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Rethinking life-in-common in the Australian landscape

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Abstract
This commentary reflects on the shifts in my personal and political lifeworld across time and space by sharing a story of changing awareness about 'life-in-common' in the Australian landscape; a landscape that is marked by historical, ecological and resource struggle and injustice. My commentary takes up the rethinking of differential belonging and 'life-in-common' as part of the search for alternatives to capitalism and a way to overcome socioecological crises which pays attention to the deep connections of nature and culture. I reflect on life-in-common as an Australian white settler feminist political ecologist wishing to understand how to address the erasures and violence that mark the Australian landscape.

Keywords
Differential belonging, feminist political ecology, life-in-common, white settler colonialism, lifeworlds

Introduction

This commentary reflects on the shifts in my personal and political lifeworld across time and space by sharing a story of changing awareness about 'life-in-common' (Singh, 2017) in the Australian landscape; a landscape that is marked by racialised historical, ecological and resource struggle and injustice.

My commentary explores the term life-in-common, in order to unpack hegemonic understandings of socionature. It aims to contribute to the collective search for alternatives to capitalism and a way to overcome socioecological crises which pays attention to the deep interconnections between nature and culture. I reflect on life-in-common as a white Australian-born Feminist Political Ecologist wishing to understand how to address the

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erasures and violence that mark the Australian landscape. From the position of a white settler Australian, I contribute as honestly as I can to the discussions around collective responsibility and the commons by bringing to the discussion the concept of differential belonging. In doing so, I point to the limits of the idea of collective responsibility (Escobar, 2017; Federici, 2018; Hardt and Negri, 2012). I seek to show in this commentary how the idea of common responsibility in the Australian context can silence what Indigenous and First Nations peoples have raised in their call for profound rethinking of white settler ways of being. In moving to a situation of life-in-common, it is important to recognise what Arturo Escobar (2017) calls the pluriversal or a world consisting of many worlds, each with its own ontological and epistemic grounding. The pluriverse demands that we live aware of multiple worlds, partially connected but radically different. It asks for profound social transformations which go beyond the complicity of well-intentioned progressive leftist white critical scholars in the epistemic and material destitution of Indigenous lands and bodies. The term differential belonging brings this complicity to the forefront in theorisations of commons and commoning in contrast with common responsibility which instead erases difference.

In my discussion on complicity in differential belonging in life-in-common, I reflect on how racialised socioecological relations and practices are shifting. I am inspired by the work of ecofeminist philosopher Val Plumwood (2008, 2012, 2014) calling for a deep reconciliation and engagement with nature; environmental humanist Deborah Bird Rose's (1999, 2004, 2013a, 2013b) storytelling that powerfully weaves together different cosmovisions from the Australian landscape; Indigenous legal scholar Irene Watson's (1998, 2008, 2009, 2018) call for white settler Australia to recognise how the colonial project has embodied a centuries-long, ongoing campaign to erase First Nation Australians and Indigenous feminist Aileen Moreton-Robinson's (2000, 2011) work on Indigenous belonging and place in a white postcolonising society. These writings speak about how to heal the historical and contemporary rifts in Australia's lifeworlds including more-than-human communities. My commentary takes heart from those writings in order to reflect further on the concept of differential belonging as I look at how different beings, knowledges and practices co-constitute our socionatural environments and how our different positions in social hierarchies/power structures in terms of gender, class and race differences operate in political-ecological processes (Carrillo Rowe, 2005; Desai and Smith, 2018; Escobar 2017; Haraway, 2016). I also reflect on JK Gibson-Graham's analysis of the politics of the commons and being-in-common beyond the restrictions of capitalocentrism (Gibson-Graham et al., 2006). As a white settler feminist thinking through differential belonging, I am grappling with the implications of coloniality, the erasure, the silence of others and how my own historical and actual positionality can erase and destroy others and more-than-humans. While I recognise that the goal is not to transcend my white settler-ness, I try in this commentary to theorise from the pain, the shame and the impossibility of making full sense of otherness. In pointing to complicity, I recognise how white settler Australia is deeply implicated in past and current violence and damaging relations. But at the same time, there is the desire for life-in-common, in the effort to move beyond erasures and not to wallow in white guilt. In speaking to the concept of differential belonging, I consider how commons are living landscapes imbued with dynamic social and ecological relations. Understanding complicity in these changing social and ecological landscapes recognises how they are built on erasures but also it is possible to take up differential responsibilities for past, present and future, in order to embrace life-in-commons and the practice of commoning. I define the practice of commoning as the collective actions to transform and reconnect human and more-than-human communities as we take up differential collective responsibility guided by concepts of social

justice and ecological sustainability (Bresnihan, 2016; Centemeri, 2018; Escobar, 2016; Moore, 2017; Singh, 2017).

