

Chapter 5

Romancing or Re-configuring Nature in the Anthropocene? Towards Common Worlding Pedagogies

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Introduction

Nature is a very seductive idea. Within Romantic western cultural traditions, nature has been aestheticised, valorised, and sanctified. It has come to stand for everything pure, good and innocent that imperfect human society is not. This bifurcated concept of pure nature as an antidote to corrupting society carries a compelling force of moral authority (Daston & Vidal, 2004). In today's technologically-focused societies, in which children spend increasing amounts of time interacting in a virtual environment, Romantic notions of nature are being enlisted to support morally charged claims about children's alienation from the natural world, and to warn about the subsequent endangerment of childhood (Louv, 2008). Coupled with growing concerns about the endangerment of the natural environment itself, such apprehensions are driving a resurgence of interest in nature-based pedagogies.

These nature-based pedagogies not only promote 'returning children to nature' in order to 'save' them (Frost, n.d.), but are also offered as the means by which children will be enabled to become future environmental stewards, who will, in turn, be ready and able to 'save' nature (Chawla, 2006; Sobel, 2008). Against the backdrop of these nature and childhood endangerment and salvation tropes, I set out to problematise sentimentalised notions of nature as a pure, innocent, and separate domain to which children must be 'returned' in order to be 'saved', and to also trouble the assumptions that underpin the notion of environmental stewardship.

Ideas of nature are my central concern. Guided by the set of questions "what counts as nature, for whom and at what cost?" (Haraway, 2004, p. 90), I begin by interrogating the seemingly benign conceptualisations of Romantic nature that underpin nature-based pedagogies in the early years of education and also permeate

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some approaches to sustainability education. I examine why it is so seductive to romance nature and childhood, point to the unintended consequences of these romantic ideas and present a case for resisting this temptation. I argue that it is precisely because those of us who have been schooled in western knowledge traditions are beginning to recognise how we have contributed to these ecologically precarious times, that we urgently require a paradigm shift in our thinking about nature and our relationship to it. The alternative conceptualisation that I propose, one that reconfigures both nature and childhood within an imbroglio of common world relations, is prosaic rather than romantic, and messy and political rather than pure and innocent (Taylor, 2013, 2014; Taylor & Giugni, 2012; Pacini-Ketchabaw & Taylor, 2015). I conclude by offering some examples of common world pedagogies that are drawn from the Canberra chapter of a larger Canadian/Australian early childhood multi-species ethnography that I am involved in, along with other colleagues in the Common World Childhoods Research Collective (2015).

But before I begin, I want to underscore that although I set out to critique the unintended consequences of pursuing romanticised and bifurcated notions of nature it is not my intention to simply discount the relationship between nature, the environment, children, and education. Rather, my purpose is to shift understandings about this relationship through reclaiming what counts as nature back from the Romantics and politicising and re-configuring it as a lively and un-foreclosed set of heterogeneous common world relations, with new kinds of cosmopolitical and ethical affordances.

What Counts as Nature?

To understand what counts as nature in nature-based pedagogies, it is necessary to appreciate something about the historical trajectory of the nature/culture divide that structures modern western thought. Since the Enlightenment, or the Age of Reason, human capacity to reason and exercise intentional agency has been celebrated above all else. The valorisation of human rationality (or to be more precise, the rationality of ‘man’) has provided the epistemological basis for separating our species off from the rest of the natural world and has affirmed the need for us to exercise our exceptional intelligence and agency (through scientific study and technological interventions) in order to ‘improve’ on nature, or more recently, to ‘fix’ it. It is this instrumentalist version of the nature/culture divide that valorises the exceptionalism of human intelligence and agency and renders nature passive and inert, which still predominates in western thinking and which underpins mainstream scientific research practice and educational theories. School-based education, per se, can be seen as a key conduit for enculturation – for bringing the pre-rational child (aligned with nature) into the rational adult world (aligned with culture) by developing her/his cognitive capabilities.

