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Speculative Fabulations in the Ruins of Colonial Topographies: A (Messy) Review of 'Developing Place-responsive Pedagogy in Outdoor Environmental Education: A Rhizomatic Curriculum Autobiography' by Alistair Stewart

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Prologue: There are fundamental differences between the various ontologies of Australian First Nations peoples who have lived there for 40-60,000 years and the various ontologies of more recent Australian arrivals from the 18th Century onwards (peoples of European descent or Asian descent, for example). These differences create wildly opposing relationships with, and treatments of, varying environments due to the ecological performance of the different ontologies. As Alistair reminds us, 'the Eurocentric model of understanding and relating to the land has been an ecological failure in Australia' (p.71). Maybe it would be prudent to *listen* to other ontological voices, and *act* on them, for the sake of many species – including humans - currently experiencing another mass extinction event. This is because some voices are often more ecologically sustainable than others due to the (often) more equitable trophic cascades emanating from their ethical and epistemological relationships with those environments. Following 'Noel Gough's (2000) observation that people and knowledge are always located somewhere (rather than everywhere/anywhere)', Alistair informs us that knowledge of the land is situational, contextual and performative (p.102). Unfortunately, one language every three months is lost to the world or consumed in a western monoculture (Wiecha, 2013), and with that language goes a completely different way of articulating the world. As languages die, so do modes of inhabiting, knowing, relating, and acting in/for/of environments, gathered exponentially over millennia.

Main Story: Alistair Stewart's book is a plea to learn to listen – but not necessarily speak - in a way other than the way many Australians of European descent have been taught by their normative curriculums with their 'universalist approaches to outdoor environmental education in Australia' (p.46). This is not an order. Alistair resists 'the temptation to recommend how others *should* re/think or re/conceive pedagogy' (my emphasis), instead offering his autobiographical meanderings to think 'differently about thinking differently about practice~theory of pedagogy' (p.97). In this way, it

seems to fit well with Deleuzian versions of immanent ethics as opposed to transcendent moralistic and/or monotheistic accounts. These later renderings often lead to colonialist outcomes due to their insistence that there is a truth that surpasses other inferior truths by the use of the concept, *should* (e.g. you *should* not steal, even though your children might starve). Here we sense Alistair's commitment to a Deleuzian ethics of education, which is practiced *in the moment*.

This book is a story about my attempts to construct outdoor environmental education (OEE) pedagogies and experiences that are place-responsive; that is, to create educative experiences that are about the natural~cultural history of the Australian places in which they occur [...] Curriculum as I conceptualise and understand it is ongoing, lived, enacted, dynamic and responsive to changing circumstances of individuals and environments within which they live and work. Curriculum, for me, is always already *becoming*. (p.1)

Alistair offers his concept '*rhizocurrere*' to signal his approach of perpetual and dispersed narrative inquiry. This derives from Pinar's *currere*, 'an autobiographical approach to curriculum inquiry' which 'transforms curriculum from a noun to a verb', and Deleuze and Guattari's *rhizome* which 'is a mode of thought that displaces binary logic for open pluralistic thinking' (p.2). Alistair continues to make use of Deleuze and Guattari's linguistic inventions, such as assemblages, becoming and deterritorialisations but also provides the reader with his own inventive 'Handrails for Thinking with/in/through' and 'rhizomatic offshoots' such as 'A Day at the Beach' (p.94), which reads like a stream-of-consciousness poem. He utilises these concepts to think *with*, very much in keeping with the recent ontological and/or material turn in contemporary inquiry (see Jackson & Mazzei, 2012; or St. Pierre, 2014, for example).

Alistair seeks to '(re)create education that utilises new concepts, new imaginings, for contemplating the particulars of Australian landscapes, their more-than-human inhabitants, and how the landscapes and inhabitants have changed over time and what we might do to restore them' (pp.95-96). He wishes to 'counter colonialist understandings of 'nature' and foster deeper awareness of our relationships with this river and this land' by employing 'small acts of decolonisation' (p.9). This last sentence made me smile and as it was stated at the start, it promised much.

Alistair Stewart has been exploring place-responsive outdoor and environmental pedagogies for 20 years or more and has been a leading figure in this field. Indeed, this book itself is an assemblage of reworked versions of pre-published material spanning back to 2004 (among other, more contemporary additions) when Alistair wrote about/with the Murray river, spreading his 'messy theorisations' in outdoor and environmental education. Australia's bones are evident in this writing. It is not only Alistair's pedagogic ideas and theoretical offshoots that are Deleuzo-Australian, his thoughts are often shaped by Australian watercourses, mostly as rivers, meandering and continually accompanied by snaking tributaries of mycelial thought.

