



# Inheriting the Ecological Legacies of Settler Colonialism

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One of the driving methodological and pedagogical concerns of the Common World Childhoods Research Collective, to which we belong, is the question of how to deal with the mess of the damaged worlds that we inherit and bequeath to future generations. The essays in this special section were commissioned in the wake of a Canadian SSHRC ‘Connections’ symposium organised by the Common World Childhoods Research Collective, and held at the University of Victoria, British Columbia in late 2014. This interdisciplinary event brought environmental and Indigenous humanities scholars into conversation with early childhood education scholars and practitioners around the theme of: “Learning how to inherit colonised and ecologically challenged lifeworlds.”<sup>1</sup>

The authors of these three essays ponder the question of ecological inheritance in the settler colonial contexts of Canada and Australia, cognisant of the fact that settler colonialism remains an incomplete project. Nothing is finally settled.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, they start from the premise that the ecological legacies of the western colonial enterprise of early modernity closely articulate with the anthropogenic disturbances to the earth’s geo-biosphere that we are

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<sup>1</sup> Details of this symposium can be found on the Common World Childhoods website, <http://commonworlds.net/learning-how-to-inherit-colonized-and-ecologically-challenged-life-worlds/>.

<sup>2</sup> For more on settler colonialism as an unsettling and incomplete project see Affrica Taylor and Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw Taylor. “Unsettling the Colonial Places and Spaces of Early Childhood Education in Settler Colonial Societies,” in *Unsettling the Colonialist Places and Spaces of Early Childhood Education*, ed. Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw and Affrica Taylor (New York: Routledge. 2015), 1-18.

now confronting in late modernity, and which is increasingly referred to as the Anthropocene.<sup>3</sup> Like previous *Environmental Humanities* contributors, the authors in this special section engage with the Anthropocene in ways that are attuned to the limits and problematics of its nomenclature, resist the impulse to indulge in heroic anthropocentric responses, and are motivated by the possibilities of exploring new and generative ethical responses and fostering reparative cosmopolitical relations.<sup>4</sup>

Human-animal relations provide a common focus across these essays. The authors reflect upon the ethics and politics of these relations as they explore the entanglement of local/global ecological legacies in very different settler colonial contexts—in a rural valley in south-eastern Australia, in an early childhood setting in urban west coast Canada, and in Nunavut territory in the Canadian Arctic. When taken as a set, these situated studies reveal how things turn out differently in different settler contexts—how distinctive assemblages of human/nonhuman/inhuman actors inherit constellations of place-specific colonial legacies. As well as accounting for inheritance in geographically diverse settler colonial contexts, these essays draw upon a diversity of sub-disciplinary perspectives—including more-than-human geographies, children’s geographies, human-animal studies, feminist science and technology studies, Indigenous humanities and the sociology of waste. This spread testifies to the broad reach and relevance of issues of inheritance in settler colonial contexts and in ecologically challenging times.

In “Thinking about Inheritance Through the Figure of the Anthropocene, from the Antipodes and in the Presence of Others,” Lesley Instone and Affrica Taylor contemplate the various inheritances that shape everyday multispecies life and relations in a small rural valley in south-eastern Australia. They do this by alternating between narrative interludes about daily life in the valley and musings that are inspired largely by Isabelle Stengers’ notion of (more-than-human) collective thinking.<sup>5</sup> Through making these to and fro moves, they illustrate some of the small multispecies events that characterise the commonplace grapplings of valley life, as well as adopting deliberately situated and cosmopolitical modes of thought to think differently about the generative spaces of possibility opened up by these small events. By emphasising the micro-politics of multispecies relations in one local place, the authors recast the dominant generic tales of heroic white rural settlement and the singular totalising account of the Anthropocene within a collective down-to-earth account of ordinary, everyday, rural Antipodean mutually-constituting relations. Like Donna Haraway, Instone and Taylor maintain that the very act of paying attention to the inheritance and everydayness of these messy but

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<sup>3</sup> Will Steffen, Jacques Grinevald, Paul Crutzen and John McNeill, “The Anthropocene: Conceptual and Historical Perspectives,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society A* 369, no. 1938 (2011).

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance Donna Haraway, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin,” *Environmental Humanities*, 6 (2015): 159-165, and Eileen Crist, “On the Poverty of our Nomenclature,” *Environmental Humanities* 3 (2013): 129-147.

