the world exists in these spatio-temporal relational bodies (Abram, 1996; Bannon, 2011; Merleau-Ponty, 1968, 2008; Naess, 1989).

If the foundation for the multispecies relationship is in our sensuous, “enfleshed” entanglement within the symbiotic life on Earth, ethics requires foundations that pre-date the dichotomy of human and nonhuman (Pulkki, Dahlin, & Väri, 2017). In exploring what could inform ethics in this pre-objective existence, the ecosocialization theory turns to empathy. While empathy has cognitive aspects too (Aaltola, 2018; Spackman & Miller, 2008), it is rather its affective and embodied aspects that play critical roles in understanding the difference of others, motivate helping behaviors, and make harming others aversive (Aaltola, 2018; Takamatsu, 2018).

Empathy has been found to predict pro-environmental attitudes and action, perhaps more than any other trait in humans (Pfattheicher, Sassenrath, & Schindler, 2016). The relevance of empathy spreads across human-human and more-than-human relations. The ecosocialization model aims to explain how empathy with the more-than-human is developed. Empathy, while being an innate capacity of humans and other empathic animals (De Waal, 2010), can be further cultivated through forms of pedagogy in intimate, equal, trustworthy, and supportive relationships such as those of teacher-learner and peer relations, whether human or more-than-human (Boele et al., 2019; Hoffman, 2001).

Humans have a long history of expressing empathy toward nonhuman life. The tendency of humans to form empathic relationships with nonhuman life is presented, for example, in the biophilia hypothesis that suggests that humans have an innate orientation toward other forms of life (Wilson, 1984). When empathy is developed in intimate relationships with non-human beings, aversion to harm other species develops consequently (Aaltola, 2018).

Empathy exists in embodied ways (Fuchs, 2012). Hitting a bird with a car might feel like a punch to the stomach, with a feeling of despair and sorrow spreading through the body. These bodily sensations are also remembered in childhood memories. From a pedagogical point of view, it is essential to remember, recognize, and nourish this kind of sensitivity for engaging the multispecies reality. The body also holds memories: As we remember hitting a bird, the sensations are brought back. Also, a similar feeling resonating with a body memory might call up the whole memory of killing a bird that may have been otherwise forgotten.

Paul Nabhan and Stephen Trimbles’ (1994) personal memory essays describe their early experiences in the wilderness and call attention to children’s significant relations to plants and animals. Realizing the importance of childhood memories in understanding our relatedness to more-than-humans, Edith Cobb (1977) emphasizes how childhood memories often picture vivid experiences of sensing the inner and outer worlds as one. These are moments when “the child appears to have experienced both a momentary sense of discontinuity—an awareness of his unique separateness and identity—and a revelatory sense of continuity—an immersion of his whole organism in the outer world of forms, colors, and motions in unparticularized time and space” (Cobb, 1977, p. 88). Childhood memories can
also tell about events and experiences that are not intellectually processed but rather expressions of sensations, emotions, and perceptions organized through a poetic creative power of what Cobb (1977) terms as the “genius of childhood.” Childhood memories and activating the “genius of childhood” can serve as pedagogical means through which we recognize and re-learn our continuity and interdependence with nature.

**Collective biography**

Collective biography foregrounds the shared (collective) generation and analysis of childhood memories in groups over a period of time. In this project, we spent a three-day-long workshop with participants who lived their childhood on either side of the Berlin Wall to create richly descriptive narrative vignettes from memories. Rich descriptions attend to the embodiment of memories that are produced in an iterative and collective group process of careful sharing, listening, questioning, writing, and rewriting the memories in more and more details; collective remembering brings back the feelings and sensations that were experienced with/in the body in that particular micro-moment in time (Davies & Gannon, 2006; Gonick & Gannon, 2014). The idea is that the one who listens to the memory can feel, sense, and experience what the child felt, experienced, and sensed at the described moment. As participants collaboratively create vignettes, they explore micro-moments and micro-processes of subject formation, discursive effects, relational, affective, and material entanglements that in some ways were shared (e.g., Silova, Piattoeva & Millei, 2018; Davies & Gannon, 2006; Gonick & Gannon, 2014; Haug et al., 1987).