As Linda Tuhiwai Smith notes, 'research is not an innocent or distant academic exercise but an activity that has something at stake and that occurs in a set of political and social conditions' (Smith, 1999: 5). In writing this commentary, I therefore have to be explicit about my own positionality as a white Australian feminist scholar activist now working in a Dutch university. I follow the sentiments of Sara Ahmed (2004), also a feminist who was born in Australia but no longer lives there, that my lifeworld is still saturated by Australia; it has shaped my skin and my senses of self and nature. Since my early activist days as a student activist, feminist and environmentalist, I have loved but also been troubled by the Australian landscape, marked as it is not only by natural beauty but also by the violence of white patriarchal and class privilege (Ahmed, 2004; Bell, 2008). I take up the feminist notion of strong objectivity by making visible the values, cultural assumptions and biases that underlie the assumptions of my points of view (Harding, 2005: 229–230). In looking at differential belonging, as stated above, I try to be honest about my complicity in erasure and to unpack my biases and assumptions and (ultimately) recognise how to learn from others across difference. The commentary is driven by the personal and the political in my desire to heal the past, present and future as I try to 'disembark from the colonial constraints of my belonging' (Hooks, 2010) in my revisiting of the Australian landscape and in relation to 'life-in-common' (Read, 2000; Routledge and Driscoll Derickson, 2015). It reflects a Feminist Political Ecology (FPE) imaginary, explained further below, which aims to redress and change our socionatural relations and to take up our responsibilities in changing how we think-feel-sense the lifeworlds we inhabit (Escobar, 2016; Gibson-Graham, 2008). Epistemically, I recognise that I am not able to fully comprehend lifeworlds that are not my own. As I strive to learn across difference, I am mindful that engaging with Indigenous stories and ways of knowing can often lead to the ethical problem of appropriating and depolitisating the writing, ideas and stories of First Nations Indigenous Australians. This commentary can be understood as a provocation and a deliberate effort to engage in what McKinnon (2017) calls 'naked scholarship' which seeks to be open and transparent about the tangled emotions in asking questions about how to come to terms with complicity.

I cannot claim to have found the answers; indeed, in writing this commentary, I have found it almost impossible to formulate the questions, although I see it as crucial work especially when trying to be honest about divergence from the concept of common responsibility.

The commentary is divided into three sections. In Section 1, I bring the current interest in FPE on relationality and the more-than-human (Elmhirst, 2018) to a rethinking of 'life-in-common' and ways of changing our understanding of being and doing in the world with a discussion of differential belonging. In Section 2, I look at the changing approaches of racial and ecological justice struggles in Roxby Downs, South Australia as an example of changing practices around life-in-common. In Section 3, I reflect on how by acknowledging the politics of relations in differential belonging, we can nurture collective subjectivities of being-in-common with the world that can help us live with and correct the past.

FPE and differential belonging of being-in-common

FPE understands ecology as marked by deeply political, historical and social sets of relations (Elmhirst, 2018; Harcourt and Nelson, 2015; Rocheleau and Nirmal, 2015). FPE infuses political ecology, which examines human–nature interactions in the context of

social and environmental injustice, with feminist analysis of social identities. By linking these different visions of environmental and social relations, FPE opens up a discussion on the tensions and troubles around how society and nature co-constitute each other in processes that are continuously negotiated and reshaped (Harcourt and Nelson, 2015: 17). In its studies of different ecological settings around the world, FPE looks at how social difference emerges from the convergence of political/economic structures and everyday practices in specific ecological contexts (Elmhirst, 2018; Harris, 2015; Nightingale, 2015; Sultana, 2011). In studies on extractivism, water cultures, toxicity, protests and struggles, FPE asks questions about the intimate connections between oppression, based on gender and other dimensions of difference, and the exploitation of nature. The analysis looks at how gender, class, caste, race, culture and ethnicity shape processes of ecological change in 'the struggle of men and women to sustain ecologically viable livelihoods, and the prospects of any community for "sustainable development"' (Rocheleau et al., 1996: 4). An important element of FPE scholarship and activism has been to analyse social movements and resistance to environmental injustice and what can be learned from these groups about creating and sustaining alternatives. The studies of these struggles look at how ecologies, power relations and the search for alternatives shape the relations among 'nature, women, men, land, resources, and ecological systems' (Rocheleau and Nirmal, 2015: 794).

FPE provides insights into processes of commoning and making a 'life-in-common' (Clement et al., 2019). Commoning is understood as a process of re/making or re/producing 'life-in-common'. In this framing, FPE helps us to understand 'the everyday practices, social relations and spaces of creativity and social reproduction where people come, share and act together' (Clement et al., 2019: 1) – including the problematisation of the construction of 'community' and 'collective' in contexts of multiple intersecting categories of difference. In other words, FPE helps to critically analyse 'what is in common and for whom'. FPE also enables us to unpack the relation between patriarchal systems, the gendered roles of the reproductive labour of caring for and sustaining the commons (the reproductive commons) and the capitalist discourse about nature as separate from the social domain, to be used as resource for exploitation or conservation for human benefit.