<sup>5</sup> Isabelle Stengers, “Cosmopolitics: Learning to Think with Sciences, Peoples and Natures.” Public lecture. Situating Science Knowledge Cluster, St.Marys, Halifax, Canada, 5 March 2012, accessed 21 October 2015, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ASGwo02rh8>.

generative multispecies relations offers hope for some kind of modest recuperation in ecologically challenging times.<sup>6</sup>

Also pursuing hope for more sustainable, responsible and ethical ways of living with other species in the Anthropocene, Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw and Fikile Nxumalo explore some of the unsettling possibilities of human-raccoon cohabitations in their essay “Unruly Raccoons and Troubled Educators: Nature/Culture Divides in a Childcare Centre.” Of central concern here is the inherited nature/culture divide that structures western knowledge systems (but not Indigenous ones) and which seeks to create and maintain a separate cultural domain for humans that differentiates us from nature, and hence from other animals.

Drawing upon stories from their multispecies ethnography within a west coast Canadian childcare centre and in an urban mountain forest setting, Pacini-Ketchabaw and Nxumalo consider the various ways that the persistent boundary crossing behaviours of a resident family of “unruly” raccoons unsettle, confound and exceed the prevailing binary logics that would keep the children’s space pure, clean, safe and segregated off from the “threat” of wild animals.<sup>7</sup> In a similar vein to the Instone and Taylor essay, Pacini-Ketchabaw and Nxumalo also use a combination of narrative vignettes and philosophical musings to reveal the inextricable entanglement of multispecies histories, lives and futures within damaged settler colonial environments. With a primary interest in the possibilities of multispecies relational pedagogies, they reflect upon what the raccoons might teach educators, children and researchers about the impossibilities of enforcing and maintaining nature/culture boundaries and about the absurdities of believing that we can ever fully control nature.

Some form of resistance to the bifurcation of nature and culture flows through each of these essays. In “Raven, Dog, Human: Inhuman Colonialism and Unsettling Cosmologies,” Alexander Zahara and Myra Hird interrogate the neo-colonial binaries that work to separate the human from the inhuman in ways that are antithetical to Inuit cosmologies and ultimately damaging to Inuit ways of being. Their central concern is the ways in which Canada’s neo-colonial waste and wasting inheritances have reconfigured Inuit human-animal relational ontologies, and continue to “haunt current and future generations” of Canadians.

Through engaging with the figure of the trash animal in the Nunavut context—a figure that is explicitly associated with neo-colonial discourses of waste management and implied within the subjugation of Indigenous peoples—they trace the ways that significant Inuit, raven and sled dog cosmologies and close material relations are gradually being eroded by neo-colonial discourses and governance practices that not only ‘other’ trash animals as abject pests, but also systematically set out to eradicate them.<sup>8</sup> They argue that waste inheritances not only pose an environmental challenge for future generations (in terms of what to do with non-

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<sup>6</sup> Donna Haraway, “2013 Institute of Humanities Research Distinguished Lecture,” Arizona State University, [video], accessed 21 October 2015, <https://vimeo.com/62081248>

<sup>7</sup> Pacini-Ketchabaw and Nxumalo’s figure of the “unruly raccoons” is inspired by Lesley Instone’s article: “Unruly Grasses: Affective Attunements in the Ecological Restoration of Urban Native Grasslands in Australia,” *Emotion, Space, and Society* 10 (2014): 79-86.

<sup>8</sup> In their discussions of trash animals, Zahara and Hird draw upon Kelsey Nagy and Phillip David Johnson III eds., *Trash Animals: How We Live with Nature’s Filthy, Feral, Invasive, and Unwanted Species* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

degradable toxic materials), but they restructure human-inhuman relations, norms and practices in complex and contradictory ways that cannot be ignored. As they point out, the persistent presence of so-called trash animals in Northern Canada stands as a reminder that inherited waste legacies can never be entirely concealed or forgotten.

These essays reveal that the ecological legacies of settler colonialism continue to unfold in quite distinctive ways across a range of settings involving a heterogeneous array of actors (including waste, humans young and old, raccoons, dogs, ravens, wombats and more) but always as productively unsettled and relational matters of concern.

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