Neither of the air, nor of the earth but a creature somewhere between: The researcher as traveller between worlds.

ABSTRACT: (102 words) *In this story of places, spaces and power I adopt the persona of the bat as storyteller, bringing together narratives of my experience as an educator of pre-service teachers, and from my three years' participatory research within a Reggio-informed and community-managed primary school. The bat's story becomes a fable for neo-liberal times as the forced closure of the alternative school and university restructures reflect increasing government controls of educational systems in Australia and globally. In and between these seemingly contradictory epistemologies and ontologies I re-interpret the bat's hybridity and experience of darkness as a disruptive and generative third space for re-thinking education.*

Introduction: The bat, the birds and the beasts

> *The birds were at war with the beasts, and many battles were fought with varying success on either side. The bat did not throw in his lot definitely with either party…so he remains to this day a solitary outcast from both"* (Aesop, 2006/2011, p. 158)

In preparation for a battle with their enemies the beasts, the birds invited a bat to join their ranks. The bat declined, stating that her fur marked her as one of the beasts. Later, the bat also rejected the invitation of the beasts, aligning with the birds. War was averted and the birds and beasts were reconciled: seeking a place of belonging, the bat went from one group to the other, but neither would accept her. She was left alone to fly in darkness.

This fable's moral core suggests that to know oneself means to align steadfastly with the values and practices of one's kind. It teaches that where there is ambiguity, a firm decision is better than vacillating between belief systems, and that to fail to take a position risks alienation and punishment for cowardice or betrayal. The bat is not presented as a pacifist, but as a transgressive and ambiguous entity, so that her opting for the seemingly safe middle ground between opposing forces is offered as an example of moral turpitude. The moral centre of the fable cautions that we must recognise our own tribe – and that which is *other*, even when we see in the *other* aspects of our own being and doing in the world. Failure to recognise and reject those aspects of self that embody the spatial, cultural and epistemological *other* brings penalties: punishment and exclusion.

In this chapter, I offer a contemporary recasting of Aesop's fable as a narrative of identity, border-crossing, and power. By adopting the role of the bat, my intent is first to make transparent the ways in which boundaries and borders are internalised by educators and researchers (Bhabha, 1997) and expressed as personal and professional habitus, then to articulate and identify the complexity of those epistemologies and practices of power that form institutional habitus. I suggest that as educators our awareness of boundaries impacts upon and is also shaped by our personal and professional habitus (Bourdieu, 1992; Maton, 2008) determining our beliefs about the limits of what can be thought, enacted and reported in education (Cornbleth, 2010; Wacquant, 2005). Readers will, in turn, disrupt this narrative, interpolating their own telling into this consideration of how educators' beliefs and institutional habitus may act as constraining or enabling frameworks for our individual and shared professional practices, in the context of increasing bureaucratic controls of education.

Place and space – beasts and birds

The physical, relational and spiritual places and spaces of my doctoral research (and my psyche as researcher) were: a regional university (presented as the world of the beasts), and an alternative and play-informed school (presented as the world of the birds). As a bat, my journeys in and between those places and their respective ways of 'doing education' over a three year period required me to find new ways of making sense of place, space and my positioning(s) so that, over time, what first appeared to be the distinct epistemologies and ontologies of university and alternative school were de-positioned and re-positioned, made hybrid, and contested. As a researcher I began with an unquestioned belief that I was neither beast nor bird but 'both/and'. My experience of formal education as a learner had been didactic yet I had a strong empathy with Illich's beliefs in the power of de-schooling (1973), and graduating with the new ideas of that time, I believed myself to be a constructivist practitioner working within traditional frameworks of education. The opportunity to undertake research in action with the community of a newly established alternative school offered the prospect of my making a unique contribution to knowledge: how learning through play was experienced in in the primary and middle years. My hope was that with this community I may find a spiritual and epistemological 'home' with like-minded others.

