

# Thinking About Inheritance Through the Figure of the Anthropocene, from the Antipodes and in the Presence of Others

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**ABSTRACT** Modes of thinking matter. In this article we engage with the figure of the Anthropocene as the impetus for rethinking the messy environmental legacies of Australian settler colonialism that we have inherited. We do this rethinking in a small rural valley community, where the intractable realities of human and more than human settler colonial relations are played out on a daily basis. We also try to do this rethinking collectively, in the presence of other animals with whom our inherited pasts, our mundane everyday presents and our uncertain futures are inextricably enmeshed. What comes of all this thinking is a common account of mutual multispecies vulnerabilities and of collective agencies that recasts the dominant tales of a singular Anthropocene and the conventional human-centred inheritances of a rural Australian place.

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## Introduction

Thinking matters. Beyond this, it also matters what semiotic/material nodes or figures we think *through*,<sup>1</sup> where we think *from*<sup>2</sup> and whom we think *with*.<sup>3</sup> In this article, we pick up on some recent feminist debates within the environmental humanities to think about the question of inheritance through the paradoxical figure of the Anthropocene. Our thinking is also firmly

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<sup>1</sup> Donna Haraway, "Distinguished Lecture," Arizona State University, Institute for Humanities Research [video] 2013, accessed 3 February 2015, <http://ihr.asu.edu/news-events/news/2013-distinguished-lecturer-donna-haraway-reading-group>

<sup>2</sup> Kay Anderson, "Mind over Matter? On Decentering the Human in Human Geography," *Cultural Geography* 21, no.1 (2014): 3-8.

<sup>3</sup> Isabelle Stengers, "Cosmopolitics: Learning to Think with Sciences, Peoples and Natures," Public lecture. The Situating Science Knowledge Cluster, St. Marys, Halifax, Canada, 5 March 2012, accessed 3 February, 2015, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ASGwo02rh8>

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situated. We are thinking and writing from the Antipodes, from the messy legacies of Australian settler colonialism that we have inherited. More specifically, through a series of interludes and musings, we think and write from a small rural valley community in the Southern Tablelands of New South Wales. It is in this place that we are implicated in the intractable realities of human and more than human settler colonial relations that are played out on a daily basis. The interludes are inspired by Kathleen Stewart's performative technique of taking everyday incidents from our own lives and relating them in the third person 'she.'<sup>4</sup> We hope this tension between the 'we' of the musings, and the 'she' of the interludes, opens an intimate space of affective engagement for the reader.

### Interlude 1



**Figure 1.** Wee Jasper Valley. Image courtesy of Lesley Instone.

*She drives down the valley past the paddocks and fences, sheep and cattle, past the 1080 poison signs warning of baiting for dingoes and wild dogs, and the kangaroo and wombat road kill. She is on her way to her home in the conservation reserve at the end of the valley. Her exhaust gases mix with a soft breeze carrying smells of gums and manure. At her place she lets the dogs out of the car and they rush off to harass the water dragons along the creek. As she enters her house she's greeted by the kookaburra and magpies who frequent her verandah. She*

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<sup>4</sup> Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

*unpacks the car, careful not to tread in the piles of wombat poo. A sparrow catches her eye and she wonders what to make of the mess of inheritance.*



**Figure 2.** Micalong Creek Conservation Reserve. Image courtesy of Affrica Taylor.

This valley is not just a pastoral-conservationist assemblage. Its legacies are ancient, multiple, complex and ongoing. They far exceed the conceits of today's dominant white settler narratives of "improvement" and "protection." As in all other parts of Australia, this valley has been made and remade by many actors, human and nonhuman, not just those featured in the heroic white male settler histories of the last 200 years.

Despite white settler projections of untamed land/wild nature tropes onto the country (and upon which both "improvement" and "protection" narratives are predicated) there is growing recognition that prior to British colonisation, it was the sophisticated land management practices of Indigenous people, such as controlled seasonal burning, that ensured that much of the Australian landscape appeared more akin to a carefully cultivated and manicured "estate" than an unpeopled wilderness.<sup>5</sup> The Nggunawal people and their ancestors, the Indigenous custodians of this valley's region, are central among the human actors who have contributed to shaping this valley as a nature-culture assemblage. For tens of millennia they have cared for this country, actively fostered its biodiversity and left a lasting imprint on the valley.

The valley's white settler occupation only began in the 1820s, when the land was gazetted for sheep pastoralism. It was hastened some 30-40 years later, when the valley became a well-travelled route to the gold fields further south. The 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial pastoral

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<sup>5</sup> Bill Gammage, *The Biggest Estate on Earth: How Aborigines Made Australia* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2011).