It is not by chance that Alistair's nomadic, rhizomatic writing should be rooted from the geological position of Australia. There has been an increasing bulge of this turn to rhizomatic writing and inquiry from consistent pockets in Australia. There are certain

lineages that have created streams of Deleuzian informed environmental pedagogy: Annette and Noel Gough, Alistair Stewart, Kathleen Pleasants, Scott Jukes, Marcus Morse, Margaret Sommerville, Susanne Gannon, Margaret and Warren Sellers, to name only a few. These are all important mentions due to the philosophical and pedagogical nature of the rhizome. It spreads in tentacular fashion and creates trophic cascades - all ecological, all physical. For example, Alistair acknowledges Noel's influence, especially when introducing him to the works of Deleuze and Guattari, as is evident throughout this book, as well as the works of Ursula Le Guin, the science fiction/fantasy author. This is particularly interesting due to Ursula's influence on speculative fabulations and concepts such as 'unnaming' from her short story 'She unnames them'. Alistair suggests, 'perhaps some careful renaming, such as using the names of local Aboriginal people, might foster some alternative conceptions and relationships between humans and the more-than-human world' (p.40). Not a bad idea, as a sort of linguistic replacement for the colonial statues of oppressive Latinised/Anglicised nouns. 'Such is the way of science and the State, inseparable partners in the colonial projects of control by classification' (Ingold, 2011, p. 174). Alternative linguistic conceptions can be found from First Nations ontologies as well as western science, art and philosophy. For example, many animist names for animals are verbs - in relational contexts with the landscape/waterscape - instead of the more static noun (see Clarke and Mcphie, 2014). The physicist Bohm (1980) advocated a verb-based language that emphasized the 'role of language in shaping our overall world views as well as in expressing them more precisely in the form of philosophical ideas' (p.39). Alastair Reid's poem 'Growing, Flying, Happening' asks us to look (rather romantically) beyond the oppressive noun.

Say the soft bird's name, but do not be surprised to see it fall
headlong, struck skyless, into its pigeonhole -
columba palumbus and you have it dead,
wedged, neat, unwinged in your head.
That the black-backed tatter-winged thing
straking the harbour water and then plummeting
down, to come up, sleek head a-cock,
a minted herring shining in its beak,
is a *guillemot*, is neither here nor there
in the amazement of its rising,
wings slicing the stiff salt air. (1987, p.3, lines 1-12)

But the noun is not oppressive because it is scientific, it is oppressive because of its geological context and the colonised waterscapes it has appropriated. Of course, this

renaming has already begun in Australia (think 'Uluru' – formerly Ayer's Rock, named after former South Australian Premier Sir Henry Ayers). Yet, renaming is not the same as unname. In Le Guin's original short story Eve acknowledges the controlling and categorizing performance of names.

In returning the names, she rejects the uneven power relations of having Adam in charge of everything and everybody. So, "She Unnames Them" is a defense of the right to self-determination. [...] It is also a story about tearing down barriers. Names serve to emphasize the differences between the animals, but without names, their similarities become more evident. (Sustana, 2019, n.p.)

Hence, the similarity with Deleuze and Guattari's (2004) project of deterritorialization and their strategy of inventing concepts. 'After all, "unname" isn't even a word, so right from the beginning, Eve has been imagining a world that is unlike the one we know' (Sustana, 2019, n.p.). This is an invitation to speculatively fabulate more equitable stories in the ruins of colonial topographies.

