

Vulnerable Literacies

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We'd find them nestled behind earlobes, amidst eyelashes, between fingers, in folds of the neck, along the scalp, behind knees, cozy in armpits, in zigzagged waistband imprints, hidden in eyebrows, or brazenly mid-chest. Who knew the body had so many hiding places?

There is always a bolt of shock when the examined spot—a speck of dirt, a freckle?—comes alive with spidery legs. Mother and child then engage in a practiced routine—a submission of the body, a pinch of skin, a tug of war with a barbed proboscis, a cold swab of alcohol. The wriggling visitor is always observed with a mixture of wonder and disgust.

At pick-up time, the teacher hands me a small piece of blue paper. A tick encased in plastic tape is attached, labelled with my child's name, the date, and time. *9.00 Uhr. 29. Mai*. It was found on the throat, and I'm told we should observe the area for a few weeks. There weren't any ticks in Brooklyn. Romantic ideas about forest kindergartens are one of the reasons I was drawn to Germany. We celebrated a fourth birthday on the sidewalk in front of our 800-square-foot apartment and then boarded a plane for fields and forests. It was intended to be a year for me to finish my dissertation and a chance for the children to learn their father's language. Best now, we were told, when the brain's still plastic and hungry for new language. Unlike my stiff graduate school-trained, word-sated mouth, unable to form the doughy German ö at the back of the throat, the children gobble up this new language and are speaking fluently to teachers and friends within weeks. I am a shockingly slow learner. I spend my mornings in a dimmed room wielding pixelated daggers like *epistemic* and *irreducibility*. Later, I blink in the soft afternoon light stumbling through basic niceties with the German parents waiting to collect their children in the damp forest.

We search the body at night. A book balanced in one hand, my free fingers pour over my child. My children speak to me a new intermixture of languages—three words in English, two in German. I find myself unwittingly responding in this hybrid language. As my fingers flip over earlobes, pick at spots, scan the scalp, I read in English. An attempt at maintaining the primacy of the mother tongue. I carefully disentangle a thread of dried moss from hair and then turn the page. The children point to a wolf and an Eule in the book and laugh at my incorrect gendering of German nouns. I tap into the pleasures of this nightly grooming practice—reading and picking, searching and scanning—as the warm boundaries of our bodies blur. Bedtime reading is a brief moment when body and text, human and animal, forest and home, original and translation, self and other gloriously tangle into each other.

But these are also vulnerable literacies. Modes of reading and translation, remembering and forgetting that are full of failure. A chubby finger points to the page, *Mama, how do you say Marienkäfer again in English?* How many times do our nightly body scans fail to discover a visitor who shows up the next morning in an obvious spot? Where were they hiding? *Ladybug*. Every morning, I sit at the computer and can't say what I mean. I had to leave so many books behind, and I'm certain I can't finish without them. When I search for a more apt synonym, German words start to intrude.

My daughter has a small stick with a pointed end she brought home from the forest. She calls it her *Stift*—a German word that can mean pen or pencil. She writes furiously, brow furrowed, on a slab of wood marked with the bite marks of a chainsaw. I am frequently asked with urgency, *Wo ist mein Stift?*

We keep it on the bedside table at night and transport it back and forth from the forest. Immersed in her work, I find her at pick-up time sitting against a tree, her *Stift* madly dancing on wood as a line of wiggly children beg for a turn to “write.”

Once, a morning kiss is stopped in its tracks as a tick taunts from my child’s cheek. I don’t know the German word for tweezers and mime pinching to the teachers. I learn to pull at just the right angle, with just the right tension in order to get the body out intact. These new pedagogies wound us, cut into the skin, revealing the radical openness of the body, the specter of failure, the limits of language, the impossibility of boundaries, the riskiness inherent in pedagogical encounters. Yet as Silin (2003) posits, it can be generative to dwell in this “space that unfolds between language and experience, the object and its signifier, the means and the ends” (p. 265).