However, this is not the only version of the nature/culture divide. Jean-Jacque Rousseau’s mid eighteenth century pro-nature philosophies, which spawned the

Romantic Movement, represent a radical break with the mainstream Enlightenment tradition of valorising human intelligence and promoting an unswerving faith in ‘civilised’ man’s capacity to improve on the natural world. In the opening line to his book, *Emile: A Treatise on Education*, Rousseau (1762/2003, p. 1) famously claimed: “Everything is good as it comes from the hands of the Author of Nature; but everything degenerates in the hands of man”. This unequivocal statement exemplifies the alternate Romantic version of binary western thinking that places everything essential good, pure, true, and innocent on the side of nature (for instance children, animals, ‘native’ people, and pristine wilderness areas), and everything essentially bad, threatening, corrupting, or already despoiled on the side of human society or culture (for instance greed, immorality, political exploitation, technological perversions, and urban and industrial pollution).

Rousseau’s educational treatise, with its valorisation of nature and its demonisation of rational adult society, refuted the logic and the wisdom of enculturating children during the early formative stages of life. He passionately argued that during infancy and early childhood, ‘nature’, rather than ‘man’, should be the child’s primary teacher. His reversal of the valuing within the nature/culture divide and his ubiquitous romantic coupling of nature and young children has had enduring seductive appeal in nature and environmental movements, in literature and popular culture, in the pro-nature education movement, and in early childhood education.

A century after he wrote his educational treatise, Rousseau’s Romantic conceptualisations of the natural child learning in nature, inspired the birth of early childhood education in Europe. They directly informed Freidrich Fröebel’s design of the first kindergarten in Germany, which explicitly set out to teach pre-school aged children the essential truths and perfections of nature through handling natural forms and partaking in natural growth cycles and processes (Brosterman, 1997). A Rousseauian valorisation of nature and natural methods can also be traced within Montessori and Steiner strands of early years education. From this direct lineage, Rousseau’s legacy is still clearly evident in the contemporary field of early childhood education (for instance in its insistence on the pedagogical significance of natural play), and is explicitly articulated in the Scandinavian all weather outdoor preschools and the German and UK forest and nature kindergartens (Mindstretchers, n.d.; Robertson, 2008).

In North America, the interest in nature-based pedagogies draws heavily on the nineteenth century Romantic New England Transcendentalist philosophies of John Muir, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry David Thoreau. Reflecting upon the landscapes of their ‘new world’ location, these nature philosophers modified Rousseau’s pastoral European notions of nature by arguing that essential truths can only be found in wild and instinctual nature. They are often referred to as the ‘fathers’ of the twentieth century North American environmental movement, and as having introduced the idea that wild nature, or wilderness, needs our protection. Such Romantic ideas about wild nature are encapsulated in Thoreau’s (1862/2009) famous declaration: “In Wildness is the preservation of the world”.

The contemporary US pro-nature education movement has grown out of the same Romantic Transcendentalist tradition as the wilderness environmental

movement. It also mobilises the notion of wild and instinctual nature but incorporates this with understandings of childhood. Leading US pro-nature educational scholars often cite E.O. Wilson's (1984) Transcendentalist-inspired 'ecophilia' hypothesis, which asserts that (human) infants are born with an instinctual drive to form affinities and loving relations with the natural world (Kahn & Kellert, 2002; Orr, 2004; Pyle, 2002; Sobel, 1996, 2008). They use this hypothesis to argue that children have a biologically hard-wired 'special relationship' with nature and that children's cognitive, emotional, spiritual, and moral development will suffer if they are denied the opportunity to actualise this special relationship through first hand nature experiences (Chawla, 2002). In a challenge to mainstream schooling, David Sobel (1996, 2008) suggests that children's natural inclinations to love nature will transform into fear if they only ever learn about nature in classrooms and through the media. His comments: "One transcendental experience in nature is worth a thousand nature facts" (2008, p. 13), and; "If we want our children to become environmental stewards, then one of the best things we can let them do is to play in natural settings" (2008, p. 11) sum up the beliefs and reasoning behind the push to take children out of the classroom and to let them learn directly from nature.

In quasi-religious tones that pay homage to the Transcendentalists, North American pro-nature pedagogy proponents repeatedly call on educators to renew their faith in nature and to return children to nature in order to 'save' them (Frost, n.d.). One of the most powerful umbrella groups driving this 'back-to-nature' movement is the US-based Children and Nature Network. Members of this network consistently warn, as did Rousseau and Thoreau, that when children become alienated from nature their healthy development is threatened. Such concerns are encapsulated in the crisis evoking and averting themes articulated by the founder of the Children and Nature Network, Richard Louv. In his best-selling book, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder*, Louv (2008) nostalgically laments that "the American experience of nature ... has gone from romantic attachment to electronic detachment" (p. 16) and as a consequence, childhood has been "de-natured" (p. 31). According to Louv, this de-naturing and hence disordering of childhood constitutes a crisis, which can only be averted by a "child-nature reunion" (2008, p. 36). In his terms, nature is not only a natural 'Ritalin' cure for this disorder, and an anti-dote to society, but also an all-round life-enhancing tonic.¹

For Whom and at What Cost?