The birds' vision was of a family-friendly and child-emergent education where children learned in a natural environment, without the anxiety of tests, or the pressures of formal curricula. Their Reggio-informed primary school opened in 2006 with ten enrolments, gaining full accreditation through the Office of Non State Schooling (ONSS) late that year. The community included two facilitators, John and Meg (anonymised) who had long experience as qualified teachers, yet who shared parents' belief in the value of 'unschooling' (Holt, 2004). The school was established in a rented community building in a rural location: a woodland area with no paths across the scrubland. The single building opened out onto open grassland dotted with mature eucalypts and sloping to a nature reserve. This seemed to me to offer a compromise with nature and the wild,

but to be the antithesis of a traditional school environment where paths and marked areas for play supported adults' monitoring of children's movements and behaviours.

In the world of the beasts, messages of control found expression through physical paths, spaces and no-go areas, and through the overt and tacit rules and practices of academic life. Institutional power was manifest in both physical and virtual environments with their separate sites for academic subject areas and their corporate branding. Most importantly, power was manifest in the university's right to confer or withhold academic degrees. The rules of this field required a willing surrender of agency, and "adherence to its systemic controls and social norms" (Jones, 2011, p. 191) for those who engaged in academia. As a bat taking up a new position in the world of the beasts I was surprised to discover a gap between the rhetoric of education as a student-centred and transformative epistemology, and how teaching in the university was enacted: there was broad agreement that didactic methods were a necessary compromise within systemic constraints. Despite students' use of clickers or mobile technologies to give in-lecture feedback, the dominant mode was of didactic content delivery through face to face or online lectures – the most teacher-centred method of all approaches to education. Power was embodied through physical and virtual access to systems: administrators, academics and students experienced different 'faces' of the university, with limited access to systems and processes afforded to students, and the greatest to administrators.

The shift towards the corporatisation of academic life has taken place globally, with market choices being used to justify a narrowing of the scope of academic subjects in universities and in schools (Lincoln & Denzin, 2005), and with success-related funding driving a culture of testing and competitive reporting of school and university achievement worldwide. Giroux (2011, p. para 7) offers the concern that the university's "willingness to mimic corporate culture and ingratiate itself to the national security state" has impacted upon the range of subjects taught, and also upon rewards and opportunities for academic research. In 2007 the first reorganization of my employing university led to numbers of academic redundancies. In 2013 – 14 a further restructuring informed a significant number of redundancies with most going unreported. In this new world certain subjects were privileged over others. As an as educator and a bat I considered hiding under my desk, but feared speaking back to a potentially vindictive power. Reflection through writing gave rise to a third space from which I felt able to speak. Other voices echoed there. It seemed that I was not alone in the darkness.

Perhaps my empathy with the inhabitants of two worlds was not sign of a weakness but of creative and empathetic power? Lisbeth Berbary (2013) considers that thinking as one with our research partners is vital for "rapport, trust, and connectivity in the initial process of gaining access, in the continuation of access, and in the process of collecting useful data" (p.2). In our embracing of the subtleties of human relationships, researchers are challenged to question our personal epistemologies so as to discover these points of identification with study partners. However, Alma Fleet and Ros Kitson, (2013) point to the dangers over-identifying with the communities with which we work; perhaps it was also important that I retain a sense of self-as-

other? Yet, I was troubled during the first two years of my work with the alternative school that it was so difficult to change my thinking and practice so that they were consistent with learning through play. The resistance to change of that personal and professional habitus that had evolved over 30 years' teaching in primary, secondary and tertiary contexts in several countries should not have surprised me. I had also been a national examiner and moderator for government bodies in the UK, and at the time of my doctoral study I was coordinator for an Australian university's largest teacher education program. I spoke the language of policy and procedure yet believed myself to be a transformative educator. Was this hybridity or self-deception? My own fiercest critic, I patiently gathered and reflected on the evidence. Over three years, however, my findings gave rise to greater complexity as both the worlds of the birds and beasts underwent dramatic changes. The seeming binaries of the epistemologies of the birds and beasts and my early understandings of the nature of the beings I encountered in each place began to change, as did my awareness of self. Moving between worlds, an agent in both, yet aware that I did not truly belong in either, my judgements shifted and binaries ceased to make sense. Inhabiting a third space (Jones, 2012; 2013), I came to recognise the hybrid: beliefs and practices that had once seemed solid became uncertain.

