

# Occupation in the Anthropocene and Ethical Relationality

## L'occupation dans l'anthropocène et la relationnalité éthique

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www.cjotrce.comNiki Kiepek **Key words:** Anthropocene; Interspecies justice; Decolonisation; Context.**Mots clés :** Anthropocène ; contexte ; décolonisation ; justice interspécifique.

### Abstract

**Purpose.** Occupations have “implications for individuals, societies, and the earth”. This article focusses on implications of occupation in relation to *the earth* and examines the potential to expand occupational justice beyond anthropocentric viewpoints to honour interspecies justice. **Approach.** A ‘theory as method’ approach is used to explore the literature. Transgressive decolonial hermeneutics informs analysis. **Key issues.** The discussion advances understandings about human occupation in relation to more-than-humans, intersections with human occupations and animals, and ethical relationality. **Implications.** Occupational justice includes honouring interdependence of species, engaging in occupations in ways that are sustainable, considering future generations, and refraining from occupations that have a destructive or detrimental impact on the earth and more-than-humans. The profession has a collective responsibility to honour Indigenous worldviews and Indigenous sovereignty, recognising and welcoming the potential for Western conceptualisations of occupation to be transformed.

### Résumé

**But.** Les occupations ont des « implications pour les personnes, les sociétés et la Terre ». Cet article se penche sur les implications des occupations sur la Terre, et examine le potentiel d'étendre la justice occupationnelle au-delà des points de vue anthropocentriques pour honorer la justice entre les espèces. **Approche.** Une approche de « théorie comme méthode » est utilisée pour explorer la littérature. L'analyse s'appuie sur une herméneutique décoloniale transgressive. **Questions clés.** La discussion présente différentes compréhensions de l'occupation humaine en relation avec les plus qu'humains, les intersections entre les occupations humaines et les animaux, et la relationnalité éthique. **Implications.** La justice occupationnelle consiste notamment à honorer l'interdépendance des espèces, à exercer des occupations de manière durable, en tenant compte des générations futures, et à s'abstenir d'exercer des occupations qui ont un impact destructeur ou préjudiciable sur la terre et les plus qu'humains. La profession a la responsabilité collective d'honorer les visions du monde et la souveraineté autochtones, en reconnaissant et en accueillant le potentiel de transformation des conceptualisations occidentales de l'occupation.

### Introduction

Laliberte Rudman and colleagues (2022) defined occupation as “a wide-ranging expanse of everyday and extraordinary doings of individuals and groups, which have implications for individuals, societies, and the earth” (p. 15). This broad framing expands conceptualisations of occupation beyond Western values and ideologies that privilege individualism, objective scientific rationality, and human

superiority over nature (Laliberte Rudman et al., 2022). The implication of occupation on *the earth* has received scant attention in occupational therapy literature.

The author is from a rural community in Canada, on the traditional lands of the First Nations of the Anishnawbe people of Lac Seul First Nation, raised in a family and community where hunting and fishing for sustenance continues to be commonplace. I have early memories of skinning rabbits and my

family has always ‘owned’ retriever dogs. My current economic status and place of residence provides me the privilege of purchasing locally and sustainably produced foods, including meat, fish, and produce. Raised in a small, remote community, I have always sensed ‘roots’ to the land. On a recently visit home, in the context of COVID-19, I was the only resident at a fishing camp and my only ‘neighbour’ a beaver who came to eat in the evenings. I feel most at peace and at one with myself and the world around me in such settings where I feel kinship to local animals and land and believe that I am no more or less significant than any of these beings.

This paper opens with an introduction to major concepts, examines ‘context’ in relation to occupation, and offers a personal commitment to embracing diverse worldviews.

## Major Concepts

Where conceptualisations of occupations tend to centre on individual and collective interventions, this theoretical paper shifts focus toward human occupation in relation to interspecies, or multispecies, justice. Interspecies justice challenges “human exceptionalism and the violence it enacts, historically and in this era of the Anthropocene” (Tschakert et al., 2021, p. 1). The *Anthropocene* marks the geological period when human industry dramatically and permanently altered the earth, intersecting with and impacted more-than-humans. ‘More-than-human’ refers to all living and non-living entities to which we are connected, such as mammals, trees, rivers, and rocks (Tschakert et al., 2021). Alternate terms include less-than-human, not-fully-human, non-human, other-than-human; however, these terms are viewed as Othering and speciesist.

‘Anthropocentrism’ refers to “the belief that humans are unique or central to the universe” (Moffett, 2010, p. 221) and reflects the propensity to privilege humans over other species and – within such world ordering – to privilege some humans over others. Notions of interspecies justice have not yet entered occupational therapy and occupational science literature, but recognition of social inequities is central to understanding ‘choice,’ ‘possibility,’ collective occupation, resistance, and other related concepts (Laliberte Rudman et al., 2022; Simaan, 2017; Valderrama Núñez et al., 2021).

