

# Multispecies Contact Zones at the End of the Anthropocene

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Jessica Lussier and Claudia Ruitenberg speak directly to the theme of the conference, concerning themselves about human actions in contact zones.<sup>1</sup> They take us beyond the merely human to the more than human interaction, and I shall argue, bond among humans, more than humans, and all living things. My response to this luminous paper has four parts.

First, how do the authors see contact zones? They go beyond human-to-human contact. Our contacts, as humans, do not occur in an ontological vacuum bereft of other beings. We are part but not dominant in the ecology of beings. Other animals, flora, earthly geologic structures, dirt, all have ontological status. The Cartesian rupture and binary are a fiction whose time has passed. Seeing contact zones as places of *natureculture* begins to afford human animals the ability to see their own initiated, or happenstance, contacts in intersecting ways. The war in Ukraine is a humanitarian disaster, but it also is lethal to companion animals, plants, soil, rivers, and the entire environment. It is not necessary to use such an example, though it makes the intersecting of contacts stark and visible. Such encounters, as the authors point out, are within our senses every day. The authors give us means to see, by their discussion of touch, plain and simple examples such as the worm observed by Stephanie Mackler's daughter and the surfeit of worms in the Dutch composting bin.

Second, the authors' more than encompassing view of contact zones puts in perspective human conflict. This has positive and potentially negative results. If we see human conflict *sub specie aeternitatis*, we are reminded that we exist on this planet provisionally, locked in finitude. We all have limited time to do what we will with our lives, though perhaps we all ignore this at times or even, willfully, continuously. We can leave our mark and aim toward human and earthly meaning and significance, or we can let time slip by. Yet, in an eternal view, it doesn't matter what any one of us does. But to make life significant and meaningful, we must challenge this eternal view. Humans are particularly evolved

primates, that is all. While this view is sobering to human enterprise, it is not or should not be depressing. Such a view sets us up to be grateful and humble, and by doing so, to lower our epistemological and ontological expectations, to sense and be a part within a whole, rather than a part apart.

Third, I share here some other, perhaps unlikely insights into this view of contact zones to stress the importance of what the authors are saying. These insights come to us from Albert Schweitzer, who as an accomplished musician, music scholar, and theologian, left all this at age thirty to study tropical medicine and serve the native population in Africa. Here he doubly entered contact zones. Africa was a destination for idealistic and religious do-gooders like Schweitzer, motivated to save and to revive an exhausted European spirit, as well as a place of untold misery due to European colonization, exploitation, and extraction. The Gabon Schweitzer arrived at was pilfered of lumber. While we should note Schweitzer's own bias and his form of settler colonialism, he did formulate and enact a philosophy based on reverence for life. Reverence for him meant more than the word does in English, as the German *Ehrfurcht* connotes awe, wonder, and fear. For Schweitzer, reverence for life meant being open to perhaps stormy, conflictual emotions, to be aware, and to listen. This stance encapsulates the attitude sought and described by the authors toward natureculture. Fear might be too strong for our taste today, but is recognition of humility and perhaps even fear too strong for what we need to discuss and hear? We have right now planetary devastation and still have no real way to energize, or even locate, our collective will to deal with what we are told is a tipping point already looming for climate disaster.

It is difficult to disseminate educational ideas and ideals and the slight influence of Schweitzer's work upon current schooling is ironic, given that he believed that "the school will be the way."<sup>2</sup> While I do not doubt the sincerity of intention and purpose, the world of education turns a slightly deaf ear toward these efforts. I believe reasons for this have to do with the Schweitzer myth and legend. However, another reason, related to myth and legend, goes deeper and is morally troubling: The possibility of many exercising "willful ignorance" about the prophetic call of Schweitzer, and to what, in relation, we say about

*natureculture* and multispecies contact zones.

Choosing to remain ignorant was recognized as a sin by St. Thomas Aquinas, and willful ignorance of a situation or consequences is a 19<sup>th</sup> century legal concept, when a judge ruled that the accused could not be convicted for possessing government property unless he knew that the goods in question came from the government or he had “willfully shut his eyes to the fact.”<sup>3</sup> In psychological terms willful ignorance is a form of “cognitive dissonance,” a condition theorized by Leon Festinger.<sup>4</sup> In a state of willful ignorance one avoids or rejects evidence that contradicts existing attitudes and beliefs, thereby maintaining a relative state of cognitive consonance or harmony. In her book, *Willful Blindness*, Margaret Heffernan argues that many of the world’s most heinous misdeeds have not been perpetrated in secret, but in full view: “[The] central challenge posed by each case was not harm that was invisible—but harm that so many preferred to ignore.”<sup>5</sup> Do we choose to ignore the calls of Schweitzer, or our authors today, because it will make us uncomfortable, and thus are we willfully ignoring the call for transformation? Do we choose to avoid such work, in the manifold and intersecting contact zones discussed today?

Recognizing Nature in its ordinariness, as well as with an awe-filled reverence coupled with a sense of responsibility, as Dewey points to, Schweitzer exemplifies, and our authors urge, should be one of the ends of an environmentally aware practice in education and to living and dwelling in multispecies contact zones. We would do well to teach our students, and show them by example, that we are stewards of our environment with a moral duty to live in harmony with and preserve our natural world, rather than exploit and destroy it. Reverence for Life, Dewey’s natural piety, and living and learning amid multispecies contact zones can be our model for this endeavor.

These views show us ways to teach others about Nature in its ordinariness and majesty, so that we can abide in its midst in a better and more accommodating way. The power of this sense of abiding can be used to help enact a set of different measures and attitudes toward Nature and others in our schools. For example, research into the way children learn about nurturing behavior has shown that boys can be encouraged to be caring and generous human beings

by tending to companion animals at an early age.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, what worth is this to philosophy of education? I don't think philosophers of education realize how powerful and insistent we can be. I say can as we, or shall I say some of us some of the time, believe we have little or slight lasting effect upon our colleagues, or even our students. Certainly, there is much we encounter daily to support our doubts.

Some of us work in schools or colleges of education at research universities, or if we do not, we were educated there. We see daily evidence that the parent discipline of the field of education is psychology. Philosophers, and foundations faculty in general, often must pipe in "yes but" and "both and" when the assumed grounding of education is largely psychological science. I had a colleague in special education at my previous university remind me that what I was doing, as I put together a less than impressive annual report one year, was important and that others looked to me and my foundations colleagues to speak on reflective or "big" topics. So, while status and pecking order may not change in any substantive way, we philosophers of education should, or at least could, recognize our roles as perhaps even the leading edge of inquiry. If by this inquiry, we are taken into multispecies contact zones, as listeners and participants, rather than outside or guest observers or as dominant decision-makers, then all the better, for us, for the planet, and even for our own fleeting legacy.

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1 Jessica Lussier and Claudia W. Ruitenberg, "Touch Points: Educative Experiences in Multispecies Contact Zones," *Philosophy of Education* 76, no. 2 (same issue).

2 Albert Schweitzer, An Address to the Albert Schweitzer School, Hamburg Germany, October 5, 1959. Cited in Ronald L. Abrell, "Teaching Reverence for Life: The School Will Be the Way," *Humane Education*, Spring 1978, 10.

3 Margaret Heffernan, *Willful Blindness* (New York: Walker & Company, 2011), 3.

4 Leon Festinger, *Cognitive Dissonance* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press,

1962).

5 Heffernan, *Willful Blindness*, 1.

6 Gail F. Melson, *Why the Wild Things Are: Animals in the Lives of Children* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).