“settlement” of the valley effected the dispossession of the local Ngunnawal people—who were eventually forced off their ancestral lands. Those who survived this displacement eventually re-congregated late in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in fringe camps in nearby settlements and reserves such as Yass, Brungle and Cootamundra.<sup>6</sup>

White settlement precipitated a cascade of changes, starting with the cessation of the Indigenous land management practices that had ensured the flourishing of multi-species cohabitation in the valley for thousands of years. Land clearing and fencing, the introduction of new plants and animals, and the declaration of local wildlife as vermin or pests shifted human-animal relations. Domestication was prioritised, and the systematic eradication of animals such as kangaroos, wombats, dingos and rabbits, that were seen to threaten pastoralism, was undertaken. However, the ruggedness and steepness of the country resisted total clearing and today, following the revaluing of native nature in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, large areas are preserved for their “wilderness” values. In this way, settler colonist legacies have divided the landscape into productive land and conservation land, imposing a dualistic remit and uneasy cohabitation.

And yet this valley is much more than the sum of different forms of Indigenous and settler human agency. Human agency has always been entwined with the forces of the nonhuman and the inhuman: Ngunnawal people, settlers, bush fires, wombats, kangaroos, horses, sheep, rabbits, wild pigs, volcanoes, earthquakes, leaching chemicals, dripping limestone caves, erosion, mountain creeks, rocks, bushwalkers, sheep farmers, campers, fish and all, have variously inscribed, reinscribed and shaped this valley. It is a constellation of different entities and forces converging in different combinations at different times. To use Doreen Massey’s terms, this valley is a dynamic, heterogeneous “thrown together” political place event.<sup>7</sup> Our inheritance is the sum of these complex human-nonhuman-space-time-semiotic-material place convergences. Thinking about inheritance in this colonised heterogeneous place evokes eventful and often-fraught relations between human and more-than-human cohabitants. It requires us to think collectively with others.

### Collective Thinking

As Isabelle Stengers reminds us: “The time is over when we considered ourselves the only true actors of our history, freely discussing if the world is available for our use or should be protected.”<sup>8</sup> Instead of reiterating the kind of human-exceptionalist and human-centric thinking that figures human as separate from the rest of the world—whether as its masters, managers or guardians—we are interested in new modes of cognition, of strategically practising new ways of knitting ourselves back into the world by thinking *with* it.<sup>9</sup> We set out to perform what Stengers describes as “collective thinking in the presence of others” as a way of producing a

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<sup>6</sup> Peter Kabaila, *Wiradjuri Places: The Murrumbidgee River Basin* (Canberra, Black Mountain Projects, 1998); Carl Brown *et al.*, *Stories of the Ngunnawal* (Canberra, The Journal of Healing, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London & Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> Isabelle Stengers, “Cosmopolitics.”

<sup>9</sup> Freya Matthews, “*Strategia: Thinking with or Accommodating the World,*” in *Manifesto for Living in the Anthropocene*, ed. Katherine Gibson, Deborah Rose & Ruth Fincher (New York: Punctum Books, 2015).

“common account” of the world.<sup>10</sup> This necessarily means putting preconceived ideas of our place in the world at risk. It means risking rethinking dominant notions about nature and our own fraught relationship to the world. “Collective thinking in the presence of others” requires us to slow down, to be present enough to notice the multiple presences of others, and to risk re-attaching ourselves to the far more than human worlds in which we have always actually lived.<sup>11</sup>

## Interlude 2



**Figure 3.** *Goanna up the tree at Micalong Creek. Image courtesy of Lesley Instone.*

*The summer is extremely hot—climate change is biting, people say. She refrains from swimming in the creek as the water snakes have given her a fright, and instead she follows her dogs and sits under the dense shade of a fir tree. There’s a goanna half way up the tree, and king parrots take up the lower branches. All sit quietly enveloped by the heat. A sort of “we” opens up.<sup>12</sup> Will the Anthropocene draw us together or wrench us apart she wonders?*

Our path to collective thinking in the Anthropocene leads us to prise open the “we” that charges this valley’s current multispecies assemblages with at least some “lines of

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<sup>10</sup> Isabelle Stengers, “The Cosmopolitical Proposal,” in *Making Things: Public Atmospheres of Democracy*, ed. Bruno Latour and P. Weibel (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 2002.

<sup>11</sup> Lesley Instone, “Risking Attachment in the Anthropocene,” in *Manifesto for Living in the Anthropocene*, ed. Katherine Gibson, Deborah Rose & Ruth Fincher (New York: Punctum Books, 2015).