## ‘Context’ in Relation to Occupation

Models of occupations tend to consider intersections of person, occupation, and context (Reid et al., 2020). Context is often conceived as a ‘container’ in which occupations occurs, impacting participation or quality of performance by individuals (American Journal of Occupational Therapy, 2014). In occupational therapy, this type of reasoning lends itself to interventions aimed at manipulating aspects of the environment with the goal of promoting occupational participation. However, framings of occupation that expound “human control over the environment” are asserted to be “a resounding failure,” with human occupations “at the root of the global disruption of health, economic and social conditions (Ung et al., 2020, p. 15). Delaisse et al.

(2021) assert, “space ought not to be considered as an absolute, static, pre-existing container for people and their occupations, and researchers ought to move away from longstanding dualisms of internal/external, subject/object, material/ideal” (p. 2). The environment is not a fixed or constant place where humans engage in occupation (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015); rather, there exists a dynamic relationality where human occupations constantly act on and alter environments (Christiansen, 1994).

By deliberately viewing humans as constituting the ‘context’ and impacting more-than-humans, occupational justice and occupational rights may be re-examined. Occupational justice relates to a belief that justice involves “participation in occupations suited to each person’s constellation of capabilities and needs to benefit individual and collective health and quality of life” (Kiepek et al., 2022, p. 266). ‘Occupational rights’ was refined by Hammell (2008) as “the right of all people to engage in meaningful occupations that contribute positively to their own well-being and the well-being of their communities” (p. 61). These definitions are ‘anthropocentric,’ which means that the ‘good’ of humankind is a central consideration in occupational rights and justice, whereas other living and non-living entities are absent. Understandings about the potential for occupations to impact or alter the land and relations has received little attention, though a shift is evident (Aoyama, 2014; Lieb, 2022; Pollard et al., 2020; Simó Algado & Ann Townsend, 2015; Wagman, 2014; Wagman et al., 2020). It is acknowledged that “human occupations are causing an unprecedented crisis of environmental sustainability” (Aoyama, 2014, p. 459) and there are calls for occupational therapy education and practices to promote global sustainability goals.

## Honouring Indigenous Worldviews

One principle underpinning this paper is a commitment to reconciliation. The Competencies for Occupational Therapists in Canada document (ACOTRO ACOTUP & CAOT, 2021) articulates expectations that:

Occupational therapists acknowledge and respond to the history, cultures, and social structures that influence health and occupation. They recognize the social, structural, political, and ecological determinants of health... They act on situations and systems of inequity and oppression within their spheres of influence. (p. 13)

Beyond truth telling, acknowledging harm, and enacting justice, reconciliation can be viewed as a relational process where settler colonists value and respect Indigenous sovereignty and where institutions and practices are reshaped according to collective outcomes (Deckha, 2020; Finegan, 2018).

Emery-Whittington (2021) speaks to the “resilience of colonialism” in occupational therapy, entrenched in disciplinary theories, concepts, and philosophies (p. 7). In this paper, Indigenous worldviews are introduced, including learnings from Indigenous authors scholars, who were influential in shaping my personal understandings. I am not Indigenous and do not claim authority or legitimacy over Indigenous

worldviews. I encourage readers to seek the source material to foster deeper understandings. TallBear (2017) notes that Indigenous ontologies<sup>1</sup> are largely absent in the writings of Western scholars, which renders them invisible:

The invisibility of our ontologies, the very few references to them in their [Western thinkers'] writing, and reference to indigenous thought by other theoretical traditions as "beliefs" or artifacts of a waning time to be studied but not interacted with as truths about a living world—all of this is to deny our vibrancy. It is a denial of ongoing intimate relations between indigenous peoples as well as between us [humans] and nonhumans in these lands. We are the living that the new materialists, like so many Western thinkers before them and beside them, refuse to see. (p. 197).

Liboiron (2021) similarly encourages scholars to honour decolonizing practices and "treat Indigenous knowledge as expertise, rather than culture. Cite us" (p. 876). In this paper, I endeavour to draw together diverse knowledges and perspectives to explore complex and interconnected topics pertaining to occupation and relations with the earth.

## Approach

A 'theory as method' approach was used to "reimagine, how theory is not just epistemological or ideological framings, but perhaps, a method for research in and of itself" (Matias, 2021, p. 1) and offers a potential to produce "counterstories" (p. 4). This approach aligns with decolonizing methodologies that view methodology as "always already a co-constitutive space of theory, practice, and ethics" (Higgins & Kim, 2019, p. 113). The researcher "thinks with theory" in ways that hold the potential to "disrupt and displace taken-for-granted ways-of-knowing-in-being" (Higgins & Kim, 2019, p. 114).

I further drew on the theoretical methodology of transgressive decolonial hermeneutics, which aims to theorize collective action and texts in relation to context (Fúnez-Flores, 2021). Fúnez-Flores (2021) describes three steps: Initially, "the primary ontological point of departure is the *social totality* of the *modern/colonial capitalist world-system*" (p. 188). Next, "the *coloniality of power, knowledge, and being*" is interpreted and reconceptualized to explore entanglements between contexts and processes of resistance (p. 188). Finally, institutional tensions are interrogated. Transgressive decolonial hermeneutics is aimed at unsettling an "obsession" with "empirical verification" "by emphasizing that interpretation, that is theorization, is a (geo)political act of knowing always already entangled with the social totality of the modern/colonial capitalist world-system in which social struggles unfold" (p. 195).