The territory of the forest creeps into our home. I empty pockets of sticks and beetle shells. I pick star moss and burrs from clothing. Feathers and beloved stones line the windowsills. An inexplicable collection of white BB pellets skitters across our apartment floors. Mud coats everything. Mimicking the teacher, I collect the visitors who follow my child home. A crude entomologist, I soon have a date-stamped collection of ticks. The children use magnifying glasses and plastic microscopes to examine the monstrous menagerie collecting in my desk drawer. We learn that they are arachnids, not insects—spider parasites. We entomb the tiny bodies in tape, like our first gift in blue paper, and can’t escape a twinge of sadness as they are sealed in their plastic sarcophagi. It’s a rather cruel curation, but there is a triumph I feel in capturing these intruders of my child’s body, containing the wildness of the world within the temporal surety of date and hour, the safe perimeter of a square of plastic. As I write about all that escapes attempts at controlling the path of literacies, my desk drawer swells with a mother’s archival fever, a futile desire to contain the unwieldy boundaries of childhood.

The kindergarten is not far into the forest, housed at the intersection of two truck-width paths. One June morning, the forest buzzes with chainsaws. Loggers with spiked boots gesture to us to be careful as we make our way to the morning circle. *It’s a working forest*, I’m told in German. The cut-into forest is gorgeously pungent—intoxicating with heady pine and sap. Houses with well-tended gardens are within eyeshot of the stump-lined circle area. A couple with a perfectly manicured yard hire a gardner to pull the unwanted plants that relentlessly wander over from the forest. Ticks, I learn, prefer areas like this—places of transition, of disorder, where human-disturbed landscapes shift into wild ones. *Ecotones*. Wikipedia tells me that “The word *ecotone* . . . is formed as a combination of *ecology* plus *-tone*, from the Greek *tonos* or tension – in other words, a place where ecologies are in tension” (“Ecotone,” 2021).

At night we are called from sleep to scratch the red welts that line the children’s backs and legs. They don’t have screens in the windows here. I’m told it was too cool in the past for mosquitos. *Climate change*, we all repeat. June is already really hot. No one has air conditioners. *It never used to get this hot*, I’m told. Mice, a favorite first meal for nymph ticks, have also increased their numbers as temperatures have warmed and human sprawl has cut up the large forest territories their predators need. Traversing home and woods, city and suburb, surging armies of mice have helped spread Lyme disease into new corners (Banigan, 2017). Warming temperatures have also led to ticks thriving in areas previously too cold for them. *I don’t remember having ticks when I was a child*, I’m told over and over. In Europe, ticks are moving north, spreading across country borders, reaching altitudes long thought to be inhospitable to them. They keep showing up where they’re not expected to be.

Ticks look for hosts by questing—a jarringly beautiful name—patiently waiting with arms extended as if bequeathing a blessing. Through a mix of biochemical sensing, attunement to vibrations, and chance

encounter, they wait for an opportunity to hook onto the warm passing bodies of deer, mice, children. Questing does not always bring instantly gratifying success, and it may take months before ticks get a blood meal. Surely some never succeed.

The tick is not only itself. It is a vector, reliant on relationality for survival. Like human bodies, it is multiple, potentially carrying a microbial wealth to pass onto others (Schuller, 2018). As vectors for disease, ticks, of course, are feared for their capacity to pass on a range of unwanted gifts to their hosts. Most notably, *Borrelia burgdorferi*, the spiral-shaped bacterial spirochete that digs stubbornly into cells and causes Lyme disease. Lyme, named after a coastal town in my home country, where children baffled doctors with puzzling symptoms.

On our pediatrician's wall is a color-coded poster mapping Tick-borne Encephalitis (TBE) in Europe, our province bathed in dark red. We are all getting the last of the three-part TBE vaccine. The pediatrician offers it to parents as well. The room smells of isopropyl alcohol, and a flaking clown decal smiles unnervingly from the window. Sitting with my children on the examination table, sleeves rolled up, struggling to speak German with the doctor, I am also a child. I tell her about my collection of ticks. *Should I get them tested?* I ask in the German conditional I shakily command. She shakes her head and tells me she doesn't recommend it. If I understand her correctly, she is telling me that even if they tested positive for the disease, it is not a guarantee that they transmitted the bacteria to the child. Parents then needlessly worry. Maybe I just hope this is what she says.