The bat's story of research: binaries, boundaries and hybridity

In the following narrative, the bat moves between seeming binaries, thinking as a bird *(shown in italics),* and as a beast (shown in plain text and indented) as she tells her story.

Even as the birds signed ethics forms, I felt compromised. Reflected in their eyes were small images of myself: the suit of fur, the forms and business cards marked me as a being from the domain of the beasts. Why did they sign? Perhaps their hope was that by becoming the subject of research this would allow their transformative practices in education to be shared with the world, like exotic creatures in a National Geographic Magazine? Might this eventually bring funding, recognition – or even partnership with a powerful university? The birds wanted to be accepted – for their difference to be valued by the beasts. Our first meeting revealed expectations and needs. I too wanted to belong - to be a bird - but my welcome in the world of the birds was partly contingent on my ability to enact power in the world of the beasts. The community's need was not for a researcher to become a bird like themselves – but to be a hybrid being who could connect the worlds. This would allow the birds to remain true to their nature - there would be no need to make the difficult journey to meet in the middle if a researcher could act as go-between.

> In a great meeting of the animals, my study was praised by the King of the Beasts as 'creative and innovative' with a strong 'community focus'. It appeared that he believed my research would provide evidence of the university's focus on sustainability and creativity. I blushed under my fur, confused. I had not yet started collecting data! Yet, after that day there fell the shadow of a long silence, a holding of animal breath. I felt eyes on my leathery wings as I passed theatres where grand beasts lectured groups about

student-centred learning. Wanting to challenge that contradiction, I translated ideas from the birds into my teaching, inviting (well, perhaps requiring was a more honest word) pre-service teachers to create their own assessment tasks so that we could enact genuinely student-emergent learning. They hated it, and by extension – they hated me. "We know what you are <u>trying</u> to achieve, but why don't you just tell us what to do?" They showed their teeth: anonymous feedback made it clear that I was no longer the wonderful teacher. The hypocrisy of the university, and my own complicity in its routines - my bright and clever teacher voice, the gap between my beliefs and practices – tormented me like fleas in my fur. It was a relief to fly back to the world of the birds. I felt I belonged there.

Proudly, I showed John and Meg my design for paths and activity areas in the school garden. They glanced at one another, trying to find words to bridge the gulf in our ways of thinking without hurting me. John suggested that we watch where the children played – that their footsteps would create natural paths. I put the map away. This was the first lesson in many. The school's motto was 'Trust the Child' – yet I had been conditioned for decades to plan and think for children rather than creating spaces where I could learn with children. I became increasingly aware of the discourse of the beasts and how it constrained my thinking, emerging in my notes and records, resistant to all my efforts to think and speak differently. I was disempowering children by creating a world of adult monitoring "Visits to the nearby ravine and waterfall will be in the company of adults because there is a potential risk of snakebite or fall" (Jones, 2011, p.166). Perhaps I was also disempowering pre-service teachers?

Yet my habituation in that discourse had some value. The school's continuing accreditation by the government required meticulous documentation of each child's learning. I was able to assist in that mapping against the standards: I knew the language of the beasts, and ensured that the evidence gathered by the community went beyond requirements for school reporting of student achievement. That data challenged the beasts' epistemology. It showed that a child does not learn sequentially or by year level, but that s/he is driven by interest, need and motivation and that rich learning resulted from social play, both in and out of school. The data brought other benefits too: children loved to make films, and for me as a researcher those years of documentation provided hundreds of hours of films, notes and diaries of learning. The records rustle like dead leaves now. The children have grown, yet their voices are preserved, forever young in the data and in my memories. My heart breaks.

Pre-service teachers came with me to provide arts workshops at the school, preparing well ahead by creating interesting resources and trying to imagine not teaching but facilitating. They were fearful about their role in a play-emergent environment, echoing many of the concerns I had felt. They asked the questions I had struggled with: How does one engage a group of

children without first telling them to line up or 'gather round'? Would children lose interest and run off to play, instead of taking part in activities?