My approach was at once resistive of and conforming to dominant perspectives on what constitutes a valid approach to 'knowing' in academia. Transgressive decolonial hermeneutics methodology aims to "unsettle the ontological, epistemological, and methodological limitations" (Fúnez-Flores, 2021, pp. 182–183) imposed by Eurocentrism and empiricism. The intent of this methodology is to "engage in *ethico-political* dialogue with others to comprehend and indeed learn from the texts and contexts" drawing on decolonial ways of knowing

understanding the world around us. Yet, for the purpose of establishing legitimacy in an academic publication, I will present my efforts to implement 'rigorous' and 'valid' methods.

A selective approach was used to identify relevant peer-reviewed articles, books, and book chapters. I began by identifying three theoretical questions to guide source selection:

1. In what ways do human occupations impact other species and the natural environment?
2. How do animals' occupations intersect with human occupations?
3. In what ways might Indigenous knowledges about human relationships with nature shift conceptualisations of occupational justice?

Drawing on an exploratory theoretical methodology rather than a systematic literature review methodology, I did not seek to include all relevant sources on these broad topics. I drew on articles and books that I was familiar with and identified additional sources through extensive review of reference lists. Some articles were recommended by colleagues who had familiarity with the topics. I selected additional articles and books identified through the university library system and Internet searches, using search terms like "interspecies justice," "Indigenous methodology," and ["animals" AND "community"]. Literature was selected with attention to *content* and *methodology*, as the questions I sought to explore extend beyond an intent to gather 'information' towards learning about diverse ways of seeing, understanding, and describing aspects of the world and relations.

I read numerous articles, books, and online documents relating to broad ranging topics from 'the social lives of animals' to 'legal perspectives on reconciliation'; from 'ecological justice' to 'ethical standpoints on owning pets and eating flesh' (e.g., Asch et al., 2018; King et al., 2019; Wohlleben, 2016). I underlined or highlighted all sections that held salience in relation to one of the three questions posed. In social sciences, this might be categorised as 'data extraction,' but it served to build my theoretical conceptualisation of these topics. A pragmatic approach to 'saturation' was used, where 'data collection' ceased when I no longer identified further references that added substantially new information within the identified scope. A research assistant and I transcribed all sections of the sources that I had underlined and reflected on the material through dialogue. I then organised the transcribed ideas into 'themes' (to adopt terminology from social science methodology) and discussed the synthesised ideas with the research assistant.

When seeking sources about Indigenous perspectives on relationships with the natural world, it was important to make efforts to humbly attempt to develop understandings outside my own Western worldview and to share information in ways that do not function to further colonise. To reflect the multivocal nature of this text and to distance myself as holding authority over knowledge shared, I frequently draw on direct citations. When sharing select writings by Indigenous authors about Indigenous worldviews, I do not assume to represent the author's perspectives nor speak on behalf of their communities.

I recognise diversity among Indigenous people globally. It is my intention to honour Indigenous ontologies, cosmologies, and epistemologies (Mills, 2016) as informing shared understandings, while refraining from appropriation or romanticisation.

### Learnings and Musings (or “Findings”)

I introduce here learnings about the Anthropocene as context, interspecies relationships, and justice and rights. Whereas conceptualisations of occupations have tended to centre on individual and collective wellbeing of humans, I share diverse contemporary perspectives that inform collective disciplinary responsibilities toward interspecies justice. From a perspective of relational ethics, notions of justice view humans as but one of the benefactors, and perhaps not the most important.

To enter this discussion, I share perspectives on ‘personhood’ and ‘human’ rights.

### Personhood

Legal definitions of personhood shift over time, affording some people more rights than others. Robinson (2014) explains the personhood of animals as such:

What does it mean to be related to other animals? For the Mi'kmaq it means that humans and animals both experience our lives in the first-person, overcoming fears, having adventures, falling in love, raising families, vanquishing enemies, and having a relationship with *Kisu'lk*, the Creator. Anthropologist Anne-Christine Hornborg writes, “I think it is better to talk about personhood as the common essence of both animals and humans. A human is a human, a beaver is a beaver, but they are both persons.” (p. 22)

Recently, within Western legal systems, more-than-humans are recognised as persons. In New Zealand, the forest called Te Urewera, and the Whanganui River are ‘persons’ with “rights, powers, duties, and liabilities” (Ruru, 2018, p. 219). Ruru (2018) shares, “the Whanganui River is an ancestor of the Whanganui tribe; it is a spiritual and physical entity. It is an indivisible and living whole from the mountains to the sea, incorporating all of its physical and metaphysical elements” (p. 224). In Canada, the Magpie River was granted legal personhood, protecting from future threats related to human development occupations (Lowrie, 2021).

Deckha (2020) observed that “the personhood ascribed to animals in numerous Indigenous legal orders in Canada, as well as underlying non-anthropocentric worldviews where animals are not considered inferior to humans but are to be regarded as kin, should stimulate a new legal conversation in Canadian law about who/what animals are and the legal subjectivity and regard they merit among all those committed to reconciliation” (p. 78).