What FPE as presently practised is unable to do is to engage with the knowledge and practices which are present in lifeworlds but cannot be read by modern/colonial beings with modern/colonial subjectivities that produce the notion of self and body as individual rather than being part of community and nature. FPE is engaging with and trying to understand how to go beyond the question 'what is in common and for whom', but the ways in which research is practised (including my own) is one example of FPE's implication/complicity in erasure of others. Faria and Mollett (2014) critique FPE for its own whiteness and call for FPE scholars to grapple with race and their own whiteness seeing FPE as a site of messy, affective and contingent racialised power. While uncertain how to address this fully here, I can point to the sense of impossibility which drives me into theorising differential belongings and exploring its contributions for a more complex subtle dynamic understanding of commoning that incorporates an interest in the (im)possibility to comprehend what is silenced/erased. In my research, for example, about the introduction of the begonia into white Australian rural life in Ballarat in the 19th century (Harcourt, 2019), I find in archives news stories and police reports and their later interpretation by historians about how white settlers destroyed 10,000s-year-old resting place and trading network, killing Wadawurrung and Dja Dja Wurrung peoples without impunity as farms spread out with crops and livestock destroying Country. But I could not feel or experience or really know the trauma and genocide of the Wadawurrung and Dja Dja Wurrung Country. I could acknowledge that history, as interpreted through white settler eyes, but also in conversation

with Wadawurrung and Dja Dja Wurrung peoples in the (currently third) Reconciliation Action Plans,[1] and therefore see possibilities for a pluriversal future of 'being-in-common' aware of the partial connection but radically different violence.

Recognising 'being-in-common' allows us to consider processes of commoning/building a 'life-in-common' in contexts of 'differential belonging'. Being-in-common means we are 'making ourselves while being together' through 'productive interdependence' which generates new subjectivities and forms of life (Hardt and Negri, 2012: 34). It is a subjectivity that emerges from the experience of collective struggles (García Lamarca, 2015). The point about being-in-common (and life-in-common) in white settler context is that it emerges through resistance and struggle and efforts towards healing as a reaction to material and relational dispossessions and deep injustice.

In this commentary, I bring together an FPE intent to learn from social movements and concerns about the researcher's entanglements and complicity with the webs of power and privilege they seek to analyse (Sundberg, 2017). As researchers engaged in and analysing environmental and social struggles, we are bound up in the politics of possibilities and our own sense of belonging to what we study, often seeking to rework power through our research. Such research aims to create alliances across difference, based on common interests and solidarity while still recognising how we are differently situated (Mohanty, 1991; Nightingale, 2011). What I am suggesting is not only that we are differently situated but that this is complicit with erasures of others. It is not only about where are you positioned across the colonial divide, but how your positionality is implicated/complicit with erasures of others. As Faria and Mollett (2014) invite us to consider, it is a messy process as some voices and stories drown out others unless the process of complicity and difference is explicitly acknowledged in building possibilities of shared landscapes. This critical notion of differential belonging helps to challenge the process of othering and the hierarchical relations between us/them or self/other and in this way challenge hegemonic ways of understanding social problems and norms (Carrillo Rowe, 2005). Agency and accountability are central to this process, as is the question of how subjects negotiate hegemonic expressions of power and produce counter-hegemonic responses (Carillo Rowe, 2005: 32).

In order to challenge and reimagine the negotiations of the ecological and social in rethinking life-in-common in the Australian landscape, I first need to unpack the hegemonic narrative of nature shaping white Australian imaginaries. The very fact that I start here is in itself problematic as I am centring the white settler narrative which erases the many complex and deep cultural meanings of the landscape by First Nations Indigenous Australians. While I cannot solve this dilemma, it is important for building alliances across difference to unpack the centring of white narratives, even if at the same time recognising the inevitable complicity in doing so. The hegemonic white settler Australian narrative is based on a sense of national identity which has been forged in the struggle to survive in a hot dry land that was 'empty' of European culture and nature. It was a resource to be exploited for wealth. Within this extractive narrative, nature is valued because it is perceived as unclaimed and appropriable through the myth of terra nullius which constructed the land as empty. Indigenous peoples' cultures and knowledge of living with the land and more-than-human others was violated throughout colonial and modern histories. Processes of both economic extraction and conservation of what was deemed worthy (endangered species, or ancient forests, etc.) determined which nature deserves to be protected, and which nature could be exploited (mineral bearing land, etc.). In this construction, some natures got to 'belong' in the Australian landscape, while others were seen as unworthy of belonging in the colonising culture. In modern narratives around nature, Australian policy makers have focussed on conservation and preservation based on notion of 'worth' driven by corporations,