Children had not run wild. Some had wondered off, uninterested, but most had been generous hosts, welcoming the pre-service teacher visitors, keen to try the new ideas and activities they suggested. Children had (mostly) been courteous (sticking one's tongue out is a not always an insult for an audacious little bird). Pre-service teachers remarked on how independent the children were. They expressed surprise that such young children were so critical and asked such tough questions. Like me, they had learned to think of children as needy, so discovering children's strength and capacity for independent learning was both exciting and troubling. As pre-service teachers left the school, the cheeky little bird danced alongside her new teacher friend. For days after that visit, she and other children played games inspired by the workshops. Pre-service teachers also had been inspired. Two had been sufficiently troubled and excited by the experience that they no longer wished to teach in traditional schools. Each went on to work in special schools. Others were keen to try new approaches in their future employment...but with care, so as not to seem too different. For us all, the big question remained unanswered. Why did systems of formal schooling diminish opportunities for children's self-direction, strength and individuality, and why did society blame young adults for lacking those qualities that had been suppressed in them? We had no answer. Pre-service teachers' biggest fear was of being redundant. We discussed that feeling, which I knew well, and what it meant about power. This began to sound like an answer.

Yet, the world of the beasts was also in turmoil. Edicts were read, emails sent, reassuring videos recorded. The oldest and weakest were devoured, 'realigned', 'rationalised' or given 'voluntary severance'. Groups and individuals jostled for position in meetings, trying to ensure that their subject, their perspective would survive the cull. Animals climbed over one another to survive. There was a strong smell of blood. With others, I kept my head low. Upside down, whispering about change, some of my colleagues began to look a little like bats.

Escaping the university, driving to the school took away some of the stress. The journey past ancient gum-trees and buzzing cicadas created a sense of wellbeing: I opened the window to breathe and hear the real world. But that world too was under threat. The highway was being widened as the town grew: towering eucalyptus trees were marked with ribbons, then felled. In just a few months the rural landscape became suburbia.

I discovered that the language of the birds was heutagogy: children were self-motivated to learn, inspired by their own interests, the natural world and social connectedness. A key focus for the community was to ensure continuity between learning at home and school. There was no 'professional development' available so I began to learn from extended conversations with parents, facilitators and the children about what we were seeing, and how best to support and build on children's learning. We taught one another.

Like me, most parents had experienced schooling in the world of the beasts. It was hard to change expectations and practices that had been deeply inculcated in our thinking, and which were re-iterated in the expectations of the bureaucracy to which we reported. Sometimes little birds would 'play at school': the teacher held all the power, standing proudly at the chalkboard, while obedient 'pupils' sat up straight, eyes fixed on teacher – hands raised, ready to answer.

Beastly behaviours in the world of the birds - another kind of hybridity

Some parents were more comfortable than others with a play-emergent curriculum. By 2007 disagreements in two families about the value of play exacerbated existing tensions between separated couples. Frustrated that they could not persuade their partners or the school to adopt more 'traditional' ways of managing children's education both parents withdrew their children from the school. They sought retribution, sending separate letters of complaint to the Office of Non-State Schooling (ONSS), and these precipitated a visit to the school. Unaware of any complaint, John fielded questions from the team over several hours. The visitors were uninterested that during their visit 20 pre-service teachers were running arts workshops: superheroes encouraged children to tell their stories; explorer-children navigated the bush, led by swamp-creatures. Late that afternoon the beasts hurried to their air conditioned cars, ignoring the circle of children and adults around a huge rainbow parachute. As they left, the cars kicked up a cloud of red dust. There was another kind of fallout: the school's fate had been decided.

The birds received a show cause notice listing 90 points for immediate action to avert closure of the school: it included photographs of rooms that were not used by the school. Angered at the injustice, I worked with the community on their written responses, and sent letters of appeal to the Minister for Education. At the university there were muffled sniggers from some of the beasts who referred to the school's threatened closure as my new 'research problem'. I began to avoid the lunch room.

