

## ASSA Workshop Report

### An Ethics for Living in the Anthropocene

*Katherine Gibson, Ruth Fincher and Deborah Bird Rose*

This workshop was held on 7-9 February on the banks of the Georges River close to the University of Western Sydney, Bankstown, the hosting institution. It brought together 15 key thinkers from Anthropology, Education, Human Geography, Philosophy, Science and Technology Studies, Sociology, Political Theory, Communications and Film to consider questions concerning an ethics for living in this new era of human driven climate change called the 'Anthropocene'. The workshop was conceived as a way to honour the late Val Plumwood and to begin to rise to a challenge she posed soon before her death:

If our species does not survive the ecological crisis, it will probably be due to our failure to imagine and work out new ways to live with the earth, to rework ourselves and our high energy, high consumption, and hyper-instrumental societies adaptively.... We will go onwards in a different mode of humanity, or not at all. (Plumwood 2007:1 in her review of Deborah Bird Rose's Reports from a *Wild Country: Ethics of Decolonisation*, Australian Humanities Review 42(August), 1-4).

Inspired by Val's life and practice the workshop was held in a setting that invited the bush, rocks, birds and river to be part of a creative conversation.

Our starting premise was that we are now living in an era of unprecedented rapid environmental and social change. The recent 10,000 year history of climatic stability on Earth enabled the rise of agriculture and domestication, the growth of cities, numerous technological revolutions, and the emergence of modernity. In the latest phase of this era, modernity is unmaking the stability that enabled its emergence. Over the 21<sup>st</sup> century severe and numerous weather disasters, scarcity of key resources, major changes in environments, enormous rates of extinction, and other forces that threaten life are set to increase. Current responses to these challenges focus on market-driven solutions that have the potential to further endanger our collective commons.

The workshop focused on new types of ecological economic thinking and ethical practices of living. It sought to identify creative and innovative examples of experimentation that can offer guides for how to think and live differently.

The invited participants included senior and early career scholars, all working with questions that cut across the nature/culture and economy/ecology divides. Prior to the workshop each participant circulated a piece of their writing that touched on the following themes:

- Resituating humans within ecological systems
- Resituating non-humans in ethical terms
- Systems of survival that are resilient in the face of change
- Diversity and dynamism in ecologies and economies
- Ethical responsibility across space and time, between places and in the future
- Creating new ecological economic narratives

Over the course of the workshop we built on the understanding gained from engaging with each other's work prior to the event. Each participant presented a short reflection

on the analytical tools we had marshalled for moving our thinking forward around the following themes:

### **Connectivity**

Freya Mathews (Latrobe University), Thom van Dooren (University of Technology Sydney), Anna Yeatman (University of Western Sydney), Deborah Bird Rose (Macquarie), Lesley Instone (University of Newcastle)

### **Resilience**

Katherine Gibson (University of Western Sydney), Jacqui Poltera (University of Western Sydney), Margaret Somerville (Monash), Jenny Cameron (University of Newcastle), Ruth Fincher (University of Melbourne), Gerda Roelvink (University of Western Sydney)

### **Publics and Performance**

Kumi Kato (University of Queensland), Kurt Iveson (University of Sydney), Simon Wearne (independent film-maker)

Professor Julie Graham from the University of Massachusetts Amherst (currently an Eminent Visiting Research Fellow with the Centre for Citizenship and Public Policy at the University of Western Sydney) acted as rapporteur on the reflections offered. She identified the following issues that cross-cut the discussion.

### **Acknowledging the tragedy of anthropogenic climate change**

Participants agreed that it was important to tap into the emotional richness of grief about extinction and loss without getting stuck on the “blame game”. Discussion canvassed the immobilizing effects of knowing, on the one hand, and the powerful effects of the will to ignorance, on the other—both of which are flavouring public debate. Might it be possible to welcome the pain of “knowing” if it led to different ways of working with non-human others, recognizing a confluence of desire across the human/non-human divide and the vital rhythms that animate the world?

All participants were interested in experimenting with innovative practices of being, thinking and working. We identified elements of a new ethics of place and embodiment and an ethics of research.

### **An ethics of place and embodiment**

Starting from the recognition that there is no ‘one size fits all’ response to climate change, we are concerned to develop an ethics of place that appreciates the specificity and richness of loss and potentiality. While connection to earth others might be an overarching goal, it will be to certain ecologies, species, atmospheres and materialities that we actually connect. We could see ourselves as part of country, accepting the responsibility not forgotten by Indigenous people all over the world, of ‘singing’ country into health. This might mean cultivating the capacity for deep listening to each other, to the land, to other species and thereby learning to be affected and transformed by the body-world we are part of; seeing the body as a centre of animation but not the ground of a separate self; renouncing the narcissistic defence of omnipotence.