While the memory story is written in the third person and tells one person’s account, this story is not an individual’s memory anymore. First, since the memory story has been developed collectively, it results from the collective exploration and enriching of memories described above. Second, the memory represents common experiences to which other members in the group have related. Collective biography collapses the binary that separates the knowledge-generating expert from the layperson remembering, the person whose memory is being shared, and the collective of the group.

The memory vignettes analyzed in this article were produced in the *Recollect / Reconnect: Crossing the Divides through Memories of Cold War Childhoods* project. The project explores childhoods during the Cold War through the memories of participants, including scholars and artists. Participants came together in five workshops during the fall of 2019 and produced more than 250 memory vignettes archived on the project website (Recollect/Reconnect, 2020). For this article, we searched the archive to select six memories, which in our view reference particular moments of relationships between humans and other animals or plants. These are memories of children being on holiday in the countryside, gardening, or visiting extended family. While collective memory workshops were organized around particular themes, the memories were not created with a specific focus on ecosocialization or any related themes in mind.

In the analysis, the authors of this paper read and reread memory vignettes with ecosocialization in mind, following Jackson and Mazzei (2018) approach to qualitative analysis as “thinking with theory” (p. 1240). Upon reading the selected memories, we each made inferences by problematizing modernity’s values and rationalities and bringing concepts from ecosocialization theory to aid in the meaning making of the text. We identified
connections between memories and highlighted emotions, references to bodily sensations, and relations between humans and more-than-humans. These steps helped us conceptualize the experience portrayed in the memory stories as part of ecosocialization.

Our aim with the analysis therefore was not to get to the most precise recounting of a past experience or recognizing the truth of the memory. The aim was to show the presence of ecosocialization in the selected childhood memories, and to reveal how it takes place in order to vitalize its pedagogical power. In the unfolding analytical space or “threshold, things enter and meet, flow (or pass) into one another, and break open (or exit) into something else” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2018, p. 1246). Memory as data and analysis as interpretation enter into new relations; memories re-form, and new thought horizons emerge that help the analyzer recognize continuity with the world. Remembering and working with theory thus can serve as pedagogical means “to shake us out of the complacency of seeing/hearing/thinking/feeling as we always have, or might have, or will have” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2018, p. 1244), thus enabling us to decenter modernity’s rationalism, instrumentalism, and anthropocentrism that obscure our own perspectives too.

**Sensory wonders—children’s being-with the more-than-human world**

In this section, we bring into focus children’s multisensory participation with the more-than-human world as child actors recognize living creatures as active agents and subjects in the web of life in which they also participate. Furthermore, the stories describe children forming responsible and caring relations with other than human species.

**“An orchestra of tiny creatures”—The agents of the more-than-human world**

The narrator of the memory story *Water Lilies* describes how sounds of the present evoke memories and enable a connection between present and past, between here and there (see also Fuchs, 2012). For her, “sounds cross the border and permeate the consciousness much faster than other types of perception” (Memory, *Water Lilies*). The narrator explains how she sound-traveled to a moment when she was about five or six years old, sitting on the bank of an artificially created canal with small ponds:

> It was a holiday, one of those rare occasions when she could enjoy a lazy day with other neighbours and family, not collecting Colorado beetles or weeding crops. ... She walked from the blanket to the bank, sensing cool leaves of grass and other plants with her feet. Among splashes of water coming from other children swimming in the pond, ducks and ducklings finding their way to a quieter spot, and cows thoughtfully and lazily looking around and occasionally drinking water from the pond further away, she heard buzzing sounds coming from a water lily. These were all sorts of bugs and flies that were attracted by the bright yellow colour of the flower. An orchestra of tiny creatures. She was trying to get as close as possible and look into this miniature world. She was imagining the communication that they must have with each other, younger ones playing and older ones routinely doing their job. For bugs, there are no holidays. She wondered if waterlilies heard them. How do they communicate? Her child’s imagination was coming up with all sorts of stories of bugs’ world. All of a sudden, a duck was making its way through the thick leaves of the waterlilies and scared all the bugs away. She thought that ducks are too big to join this fun orchestra. And probably a bit too loud for such delicate sounds. Walking back home she kept thinking how the water lilies play and communicate with bugs. (Memory, *Water Lilies*)
The description of the environment is highly detailed, colorful, and rich. Bodily sensations are brought back to life: the narrator recalls how the leaves and grass she walked on made her foot feel. The girl vividly observes and wishes to participate in the “orchestra” of plants, animals, water, and weather as she comes closer. These vivid perceptions happen in the sensuous body before cognition (Merleau-Ponty, 2008). Similarly, the recollection of these events occurs when she attunes through sounds to the lived body before rationalizing and verbalizing the memory (Fuchs, 2012).

Like in many other memories (re)collected in our project, the Water Lilies memory story pictures a prolonged flow of time. The family has a day off, enjoying a “lazy day.” Slowing down allows time to notice smaller, even atmospheric changes around, the shimmering of light and the soundscapes of creatures conversing among Water Lilies. Slowness and sounds foreground the more-than-human world. At the same time, the sound is material and affective (Kanngieser, 2015), opening the child for deep listening or attunement (Brigstocke & Noorani, 2016).

There is an intriguing dynamic of what is foregrounded and what is backgrounded in the story. The narrator’s senses tune in to the sunny weather, the pond, grass, Water Lilies, bugs, and flies, whereas people remain faceless in the background, their conversations ignored. Some things are visible and remembered in perceptions and memories, and some stay invisible and forgotten (Merleau-Ponty, 1968; Ricoeur, 2004). In this story, the more-than-human world becomes more sensible and animated.

There is also a quality of a child’s curiosity and witnessing without judgment (Willard, 2006) in this memory. Even though the girl is completely attuned to the more-than-human world through and in her sensuous body (Abram, 1996), she is more of an external observer to the orchestra of the bees and flies. She can only try to imagine and interpret what the world of these other creatures entails. She seems to respect and be at ease with the impossibility of knowing the world of the bees and Water Lilies. The girl’s awareness of her separateness and, at the same time, a sense of continuity with the world is expressed in a “poetic creative way” (Cobb, 1977) as she is making sense of what she experiences. Her sensory attunement and use of “ecological imagination” seem to help incorporate those “sensually perceived realities,” thoughts, and ideas into her adult “embodied realities” (Flynn & Reed, 2019, p. 134).

Even though the girl cannot fully identify with and know the world of the bugs, she recognizes their subjectivity. The other than human species too appear as active agents, doing things in their own ways and paces: the grass stroking her feet, ducklings looking for quiet spots, cows drinking, and bees buzzing. All living beings have lives, tasks, and ways of living their unique lives. The other than humans are not static or purposeless, inanimate; instead, their lives operate with other kinds of logic. These different animated ways of being are not dependent on humans (Merchant, 1980).

The memory Life Cycle shares a similar moment, in which other than human species are seen as agents too. It is a memory of two girls, about six or seven years old, who find a dead blue tit and decide to bury it. Interestingly, the bird’s grave offers the girls an opportunity to examine life after death:

Several days later, when the girl was playing again with her friend, they again found their way to the playground. They remembered the buried bird and became curious. She and her friend wanted to see what had happened to the bird, so they went to the grave and opened it. The remains of the bird were still there, but so were worms and other little creatures. She was
completely taken by surprise. Even though she knew that something happens to the bodies of humans and animals after death, she had not expected to see what she saw. She felt that it was the most disgusting thing she had ever seen. Little thin white worms were going around the bird’s body that had already broken into pieces. Various kinds of insects were crawling all over the bird’s body, coming from where its eyes used to be, escaping under the bird and wandering around what was left of its stomach. It was absolutely horrifying and churning. She could feel it in her stomach and almost threw up. At the same time, however, she thought that it was fascinating to explore how the body of the bird had started to decompose with the help of those little insects living underground. (Memory, Life Cycle)