multilateral agencies, unions and nongovernmental organizations (Goodman, 2011: 148). Environmental justice advocates have countered this by arguing for awareness of socio-natures based on regeneration and a 'commons' governance for ecological and social needs to survive extreme ecological disasters (Salleh, 2011). Ideas of what and who is worth saving are constantly under negotiation[2] under increasingly fractious and dangerous conditions. White settler logic is defining the terms of these negotiations through concepts which are imbued in power and authority, from the normative positions of legal and economic expressions. The violent historical implications have been and continue to be felt by Indigenous communities who experience the terms of access and recognition as already set and many of whom are seeking to generate completely new terms of radical autonomy. I started writing this article when the wildfires were raging across South East Australia in 2019/2020 indicating climate crisis is forcing a rethinking of life-in-common by white settler communities as they are forced to come together to fend for their shared environment as beings-in-common. The impact of the destruction of flora and fauna in such a huge area has shocked the nation and the world (which I return to below).[3]

Shifts in understandings of colonialism, neoliberal capitalism, racial inequalities and climate crisis are complicating and changing interspecies and transracial belongings in Australia (Mohanty, 1991: 300). The changing social, economic and political conditions and commitments are changing the relations that bind us to all beings. As Carillo Rowe suggests, '[t]he sites of our belonging constitute how we see the world, what we value, who we are becoming' (2005: 16). There is some recognition in Australia that lifeworlds are co-constituted by myriad belongings with other people, collectives, places and beings, and the only way to survive the current ecological climate crisis is to find new/different ways of co-becoming (Wright, 2015). There is the possibility that climate crisis will force white settler Australia to begin to sense the importance of plural ways of knowing and the recognition of the myriad ways of belonging for First Nations and aboriginal people.

Opening up the notion of belonging to include multispecies life-in-common asks that we take up a different understanding of how we live with and be part of nature (Barad, 2007; Gibson-Graham, 2008; Wright, 2015: 393). The idea of belonging as inclusion in nature has to be pushed further in terms of how we understand differential belonging. White Australian claims to belonging risks remaining colonial and in this way erase First Nations and Indigenous Australian lifeworlds and meanings. It cannot be about just a shared collective responsibility, as the conditions for who belongs are not equal. Differential belonging has to go beyond just inclusion to recognise complicity and in this way try to unlearn colonial assumptions of who or what can belong. Indigenous Australian ontologies of co-becoming (Bawaka Country et al., 2013; McLean et al., 2018; Moreton-Robinson, 2011) can help us to understand how the imaginary of the Australian landscape was never one of emptiness but one of differential belongings and a life-in-common made up of communities of human and more-than-human agents, including animals, places and emotions (Wright, 2015: 391–392). The idea of belonging in a form of co-becoming is not straightforward for white settler Australians, but it does point to tentative possibilities for white Australia to remake themselves and their lifeworlds: '[t]o practise belonging, to reimagine it, to co-become with other people, things and places, is an expression of hope in the present' (Wright, 2015: 403).

Life-in-common can be a way to visibilise and strengthen the interconnected webs of life between human and more-than-human. Such approaches resonate with Miriam Tola (2015) on 'commoning with/in the Earth' and Mario Blaser and Marisol de la Cadena's (2017) concept of 'uncommons'. Tola builds on Hardt and Negri's ideas of the 'ecology of the common' and being-in-common exploring nature's 'labour' in re/making the commons. What Blaser and De la Cadena call the 'uncommons'; uncommoning helps us to be vigilant

of the asymmetries inherent in all relationalities on which concepts like differential belonging build (Blaser and De la Cadena, 2017). While Blaser and De la Cadena are referring to conflicts around extractivism, the term uncommons underlines the need to acknowledge difference, complicity and power in white settler contexts.

An evocative example of imagining what is co-becoming and differential belonging can be seen in Australian ecofeminist Plumwood's haunting story about how she survived a crocodile attack (2012). Her story of being rolled by a crocodile and her insights into animality, embodiment and humanity as she ponders the idea of thinking flesh and knowing flesh suggests how white settler colonial Australians (like Plumwood) can rethink their positionality in ecological terms where nature and animals are part of ethics and culture, sentient beings and kin. Her story illustrates a deep caring for socionature. Instead of seeing nature as something to be feared and conquered, she invites us to embrace co-becoming so that our ecological and embodied selves are imagined as part of the wider web of relations humans cannot fully know or control. Through her narratives of differential belonging in the Australian bush, she links environmentalism and social justice, and more-than-human connections with the world of animals, plants and minerals or 'Earthothers' (Plumwood, 1993: 137). Plumwood advocates for the recognition of care for others, love, friendship, diversity and appropriate reciprocity and asks that we look at human interactions with the non-human natural world respectfully, acknowledging the agency of all beings in the world (Powell and Menendian, 2016). Plumwood helps us to rethink commoning in important ways as she states: 'communities should always be imagined as in relationship to others' as we develop a politics and ethics of place that connects environmental and justice concerns (Plumwood 2008: 139).