Stone (2010) advises, “It is not inevitable, nor is it wise, that natural objects should have no rights to seek redress in their own behalf. It is no answer to say that streams and forests cannot have standing because streams and forests cannot speak” (p. 8). Established legal processes are in place to protect ‘persons’ as defined by the law, as with corporations and municipalities.

### ‘Human’ Rights and ‘Worlding With’

Haraway (2016) states that “Nothing makes itself; nothing is really autopoietic or self-organizing...Sympoiesis is a word proper to complex, dynamic, responsive, situated, historical systems. It is a word for worlding-with, in company” (p. 58). This idea of ‘worlding-with’ conveys the interconnectedness of all things and the inseparability of living being and context, with implications for justice. Acknowledgement of intersections between human rights, interspecies justice, and ecological or environmental justice is gaining traction, with some arguing environmental degradation violates human rights to life, health, food, and water and recognise the rights of Indigenous persons and communities in relation to ancestral lands (Atapattu et al., 2021).

The 1991 multinational People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit adopted a number of principles of ‘environmental justice,’ such as the affirmation of “sacredness of Mother Earth, ecological unity and the interdependence of all species, and the right to be free from ecological destruction,” “ethical, balanced and responsible uses of land and renewable resources in the interest of a sustainable planet for humans and other living things, “choices to consume as little of Mother Earth’s resources and to produce as little waste as possible, and ensuring “the health of the natural world for present and future generations” (National Black Environmental Justice Network, 1991). It is expected that humans will honour the interdependence of all species, engage in occupations in ways that are sustainable, consider one’s actions on future generations, and refrain from engaging in occupations in ways that have a destructive or detrimental impact on the earth and more-than-humans. The extent to which these rights are upheld are inconsistent and challenging to enforce, but they can provide guidance and legitimacy toward change. While research indicates most such international treaties have little real impact, those influencing socialisation and normative processes result in longstanding changes (Hoffman et al., 2022).

When speaking of justice and rights, it is important to be cognisant of cultural diversity. For instance, it is explained that “Indigenous cultures do not typically compartmentalize or distinguish between social and legal status as Western cultures do” (Deckha, 2020, p. 84). Gear (2020) imagines ways of being “in which the ‘human’ is no longer ‘central’ but emphatically in-the-midst-of a tumult of flows and forces” (p. 357–358). Under such circumstances, “It matters how humans and non-human critters of all kinds—organic and inorganic—are understood to be bound up with each other, and in what respects and ways” (Gear, 2020, p. 360). Robinson (2014) describes that “because everything on Earth is connected, no part should be exploited or abused. Each part must work in harmony with the rest” (p. 673–674).

### Occupation in the Anthropocene

To date, ecological impacts of occupation on the earth are predominantly examined in disciplines outside occupational therapy and occupational science. Concerns surrounding global sustainability are rapidly expanding, with climate change considered a

significant threat to global health (Watts et al., 2015). The World Federation of Occupational Therapists (2018) published guiding principles pertaining to sustainability and claim “occupational therapists are unwittingly practicing in unsustainable ways by mirroring the normal workings of societies that contribute more widely to global climate change” (p. 9).

Tuck & McKenzie (2015) observe that humans, through occupation, have made “our planet increasingly toxic, unlivable, and at the same time increasingly inequitable” and ask “at what point might this cleavage be sewn back together, might we account for our pasts and to future generations?” (p. 154). Three dimensions of injustice have been identified in relation to climate change: “the inequities associated with global environmental change (e.g., disproportionate impacts on Global South and on Indigenous communities), interspecies injustice (i.e., the effects on other species and the land), and generational injustice (i.e., the effects on future generations)” (Holz, 2013, as cited in Tuck & McKenzie, 2015, p. 161).

Engaging in ecologically unsustainable occupations impacts all people; however, devastating effects tend to disproportionately impact some more-than-others. The term ‘toxic colonialism’ reflects disproportionate generation of waste among affluent, Global North countries exported to poorer and middle-income countries (Atapattu et al., 2021). Effects of environmental degradations are more severely experienced among those who are impoverished (Atapattu et al., 2021). In Canada, as elsewhere, it is observed that “the environmental effects of industrial development – roads, railroads, mining, urbanization, commercial forestry and fishing, agricultural development, overgrazing, and road and powerline construction – and the pollution, introduced species, land alienation, and other impacts accompanying them – have imposed immense harm on Indigenous peoples’ ability to use and manage their lands sustainably” (Turner & Spalding, 2016, p. 281).

### Interspecies Justice and Injustice

Social processes of oppression toward more-than-humans has been conceptualised as entangled with oppression among humans, influenced by colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchy (Atapattu et al., 2021; Corman, 2019; Nibert et al., 2002). Atapattu et al. (2021) assert, “environmental injustice cannot be separated from economic exploitation, race and gender subordination, the marginalization of children, the elderly, immigrants, and persons with disabilities, the ongoing dispossession of Indigenous peoples, and the colonial and postcolonial domination of the Global South” (p. 10). In occupational therapy literature, Simó Algado & Ann Townsend (2015) argue that “doing ecology is necessarily a matter of doing occupational justice” (p. 182), and introduce the term ‘eco-social occupational therapy’ as a means to reduce social disparities, such as poverty.