Children ponder some of the most profound philosophical questions about the cycle of life, and they seem to realize that death unites both humans and other species (Taylor & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2017). Children turn with curiosity to uncover the bird’s grave to see what is happening to its body under the soil. They seem to expect some “action,” some “life” after death—they wish to see how it unfolds. Ridden both with curiosity and disgust while witnessing the worms helping to decompose the bird’s body, they are fascinated by their observations. The girls experience profound emotions: curiosity, courage, and then surprise, fear, and disgust. They experience satisfaction with doing the right thing in burying the bird, and later again, a form of fulfillment from recognizing what happens after death: life continues in a different form.

By helping the bird experience a “proper” end of life, the girls learn from the bird in turn. As the bird’s body helps them understand what happens to bodies after life and the worms make visible how the bird’s body is decomposed, multiple relationalities emerge. Life and death fuse in front of their eyes, the bird’s dead body is full of the life of other creatures. Death and life coexist interdependently as diverse agents connect in the web of life.

Both stories foreground the agents of the more-than-human world entangled with children. While curiosity propels children to explore and realize life’s interdependencies, different actors simultaneously draw each other in their engagements and also act independently. As noted in Schuurman’s (2020) study of childhood memories of pet death, there is no apparent difference between humans and animals: both participate in relationships with others. As these mutual relations and sensations, atmospheres and emotions unfold, the sensuous bodies of children incorporate those. Also, the understandings of interdependencies and attunements emerge into their embodied realities.

“The smells of algae and the sounds of waves”—sensing body as the flesh of the world

A particular sense of time, standing still but also shifting between now and then, creates a feeling of an organic flow to the memory story Naked at the Beach. Every detail of the surroundings becomes noticeable:

One late summer afternoon, the girl was resting in her bedroom with her friend. She was around four at the time, the friend was two years older. They had just returned from a long day at the beach, by the Black Sea, in northern Dobrogea. She loved going to the beach, floating naked in clear salty seawater, then lying naked against the sand after a swim, feeling the warmth and the fine granular texture of the sand, which became sticky on her wet skin. She also loved the texture of her hair after being in the salty water, how her curls twisted, drying in the sun. Her friend enjoyed building sandcastles, but she saw this activity as a mere distraction from taking in the
surroundings. She felt a comfortable familiarity towards the beach, the smells of algae and clams in the sun, of fried fish from a restaurant nearby, the sounds of waves, of pigeons flying above her and looking for food, the sounds of children playing in the background, ambulant vendors offering special mud that apparently was good for your skin and joints. The girls laid intimately next to each other in bed. As she glanced through the window of her room, the sun was beginning to set, painting the sky in warm shades of red and orange. (Memory, *Naked at the Beach*)

Fully immersed in a dreamy and pleasant atmosphere, the girl’s body is touching and being touched by the granules of sand. The memory story expresses every detail: the smell of the sea and the sound of the waves and birds. The highly animated story pictures the girl’s strong connectedness with the natural elements and her enjoyment of this intimate relationship. She is aware of how her body changes in this relation, and she also likes the effects of these elements on her body—how sand and salt make her skin and hair change and feel different. The memory of a lively and warm atmosphere portrays a child body that is fully participating in a more-than-human world.

Similarly, the memory story *Afternoon Nap* pictures a moment of a dreamy atmosphere:

The child is lying quietly on the bed staring out the window. It is time for her afternoon nap. The room is flooded with light, it seems everything is white of different shades, the bed, furniture, the cat on top of the cupboard. The child stares through the window, watching the trees, listening to the pigeons’ cooing…

She often plays under the two linden trees just in front of the window. A rock thrown under the trees … an invitation to play.