Ticks entangle me into all kinds of new maps. Much of the educational literature on Lyme asks me to consider scale. There are sickly public service images of ticks hidden on poppy seed muffins. Can you spot the ticks? *Egg. Larva. Nymph. Adult.* The life stages are pictured next to a dime, a ruler, a pencil tip, neatly lined up along the whorls of a human fingerprint. The body of my child is also newly mapped. Rezoned into hot spots of memory. A homunculus of former bite sites. Long after the tick bite fades, the throat takes on a new importance. Is that a shadow or a bit of redness? How long has it been there? When can I forget this spot?

As a parent, I am steeped in benchmarking discourses about childhood health and development. Lyme disease is notoriously difficult to diagnose in children. Not every child will develop a red bull's eye reaction. I google what else to watch out for. *Fatigue. Irritability. The child seeming "off."* I am asked to take on a new form of literacy—reading for subtle fluctuations in my child's emotional landscape, an attunement to affective shifts, feeling out when things feel off. I am asked to confront the question, *what is a normal child?*

I have nightmares about ticks. Every inch of my child's body covered in a glittering, moving coat of parasites. I wake up crawling in my sheets.

If left untreated Lyme can lead to a dizzying array of "severe sensory, psychiatric, and cognitive disturbances ... ranging from schizophrenia, psychosis, and autism-spectrum-like disorders to more specific neural malfunctions, including auditory, visual, and olfactory hallucinations, depersonalization, neuropathy, synesthesia, and sensory activity" (Schuller, 2018, p. 55). Lyme asks me to define neurotypicality. It raises age-old specters of madness. I question my literacy skills—what if I misread the signs?

I find an infographic from the Children's Lyme Disease Network (n.d.) that reports that "children with Lyme disease are more likely to:

Have lower grades in school.
Have difficulty processing information.
Have greater risk of depression.
Have difficulty maintaining relationships.
Have behavior outbursts or mood swings”

Under the chilling banner “A Lost Childhood,” it reads “Children with Lyme disease have more cognitive and psychiatric disturbances. 41% had suicidal thoughts. 11% made a suicide gesture.”

Armed with this new information, I toggle between reveling in and pathologizing my child’s wild translations of experience, her startling ways of reading the world. She giggles in bed because of the bugs crawling on her legs under the blanket. She points in wonder to neon green lights only she can see on the bedroom door. She has a persistent headache above her left eye. Right here. She can’t remember English words for everyday objects. She swings from elation to despair in a matter of seconds. She screams for me from under a pillow to shut the shades, the soft morning light burning her eyes. At night, I sift through the mental curation I store of her strange sensations, hilarious descriptions, uncanny feelings, surprising observations, beautiful incoherence—*what is normal childhood?*

A child we know can’t smile on one side. His parents learn that the Bell’s palsy is a result of Lyme.

A child we know has kneecaps that swell to the size of softballs. He gets a PICC line of antibiotics to the heart.

A child we know screams obscenities in the middle of the night. He stares blankly at walls—weak and listless. The doctors suspect Lyme, but tests are never able confirm it. After weeks of malaise, aggressive antibiotic treatment transforms him back to the vibrant child everyone remembers.

Lyme messes with a lot of things. Many people with Lyme disease never noticed a tick bite. The disease does not always follow the logics of linear or progress-staked rationalities. It can be incredibly difficult to diagnose—my friends in the medical community tell me that testing can be like trying to catch a goldfish with a tiny net in a giant pool. Lyme imitates and hides. Spirochetes can lay dormant for years and then resurface. Lyme patients can present with initial symptoms and then seemingly recover, only to become incredibly sick again later. It can wreak neurological havoc and set off debilitating complications, exacerbate preexisting conditions, mimic a range of other conditions, including chronic fatigue syndrome, chronic pain, dementia, depression, anxiety, and learning disabilities. There are all kinds of communities for people contending with the effects of chronic Lyme disease. Lyme patients battle with US insurance companies for treatment coverage. If Lyme is suspected, many recommend finding a doctor who is “Lyme literate.”