Gear (2015) describes “Human hierarchies of being are imposed upon human beings (intra-species hierarchies) and upon non-human animals and ecosystems (inter-species hierarchies)” (p. 230). A ‘crisis’ arises because such hierarchies are associated with processes of domination and predation (Gear,

2015). An emerging question in occupational therapy and occupational science is the extent to which we become complicit in injustices when we render invisible collective responsibilities and fail to attend to the impacts of occupation on the land and interspecies relations.

### ‘Animals’

Tschakert et al. (2021) envisions multispecies justice as embracing inclusive and relational ontologies that reject human-nature binaries, cultivating collective knowing and collective living across species, and responding to intersectional injustices and oppression. Prior to delving into this possibility, I consider contemporary relationships between humans and animals. I use the term animals cautiously to convey ideas shared in the literature reviewed, while simultaneously attending to problematic connotations. As Tallbear (2019) asserts, “The word *animal*... it’s used to denigrate, to de-animate, to make some beings less than others and uncontrollable by us and exploitable by us. And that word gets applied to both non-humans and to humans. And it’s really anti-relational; it’s a horrible word” (p. 65). The authors I cite seem to use the term ‘animal’ conscientiously – to classify, not denigrate. Yet, it is important to read with critical reflexivity about the ways in which terms may inadvertently (re)produce Othering and anthropocentrism.

One way to look at relationships between human occupation and animals is the extent to which our occupations impact the wellbeing of animals. The ways humans have ‘developed’ the earth, through occupations of industry like transportation routes, strip mining, and fracking, means that animals often experience a scarcity of habitat, food, and water (Popp & Boyle, 2017; Robinson, 2014). Atapattu et al. (2021) explain the earth is currently undergoing a sixth wave of extinction, with 27,000 species becoming extinct annually.

Humans engage in occupations of ‘production’ and consumption of ‘nonhumans,’ which are viewed by many as exploitative and violent (Calarco, 2019; Tallbear, 2019; Wolfe, 2019). Producing and consuming meat is complexly understood as a personal ‘choice’ embedded in oppressive and unequal social systems. In the literature reviewed, several authors self-identified as educated, economically secure scholars in privileged situations that allow access to more costly, sustainably and locally harvested foods. Wolfe (2019) reflected, “in the culture I live in, the world I live in, I can eat like a king without killing animals” (p. 29). Wolfe notes that for many people, the taking of nonhuman life is necessary for survival. The ‘choice’ to not inflict such violence on more-than humans is a privileged position and not necessarily a moral decision.

Although many Indigenous worldviews honour reciprocal relations between humans and more-than-humans, these relationships can nevertheless be experienced as asymmetrical with humans taking more than they are giving, through practices such as hunting and consuming animals (Deckha, 2020). Showing respect, performing rituals, and engaging in

sustainable practices are ways to respond to and balance inherent power differences (Deckha, 2020). Borrows (2018) expresses the complexities of living harmoniously, saying,

I do not claim Indigenous peoples are natural environmentalists. In fact, this can be a damaging stereotype. Indigenous peoples can be as destructive as other societies on earth – we are part of humanity, not outside of it. Caring for the earth is hard work; it does not always come naturally. Humans must consume to survive. Accordingly we must strive to attenuate our impacts. It is not easy to respect all forms of life. Even in small numbers, humans can place great stress on ecosystems. (p. 49)

A belief that more-than-humans, such as animals, trees, and medicinal or healing plants, are animate creates complex relationships when humans harvest such beings. Similar to other knowledge sharers, Robinson (2014) explained, “animals are perceived as giving themselves to provide food and clothing, shelter and tools, but must not be exploited, over-hunted, or killed for sport, and must be treated with respect, even (perhaps especially) after death” (p. 676). Such worldviews differ vastly from capitalist, Western perspectives that position animals as inferior, resources to be exploited for the benefit of humans, and with potential to be legal ‘property’ (Deckha, 2020).

Alongside discussions of rights of more-than-humans is the tension of ‘ownership.’ Some scholars have adopted terms such as *companion*, *friends*, *neighbours*, or *commensals* to convey “a very different economy and logic of relations” that is co-constitutive, respectful, and mutual (Calarco, 2019, p. 196). Ownership of animals is not viewed as an inherent, universal right by many. Tallbear (2019) explains that according to her cultural worldview, “I was raised implicitly, not explicitly, to understand that nonhuman have their own trajectories. And I felt very averse to the ways that humans mess with nonhuman life paths, and that includes breeding them and making them too dependent on us” (p. 59). From her perspective, relationships between humans and ‘companion animals’ are disruptive to the social world of animals.

The presence and rights of animate beings in relation to occupations of productivity, leisure, eating, and so on are largely unacknowledged in occupation-related literature. In occupational therapy, I would contend that more-than-humans have predominantly been conceptualised as elements of the environment or occupation, therapeutic devices (i.e., service animals), or as sources of spiritual connections. Relationships between occupations and interspecies justice are undeveloped in the profession, which has centred on human wellbeing and human rights from a Western worldview.

