

CHAPTER 4

DISSOLVING THE BOUNDARIES OF THE CITY: ECO-IMAGINATION AND THE ECOLOGY OF COMPASSIONATE DEMOCRACY

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Water and imagination are powerful solvents, capable of carrying poison and nourishment, destruction and hope in their embrace. They can both cross, and even dissolve, boundaries that separate and exclude. This chapter moves back and forth between the physical fluidity of water and the conceptual fluidity of imagination. Aware of the inherent ambivalence of boundaries, our aim is to contribute to the erosion of the barriers that try to separate cities from their wider (ecological and social) world and the conceptual barriers that try to separate human from more-than-human interests in the idea of democracy in late-modern societies such as Australia. Announcing the inauguration of an Australian Creek Liberation Movement in the opening page, we champion a watershed consciousness that is irrepressibly curious about the complex social and ecological worlds of co-dependencies, co-evolution, and co-creation that we inhabit. It is a form of awareness unwilling to be contained by the rigid and impermeable borders imposed between cultures, nations, beings, and places; borders that seemingly grow stronger as a neo-colonial set of values and political interests is globalised. Comfortable with the co-existence of unity and difference that is embodied in steam, ice, oceans, raindrops, beer, and in our watery human bodies, it is a form of awareness that affirms an inclusive, compassionate politics grounded in the relationality of all identities.

Breaking news

Today we bring to you advance notice of the inaugural meeting of the Australian Creek Liberation Movement (ACLM) to be held on January 26, 2005, at an underground location in Sydney beside the entombed 'corpse' of the Tank Stream. The Tank Stream was, of course, the freshwater creek that once nourished the landscape chosen by Governor Arthur Philip as the site of Australia's first city. However, within a few years it had been turned into an open sewer and waste drain, inadequately protected by a wire fence (Birmingham 2001). 'The Tank Stream, as the colonisers called it, was the first to be poisoned before it was eventually buried under tons of concrete and neglect, so we have chosen this site to represent the sorry history of our treatment of urban creeks,' ACLM spokesperson Arterio Reviver told us. 'There is, of course, great work being done now to revive some of the urban creeks that were encased in concrete, especially in my home town of Melbourne,' he continued. 'The aim of this movement is to encourage urban-dwellers to look, reflect and wonder again at the creeks that brought life to the land before they were buried beneath the concrete of our contempt. Liberating the land's life-blood will also help dissolve the boundaries we impose between urban and non-urban landscapes, and between culture and nature more generally, by building a broader watershed consciousness.'

Reviver denied rumours that the ACLM would engage in acts of 'ecotage' to uncover buried creeks, stressing instead that the movement would adopt non-violent tactics to catalyse public awareness of urban creeks as sources of ecological and social life. He confirmed, however, that humour would play a role in the movement's public education strategies and said that there would be a travelling troupe of actors and artists who would aim to engage the public in a series of creek-side 'events' around the nation. 'We want to engage the democratic imagination to nourish our empathy for life itself, in all its forms,' Reviver said. 'As foreign as this idea may sound today, the goal of building a compassionate society in which human equality and human diversity are celebrated is not just about human interests. A compassionate society is necessarily one whose understanding of democracy embraces its more-than-human world.'

Reviver was proud to announce that world-famous musician Muddy Waters had agreed to donate one of his guitars to help raise funds for the new movement.

Rethinking water and waterways

The transformation of life-giving waterways into drains, waste-disposal systems and boundary lines provides a defining metaphor for the European colonisation of Australian landscapes. Not only were these flows of water through a parched land treated wastefully, they were also 'linearised' to make them more 'efficient' in their new function of washing away colonial 'sins'. As Paul Carter has said:

Our relationship to the ground is, culturally speaking, paradoxical: for we appreciate it only in so far as it bows down to our will We do not walk with the surface; we do not align our lives with its inclines, folds and pockets. We glide over it; and to do this, to render what is rough smooth, passive, passable, we linearize it, conceptualizing the ground, indeed the civilized world as an ideally flat space, whose billiard-table surface can be skated over in any direction, without hindrance (1996, p.2).

Skating across a frictionless surface, drawing water and food from afar, it is hard to remain aware of the ecological and cultural depths of our homes. We lose sight of the spin of earth, sun and moon when we shop in ubiquitously sterile supermarkets, as we lose sight of the sterile, and routinely undemocratic, social relationships sustained by the global industries of agri-business and marketing; relationships lodged deep within the glossy packages lining the shelves.