<sup>12</sup> Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*, 11.

potential.”<sup>13</sup> This is a deliberate strategy to counter the trajectories of anthropogenic species loss and other forms of destruction that have altered the valley’s landscapes and lifeworlds since British colonisation. In pursuit of some kind of “modest” and “partial recuperations” in this time of unprecedented loss and destruction,<sup>14</sup> we follow the movements and encounters of all kinds of animals in this valley (human, companion, native, feral and pastoral), enmeshed as they are, we are, in webs of shared histories and futurities. We do so in order to grapple with the possibilities of our entangled inheritances and precarious futures in these ecologically challenging times. We ask how we might create new modes of relation that foster the flourishing of all life forms, rather than shifting towards technocratic human survivalism. We wonder how thinking collectively in the presence of other animals in the valley might help us to respectfully respond to our collective inheritances and to our shared future challenges. Here, land and water snakes, tunneling wombats, feral pigs, and swarming mosquitoes remind us that these challenges are messy, often unpredictable, infused with contradictory feelings of love, dislike, fear and wellbeing that prompt us to face the fraught relations between multispecies coexistence and violence.

### Thinking Through the Figure of the Anthropocene

The proposal that we have now shifted from the Holocene into a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene, is supported by scientific evidence that high impact human activities have fundamentally changed the earth’s biospheric and geospheric systems.<sup>15</sup> It is a move to seek official acknowledgement that “humans have become a global geophysical force.”<sup>16</sup> It is also an urgent call to recognise that accelerating anthropogenic changes are now threatening the kind of life on earth that we have known in the Holocene.<sup>17</sup>

While we accept the science of accelerating anthropogenic change, we have mixed feelings about the implications and consequences of the naming of the Anthropocene. This is because the name “Anthropocene” risks reaffirming human-centric conceits and the blind faith in exceptional human agency that has compelled many of our species to radically alter, “improve upon,” and exploit the world’s resources with a delusional sense of separation and impunity.<sup>18</sup> We are aware how easily the Anthropocene can gesture towards a geo-sublime, towards an extra-ordinary, abstract and universal world. We are wary that calls for urgent action in the name of the Anthropocene might paradoxically justify more control in the form of intensified environmental management through to the grandiosities of global geo-engineering—the kinds of “fixes” that got us into this mess in the first place.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>14</sup> Donna Haraway “Distinguished lecture.”

<sup>15</sup> Paul Crutzen, “Geology of Mankind,” *Nature* 415 (2002): 23.

<sup>16</sup> Will Steffen, Paul Crutzen, and John McNeill, “The Anthropocene: Are humans now Overwhelming the Great Forces of Nature?” *Ambio* 36, no. 8 (2007).

<sup>17</sup> Jan Zalasiewicz, Mark Williams, Will Steffen and Paul Crutzen. “The New World of the Anthropocene,” *Environmental Science and Technology* 44, no. 7 (2010).

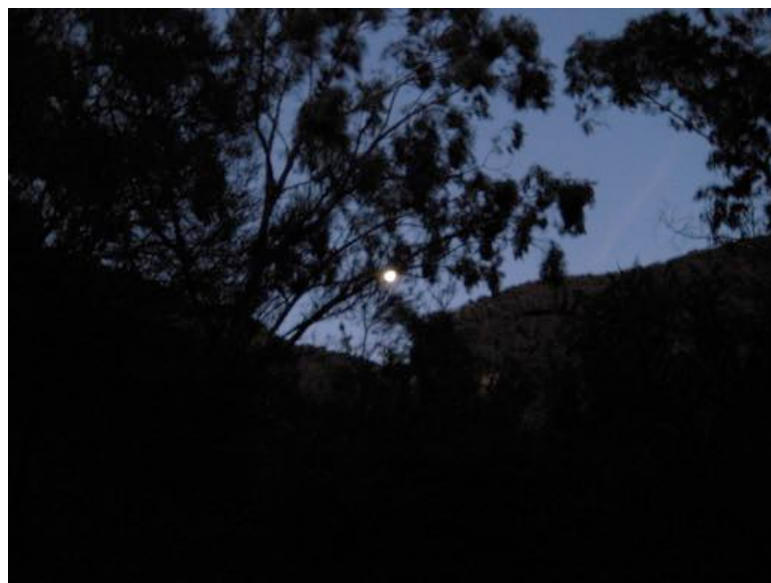
<sup>18</sup> Haraway, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin,” *Environmental Humanities* 6, (2015): 159-165.