In his desire to develop a place-responsive OEE pedagogy, Alistair asks, 'whose stories are heard and/or silenced?' (p.5). In searching for the 'counter colonialist understandings of 'nature' and 'small acts of decolonisation' that were promised on page 9, I had half expected to find an abundance of local First Nations peoples ontologies. *As far as I could tell*, Alistair continued to classify the local flora and fauna of European conceptual origin rather than unname, rename or expand upon 'other' local onto-epistemologies, such as the local First Nations peoples' with their uniquely crafted knowledge over millennia. The importance and mention of First Nations Australian peoples certainly features more explicitly from chapter 6 onwards but still not so much of their *ontologies*, which I had imagined to be so important to Alistair's project. I'm not sure of the reasons for this but there's an ethic at play here that is incredibly important for reducing (mis)appropriations – speaking 'for' other peoples, cultures, ways of life, ontologies, etc. 'Plumwood (2000) argues that it makes good sense for non-indigenous Australians to learn from Aboriginal people about how to relate to and understand the land without appropriating their knowledge' (Stewart, p.71). So then, claiming the right to authoritatively narrate First Nations people's ontologies and/or epistemologies would be inappropriate in this case. Alistair admits he is 'mindful of [...] appropriation of Aboriginal knowledge' (p.107). He does, however, utilise academic thinking from the ontological turn, in a clever way, that often mirrors rudiments of many First Nations people's beliefs, without speaking 'for' them (although many variants of the ontological turn also owe much to various First Nations peoples beliefs that deserve recognition – see Rosiek, Snyder and Pratt, 2019, for example). In this way, Alistair does counter a colonialist understanding of 'nature', *to a certain degree*:

I fear that an experience of the river that is primarily about the participants and their activities, without reference to the river as an entity with its own life, meaning and health (that may be separate from humans and yet the same time whose short-medium term future is inextricably linked to humans) becomes an act of appropriation, that we risk incorporating the

river into our selfhood and culture (as masters) (Plumwood, 1993), and the river is again colonised. (p.75)

I say to a certain degree because I still found myself wanting more of the voices that have been silenced, such as the First Nations ontologies that have been omitted from the 'Natural *History*' ('*His-story*' being the colonialist voice) of Australia. After all, 'Natural History' – a patriarchal and colonial narrative of an often-romanticised concept - is a very white idea, along with the privilege of being able to canoe for leisure which holds significant differences to canoeing for necessity. This itself is a colonialist issue worth exploring. Just as recreation in the 'green and pleasant land' of the undulating pastoral English countryside has now been called out for its elite whiteness and inaccessibility for many non-white, non-privileged people (see English national park, DEFRA and Natural England statistics as well as the BBC's *Countyfile* aired on June 28th, 2020), so too do privileged white colonial waterscapes need unnamings, as Alistair implies.

Alistair certainly tells the story with a white, taxonomized ecological lens – how could he not? – but it is with a certain humility and careful reflexive pen that his narrative becomes more equitable, both socially and environmentally (not that there's a difference).

After meeting Ngarrindjeri First Nation people, Alistair recounts, 'We spend the afternoon with elders [...] and hear stories about living with, by and on the river' (p.90). It was these stories, which Alistair does not recount to the reader (other than the one quoted by Dr Jessica Weir on page 89), that I longed to hear alongside Alistair's stories, however I understand they might not be for him to tell. Perhaps then, in addition to Alistair's narrative, it would be a good idea to signpost where these stories might be held if they exist (as stories always change when told in different mediums, many losing their ontological subtleties when written down or even recorded), told by Ngarrindjeri First Nations people themselves. Perhaps too, we could signpost any political actions that might challenge these inequities that Alistair so rightly points to. Perhaps then, this is my job here, to give a nod to commonground.org.au; Pay The Rent; The National Justice Project; Sisters Inside; Free Her; Black Rainbow; Change The Record; Warriors of the Aboriginal Resistance; Grandmothers Against Removals; National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services' GoFundMe campaign (list gathered from NME, 2020), and some recent support networks affected by the iniquitous racial impacts of the coronavirus: Barpirdhila Foundation's First Nations Artists & Community COVID-19 Appeal. And if you'd like to learn more about Australian First Nations cultures by Australian *First Nations voices*, see: <https://australian.museum/learn/first-nations/>.

Epilogue: Despite the ontological omissions that we must explore elsewhere, as well as the slightly Eurocentric ecological naming of things, I will be placing this book on the reading list of the Outdoor and Experiential Learning masters course I run in the Lake District National Park in the UK - where mountains first became romanticised sublime objects of affection for privileged white gentry to climb as an act of leisure (you see, I have much deterritorializing to do too). This is because Alistair offers a creative and critically reflexive story with which to begin deconstructing normative implicit

biases towards white colonised waterscapes. This is a great tool for researchers, students and staff alike, to think landscape and waterscape *with*. I'll be recommending they read it all the way through, in whichever order the chapters float to the surface. It will certainly challenge them, but I hope they will challenge the book in return, with the affirmative and empathetic critique it deserves.

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