But at the same time, I am fully aware that such invitations speak to women like me, who do not have Indigenous cosmovisions. In seeking out differential belongings, such insights can bring white settler views closer to other worldviews, specifically Indigenous cosmovision. What is difficult to acknowledge is that it is hard to avoid erasure as erasures can happen regardless of intent – progressive white Australians can misguidedly engage in ways that claim understanding but, in reality, obscure Indigenous experience and views. There is a limitation of my gaze as western subject who is unable to escape the myth of the individual flesh, body and embodiment as the meaning of self.

As Donna Haraway describes it, we are entangled in a 'knot of species co-shaping one another in layers of reciprocating complexity all the way down' (2008: 42). This co-shaping is differentiated and is in a fluid relationship with complicity.

'All the way down' in Australia means recognising that Australia is a land that has been known for tens of thousands of years by peoples who see plants and animals as sentient beings and where life is always lived-in relationship to more-than-human others (Rose, 2014).[4] Such an understanding of the world is based on a deep knowledge of ecological processes across time and space that determine how life works. It is a 'multicultural world from inside the earth right on through the ephemeral life inhabiting water, air and land' (Rose, 2014: 139). The question I am asking is: how can different communities in Australia be part of this co-becoming moving towards being-in-common? My contribution here is a tentative answer to this question by suggesting that differential belongings helps us to move, while we recognise that complicity in the erasures of coloniality is still present.

Roxby Downs: Caring for Country and life-in-common

In the 1980s, I was part of a small socialist feminist activist collective which joined Australia-wide campaigns to stop uranium mining in Roxby Downs, South Australia, and to prevent

the U.S. military from entering the Pine Gap U.S. weapons base in Central Australia (Bartlett, 2018). These campaigns were part of a search for more ethical economic and ecological relationships in collective actions that challenged mainstream Australian politics and environmental policy.

The struggles in Roxby Downs to stop uranium mining were part of a broader cracking of 'the Great Australian Silence' and 'the cult of forgetfulness' (Stanner, 1968),[5] as the historical violence towards landscapes and cultures of aboriginal peoples on the 'rotting frontier' and the impact of the historical and modern colonial extractivism and exploitation was becoming more recognised by the 'New Left' (Arrow, 2019; Maddison, 2019).

I painfully recall when I became aware of the violence underlying the cultural erasures that mark Australia. During my student activism, I attended a socialist feminist workshop in Brisbane when in the opening event hundreds of white feminists walked out of the auditorium after they judged the invited Turrbal women, the traditional owners of the land, took too long to welcome the conference crowd. The rush of the white feminists to leave in order to get on with scheduled workshops embodied the racialised inequity that marked the sociocultural relations of white and Indigenous Australia (Harcourt, 2001). This is an example of the coloniality of feminism as Indigenous Aboriginal women's lifeworlds remain unintelligible to western feminism. In this clash, the colonial/neoliberal representations of time and strict scheduling, contrast to what the Turrbal welcome ceremony signified and offered, show how colonialism exists alongside the racism in this example.

Such a display of violence and overt disrespect is being addressed in some ways today even if erasures and the perpetuation of violence continue in different places and contexts. At least on symbolic and representative scales, the University of Queensland where the conference was held, now has on its website an acknowledgement of the traditional owners of the lands as well as a statement that the lands on which the institute was built have always been places of teaching and learning.[6] Reflecting on this transition, I would argue that this is part of a rethinking of life-in-common by white settler Australia. The idea of land as property to be bought and economically exploited by white settler capitalists has been troubled by the Indigenous idea of Country. The idea of Country points to a politics of relations where territory and 'the commons' is not just land that is owned or a resource to be valued or 'worthy' but is in itself a living being. Country is something simultaneously to care for and a living thing that nurtures (Rose, 1999). Country is 'an integrated, more-than-human presence that incorporates land, animals and people, but also nonhuman beings such as tides, waters, winds, insects, rocks, plants, languages, emotions, songs and ancestors' (Bawaka Country et al., 2013: 1). Today's practices and conversations around Country are helping to break silences around past violence, opening up possibilities for different forms of social and ecological justice linking human and more-than-human relations and 'the overlap of connections [that] sustains a web of interdependencies' (Rose, 2014: 144). Moving away from the understanding of land as an inanimate resource to be exploited, the concept of Country opens up ways to understand 'environment in a multispecies tangible and nontangible way that speaks of connection, belonging, and affinity' (Hsu et al., 2014: 370).