### **An ethics of research**

We all felt that the current crisis calls for new ways of thinking and producing knowledge. There was concern that our research allow for the expression of grief and mourning for what has been and is daily being lost. But it is important to adopt a

reparative rather than a purely critical stance toward knowing. We can work against singular and global representations of ‘the problem’ in the face of which any small, multiple, place-based action is rendered hopeless. We can choose to read for difference rather than dominance; think connectivity rather than hyper-separation; look for multiplicity—multiple climate changes, multiple ways of living with earth others. We can find ways forward in what is already being done in the here and now; attend to the performative effects of any analysis; tell stories in a hopeful and open way—allowing for the possibility that life is dormant rather than dead. We can use our critical capacities to recover our rich traditions of counter-culture and theorize them outside the mainstream/alternative binary. All these ways of thinking and researching give rise to new strategies for going forward.

We identified the following strategies:

- Using narrative as a way of moving away from the abstractness of theory. Stories illustrate practical ethics; they foster connectivity as they can describe multiple forces coming together, they can revitalize moral capacity;
- Learning to experiment collectively;
- Developing writing practices for resilience.

Out of the discussions and explorations during the course of the workshop the participants produced a **Manifesto for Living in the Anthropocene** (see below) which we have posted on the Ecological Humanities [www.ecologicalhumanities.org](http://www.ecologicalhumanities.org) and Community Economies [www.communityeconomies.org](http://www.communityeconomies.org) web sites. Signatories to this manifesto include those who attended the workshop and those who were invited but unable to attend. This wider group is working on an edited volume that will encapsulate the creative accomplishments of the workshop. The book will be edited by Gibson, Fincher and Rose and will include short essays that discuss thinking and research strategies for the Anthropocene, interspersed with a range of stories and images. We are negotiating to get this collection published by ANU e-Press so as to maximize accessibility. Workshop participants all expressed eagerness to return to the issues discussed in a year or two to see how our research and practice has changed in light of our experience together. We would like to express our gratitude to the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia for their support for this valuable, stimulating and enjoyable event.

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## MANIFESTO FOR LIVING IN THE ANTHROPOCENE

### Preamble

Humanity’s actions have become a new planetary force with accelerating effects on the biosphere. This new era, known as the Anthropocene, calls for new ways of thinking and knowing, and for innovative forms of action.

We are a group of concerned social scientists and creative scholars who are moved to address the unique qualities of our contemporary world. In the Anthropocene we are summoned to expand our understandings of ways to conjoin nature and culture, economy and ecology, and natural and social sciences. Already, thinkers among us are exploring ways of dismantling traditional separations. We aim to further and expand this work, identifying multiple pathways toward alternative futures.

Research for the Anthropocene must and will harness the creativity of human potential to reduce harm and promote a flourishing biosphere.

### **Thinking**

We want to engage in life and the living world in an unconstrained and expansive way. Our thinking needs to be in the service of life—and so does our language. This means giving up preconceptions, and instead listening to the world. This means giving up delusions of mastery and control, and instead seeing the world as uncertain and yet unfolding. So our thinking needs to be—

- Curious
- Experimental
- Open
- Adaptive
- Imaginative
- Responsive, and
- Responsible.

We are committed to thinking with the community of life and contributing to healing.

### **Stories**

Stories are important for understanding and communicating the significance of our times. We aim to tell stories that—

- Enact connectivity, entangling us in the lives of others
- Have the capacity to reach beyond abstractions and move us to concern and action
- Are rich sources of reflection
- Enliven moral imagination, drawing us into deeper understandings of responsibilities, reparative possibilities, and alternative futures.

### **Researching**

While we continue our traditions of critical analysis, we are forging new research practices to excavate, encounter and extend reparative possibilities for alternative futures. We look and listen for life-giving potentialities (past and present) by charting connections, re-mapping the familiar and opening ourselves to what can be learned from what already is happening in the world. As participants in a changing world, we advocate—

- Developing new languages for our changing world
- Stepping into the unknown
- Making risky attachments, and
- Joining and supporting concerned others

**Colleagues wherever you may be, put your research to work and take a stand for life!**

Scholars Concerned for Life in the Anthropocene, Georges River, 8<sup>th</sup> February, 2010

Kay Anderson, Jenny Cameron, Thom van Dooren, Kelly Dombroski, Ruth Fincher, Katherine Gibson, Julie Graham, Lesley Instone, Kurt Iveson, Kumi Kato, Freya Mathews, Jacqui Poltera, Kate Rigby, Gerda Roelvink, Deborah Rose, Margaret Somerville, Simon Wearne, Jessica Weir, Anna Yeatman