So why does it matter that Romantic notions of nature are driving the seemingly benign 'back-to-nature' movement and the pro-nature pedagogies push within education? What is wrong with the idea of nature as essentially good and restorative for

¹For a more detailed discussion of Rousseau's legacy in early years education and of the US nature education movement, see Taylor 2013, pp. 3–16 and 47–53.

children? How could the promotion of nature-based pedagogies as the way of fostering children's innate love of nature and producing of the next generation of environmental stewards be anything but a positive move, particularly in these ecologically precarious times? The answers lie in thinking though 'for whom' these ways of thinking about nature count and 'at what cost'.

The 'for whom' question is easy to answer. The Romantic notion of nature as a separate (and morally superior) domain from society is unequivocally a modern western notion and a privileged and racialised (white) one at that (Outka, 2013). As often noted, Indigenous cultures do not enact such separations (Rose, 2000; Somerville, 2013; Verran, 2001), moreover, even white westerners eking a subsistence living in poor rural communities are unlikely to share the same Romantic notions of nature as those held by predominantly urban and highly educated environmentalists. The idea of nature as existing in a pure and separate domain is the product of a bifurcated system of 'advanced' western disciplinary knowledge, in which knowledge about natural history is produced in the natural/environmental sciences, and knowledge about human history is produced in the social sciences and humanities. For those of us well-schooled in western thinking that position ourselves in the pro-nature camp, who care about the natural environment and want children to share our commitment to it, perhaps the hardest thing to come to terms with is that this is not the only way to think about nature and our relationship to it.

The 'at what cost' question is even more challenging to address, for it is best intentions that drive Romantic notions of nature and the need to honour and protect it. Despite these good intentions, the paradox remains that the idea of protecting both children and nature from the excesses of modern society still trades heavily on the nature/culture divide. It still rehearses Rousseau's original treatise that nature personifies truth, goodness, and moral authority *because* of 'her' radical alterity to society (Daston & Vidal, 2004). Moreover, the salvation and rescue narratives that assume that nature in some pure form is waiting out there to serve us by saving children from the excesses of modern society, and that these same children will one day become the environmental stewards who will protect nature are not simply benign and hopeful narratives. They unwittingly position nature as existing to serve human interests, and repeat the kind of dichotomous 'heroes and villains' tropes that call us to identify with those heroic versions of human history that trade on notions of moral superiority and human exceptionalism. It might make us feel good and righteous to be on the 'right' side of human history, on the side of the good guys who will rescue and protect nature, but is it ultimately helpful, indeed relevant to be thinking in this way? What are the costs of hanging on to separated and purist notions of nature (and childhood for that matter) as we face up to the considerable ecological challenges and intergenerational justice issues of our time?

Increasing numbers of natural and social scientists are declaring that it is counter-productive to continue to separate nature off from human society and history. Leading the natural sciences in debates about the implications of climate change, rapid species extinctions, the acidification of oceans, changes to the carbon and nitrogen cycles, and other measurable and interrelated planetary changes, Earth system scientists are telling us that it is no longer feasible to think about nature as

existing in a separate realm from society and humanity (Crutzen, 2006; Steffen, Crutzen, & McNeill, 2007). At the eve of the declaration of the Anthropocene, the new epoch in which humans “have become a global geophysical force” (Steffen et al., 2007, p. 614) and fundamentally and permanently changed the planet’s biosphere (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2014), we are forced to contemplate the inextricable blurring of human and natural histories (Chakrabarty, 2009). By fundamentally altering the Earth’s geo- and bio-systems through our over-use of fossil fuels, chemical fertilizers and a multitude of other damaging industrial/agricultural practices, those of us who live in the overdeveloped west (and insist upon the epistemological separation of nature and culture), have paradoxically created a world in which “natural and human forces” are so complexly intertwined that “the fate of one determines the fate of the other” (Zalasiewicz, Williams, Steffen, & Crutzen, 2010, p. 2231).

