Young people's experiences of and learning in urban woodlands

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Introduction:

It is often argued[1] that **children and young people are 'disconnected' from nature** and suffering a so-called 'nature-deficit disorder'[2]. A range of research highlights the **benefits of woodland experiences** and interventions, such as outdoor learning programmes, are increasingly being implemented[3].

In such narratives, the **cure is the restorative property of nature itself** rather than what is **done with(in) nature**[4]. However, 'nature' in this sense is often depicted in a **nature/culture binary** - a pure, untouched, 'out there' static site of discovery for humans[5], rather than the messy, informal and scrubby realities of, particularly, urban natures. Often neglected is the intersection of everyday and complex **experiences of children with all kinds of (urban) nature**. Emergent research questions these nature/culture binaries and provides opportunity to consider diverse conceptions of 'natures' and forms of encounter[6].

Research of diverse encounters with urban woodlands is **timely and significant**:

- Birmingham as a 'biophilic' city - what does this mean to young people?
- Environmental impacts of the Anthropocene demands new ways to consider our relationships with nature
- Research in alternative educations is emergent
- Increasingly diverse urban identities - does intersectionality affect encounter?

Research aims:

This research aims to explore the **diverse ways** in which young people engage with urban woodlands within UK cities. Through a **comparative study** of formal Forest School groups and informal independent groups of young people, it aims to highlight **entanglements, uses and meanings** of urban woodlands (and to stretch ideas of what urban woodlands might consist of). In doing so it is hoped this research may trigger a **re-evaluation** of (adult) perceptions of young people's activities in such settings.

Methods:

- Qualitative, **ethnographic** field-work in UK urban woodlands
- Working with both Forest Schools and informal groups
- **Creative methodologies** including using video technologies, walk-around interviews, participant observation and creative workshops using materials of the forest
- Working with diverse young people aged 10-14

Theoretical framework:

This research shall think with **non-representational** and **new materialist** theories to consider young people's relationships with 'nature' not as disconnected but as **entangled, embodied and relational**. That is to say that young people are already-always part of nature, rather than separate. Non-representational work supports this through considering the *doing* and the emotional or affective.

In thinking with **materialities (e.g. trees, animals, mud, sticks, leaves)** and **more-than-human interactions** it becomes possible to witness alternative uses, learning, encounters and knowledge(s) that may be youth-initiated (rather than adult-led). In the embodied and **emotional** encounters young people may have with(in) urban woodlands, *other* alternative educations and ways of knowing may be being cultivated.

Impacts:

- Contributions to growing academic debate concerning a) young people's engagement in urban natures and spaces b) alternative forms of education
- Contribution to new materialist theory application within children's geographies
- Contributions to learning for Forest Schools practitioners, urban woodland management services, landowners and wider youth and community groups.
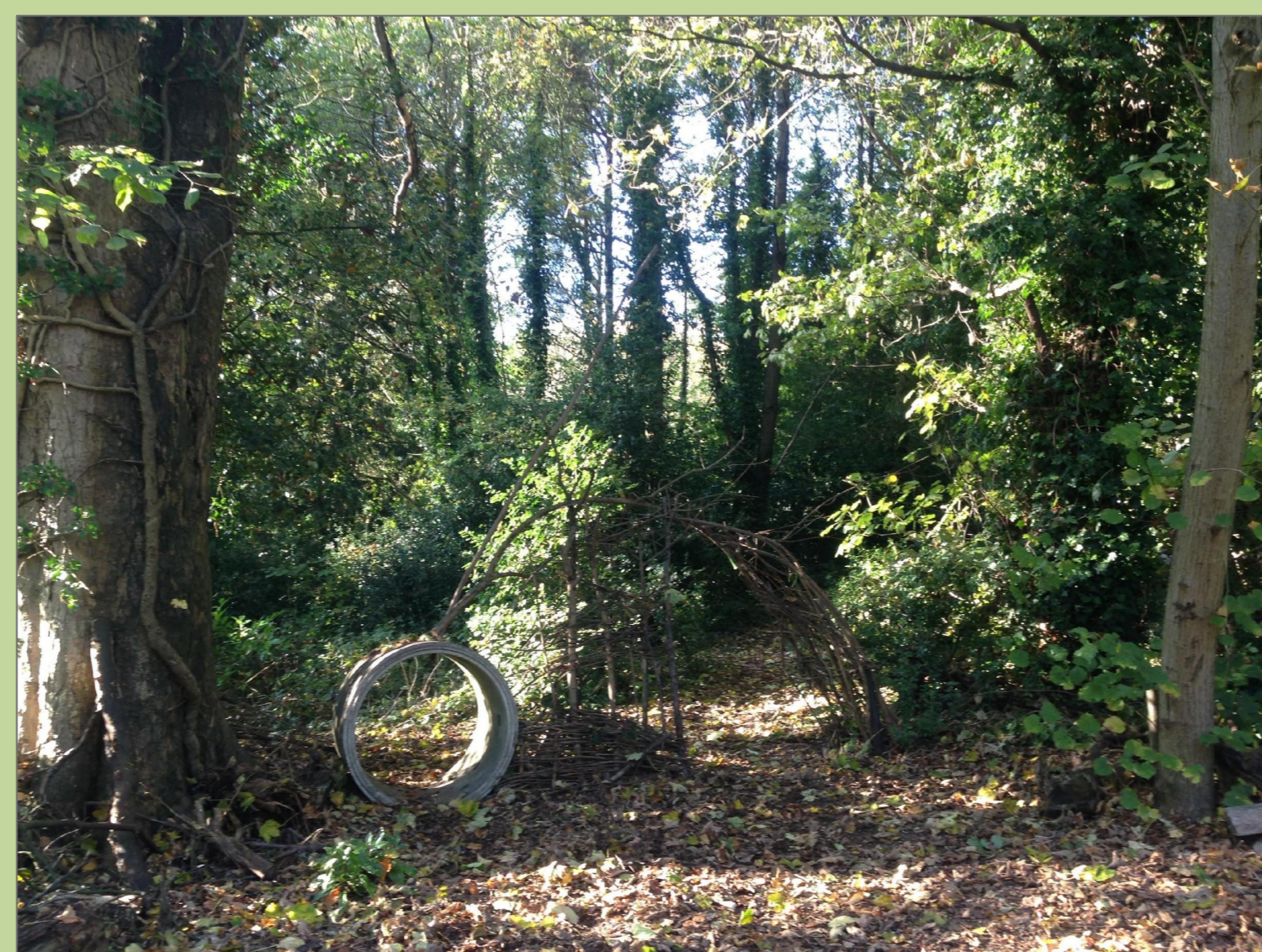
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