<sup>19</sup> Eileen Crist. “Provocation: On the Poverty of our Nomenclature,” *Environmental Humanities* 3 (2013): 129-147.

There are, however, other possibilities. If viewed as a potentially transformative naming event with complex affordances, rather than as a scientific validation to scramble for yet another heroic techno fix, debates over the Anthropocene can open a space for constructive circumspection and thoughtful response. Kay Anderson reminds us that we can use the “emerging paradox” that pivots around the question of human exceptionalism triggered by the naming of the Anthropocene, to reframe human intelligence not as a means to control the world but as a means to recognise our limits and to re-join the rest of the world.<sup>20</sup> As she points out: “human intelligence is invoked precisely in an acknowledgment of the [finite] materiality of human life; exactly in the recognition, then, that we don’t exist on some other or otherworldly plane somehow distinct from the rest of the world’s life-forms.”<sup>21</sup>

Other feminist scholars are also thinking through the paradoxical figure of the Anthropocene as an opportunity to take stock of the dangers of human solipsisms and to use it as an interruptive thinking device. Inspired by feminist environmental philosopher Val Plumwood’s life and work, Australian scholars call for a new ethics of co-transformation and a new mode of living in the Anthropocene.<sup>22</sup> They speak of the Anthropocene as a spur to action, to resituate the human within an ecological domain and to rethink the nonhuman within the domain of ethics. In a similar vein, we engage with the figure of the Anthropocene as an additional impetus to reconfigure our place and agency in the world as one among many species. We do this by attending to the ways we are mutually affecting and being affected, mutually shaping and being shaped through our everyday encounters. We do it through thinking in the presence of others.

### Interlude 3



**Figure 4.** *Dark night in Micalong Creek. Image courtesy of Lesley Instone.*

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<sup>20</sup> Kay Anderson, “Mind over Matter? On Decentering the Human in Human Geography.”

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>22</sup> Katherine Gibson, Ruth Fincher and Deborah Rose eds., *Manifesto for Living in the Anthropocene* (New York: Punctum Books, 2015).

*It's a dark outside. The waning moon has only just risen, and she's forgotten to take a torch. She's walking back to her house along the dirt road with all three dogs. The young larrikin one dashes ahead, barking frantically. The others heave on their leads, and start barking too. It's a wombat. She tugs back the leaded dogs and attempts to herd the young one away from the wombat. She's trying to protect the wombat from the barking dogs, but it's hard to see what's going on. They're small breeds not likely to attack, but she doesn't want them harassing the wombat on its home territory. And then it happens. The wombat charges. Dogs and woman flee. In shock she drops the leads and they all run in different directions. She feels, what Lingis calls, the "jump of affect," and is catapulted into a kind of powerful and involuntary learning.<sup>23</sup> The jump of affect can grab you viscerally, make you pay attention in a different way and tune you into the vibrancy of the ordinary.*

Thinking in the presence of other animals, within our everyday relations as well as through our surprising encounters with them, is a sort of "learning to be affected" that helps us towards a modest apprehension of the "how" of inheritance.<sup>24</sup> For Haraway, the notion of inheritance poses the question of accountability.<sup>25</sup> For her it is "coming to terms with the world we live in that forces the question of 'what is to be done.'" She insists that the important question is *how* to inherit.<sup>26</sup> For geo-history *is* inheritance, and we are deeply implicated in the conditions of our common inheritance in personal, political and intellectual ways.

### **Thinking From Where We Are**

Thinking through the figure of the Anthropocene and in the presence of others not only helps us to come to terms with the world in which we live, but it also reminds us that there is no external standing position, no place outside of our geo-historical inheritances. Like all other places, the valley we coinhabit is woven into global concerns and conversations about climate change, threatened species, sustainable farming practices and possible futures. When we think from where we are, we can see how the material-semiotic particularities of our Australian settler colonial inheritance are entangled in the convergence of the human and natural histories that constitute the Anthropocene.<sup>27</sup> At a local level, the colonising assemblage of this valley's dammed river, its cleared hillsides, the cattle and sheep that graze its "pasture improved" grasslands, its disrupted nutrient cycles, all contribute to the changes that constitute the Anthropocene, which concurrently reshapes the valley through climate change, exacerbated droughts and floods, resource depletion, land degradation and species extinctions. In this sense the Anthropocene is both effect and agent. It is both the result of colonial settler

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<sup>23</sup> Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*, 7.

<sup>24</sup> Bruno Latour, "How to Talk about the Body? The Normative Dimension of Science Studies," *Body and Society* 10 (2004): 205-229.