### **Ontologies of Kinship and Relations**

Interspecies justice is considered by some as integral to reconciliation and decolonisation efforts in Canada, with a theoretical examination of the nexus between “colonialism, racism, nation building, and speciesism” (Deckha, 2020, p. 78). Burrows proclaimed that reconciliation goes beyond “reconciliation with

other people” and includes “reconciliation with the earth” (Borrows, 2018, p. 49). Deckha (2020) challenges “the abysmal treatment of animals as resources to be exploited under Canadian law as not simply a harm to animals, but also a disavowal of Indigenous worldviews. A “circle of care” attending to restraint and freedom, rather than exploitation, can promote just relations with “Rocks, water, plants, insect, birds, animals, and humans with little social, economic, or political power” (Borrows, 2018, p. 61).

Robinson (2014) shares learnings that “the world around us is imbued with sentient life. Not only animals, but also plants, rocks, water, and geographic locations can have an identity, personality, and spirit” (p. 673). Salmon (2012) describes a kinship with plants, saying, “when [my family] introduced me to individual plants, they also introduced my kinship to the plants and to the land from where they and we had emerged. They were introducing me to my relatives (p. 2). Notions of kinship are a part of the Maori cosmogenic perspective as well, described by Emery-Whittington & Maro (2018):

Tane Mahuta, one of the children of Ranginui (Sky Father) and Papatuanuku (Earth Mother), created the natural world before creating human beings. Our kiwi, weta, manuka trees, are seen as tuakana: those that were created first. Human beings were created last and as such we are the teina, the youngest in the whanau [family]. (p. 14)

Language is a means through which the world is constituted and understood (Robinson, 2014). According to some Indigenous teachings, “Rocks are animate, as are mountains and water and fire and places. Beings that are imbued with spirit, our sacred medicines, our songs, drums, and even stories, are all animate” (Kimmerer, 2017, p. 132). Such worldviews are encapsulated in language, with Kimmerer elaborating, “Of an inanimate being, like a table, we say ‘What is it?’ And we answer Dopwen yewe. Table it is. But of apple, we must say, ‘Who is that being?’ And reply Mshimin yawe. Apple that being is” (p. 132). Languages that acknowledge agency and animacy have implications for ways of understanding and being. Borrows (2018) purports,

If trees, mushrooms, otters, and mosquitos are all endowed with agency, then the scope of our relationships take on different meanings. When we add the sun, moon, and stars to this list we may start to see and hear the world in a different way. Each of these forces possesses powers of communication, which humans can discern if they pay attention. (p. 52)

Western scholars also discuss the need to reconsider “the presupposed differences between humans and animals” and the potential for cross-species solidarity (Singh, 2017, p. 140). Within a radical ontological shift in multispecies ethnography, it is explained, “Animals, plants, and microbes once confined in anthropological accounts to the realm ‘bare life’ - that which is killable - have started to appear alongside humans realm of bios, with legibly biographical and political lives” (Kirksey & Helmreich, 2010, p. 545). Ethnoecology involves a shift in focus to “the study of practical factual knowledge (e.g., about plants and animals that can be used as sources

of food, materials, or medicines, where they are found and how they can be harvested and prepared)” towards “people’s attitudes, world views, and values as they pertain to the environment” (Turner & Spalding, 2016, p. 267). Safina (2015) confronts assumptions around more-than-humans as inferior, pointing out similarities in chemical production between plants and animals (e.g., serotonin, dopamine, glutamate) that serve as neurotransmitters; for instance, “Plants attacked by insects and herbivores emit “distress” chemicals, causing adjacent leaves and neighbouring plants to mount chemical defenses” (p. 23).

Brighten (2011) provides a number of examples among Indigenous cultures where humans and ‘animals’ share social-ontological categorisation:

The Rock Cree, for instance, believe that animals possess *ahcak*, “the seat of identity, perception and intelligence”, just as humans do. The Waswanipi perceive that animal persons “act intelligently, and have wills and idiosyncrasies, and understand and are understood by men”. The Makah, Inuit and Inupiat conceive of whales as volitional beings, more intelligent and powerful than humans. The James Bay Cree word for person, *iiyiyuu*, applies equally to humans and animals. The Gitxaala, likewise, conceive of no distinction between humans and animals; both are considered “social beings”. The Ojibwa ontology also includes a “person” class for which “neither animal nor human characteristics define categorical differences in the core of being”. The Chipewyan believe that animals are persons inherently possessing *inkonze*—“power and knowledge”—that they teach to humans. The Mistassini envision human-animal relations as “[exchanges] between persons [at an] equivalent level”. (p. 60–61)

Looking beyond an anthropocentric view of occupation, one can see more-than-humans engaging in occupation. Wohlleben (2016) describes nest construction by squirrels:

[T]he interior is cushioned with soft moss that helps conserve heat and provides a comfortable place to sleep. Comfortable? Yes, animals value comfort, too, and squirrels don’t like twigs poking into their backs while they’re trying to sleep any more than we do. A soft moss mattress guarantees a restful night.” (p. 7)

Understanding more-than-humans as sentient and animate is an ontological position from which to view the world. Individuals and collectives learn “both *from* the land and *with* the land” (Simpson, 2017, p. 150). Borrows (2018) refers to the teachings of elder Dr. Basil Johnson, who describes the natural world as a source for learning and making judgements, where “authority, precedent, and rules are triggered by observing the winds, waters, rocks, plants, and animals, and describing what we see in this light” (p. 51).