Taking the naming of the Anthropocene as a spur to action and an incentive to find new ways of thinking about nature and our relationship to it, scholars in the emerging transdisciplinary field of the environmental humanities are calling for researchers to resituate the human within the environment and to rethink the nonhuman within ethical domains (Rose et al., 2012). Science studies scholar, Isabelle Stengers (2012), calls upon researchers to risk letting of our preconceived ideas about the natural world, and to experiment with new collective ways of accounting for it. She concurs that we must interrupt the kinds of thinking and practice that sets us apart from nature, whether as its masters, its managers, or its guardians (Stengers, 2005). Confronting our human (and often heroic) western conceits to see ourselves as exercising exclusive (and exceptional) agency, she declares: “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” (Stengers, 2012).

It is taking a while for such conversations to reach the disciplinary field of education. However, given the realisation that the Anthropocene has now fundamentally changed life on Earth as we thought we knew it, it is no longer enough to draw upon old Romantic western thinking traditions. As we bequeath this profoundly ecologically damaged world to the next and future generations, there is a pressing need for educators to radically rethink our implication in the web of attitudes and actions that emanate from the epistemological nature/culture divide. In the human progress camp, this means linking the myopic western belief in our exceptional human capacity to objectively study the natural world, as if we were not already a part of it, with the delusional belief that we can act upon this same world to ‘improve’, modify, or exploit it with impunity. In the pro-nature pedagogy camp, it means resisting the urge to cast nature as a pure sanctuary to which we can send children in order to ‘cure’ them of social ills, and to cast ourselves (and them) as heroic environmental protectors and protagonists.

Both camps rely upon the framing binary logics of us-and-the-rest and reiterate the notion of heroic human agency that prevent us from recognising that we have always been indivisible players within the world’s ecological systems, call them nature if you like. We have always been inseparable, so we don’t have to return children to some imaginary purified space of nature in order to save them.

Much more helpful is the task of re-focussing on the past/present/future entanglement of human and more-than-human lives and fates (Haraway, 2013; Whatmore, 2013), risking thinking collectively with nonhuman others about the ‘cosmopolitical’ worlds we cohabit (Stengers, 2005, 2012), or as Bruno Latour might put it, taking up the task of reassembling the human and nonhuman collectives that make up our ‘common worlds’ (Latour, 2004, 2005, 2009).

Towards Common World Pedagogies

Over the last few years I have been undertaking collaborative multispecies ethnographic research with pre-school aged children, educators and resident plants and animals in the urban bushlands of Canberra, Australia. This multispecies ethnography is part of a larger Canadian/Australian Early Childhood Common Worlds project (Taylor & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2015, 2016; Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2015; Taylor & Rooney, 2016).

In this research, we deliberately push beyond the prevailing humanist educational paradigm and its preoccupation with the development of the individual child in her/his socio-cultural context. We also push past the outdoor play-based learning approach that characterises most early years nature pedagogies, and which is often presented as adding holistic value to children’s development (Cutter-Mackenzie, Edwards, Moore, & Boyd, 2014; Elliott, 2008). Instead of observing the ways that children play, explore and form relationships outside in nature, we focus on understanding the complex and layered ways in which children, educators, researchers, local plants and animals are all already co-implicated in their immediate common worlds, and we observe what unfolds when children, plants and animals meet in these common worlds. This requires us to resist the assumption that the nonhuman natural world is out there waiting for us to discover it and benefit from it. It requires us to recognise that these worlds are not just about *our* actions, *our* learnings, and *our* needs. It requires us to pay attention to the complex and political ways in which our lives are already entangled with other species and to observe how these common worlds are made and re-made through our everyday interspecies encounters – not just by us (humans) but by all members of our common world collective. It requires us to pay attention to what Stengers (2005) refers to as the ‘cosmopolitics’ of our common worlds.

Far from being innocent natural worlds, these cosmopolitical common worlds are potent and damaged worlds. This brings our multispecies relations within them into the realm of ethics. The ethical questions we are pursuing in our research are not about how we might (heroically) save nature and children and protect them from the evils of society. They are about how we might foster new modes of (human and nonhuman) collective attention and thinking through our everyday multispecies interactions and relations. They are about how we might recognise our interdependencies and mutual agencies. And finally they are about how we might make a modest contribution, through this collective thinking and these everyday interactions

and relations, to at least some form of partial recuperation in which all species can flourish (Haraway, 2008, 2013).