Pending the result of an appeal the school re-opened in January 2008 with 25 enrolments and with younger siblings ready to commence later that year. In late February the letter came. It was backdated. The school had been operating illegally for 8 days. John told me that the minister and the ONSS had discounted my letters of appeal because I was 'partisan' – one of the birds. There was no period of grace in which to wind down business, or find new schools for the children. The community was required to pay back money that had been spent on bus contracts, equipment and books for the year. I belonged now, but it was a bitter homecoming.

For me as a researcher this experience was traumatic. With John and Meg I had laughed when John said he had overheard a visitor from out of town quizzing local shopkeepers about what they knew of the school. I had become concerned to hear rumours that the school was a cult,

thinking that the community's fears of enmity from local power groups with a strong religious interest must be exaggerated, but Phil Cullen (2006), former Queensland Director of Primary Education had already provided plentiful evidence that such interest groups had influenced decision-making at the highest levels of State and National government, privileging bureaucracy over the interests of families and children. In response to this systemic violence my critical gaze turned inwards - and outwards. How far was my personal compliance with systemic controls replicated through my professional practices as an educator of pre-service teachers?

I am the bat: courageous yet cowardly, critical yet compromised.

Territory, space and power – the seeming binaries of the beasts and birds

> In the 2013 restructure the language of improvement and freedom came into play: 'silos' would be removed in favour of new ways of thinking. There would be 'less red tape'. Now, the only spaces for research would be in 'resilient communities', agriculture or engineering. As educational researchers we were told to find new more scientific ways of working, to publish in scientific journals. Some narrative researchers began to ask for courses on statistical reporting. On Twitter, another kind of conversation commenced: a cloud of academics sprouted small leathery wings. The darkness was populated by whispers of dissent, but we were all afraid to challenge those in power. Many highly knowledgeable and experienced colleagues had already lost their jobs.

As a researcher these experiences drew me back to Lefebvrean (1974) concepts of space and third space in relation to environments, and to critically evaluate how relationships of power were expressed through my own and others' thinking and actions as an educator and researcher (Goonewardena, Kipfer, Milgrom, & Schmid, 2008; Soja, 1996). Factory-like systems of education were being enforced in schools; and the same forces were at work in teacher education courses where external frameworks left little room for creativity or originality; research too was being constrained to a narrow range of subjects and methodologies. During my participatory research I had become so closely engaged with the birds and their 'other' ways of engaging with and thinking about the world that theories of identity and place, power and difference (Licona, 2005, 2007) and homogeneity had become part of my every day thinking. Where Aesop's fable had focused upon identity and territory my transitions between the school and university had been more blurred, but no less a visceral experience in terms of power relationships, belonging and being other(ed). However, over time, what had once seemed to constitute the centre or periphery, beast or bird in my understanding had gradually become confused and de-territorialised (Tramonte & Willms, 2010). The war was no longer a battle between beasts and birds, or even within me as a researcher: it was a struggle of ideologies at a global level.

The message of this neo-liberal fable is that bureaucratic violence is enacted beyond the level of the tribe, and is deeply embodied in the symbols, rituals, pedagogical practices, and celebratory rites of passage that constitute formal education (de Lissovoy, 2011, p. 473). It is enacted in national and global contexts (e.g. Lipman, 2005; Torres, 2013), and disguised by being couched within the discourse of quality control. It shapes classrooms, communities and families where a climate of zero tolerance has led to greater monitoring of and physical and chemical controls of children (McNeal & Dunbar, 2010; Skiba & Peterson, 1999). It drives institutional compliance with large-scale systems for quality control, in both teaching and research. Institutional monitoring and self-reporting of academic and research outputs has been reframed as continuing professional development and a tool for greater employability on the world market. When the language used for understanding and imagining education becomes indistinguishable from that of economics and production (Bockman, 2013), this diminishes our humanity: like the bat, we are truly exiled to fly in darkness.