<sup>25</sup> Nicholas Gane, "When we Have Never Been Human, What is to be Done?: Interview with Donna Haraway," *Theory Culture Society* 23 (2006): 145.

<sup>26</sup> Donna Haraway, "Speculative Fabulations for Technoculture's Generations: Taking Care of Unexpected Country," *Australian Humanities Review*, 50 (2011).

<sup>27</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry* 35 (2009): 197-222.



practices and an agent shaping future possibilities. These are the conditions of inheritance that only come into being in the situated geo-histories of human-inhuman-nonhuman entanglement. Things never just are. They are never just there.

#### **Interlude 4**



**Figure 5.** *Wombat burrow under the house at Micalong Creek. Image courtesy of Affrica Taylor*

*It was after an unusually wet spring that the wombat set up residence under her house. The ranger's theory was that its creek-side burrow was probably washed away in last year's record-breaking flood. The wombat has no truck with the violence of property, with its gridded landscape and no trespassing signs. It moves to a different pattern and finding nice dry soil under her house, starts to dig. Urged on by the traces of colonialism resonant in the earth, paws move faster, burrows expand and foundations quiver. She catches a slight movement in the soles of her feet and feels the precariousness of other creatures, like herself, whose belonging in this place is not assured.*



**Figure 6.** Wombat burrow under the water tank at Micalong Creek. Image courtesy of Affrica Taylor

*At first she was quite enchanted by the idea of cohabiting at such close quarters with a wombat, and she didn't really expect it to stay. That was over four years ago now. She's grown accustomed to its gruntings and scrapings and bumpings in the night, and assumedly the wombat's not too phased by living with her smells and noises either. It ignores her small dog's efforts to bail it up and watches as the dog retreats to the safety of the verandah. Wombats love to dig, always renovating and extending their subterranean homes. So the holes under her house just keep getting bigger and bigger. Last week she arrived to find the wombat had undermined her new water tank, upending it and pressing it hard against one of the structural posts. She had to completely empty it to prevent further damage. Precious water lost. This is what the farmers mean by "dangerous trouble makers." "I'd shoot it if it was under my house" her neighbour tells her. She ponders the space of shared contact of burrow, house, human and wombat. She could take action to evict it, but can't. Wombats have an inheritance too. This Ngunnawal country is also wombat country. It has been for millennia.*

Mutual vulnerabilities on shaky grounds characterise everyday cohabitation in colonised places in the Anthropocene. In contrast to the grandiose geo-sublime imaginary of the Anthropocene, Haraway proposes "the more modest goal of a finite flourishing" with other species.<sup>28</sup> This necessarily involves a preparedness to "stay with the trouble" of multispecies cohabitation. As she says: "staying with the trouble is my way of staying alive, non-cynical, non-skeptical, non-defeated, but also not in denial about the level of the destruction that we

<sup>28</sup> Donna Haraway, "Staying with the Trouble: Symptomatology, String Figures, Multispecies Muddle," Lecture, University of Alberta, 25 March, 2014, accessed 5 June, 2014, [www.new.livesteam.com/aict/DonnaHaraway](http://www.new.livesteam.com/aict/DonnaHaraway)

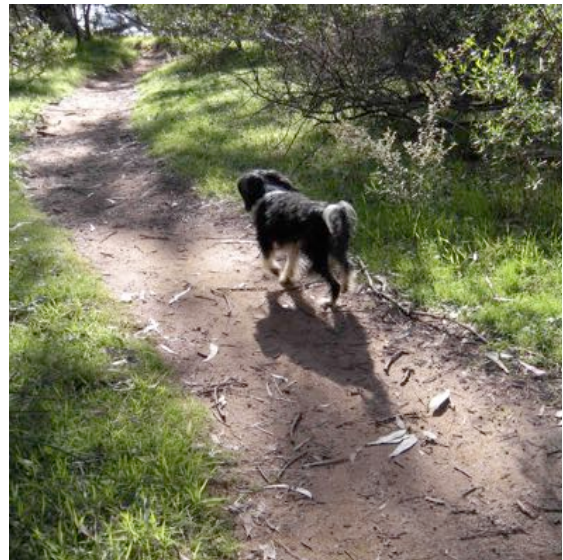
inherit and hold in our hands whether we want to or not." Haraway's bio-philosophies of messmates, situated encounters, everyday embodied relations of indigestion and intimacy feature the ordinary tangles and entanglements of humans, nonhumans (of all kinds) and things that make worlds. This vision of the Anthropocene is as much about messy relationalities, confusion, partiality and small things as it is about carbon measurements, nitrogen cycles, and melting ice caps. It refigures the Anthropocene as the mundane and banal world of everyday relations.