Alongside these observations are calls for critical reflexivity about the extent to which one can speak on behalf of another. Corman (2019) contends, “we need to build a kind of critical consciousness into animal movements, which are pretty brazen about being able to, for feeling able to, speak on behalf of others” (p. 47).

Within occupational therapy and occupational science literature, there is increased commitment to ‘decolonisation’ (Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists, 2018; Emery-Whittington, 2021; Fijal & Beagan, 2019; Restall et al., 2019). Part of this commitment may be to re-envision and transform ways in which the ‘context’ is construed and constructed through language, models, and concepts. Bringing such understandings into notions of justice and rights would mark a dramatic shift from dominant Western perspectives.

## Justice and Rights

Haraway (2016) asks an important question, as we move towards revisiting the concepts of occupational justice and occupational rights: “What happens when human exceptionalism and bounded individualism, those old saws of Western philosophy and political economics, become unthinkable in the best sciences, whether natural or social?” (p. 30). If we recognise that occupation has broader implications than human-centred health and well-being, with implications for the earth and more-than-humans, how might our understandings of ‘occupational justice’ and ‘occupational rights’ be re-envisioned? Tschakert et al. (2021), for example, call for decentring of the human and the individual with a vision of justice as “relational and focused on inclusive, interacting, functioning, and flourishing environments” (p. 2). Starblanket & Stark (2018) encourage us to:

Imagine the transformations that could occur when humans begin to realize that we are not neutral in the face of crises that surround us, but instead recognize that through our choices we have the potential to actively change the world we inhabit. There is thus an important difference between *understanding* our place in the world as situated within relations of interdependence with all of creation and *living* in a way that carries out our responsibilities within these relationships (p. 177).

Ladner (2018) describes “living the good life (*miyo pimat’-siwin*)” as “living collectively in accordance within an ecological contextuality, or an ethical relationality” (p. 245). Ethical relationality refers to an ecological relationality, where people are “enmeshed in webs of relationships with each other and the other entities that inhabit the world. . . those entities that give and sustain life” (Donald, 2012, p. 103).

Drolet et al. (2020) build on the concept of occupational justice to introduce ‘intergenerational occupational justice.’ They advocate for occupations to align with sustainable approaches, with a perspective toward the implications for future generations. They note, “What humans have done and what they do today will have an intergenerational impact on the ecosystem and on occupational rights of tomorrow’s humans.” (p. 421). Beyond this, the authors present a concept of ‘occupational duties’ in juxtaposition to individual ‘occupational rights.’ Occupational duties are the “responsibility of each person (and community) to limit their own freedom to allow others to actualize their occupational rights” (p. 423).

When reflecting on the impact of human occupation on the land and implications for broadening conceptualisations of

occupational justice and occupations rights, Indigenous ontologies, such as those of ethical relationality, may open us to new ways of understanding. Simpson (2017) contends, “The academy has continually refused to recognize and support the validity, legitimacy, rigor, and ethical principles of Nishnaabeg intelligence and the system itself” (p. 171). Indeed, such perspectives have largely been absent in scholarship about ‘context’ and ‘justice’ in occupational therapy and occupational science. Yet, in this process of openness to learning and understanding, Starblanket & Stark (2018) further cautions that, “Indigenous knowledge is too often treated as an additive to Western knowledge, eclipsing its transformative powers” (p. 179).

## Discussion and Implications

In this paper, I presented key learnings emerging from a review of select literature regarding human occupation in relation to more-than-humans, the intersection with human occupations and animals, and worldviews presented by Indigenous scholars about the relationship between people and the land. Starblanket & Stark (2018) observe that “Indigenous knowledge is most often given consideration or taken up by Western thinkers when there is either a *vacancy* or *bankruptcy* in Western thought, replicating a power binary between Western and Indigenous knowledge” (p. 181). As a non-Indigenous scholar, I have attempted to draw perspectives together, engage in critical reflexivity, and limit my reproduction of dualisms, binaries, and processes of domination; however, my own knowledge is partial and situated – ‘understanding’ is an ongoing, relational, and generational process. To conclude, I present preliminary reflections to open discussions related to context, reconciliation, occupational justice, and occupational rights.

### Context Revisited

A key insight that emerged was the inadequacy of the concept of ‘context’ or ‘environment’ in models of occupation to convey de-centred, non-anthropocentric interactions between people, the land, and more-than-humans. Worldviews that understand humans as embedded in reciprocal relationships may challenge attempts to disentangle and distinguish between person and context, seeing them as one in the same. In other words, humans are embedded in contexts while simultaneously *being* the context. The potential for occupation to alter the environment is under-developed in occupation-related literature, essentially silencing the potential for occupation to be locally and globally destructive or protective. Scholarship that involves analysis of context may be enhanced through deliberate exploration of i) context as dynamic, shifting and interactive between species, ii) the ways in which context shapes and is shaped by social practice, iii) multiple realities about how context is experienced and understood, iv) place-based processes of colonisation; v) land and more-than-human relationships, and vi) relational ethics and accountability (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015).