The bat reflects…

Research in and between the two worlds of alternative school and university gave life to a greater critical awareness for me and reportedly, it did so also for those pre-service teachers with whom I worked. We shared the simple understanding that rare experiences of 'authentic' assessment or immersion in child-emergent curricula may be exciting and challenging but that they do not constitute transformative pedagogy although they may precipitate critical re-thinking of personal and professional power, language, pedagogy and heutagogy. While change is unlikely to come from isolated experiences the sharing of stories about those experiences is important in building the capacity for change.

While university restructures and a privileging of scientific research are informed by global trends (Apple, 2000; Bockman, 2013; Furlong, 2013) my hope is that a re-balancing will occur as researchers form new communities for knowledge sharing across the boundaries of institutions and through virtual communities. The seemingly Janus-faced discourses of cultural binaries that are encouraged by institutional restructures may emerge as less simple than they appear: like my personal experience of the de-territorialisation of binaries, more productive institutional change may come from shared conversations and cumulative capacity building. This is what Dervin (2011, p. 47) describes as a two-way mirror where the combined processes of reflection-in context and of our *being* - as reflected through our own writings and others' observations - becomes a generative and interactive discursive process of creation. Research is a political act, calling upon us to think and see through hybrid lenses: to sense with our bat-ears the complex states of being that are not 'either/or' but move towards becoming 'both/and'.

Conclusion

The school had closed. I stood in the school grounds beside children and families I knew and loved. A news reporter was there, microphone in hand, seeking the catchy sound bite. I spoke:

'The school is …' then stopped mid-sentence, *'I mean, the school was a wonderful place'.*
The newspaper reported one parent's

> *…sense of loss and a sense of mourning that something so valuable and so important is now lost to lots of children. As a parent when you find something that works so well for your child and you can see them and other children around them growing, blossoming and learning in leaps and bounds and you know this is the best educational opportunity for your child, to have that taken away it's quite devastating really.*
> *The biggest issue, she said, is the loss of choice for parents whose children don't fit into the State educational system.*
> *"Where do they go?"* (Searle, 2008)*.*

A participatory researcher may invest fully in the field, learning much through engagement and giving fully to the community wherein his or her research takes place. S/he may embrace hybridity, yet that position may be itself an expression of power and ownership of cultural capital. If we frame our participatory research within the discourse of 'projects' this implies a detachment by which both context and participants are distanced - and by which researchers may distance themselves from personal and spiritual responsibility for individuals who have become part of their lives. Like the bat, we as researchers navigating between places and communities, carry with us the weight of ethics. This does not find form only in the documents signed by participants, but also in the weight of collateral damage that travels with us, like the dust of moths' broken wings on a bat's fur. That weight is testament to our habits and habitus, and also to the integrity of our participation. Thus the seeming failure of the school has multiple meanings, and none of them is concerned with defeat.

At what point does 'participatory' research end? After how long, if ever, may the bat say that she has truly lived as animal or bird and acquitted all responsibilities to that group? As a doctoral candidate, I had not anticipated how far participatory research would challenge my personal and professional beliefs and practices of education, nor that over time my growing identification with the values of the community of parents would lead me to lobby for the survival of a school whose practices challenged the foundations of my teaching in the university. Powerful and powerless, both belonging to yet alien in both places, I became attuned to being in a world between two epistemologies and I now speak from both places: my conference presentations, journal articles and books are small irritants to others' and my own thinking, echoing back like sonar, and mixed with the voices of others. At the university, several bats have emerged to practice in community schools for young people who have rejected mainstream education, and in prisons and in juvenile justice centres where traditional practices of curriculum and pedagogy have less potency.

What has inspired me, and healed my grief at the seeming destruction of the school and its small community of parents, children and facilitators, is that there were new beginnings. A few

children found happiness in traditional schools. The majority of parents began homeschooling, finding new confidence in their own knowledge and skills. Two of the older children who attended the school now guide anxious parents taking their first steps as homeschoolers, and several are enjoying their first years at university. John and Meg re-framed the school as a resource centre for 50 homeschooling families. Failure is a blurry term: it is educative, powerful, transformative and hybrid. But what future lies out there for me and other bats?

The bat carries fleas in her fur, and fleas carry new ideas like a plague.

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