It is no mean feat to foster these new modes of collective attention and thinking. We are aware that our efforts remain nascent, experimental, and limited by the impossibility of completely stepping outside of our human-centric traditions (Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2015). We try and follow Stengers (2005, p. 1002) suggestion to practice collective thinking in the presence of others, as a way of producing a ‘common account’ of our common worlds. As we have found in our common worlds’ research, it takes time and patience to decentre the human for long enough to learn how to pay close attention to what else is going on, both beyond us and also often in tandem with us. Collective thinking requires slowing down, being present, and risking attachment with others in our common worlds (Zournazi & Stengers, 2003). Stengers (Zournazi & Stengers, 2003) acknowledges the riskiness of such practices. But she also emphasises the hope and possibilities engendered by risking re-attaching ourselves to the more-than-human world. Picking up on Stenger’s embracing of risk, Haraway also talks about “risking redoing ways of living and dying with others” (2013), of recognising our mutual vulnerabilities, and of paying attention to our mortal entanglements with other species in our immediate common worlds, in these precarious times.

These are precisely the modes of cosmopolitical attention that we *try* and practice on our weekly walks with the children in Canberra. I emphasise *try* as after more than three years of regular walking and multispecies encounters, we still struggle, every time, to put our preconceived ideas of nature and childhood at risk, to think collectively with others, and to stay open to what else is going on.

The Cosmopolitics of Kangaroo–Child Relations

One of the most regular encounters we have had on our walks is with a big mob of resident Eastern Grey kangaroos that graze on the campus grasslands and shelter in the plantation forests. The kangaroos are ever-present, and ever-mindful of our presence too. Like us, the kangaroos are not just self-evidently there. They are not simply innocent animals naturally at home in nature. There are multi-layered and multispecies histories that pre-date and frame our encounters.

The Eastern Greys are urban fringe dwellers, trapped on the campus grounds, landlocked on all four boundaries by major roads. These trademark Canberra free-ways are the same ones that make car commuting such an easy event for humans and yet such a lethal one for kangaroos. The ACT government estimates that there are over 2000 kangaroo and vehicle collisions every year in Canberra (ACT Territory and Municipal Services [TAMS], 2013), which is not enough to significantly reduce the ACT’s huge kangaroo population – the highest per hectare in Australia – but enough to alert the vast majority of kangaroos to the dangers of crossing major highways (Westh, 2011).



Fig. 5.1 Children and kangaroos on campus (Author's photograph)

Canberra's kangaroos are also climate change refugees. Although Eastern Greys have lived on the grassland plains of this region for millennia, during the last 10 year drought – the hottest and driest on record – they moved into the city precincts from the surrounding over-cleared, over-grazed, and drought ravaged sheep country in search of sustenance. These adaptive kangaroos have never left. They have thrived in Canberra's well-maintained parklands and reserves, and have undergone a massive population explosion over the last un-seasonably *wet* 5 years. In fact, they have done so well as urban dwellers that their burgeoning numbers have come to be seen, by local ecologists, as a threat to the survival of some rare and vulnerable indigenous plants species (Westh, 2011). This, in turn, has prompted the ACT government to develop a Kangaroo Management Plan, the main strategy being a highly controversial annual kangaroo cull (ACT TAMS, 2010).

The charming appeal of seemingly-natural child and kangaroo encounters such as the one in the photo above (Fig. 5.1), is belied by these 'cosmopolitics', underpinned by the non-innocent grounds of possibility that have thrown kangaroos and children together on these anything-*but*-pure-nature campus grounds. Whether or not we are directly responsible for these entangled multispecies histories, these are the kinds of paradoxically 'unnatural' natural inheritances that that accompany us on these walks.

The children are aware of the culls, of the fact that the kangaroos are trapped on campus, and of the dangers that cars pose to kangaroos. They have seen the kangaroos start and bounce away at the sound of revving engines in the nearby campus car park. They know that the kangaroos are ever vigilant, and that their response to