## Occupational Justice and Occupational Rights

It is increasingly recognised in national and international laws, legislation, and principles that human rights are inseparable from ecological justice as the rights of more-than-humans. As concepts of occupational justice and occupational rights continue to evolve (Drolet et al., 2020; Ung et al., 2020), further exploration of formal and informal theories that extend beyond anthropocentric definitions is warranted.

Occupational therapy practices are tightly connected to individual and, increasingly, collective health and wellbeing. The significance of occupation on this earth is broader and we risk becoming complicit if we assume ‘neutrality’ in the types of occupations we promote, condone, or ignore. We need to critically reflect on ethical questions regarding justice and reciprocal relationships with more-than-humans.

Justice and rights are collective responsibilities extending beyond individual conduct. Not all people are equitably positioned to undertake sustainable practices that would infringe on individual and community survival. Thus, ecological justice, interspecies justice, occupational justice, and equity are highly intertwined.

We have an obligation to consider implications related to honouring the interdependence of all species, engaging in occupations in ways that are sustainable, considering one’s actions on future generations, and refraining from engaging in occupations in ways that have a destructive or detrimental impact on the earth and more-than-humans.

### Reconciliation

Tully (2018) presents reconciliation to involve “reconciliation of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people (human beings) with the living earth: that is, reconciliation *with* more-than-human living beings (plants, animals, ecosystems, and the living earth as a whole)” (p. 83). In occupational therapy and occupational science, if we consider that genuine decolonisation is not a matter of ‘integrating’ Indigenous worldviews into Western models or practices, but is a transformative, ontological shift with respect to ways of doing and being, how might that influence our approaches to knowledge sharing, learning and teaching, and occupational therapy practices? Tully (2018) challenges us to consider, “Our relationships with each other and our relationships with the living earth are far too interdependent and entangled to treat their reconciliation separately, as if they were independents” (p. 83). From such a perspective, how might we reconceptualised notions occupation and occupational justice?

### Future Directions

As occupational therapy and occupational science continue to evolve, our responsibilities to the earth and more-than-humans are worth consideration. Models of occupation may be revisited to evaluate the extent to which humans are represented as separate and distinct from the environment, the extent to which human dominance is reinforced, and the ways in which relationships with more-than-humans are negated. Re-envisioning



models of occupations ought to be approached with a commitment toward honouring Indigenous worldviews and a willingness to dispense practices and education that function to further colonise through occupation.

Research, as one of many diverse forms of knowledge generation and knowledge sharing, can be directed towards understanding occupation as worlding-with more-than-humans – in ways that have the propensity to exploitative and damaging or harmonious and reciprocal. Approaches to scholarly inquiry may involve deliberate decisions to learn *with* more-than-humans in situ. Furthermore, recognising that oppression, environmental degradation, and toxic colonialism are *outcomes of human occupation* affords occupational therapists and occupational therapy organisations a voice at decision-making tables.

Indigenous knowledges have historically been relegated, discouraged, silenced, demeaned, and even prohibited. Knowledge pertaining to occupational therapy practices, scholarship, models, and education emerged in this context of silencing and shaming. With commitments to reconciliation, equity, and justice, it is the responsibility of the profession to embrace opportunities to invite diverse worldviews and Indigenous knowledges and (re)envision concepts of occupation.

### Limitations

Throughout writing, I kept in mind Starblanket & Stark (2018), who said, “it is not enough to make space for Indigenous knowledge. We must allow for this space to be reconfigured by Indigenous knowledge” (p. 182). I do not presume sufficient understanding of the diverse worldviews cited here to lead any such transformation. Instead, I see this paper as a starting point and an invitation for a broader, collective approach to examine diverse ways of knowing and being when seeking to understand notions of occupation and justice.

### Conclusion

Deepening understandings about anthropocentrism, colonisation, and reconciliation invites critical reflection on occupational therapy knowledges, ethical relationality, and practices. In what started as a simple attempt to understand the ways in which human occupation intersects with other species, guided by a commitment to decolonisation, this paper uncovered complex perspective pertaining to power, knowledge, and being. Guided by transgressive decolonial hermeneutics, central concepts in occupational therapy, such as context, occupational justice, and occupational rights, are interrogated. Anthropocentric approaches to understanding health and well-being are confronted and readers are encouraged to reflect on relationality of human occupation with the earth.

### Key Messages

- We have an obligation to consider implications related to honouring the interdependence of all species, engaging in occupations in ways that are sustainable, considering one’s

actions on future generations, and refraining from engaging in occupations in ways that have a destructive or detrimental impact on the earth and more-than-humans.

- Radical transformation of concepts of occupation and purported roles of occupational therapy may be required when re-envisioning ‘occupational’ justice from non-anthropocentric perspectives.
- Indigenous worldviews and voices have been conspicuously silenced in occupational therapy. The profession has a collective responsibility to honour Indigenous worldviews and Indigenous sovereignty, recognising and welcoming the potential for conceptualisations of doing, being, becoming, and belonging to be radically transformed.


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This project did not require ethics approval.

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### Note

1. Ontology refers to questions about “what exists, and how things that exist are understood and categorized” (O’Leary, 2007).

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