She listens to the pigeons calling…. Slowly fading away. (Memory, *Afternoon Nap*)

The sensing bodies “where the powers of nature and human nature meet” (Cobb, 1977, p. 89) carry the girls to an atmosphere accentuated with sounds of birds, smells of air, and shimmering lights. This kind of experience can be described with the concept of *asubjectivity* as it cannot be reduced to the psychological condition of a subject nor the qualities of an object (Vadén & Torvinen, 2014). The asubjective experience exists in between the girl and the beach, and the girl and the trees or with the words of Merleau-Ponty in *the flesh of the world* (Bannon, 2011). As the girl lies on the bed, she perceives both spaces, inside and outside, simultaneously and with the same intensity. If she focused on her perception in something specific, she would slip either in one space or the other, losing touch with the atmosphere and to the position of a subject or an object. These memories describe a fleeting moment of asubjective experience, which is the closest we can get to experience the flesh of the world (Keto & Foster, 2021).

**“Their little bodies pulsating”—empathy and a sense of ethics toward the more-than-human**

The story *Chicks in the Cooperative* describes a vivid memory of a girl visiting a chicken farm that her dad leads, and which is full of sensory and emotional impressions that overwhelm the little girl:

She arrives with her dad at the agricultural cooperative he directs. Something foul-smelling reaches her nostrils. Chirping becomes louder as the door opens. The smell is intense.
She almost takes a step back. The warm stuffy air envelops her face as she walks carefully among a million of small chicks. The chicks are peeping faster as they scurry to avoid her feet stamping on them. She bends down, then squats, and tries to touch their back, to feel the soft yellow feathers. They are trying to escape but the space is so crowded that they have little chance. She feels their little bodies pulsating. She notices some adults in one corner. A woman in a white coat is catching and handing over the chicks to a man with a syringe in his hand. The man handles them one by one giving them an injection. The girl turns to her dad wondering what is happening. He explains that they need the injection to stay healthy and grow fast. The woman asks the girl if she wants to help, and she does. The girl lifts carefully the tiny chick body. After injections, the chicks are thrown to a walled off area. The girl looks in, the chicks seem to be fine. She tries to catch another one, but she lets it go. She feels suffocated by the pungent smell and lack of air. She wants to run out of the barn, but she is kept hostage by the chicks’ little bodies. She squats down and tries to get over her weakness, then her father notices her and leads the girl out of the barn. (Memory, Chicks in the Cooperative)

The unbearable smells and sensations surprise and puzzle the girl. She tries to orient herself: the adults seem to know their roles and are clear on their relationship to the chicks, and she sees the chicks as both fragile objects and sensing subjects whom she does not want to harm. In the end, the girl feels “suffocated” in the situation and sets out to flee the space. It may be that she senses the suffering of the chicks, the fact that these living creatures are treated without care or love.

Similarly, the memory story Colorado Beetles discusses the complex relationship between humans and various other animals: on the one hand, their mutual co-existence, and, on the other, the boundaries between species and their hierarchical relations. The beginning of the narrative reflects contrasting observations of domesticated animals in villages and pets in cities:

She didn’t realise that there is a boundary between animals and people until her family moved to the city. Animals in the city had different functions—they were pets. Their purpose was to entertain, bring comfort and sensual pleasure of touching their fluffy bodies. Until she was 6—animals lived everywhere. They lived in a field and would annoy grandmother with their interference to the crop growth and harvest. They lived in the barn—but it was their home only out of convenience and when they were older, since the younger ones—piglets, chicks, ducklings, small geese, puppies and cats would always stay inside the house until they grew old enough to live outside. Cats were the most independent ones—they would come only to have their share of milk. After all, they were working hard to keep the house clean of mice and rats. (Memory, Colorado Beetles)