Like everything, there is an intersectional politics to the disease. The white body is used as the default for diagnosis—the red bull’s eye against white skin. Tethered to discourses around the “urban,” people of color are underdiagnosed as they contend with racialized assumptions about who “belongs in nature.” We already know that Oppositional defiant disorder (ODD) is overdiagnosed in black children. How might the potential mood disturbances of a child of color with Lyme be read differently than those of a white child? Women with the neurological Lyme symptoms such as mood disturbances, fatigue, depression, and chronic pain frequently have their complaints dismissed.¹

1 There is a range of fantastic narratives around the racialized and gendered politics of Lyme disease, including Khakpour’s *Sick: A Memoir* (2018), Anderson’s documentary *So Sick* (in production) and Schuller’s gorgeous theorizations in “The Microbial Self” (2018).

I am anxious to get writing as we walk up the forest path. My child's hand is warm and sticky. There is a verdant lushness to this June morning, a teeming trill of birds and insects, a damp waft to the forest that signals that the forest is bursting with life. Fragrant wood chips, mementos from the loggers, offer a soft bed for our feet. I hold my child's impatient body still and spray her shoes and legs with the natural tick spray that doesn't work. Her Stift is safely stored in her backpack. She breaks away from an attempted kiss, calling Tschüß, Mama! without looking back.

The collection of ticks sits in my desk drawer as I write. These visitors I've cruelly killed—or even more unnerving, that perhaps still live—force me to confront the uncomfortable in pedagogy, in childhood, in myself—the unintended, the dangers that burrow in and linger. I am forced to learn one of the lessons my dissertation is trying to teach—the body is implicated in education, open, porous, woundable.

In an age of human-based environmental devastation and a global pandemic, the creatures in my drawer underscore the pedagogical consequences of human interference. They disturb the humanist figure of my child as self-contained, as developmentally sequenced, as rationally knowable, as having clear boundaries I can map, mark, and control. They reveal the vulnerability of literacy—the limits of what can immediately be read, communicated, translated, understood.

But it is these vulnerabilities—these spaces of warp and wound, openness and instability—that can usher in new possibilities. As Silin (2003) urges:

[P]arents and educators need to honor the satisfactions of the unarticulated experience. Not [as] a romantic eschewing [of] the accomplishment of language . . . [but] to clear a space in which children and adults can move back and forth, a space that recognizes the value of linguistic incompetence as well as fluency, verbal insufficiency as well as communicative competence. For some, the rush to literacy, to fill the void with words and texts, reflects fears of a time when emotions were less modulated, bodily functions less well controlled, and desires less well socialized. Then, language represents the only way forward, and unarticulated experience is consigned to the past. (p. 264)

As I labor to scratch meaning into the page each morning, perhaps I should take a cue from Silin's words and my daughter's wooden pencil and revel in the play and movement, rather than in the etched finality of writing. Perhaps I should welcome, rather than fear, the unexpected way the wild pedagogies of the forest enter our home, our bodies and disturb our entrenched ways of reading and knowing the world.

What do I do with these new pedagogies that halt and cut into what can be said and immediately understood, that entangle us with the histories and bodies of others, that confront precarities that demand new forms of attention and new grammars of care? As Silin (2003) reminds us, "Pedagogy is unpredictable, incomplete, and immeasurable in its impact" (p. 265). Vulnerable literacies ask us to be willing to learn from what evades language, what digs into our skin, hides in our body, leaves traces we can't eradicate, what resists immediate reading, waits for later to reveal itself, sets off effects we can't contain. I must learn to welcome these vulnerable literacies—relinquish my hopes of a final reading, let go of fear, attune to new scales of noticing, commit to slow practices of care, wait patiently with arms extended to the unpredictability and wildness of the world.

And I must learn to give up my child to the forest.

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Alyssa Niccolini's work looks at intersectional issues in education drawing from English education, cultural studies, feminist new materialisms, and affect theory. Her past studies have examined how gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and race intersect in controversies over challenged texts in secondary schools. A former high school English teacher, she received her doctorate in English Education from Columbia University. Her work has been published in a wide range of national and international journals and collections and she is co-editor of *Mapping the Affective Turn in Education*. She currently lives and teaches in Germany.