Such an opening or invitation requires attention to particularity and a focus on specificity. It becomes a mode of examining lives, in this case our lives in a small Antipodean settler community, in ways that reveal the practices of love and knowledge that help us become worldly.<sup>29</sup> If the Anthropocene is meaningful it is as a multitude of stories of particular people, walking along particular river banks, working in particular places, and of the "earth others,"<sup>30</sup> companion species and all manner of organisms and inorganic processes who are all telling their tales of everyday encounters that constitute the world.

### Interlude 5



**Figures 7 and 8.** Walking the tracks beside Micalong Creek. Image courtesy of Africa Taylor



<sup>29</sup> Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

<sup>30</sup> Val Plumwood, "Shadow Places and the Politics of Dwelling," *Australian Humanities Review* 44 (2008).

*She thinks she knows the country around here and she's walked this track many times. But the dogs know better. They are moved by the mysterious smellscape of animal trails, scratching trees and hiding places. The dogs, the dusty track, the plants and animals, the wafting clouds pull her senses in different directions arousing her curiosity about the unknown and unknowable but intimate lives of other living things. They teach her to think differently about the movements, rhythms and textures beyond sight. She wonders about the forces, relations and histories that have thrown all these things into the conjunction that is this place, this day, these dogs, this track, her. The flash of a tail, the flash of an event, animate the qualities of inhabitation and inheritance that compose a place.*

The "where of encounter" matters.<sup>31</sup> As we follow the tracks we try to be mindful that we walk in the footsteps of others. As newcomers to this limestone and granite valley, we bear modest witness to a living country that has been shaped by millennia of trackings and movements: by water and ice; by the burnings, huntings, dwellings of Ngunnawal people; by prehistoric marsupial burrowings, ramblings, foragings. As well as understanding that the histories of this place are made by more than humans, we try and register that they are also more than material legacies. These pastpresent inheritances are agentic. They move bodies, shape stances, mediate visions, influence preferences, direct choices.<sup>32</sup> As much affective as material, inheritance is a continuous and unrelenting event. For Haraway, the purpose of tracing inheritances is in becoming differently curious and differently accountable.<sup>33</sup> Our task is to pay attention in different ways, through thinking in the presence of others, and with different affects.

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<sup>31</sup> Lesley Instone, "Living Rock and Human Bird: An Antipodean Refrain," *Dialogues in Human Geography* 2, no. 3 (2012): 282.

<sup>32</sup> Lesley Instone, "Unruly Grasses: Affective Attunements in the Ecological Restoration of Native Grasslands in Australia," *Emotion, Society and Space* 10 (2014).

<sup>33</sup> Gane, "When we Have Never Been Human, What is to be Done?" 145.

## Interlude 6



**Figure 9.** Dead wombat on the road to Wee Jasper. Image courtesy of Affrica Taylor

*Yet another grisly early morning discovery. It's a regular event. Because the blood's so red on the road, she wonders how long it's been since the wombat was run over. Her dog sniffs the body then backs off. It's very stiff. After dragging the dead wombat off the road, she girds herself and checks to see if there's a live joey. She can feel a lump. She's too squeamish to put her hand right inside the pouch, so she squeezes the joey to the entrance by pressing on the mother's abdomen. It's coming out. She can see and feel it now. It's hairless, still and cold. It must have frozen overnight. She returns to the car, feeling disappointed and relieved, shaky and sad. Her dog sniffs her hands.*

Wombats, once declared vermin and killed under state legislation, are now mowed down by cars. Despite their current tenuous "protected" status, they are still perceived by many of the local farmers as dangerous "trouble makers" and "mangy pests." It is ordinary, everyday settler incursions into wombat territory that renders their lives increasingly vulnerable. The wily intelligence, purposeful determination and obstinate resilience of wombats have ensured their continuation in the face of human antipathy. But, inheritance is not the choosing of wombats or humans and it confronts us with connections that we may not care to acknowledge.<sup>34</sup> There are no guidelines for the correct way to respond, only relations of "response-ability" (on the part of wombat and human alike), and ongoing mutual grapplings over this response.<sup>35</sup> However, these grapplings do open up a sort of "multispecies we," in the sense of a generative mutual affect, that can propel us towards a deeper understanding of our connectedness with the world.