The idea of Country as a living entity with a yesterday, today and tomorrow, with a consciousness and a will towards life, helps to transverse racial and cultural divides (Dodson, 2000). It suggests ways to help overcome the deep 'schism between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia's understanding and perspectives of the Australian nation's history' (Ramzan et al., 2009). In the dialogues and debates around Caring for Country, a sense of differential belonging is emerging in alliances across difference working towards ecological justice (Dunstone, 2008; Pickerill, 2009) that aim to acknowledge if not transcend

colonial violence and erasure. In a collaborative research relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers on Indigenous water values associated with the Cudgegong and Goulburn rivers, McLean et al. (2018) in a collaborative research relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers on the Cudgegong and Goulburn rivers show the 'resilience of Indigenous water cultures in an entrenched settler colonial landscape'. Their work 'challenges and seek to decolonise existing epistemologies and methodologies through the co-production of water-related knowledges' (McLean et al., 2018: 618).

These shifts can be seen in the recent Roxby Downs environmental justice campaigns where Country is involved as a living subject. Since 2011, there have been renewed protests against nuclear waste dumping, uranium mining and the general expansion of the nuclear industry in South Australia. Unlike the earlier campaigns in which I participated against capitalist extractivism and exploitation in the context of global peace and anti-militarism, the recent campaign 'The Lizard Bites Back' focuses on protecting Country. The campaign is built on the knowledge of the Arabunna peoples who are from Kokatha Country where the Roxby Downs mine has been built forming alliances with rural and urban organisations living in the community or based in Adelaide. The campaign title comes from the Arabunna Indigenous understanding of Country as the body of a sleeping lizard.[7] The 'Lizard's Revenge March' to the Olympic Dam site in South Australia in July 2012 was led by anti-nuclear activists, including Arabunna Elder Kevin Buzzacott[8] from northern South Australia in a protest against the mine expansion and the uranium industry, which they argued put short-term economic gain ahead of environmental and health concerns (Martin, 2012). 'The Lizard Bites Back' is in solidarity with Aboriginal custodians of Country and evokes the need for a broader politics of relations among all South Australians, past, present and future (Harrison and McLean, 2017).[9] These ways of being-in-common are also part of other resistance movements such as the Stop Adani mining project (to move beyond coal) where the Wangan and Jagalingou people are among the communities leading the struggle, highlighting the intersection of environmental and social justice from the perspective of Country. The protest that has escalated since the summer bushfires bringing together communities across Australia are another example of shifting differential belongings and being-in-common as the demands relate both to the rights of Country of the Wangan and Jagalingou peoples and to going beyond coal in relation to climate crisis.[10]

This rethinking of life-in-common comes out of processes where Indigenous and non-Indigenous activists are negotiating a common ground in informal spaces of activism rather than the formal process of reconciliation. Debates around Country are changing how Australians are seeing themselves as belonging across historical divisions creating spaces for Indigenous ways of being-in-place (Pickerill, 2009). These 'new scales of coexistence' across localities recognise the social and 'ecological wreckage' of white settler capitalist developments and the effects on Country and all Australian peoples' lives (Hinkson and Vincent, 2018: 242). The growing awareness of 'ecological end-times' underlines the need to reconfigure racialised cultural difference and ongoing colonial relations of domination as part of ecological justice and differential belonging (Hinkson and Vincent, 2018: 245).

The severity of the recent bushfires that impacted all states and led to huge destruction of the flora and fauna in 2019/2020 has shaken Australians in various ways. Such disaster capitalism that has led to the fires is forcing white settler Australians to rethink their differential (implicated) belonging in the destruction of Country. Belonging to Country is part of aboriginal existence in Australia, but for white Australia, it has forced a deep rethinking of what 'Caring for Country' means. For example, Deakin University (in Victoria) lowered the Aboriginal flag to half-mast to mark the destruction of the Australian landscape.

The Director of the Institute of Koorie Education issued this statement which shows profoundly what being-in-common with Country means in a statement intended for white settler Australians:

> Country moves beyond landscape, allotment, vista or wildlife as discrete components. It is also place, Ancestors, shadows, mist, warble, maps, vapour. It is Knowledge, Ways, Forms, Spirit, Healing – a fluid fixity that is a web of inter-connection that assembles, then re-assembles. A complex system where everything has its place to teach, feel, show, speak. To lose Country, in this way, is a distinct, messy kind of grief. It is not just a loss of connection to these systems and to place, and so an ever-increasing slippage of understanding of who we are and how we fit. It is not just the loss of sentient, sapient Beings, and the torture of captive incineration when there is nowhere else. It is also a grief of guilt in our irresponsible helplessness – our sense of the abandonment of our cultural obligations to Care for Country. Without Country we are ungrounded and un-belonging. Without Country we are nothing. And without us, Country cannot Be.[11]