The space between human and other animal life is intimately shared in this story. Domesticated animals in the village seem to be on equal standing with the humans (see also in Schuurman, 2020)—they have (shared) homes and tasks, and they intervene. However, it is notable that the memory only talks about those other animals that seem to have a direct connection to humans: the ones that are domesticated and have a particular “purpose” and are somehow “useful” for humans as providing food or entertainment; and on the other hand, those that live around humans, such as mice, rats, and beetles, but may be unwanted (see also Donaldson & Kymlicka, 2011). Humans are both adjusting to the wills and cycles of the cohabitants but also deciding on the lives and fates of some, like Colorado beetles:

The task was simple—walk along the rows of green potato bushes and collect those small bugs into the bucket. Each leaf had to be carefully explored, and then she had to grab bugs
with hands and place them into the bucket. Her grandmother never needed a bucket—she would squeeze them between her fingers. She wasn’t brave enough to do that, but the final step of the task was to get rid of the bugs. So, she would go outside the front yard onto the road, throw them from the bucket and step on them, making sure that all of them are dead. This task was so unpleasant that she preferred just to pour some water into the bucket and wait until all of them drowned. (Memory, Colorado Beetles)

For the girl, it is troubling that she is not able or willing to hierarchize animals into those who deserve to live and those whose lives are useless or even harmful and whose killings are thus expected to be easy and painless. This poses an ethical dilemma for her. Her aversion to harming the insects, similarly to not harming the chicks in the cooperative, is likely an indication of empathy toward them (Aaltola, 2018).

The aversion to harming someone can be diminished either by weakening one’s empathic concern for the victim or by enhancing cognitive explanations to countervail one’s emotions (Takamatsu, 2018). The girl might utilize both routes to be able to harm the beetles. She distances her direct sensuous bodily contact from the killing to avoid the difficult emotions related to harming the insects. Perhaps she also enhances the rationale to kill the beetles; she ponders about the narrative of the beetles as “foreign.” Not only do they cause damage to the potato crops, but they were intentionally put there to do that by the enemy:

Her parents were telling her that Americans dropped bombs with beetles back in Soviet times. The memory triggered curiosity, and she decided to research how Colorado beetles got to her village. Well, it looks like it started spreading from Europe back in 1859 onwards. Wikipedia also has a mentioning about the case: “In East Germany, they were known as Amikäfer (“Yankee beetles”) following a governmental claim that the beetles were dropped by American planes.” (Memory, Colorado Beetles)

The Colorado beetles were not just another insect in the yard but a foreign invader who may threaten the ecosystem of the family garden and the nation, buying into discourses of nationalization of nature and related inclusions/exclusions (Antonsich, 2021). However, the fact that these bugs may be “foreign invaders” did not make it easier for a child to kill them. The ecological justification of getting rid of the invasive species was then actually decided on evaluating different forms of life as “native” or “alien” species (Antonsich, 2021). Beyond nationalism, the Cold War divisions may have further deepened her perception of the beetles as enemies and justified their killability.

Discussion

In the memories of children raised during the Cold War era of modernity, aspects of ecosocialization spill out as embedded in the specificities of their broader historical contexts. Firstly, the stories focus on everyday life, describing children’s interactions with other than human species as agents. These interactions happen within the practices and cultural interpretations prevalent in different contexts, such as the agricultural cooperative or struggle with invasive insects, and the local symbiotic environments of flora, fauna, and landscape. Secondly, the children participate in the more-than-human world through and in their multisensory bodies—seeing, hearing, feeling, smelling, and tasting these earthly companions and making sense of them and their relations. As Cobb (1977, p. 89) explains, children recognize in these moments that they make the world in
their living bodies “where the powers of nature and human nature meet.” Thirdly, the memory stories show an aversion to harming other creatures, revealing the children’s empathy and a will to create ethical relations with the more-than-human companions. Empathy is associated with an ability to experience a sense of awe and wonder, making the children feel part of something greater than themselves (Zhang et al., 2014). This kind of intense sense of belonging—and we add, recognizing and remembering this belongingness—also enhances the meaningfulness of life (Lambert et al., 2013).