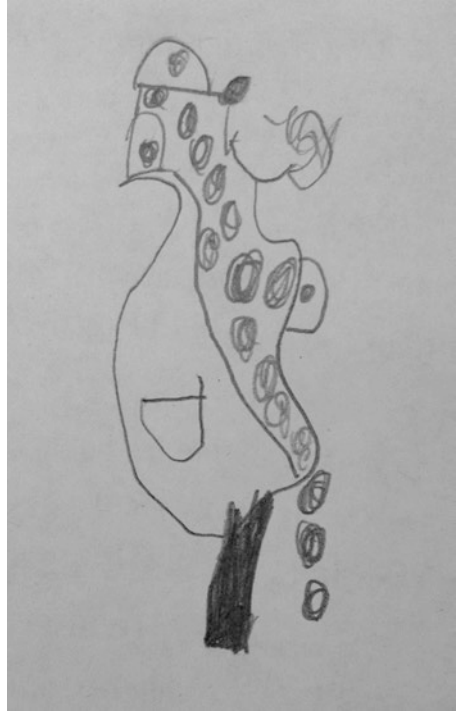
Fig. 5.2 Thinking in the presence of kangaroos (Author's photograph)



potential risk, including *them* if they get too close, is to quickly turn and hop away. We've been practising thinking in the presence of these kangaroos. As kangaroos *themselves* are always so hyper-present and attentive, they make outstanding mentors. By thinking with them, and in their presence, the children learn a *lot* about *being* present and noticing who and what is there with them.

As they think in the presence of these kangaroos, the children often imagine what it would be like to have a kangaroo body – to have big ears that can swivel and pick up sounds from all different directions, to have large, furry bodies and furry pouches (Fig. 5.2). They think about what it would be like to be a joey living in one of those furry pouches. They imagine scratching their furry bodies with sharp claws and fighting, if necessary, by scratching others. Thinking about what it would be like to have a great long tail particularly intrigues them. They try and imagine what it would be like to balance on this massive tail when standing up, and to flick it for extra speed and momentum when hopping along. They imagine what it would be like to eat nothing but grass and to do so many poos directly onto the ground. Many of their imaginings are enacted – they hop, they stop and look around, they swivel their hands on top of their heads as imaginary ears, they scratch their imaginary furry chests with fingered claws, and they lie down on their sides, elbows propped, tails outstretched, to rest their imaginary kangaroo bodies. They also draw many kangaroo pictures, which feature joeys in pouches, kangaroo poos, and great big long tails (Fig. 5.3).

Fig. 5.3 Drawing kangaroos (Author's photograph)



Such intimate presencings and imaginings also evoke the risk of attachment and of risking redoing ways of living and dying with others. On one of our recent walks near the perimeter of the campus grounds, we found the body of a dead kangaroo that had presumably been hit by a car on the nearby road, and thrown back over the barbed-wire fence (Fig. 5.4). This was not the first time the children have come across a dead body on their walks. In fact over the last couple of months they had been curiously observing the slow decomposition of a long-dead galah. Even though the children have been witness to cycles of life and death, and had discussed the possibilities of kangaroos being run over on the roads, this was nevertheless a sobering encounter for them. Up until now, it had only been enlivening face-to-face encounters that stimulated their imaginings of what it would be like to inhabit a kangaroo's body. This was the first dead kangaroo body that they had encountered in their common worlds and it was a large one. They noticed that the head was twisted and thrown back. They could see the kangaroo's teeth. They also saw that the fur was coming away from the skin, falling in clumps on the grass. They stood and stared, as small gusts of wind rolled the fur along grass and blew the body stench towards them.



Fig. 5.4 Witnessing a dead kangaroo (Author's photograph)

Conclusion

This research is not about taking children out into nature on bush walks in order to save them and protect nature. It is about re-configuring our fraught relationship with nature by searching for new ways of thinking collectively about our common worlds. In this case, it is about thinking through the ways that we and the kangaroos coinhabit this place simply because of our entangled inheritances and trajectories. It is about coming to recognise that we are just one amongst many players that shape and re-make our common worlds, and that we share mutual vulnerabilities and life and death responsibilities for these worlds. It is about recognising that unlike Romantic notions of 'nature', common worlds are the non-innocent, cosmopolitical worlds in which we actually live that they require us to foster a new collective disposition and new collective form of ethics.

This research is not seeking to package a ready-made curriculum for doing all this. Rather it is following real-world relations that unfold on weekly campus walks, and staying open to seeing how the common world is already a part of the pedagogical process. There is some comfort in hanging onto the mantra of "staying with the trouble" – as Donna Haraway (2010) puts it. We know that it is only through dealing with the messiness of these worlds, by grappling with the ethical dilemmas of these often less-than-ideal encounters and entanglements in the common world spaces we inhabit, that we can figure out, together, how best to respond.

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