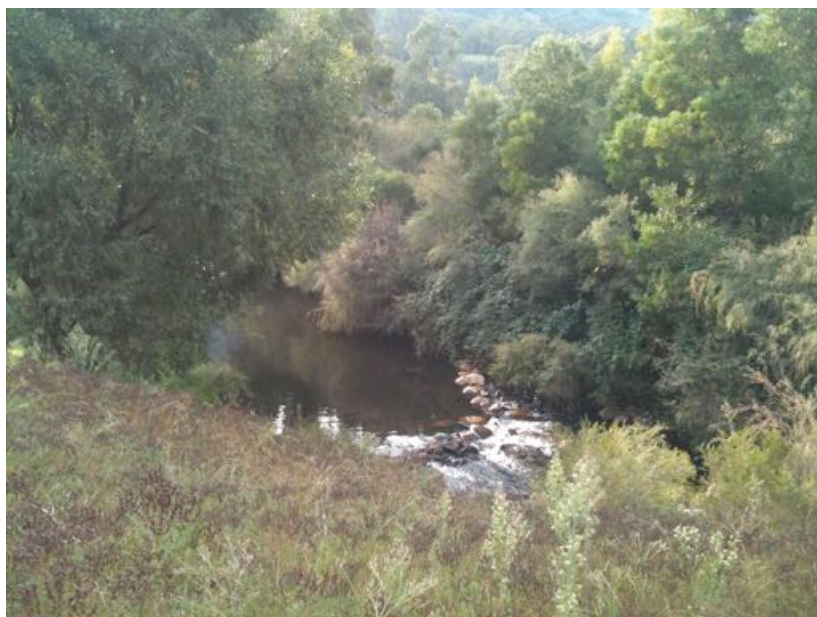
<sup>34</sup> Affrica Taylor, *Reconfiguring the Natures of Childhood* (London: Routledge, 2013), 102-112.

<sup>35</sup> Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 71.

One of the things to be done, we think, is to cultivate risky attachments as a mode of attending.<sup>36</sup> The kind of risk involved in these risky attachments is akin to Stenger's notion of risk as a concrete experience of hope for change, rather than the calculative insurability of risk-as-danger common in Anthropocene discourse.<sup>37</sup> For Stengers, risk is about the unpredictability of opening ourselves to possibility, letting our thinking spill out beyond the safety of our pre-existing theories and questions. Thinking in the presence of others, like wombats, is not abstract cognition, but a doing and feeling. We think of this as risking attachment with unlikely others. Risking attachment is the active engagement in complex heterogeneous networks of more than human relations where we risk losing our sense of control and separateness. Not only do we put our ideas at risk, but so too ourselves, in ways, to paraphrase Stengers, that oblige us to feel and think in a new way.<sup>38</sup>

We take Stengers to be advocating for risking ourselves on relations that may pull us out of our comfort zone. Risking attachment is to be confronted by the unknowability of others' lives and the task of discarding dualistic divisions and the conceit of human will. With Stengers we acknowledge that thought, feeling and action are inextricably entangled. In risking attachment with wombats and others we inhabit the interstices of natureculture entanglements, where we search out collective modes of becoming with other animals in colonised lands.<sup>39</sup>

### Interlude 7



**Figure 10.**  
*Watching Micalong  
Creek from the  
verandah. Image  
courtesy of Affrica  
Taylor*

<sup>36</sup> Instone, "Risking Attachment in the Anthropocene."

<sup>37</sup> Mary Zournazi and Isabelle Stengers, "A 'Cosmo-Politics'—Risk, Hope, Change—with Isabelle Stengers," in *Hope, New Possibilities for Change* ed. Mary Zournazi (London & New York: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 246.

<sup>39</sup> Haraway, *When Species Meet*.

*By the end of this very dry summer, she finds herself dreading what she might see when passing the last farm in the valley on the way to her house in the nature reserve. Overstocking on spring grass and hope has resulted in starving cattle busting through the fences to get to the few remaining blades of roadside grass. Skeletal and mooing soulfully the cattle move among the growing number of carcasses on the bare hillside. Back home, she's greatly relieved that she does not have to confront this scene any more. She finds consolation sitting on her verandah, watching the creek bubble by. But intermittent faint bellows draw her back into relations not of her choosing. These are the surface tensions of non-innocence and accountability.*