Such a 'messy kind of grief' was expressed in the way communities organised to care for native fauna and flora that were devastated by the fires. Volunteer community groups provided food and water and rescued burnt animals. Local groups found ways to be-in-common across different lifeworlds some with respect for First Nations knowledge. There was a recognition (and demand) to listen to Aboriginal people about fire – their thousands of years of how to Care for Country. Waanyi nation author and academic Alexis Wright quotes Gangalidda elder Murrandoo Yanner: '[i]f we can learn from and imagine our place through the laws and stories of our ancestors then we will have true knowledge on how to live, adapt and survive in Australia, just as our ancestors did' (Yanner cited in Wright, 2020: 9). Indigenous techniques from the 'caretakers of the land' include mosaic cool-fire burning and creating wildlife corridors. Such techniques are beginning to be taken up by firefighters. As well as learning to listen to ancestral wisdom, more and more communities in Australia are coming together in order to demand that the country's elected politicians recognise the apocalyptic situation and take climate crisis and planetary boundaries seriously.[12]

Entangled implications and becomings

These changing relations of belonging for white settler Australia in conversation with Country and Indigenous Australia indicate the way to nurture collective subjectivities of being-in-common with the world that can help to correct the past. Particularly given the tragedy unfolding in Australia in late 2019/2020 with fauna and flora destroyed along with huge swaths of land, Indigenous ways of knowing and becoming including how to deal with fire[13] make a change in understanding co-becoming and how to live life-in-common even more vital: 'all humans and nonhumans, actors, actants, everything material, affective, all processes and relationships, are not *things*, are not even isolated *beings,* but are entangled becomings, creative and vital and always in the process of becoming through their connections' (Bawaka Country et al., 2013: 187). A relational co-existence as we move towards just, sustainable futures could emerge where an 'ethics of collaboration and care, based on recognition of human and nonhuman agency' could take us beyond 'false dichotomies of researcher-researched, manager-managed' (Bawaka Country et al., 2013: 196).

My commentary points to how those who are implicated in the destruction and erasure could imagine how to reworld, reimagine, relive and reconnect with each other in order to

heal the past and foster cross-cultural human and nonhuman well-being. Such dialogues open collective possibilities for rethinking life-in-common as we build a form of ethical practice amongst human and nonhuman subjects (Rose, 2013b: 9, 2014).

Stating that research is about healing violent and troubling pasts, presents and futures is not a comfortable or easy position to maintain in academe or in activism, but for some, this is the only possibility and for others our deep responsibility as part of life-in-common. This commentary points to how research that is driven by a deep concern about how to transform our lifeworlds so we can collectively live better with multispecies others on the Earth is one important step towards living life-in-common by recognising our personal and political entanglements (Dombroski et al., 2019; Sato and Soto Alarcon, 2019). Our 'affective socionature entanglements' are nurturing grounds for 'other than capitalist subjectivities' based on empathy for others in our lifeworlds (Singh, 2017: 751). Australia's shifting geocultural landscape is made up of past, present and future violence as the burning bushfires of late 2019 horrifically illustrate.[14] I write knowing there is much more to listen to and learn from in Indigenous world views as we 'learn how to reciprocate and share the responsibility we have to the natural world' (Watson, 2018: 139). It is not just about listening. It is also about what you are ready to give up in the process of unlearning. The colonial wound white settlers cannot experience fully – given the epistemic, cultural and spiritual violence of this messy grief. In writing about white settler Australia, my own complicity in erasure and the difficulty of the awareness of the complicity and impossibility of knowing, I recognise it is time to move forwards, backwards and sideways with others.

The commentary points to the tensions among white settler Australian ideas of conservation/extractivism, the racist and colonial language and actions of leftist social justice circles. It aims to show the potential of being-in-common and differential belonging as a framework for dialoguing with diverse worldviews and cosmovisions. The examples I have taken from my own struggles with these tensions show how important it is to explicitly unsettle white settler Australian complicity. What the effect is and who is being affected by the current ecological and social crises means we have to reconstruct a politics of belonging in which the entanglements as implicated white settlers are acknowledged. There is no simple (nor romantic) solution that Indigenous peoples who have contributed the least to climate change and ecological degradation have now the knowledge to alone 'save' Australia. This narrative is the Janus face of the white settler narrative about exploiting and using such peoples while not changing the hegemonic narrative of Australia as thriving on modern capitalist technologies (Castan and Arabena, 2016). The Lizard Bites Back, along with the different responses to the wildfires, are examples of a counter-hegemonic narrative. How to reappropriate, reconstruct and reinvent personal and political lifeworlds (Escobar, 2008, 2017) is no longer something for the future. Deep listening requires sharing responsibility for damage to ecosystems, including all life that fled the wildfires. The apocalyptic fire season in Australia as a terrifying new normal points to experiential and emotional change. In addition to the huge fires in South East Australia over 2019–2020, in 2019 much of Tasmania burned, and most of its giant kelp forests have now vanished. Large parts of the Barrier Reef have bleached, and Australia has lost ancient and unique forests. The response to such ecological crisis requires the respect of Country as white settler Australians find ways to live-in-common in order to survive the dangers facing their shared socionatural landscape (Watson, 2015). It is important white settler Australians sit with the discomfort, struggle with it, be humbled by it, be called out and learn from it in order to find life-in-common through otherworlding and acting in service of others.