Ecosocialization, in Cobb’s (1977, p. 89) words, can be explained as sense-making, which is “essentially poetic because it is lyrical, rhythmic, and formative in a generative sense: it is a sensory integration of self and environment, awaiting verbal expression.” The memory stories portray events of unmediated awareness through which seemingly everyday experiences gain new lights, and their “poetic creative power” returns (Cobb, 1977, p. 89). The ensuing lyrical and formative process brings about a generative sense in which relations with other beings, landscapes, weather, and so on re/organize (as organized by the child encountering the world). Empathy, recognition, gratitude, and reciprocal caring for those that sustain us may emerge (Kimmerer, 2013). Memory stories, in this way, reveal traces of ecosocialization and, at the same time, exploring memories through collective biography operates as a pedagogical means to help us recognize and re-learn our relatedness and reciprocal responsibilities in the living world. Children’s bodies incorporate and resonate with the relations, sensations, affects, and atmospheres created by symbiotic life, the “flesh of the world” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968). Identifying ways in which ecosocialization unfolds can help develop pedagogical engagements to sustain the human capability to wonder, empathy, and holistic participation in the more-than-human world.

The explored memories were created without an explicit focus on relations with the more-than-human. However, the process of engaging in a collective biography has unexpectedly brought into focus the traces of ecosocialization. When sharing a memory in a carefully listening group—so that the memory becomes sensible by and for the others—experiences can become collectively and intimately felt and re-lived. The atmospheres and affects produced within these stories were contagious. As we shared the memories and analyzed them in this paper we also experienced the pedagogical power of collective re-membering as we remembered seeing, hearing, feeling, smelling, relating to, and tasting earthly companions. As we listened to the memory stories about the children touching the dead bird, chicks, and farm animals, we started to remember how these feelings felt in our bodies and recalled the moments when we tried to make sense of them through a creative poetic power (Cobb, 1977). As we listened to how children in the memories tried to avoid and felt an aversion to harming other creatures, our empathy grew toward our more-than-human companions, and our ethics turned us toward seeking to create ecosocially sustainable communities.

While collective biography can be used in many different ways in education (Davies & Gannon, 2011), it can also offer a way to mend some of the broken relations that modern humans have with other species, flora and fauna, landscape, Earth, and cosmos. By collectively sharing memories, we can revitalize and sustain our capacities for using our creative poetic power in recognizing and strengthening ecosocialization for the wonder of diversity, empathy, care, reciprocity, and holistic participation in the more-than-human world.
Collective biography workshops as part of education allow us to experience belonging to the whole web of life and re-enchant ourselves with the “genius of childhood” (Cobb, 1977). In short, by acknowledging and engaging with the pedagogical dimensions of the collective biography process we can again recognize and re-enact the phenomenon and process of ecosocialization. Understanding the genius of childhood could also provide more spaces for children to follow their curiosity and explore their creativity without constant adult guidance (Cobb, 1977). With adults, doing body and movement-based practices in silence and closed eyes may help revitalize the affective and sensory stance toward the world (Foster & Turkki, 2021). To recognize this unmediated capacity of ecosocialization is the first step in regenerating human relations with other forms of life and sustaining the mutually beneficial multispecies co-living.

As the dynamism of affect in collective biography produces various emotions and atmospheres, “such as pleasure, joy or other positive or negative feelings” (Gannon et al., 2019, p. 50), it offers the potential to re-attune us with the more-than-human world. This attunement re-orients our present and future lives, sensations, and relations away from anthropocentrism, rationalism, and instrumentalism inherent in Western modernity. Including multisensory body awareness practices in memory workshops, as participants create their memory stories in relation with others of many kinds, could potentialize collective biography even further as a form of ecosocial pedagogy.

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