In the conservation zone, it is tempting to practice relations of detachment and disconnection from the unprotected, sacrificed spaces that feed the consumer-culture driving the Anthropocene. These sacrificed parts of the country are the "shadow places" of colonised lands: "all those places that produce or are affected by the commodities you consume, places consumers don't know about, don't want to know about, and in a commodity regime don't ever need to know about or take responsibility for."<sup>40</sup> For us, it is comforting to think of our attachments to the green bushland of the conservation area, but harder to risk attachment to the sacrificed spaces of production landscapes. As risky attachments, shadow places provoke us to recognise that we are intimately enmeshed in disagreeable relations as much as pleasurable ones. We are reminded of our implication in the state of things, that our actions and practices are never innocent and always consequential. The *where* of "where we think from" then, is a complex spatiality of interlinked near and far, colonised and decolonising, human and more than human spaces.<sup>41</sup> Such a "where" is embodied, geographical and conceptual. As Anderson reminds us, the colonisation of the Antipodes was implicated in defining a racialised version of humanness that found its zenith in a notion of humanity definitively separated from nature.<sup>42</sup> It is this nature-altering human who is a critical figure in the making of the shadow places of our valley and the broader landscapes of the Anthropocene. Risking attachment to shadow places enacts a critical ecology of place recognising the other not as menace, but as related.

In Stengers' sense of taking ontological risk, risking risky attachments by thinking in the presence of others slows us down. It compels us to ponder the inescapability of our entanglement within messy inheritances. It prompts us to stop at road kill rather than speed by, and knots us into unlikely partnerships, wanted and not, with all kinds of others. It reminds us that our home place of treasured dogs and wily wombats is constituted as much by the superphosphate, cattle and human effluent polluting the local creek, as it is by the natural beauty of the valley and its wildlife. In the time of the Anthropocene, it helps us to presence the connections that tie us to other species, other people, other places and other times.

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<sup>40</sup> Plumwood, "Shadow Places and the Politics of Dwelling," 146-7.

<sup>41</sup> Anderson, "Mind over Matter?"

<sup>42</sup> Kay Anderson, *Race and the Crisis of Humanism* (London: Routledge, 2007).

## Conclusion

Thinking in the presence of others from a small river valley in the New South Wales Southern Tablelands, we have paused to reflect upon some of the mundane everyday interspecies encounters that stitch our lives within the fabric of our shared inheritances. We have appropriated the paradoxical figure of the Anthropocene to provide a common account of mutual multispecies vulnerabilities and of collective agencies that refutes the more standard monologue of the Anthropocene as one of singular human endeavour.

We have also exploited another paradox afforded by the figure of the Anthropocene. This is that the dangers and risks that anthropogenic change heralds may be best addressed not with insurance and control, but through reaching out and risking attachment with all manner of unlike others. In risking attachment with co-resident wombats, companion dogs, visiting birds and lizards, the shadow places of starving cattle and overgrazed lands; by walking in the footsteps of others and tracking across the reserves, we have risked our thoughts and feelings, and plunged ourselves into a world of matters of concern. This is a messy, non-innocent, complex, hybrid and multispecies world where uncertainty reigns.

In addition to this, we have followed Haraway's insistence on the 'how' of inheritance and set out to foreground the *act* of risking attachment as a mode of learning to inherit. As Freya Matthews points out, thinking differently about the Anthropocene cannot be cultivated through a purely abstract form of reflection: "but through practice – specific forms of *strategic practice*".<sup>43</sup> This article has showcased our active search for a different and interconnected set of strategic practices. These are practices that necessitate slowing down, thinking through where we are and who and what are there with us, "staying with the trouble" in the everyday local contact zone of messy colonial inheritances and mutual affects. We can think of this in Val Plumwood's terms as a more than human ethics of negotiation and partnership that leads us to think more deeply about how we might make worlds of connectivity without hierarchy.<sup>44</sup> Or as Kate Rigby puts it, we can take part in "agile dodging", in a creative dance of partnering with other-than-human creatures in mobile and flexible connectivity.<sup>45</sup>

In this article we have explored the potential of thinking *through*, *from* and *with* to recast the dominant tales of a singular Anthropocene and the conventional human-centred inheritances of a rural Australian place. Inheritance implicates us in a bevy of relations of varying qualities and potentials and entangles lives of all kinds in storied, embodied and material ways. Our attunement towards "collective thinking in the presence of others" provides a context for the kind of alternative performative engagements that materialise place in different ways. In thinking through the paradoxical figure of the Anthropocene about our messy inheritances, of risking attachment with wayward dogs and pesky wombats, we are learning to retie the knots of ordinary living in co-inhabited damaged places. We are moving towards practising thinking-with in order to contribute towards some modest recuperations and flourishings within our immediate multispecies worlds.

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<sup>43</sup> Matthews, "Strategia."

<sup>44</sup> Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (New York, Routledge, 2002).

<sup>45</sup> Kate Rigby, "Dancing with Disaster," *Australian Humanities Review* 46, (2009): 141-42.



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