Highlights

- Looks at an FPE interest in relationality and the more-than-human to a rethinking of 'life-in-common'
- Explores the concept of differential belonging in differential belonging Australian landscape marked by racialised historical, ecological and resource struggle and injustice.
- Looks at environmental justice struggles in Roxby Downs, South Australia as an example of changing practices around life-in-common.
- Suggests why it important to explicitly unsettle white settler Australian complicity.

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Notes

1. See https://www.ballarat.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2019-05/Reconciliation_Action_Plan_2019-2021.pdf (accessed 14 September 2020).
2. For example, the 'Rising Tide: Newcastle Climate Change Action Group' prevented the opening of a mine that would produce 10.5 million tonnes of coal over 21 years and in the process destroy fragile wooded and grasslands (Goodman, 2011: 48). See also below for further examples.
3. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), *The Guardian Australia* and multiple social media networks have reported in great detail the impact of the South East Australian fires. The media reports and information on how firefighters responded can be seen on https://www.rfs.nsw.gov.au and https://www.emergency.vic.gov.au/respond/ (accessed 7 January 2020).
4. This metaphor of going all the way down also resonates with Native American creation stories of Turtle Island and of how the turtle sits on the back of another turtle, so it is 'turtles all the way down' (Simpson, 2011).
5. See the ABC Philip Adams podcast on the occasion marking 50 years after Stanner delivered the Boyer Lectures: https://abcmedia.akamaized.net/rn/podcast/2009/03/lnl_20090326_2205.mp3 (accessed 18 January 2019).
6. See https://www.qut.edu.au/about/social-responsibility/acknowledgement-of-traditional-owners (accessed 18 January 2019).
7. 'Beneath the Roxby Downs Uranium mine, there is an old Sleepy Lizard. BHP's Olympic Dam mine is digging right into its guts to extract the worlds [sic] most poisonous ore. That Lizard ain't so sleepy no more.' See https://lizardbitesback.net/category/about/ (accessed 3 March 2019).
8. Kevin Buzzacott is respected by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in his active Caring for Country, politically, materially, culturally and spiritually in the protests against uranium mining on Kokatha land and the exploitation of the water from the Great Artesian Basin. See http://www.engagemedia.org/Members/pipstarr/videos/kevin-buzzacott2.mov/view (accessed 3 March 2019).

9. See https://lizardbitesback.net/why-are-we-here/ (accessed 3 March 2019).
10. The Adani Carmichael Mine in Queensland will destroy Country of Wangan and Jagalingou peoples, the ancestral lands, waters and cultures without their consent, as consent is taken from the Australian federal government. It will damage the Great Barrier Reef world heritage area and the aquifers of the Great Artesian Basin as well as add 4.6 billion tonnes of carbon pollution to the atmosphere. See https://www.stopadani.com/why_stop_adani (accessed 22 January 2020).
11. See https://blogs.deakin.edu.au/deakinlife/2020/01/17/aboriginal-flags-fly-at-half-mast-to-mark-loss-and-destruction-of-country-during-bushfires/ (accessed 21 January 2020).
12. There are too many discussions to report here, from personal correspondence to journalist reports, twitter feeds, blogs and other social media coverage. See, for example, Environmental Studies and Sciences first-hand account of the Australian Wildfires: https://podcasts.apple.com/au/podcast/environmental-studies-and-sciences/id1475692098?i=1000462696499&fbclid=IwAR1IqNczeDyPWkBaQb5mTvKXh-fZr_NiklZ3AvDyPBO9V28EZypi01vMHsk (accessed 20 January 2020).
13. See https://mobile.abc.net.au/news/2018-09-18/indigenous-burning-before-and-after-tathra-bushfire/10258140?pfmredir=sm&fbclid=IwAR2cC7uw2BUMeg0V7yu6L3ofg0P5gbR93slbjLxUjosJpfGC9IaXLzXCCWQ (accessed 7 January 2020).
14. I am writing this as the bushfires are raging in Victoria and NSW. See *The Guardian Report* on 31 December 2019 by Henriques-Gomes.

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