Yet, busily burying meaning in our home-places, 21st-century Australians paradoxically hunger for glimpses of what we have been unable to fully subdue. Sydneysiders, for example, experience the magnificent harbour – Cadi¹ – as the hub of so much of the city's commercial and cultural life, yet it also provides a glimpse of what existed before and beyond the colonisation of this place. The harbour is at the heart of the city and in the hearts of many who call Sydney home. Despite the continued colonization of Cadi and the seaside beaches by the all-too-visible and undemocratic hand of real estate markets, both remain centres of human affection and points of encounter with non-human domains that lap at human consciousness. As Philip Drew argued so persuasively *The Coast Dwellers* (1994), Australians have become a veranda people. We hover now in liminal space, perched on the edges of this continent, the enclosure of the city protecting our backs against the vast unfamiliarity of the inland as we look out at the waters that enfold us.

As the renowned adult educator Ivan Illich once noted (1986), the remarkable history of water's economy can perhaps teach Bacon's heirs more humble, more sustainable and more sustaining stories of human

'progress'. The prior existence of water enabled the emergence of life on our planet and it is, of course, essential for the continuation of all life. Water remains the dominant feature of the earth's surface and its ageless and restless molecules wash continuously through the bodies of all living things, providing the solvent that enables other atoms to combine and recombine (Perkowitz 2001). We cannot live without enough 'fresh' water, yet, in the dialectic of nature, death belongs to water also. Water can dissolve arsenic as easily as sugar; can be anything from a gently flowing stream to a tsunami; from a babbling brook to the 'effluent' in our sewers. Water can nurture and poison; sustain and demolish. Backyard pools are the venue of delight and drownings alike.

Given that water is so integral to our lives, it is little wonder that it has long fascinated scientists and artists alike. It has been mythologised, worshipped and cursed. Leonardo da Vinci was one of many who was fascinated by the appearance of eddies in moving streams (ibid, p.10), while the sinking of the unsinkable *Titanic* was a critical moment in modern myth-making, one that only intensified the engineer's dream of 'taming' the sea. In the pursuit of technological progress, water has been treated as a limitless bounty, and as limitlessly malleable in the service of its human masters. Dammed, siphoned and piped it has been held as a 'standing reserve' awaiting its orders. In the process, the precise and critical commerce of water within ecosystems has been overridden. Much less discussed than the dangers posed by the industrial transformation of the atmosphere, the immeasurable dangers posed by the overuse, contamination and unjust distribution of earth's very limited harvest of drinkable water define the unsustainability of our age.

Even in an obviously arid land such as Australia, water has been mostly seen as a 'free' resource. An island nation, Australia is perhaps fortunate in not having to negotiate water rights with other nations sharing the same waterways – a growing source of international tensions – but earlier failures to consider the downstream and lateral consequences of water usages are beginning to have their impact. Access to water – increasingly translated into resourcist jargon as 'water rights' – is beginning to cause domestic tensions between competing interests; as seen in seemingly intractable disputes between farmers who have come to rely on irrigation and those who want to see better flows in major rivers and streams for commercial or ecological reasons. The ceaseless movement of water is an affront to a society increasingly organised around the sacrosanct boundaries of 'ownership'. It was not surprising, then, that a group of Australian business and media leaders responded in 2002 to the economic dangers posed by this continent's current drought by proclaiming the

need to 'turn the rivers inland', presumably to avoid an appalling waste of 'our' precious water as it pointlessly tips itself out of the country and into the salty commons of the oceans, and to provide a boon for irrigators, industrialists and property developers².

Urban-dwellers experience water as something that arrives in taps and disappears down drains. Only at times of severe drought are we obliged to think about its 'free' availability to do with what we like. And only when hit by floods or 'freak' storms do we notice its other than benign qualities. Real estate prices indicate that many Australians value dearly the opportunity to live near urban waterways provided they don't smell or flood, and many of us head for water on our holidays. We background water – seeing it as essentially passive and useful – rather than contemplate our multifaceted relationships with one of our planet's key signature elements. We deny our responsibility for the changing economy of water, portraying drought and deluge as the arbitrary viciousness of nature (or, as insurance companies strangely prefer it, 'acts of God') with no link to anthropogenic changes in atmosphere, vegetation, soil, and hydrology.

What might happen, then, if we foreground water and waterways in our consciousness? We might be reminded of how precise and precarious life is and how much we have taken the life-giving qualities of water for granted. We might remember that we have turned many charming creeks into drains and we might see practical, political possibilities for them to reclaim their magical charms again. We might see that creek liberation is not simply a matter of creating spaces within which urban creeks can restore themselves; it opens up possibilities for learning from water's logics who we are and who we might become in this land.

Enter eco-imagination

Although waterways have long been used as dividing lines between human communities, they also have a great capacity to connect. If we travel, imaginatively, upstream on waterways that have shaped the very landscapes on which our cities rest, we will move beyond the metropolitan frontier to encounter farmlands, small settlements, and, most likely, areas of bush that may be at their most 'wild' where the waterways begin. To travel upstream is to see how the civilised and the wild are joined. And so it is as we travel downstream into the oceans and into the extraordinary bodies of the creatures living within the crushing pressure and frigid darkness of their depths. If our imagination lets us, we might continue that journey in space and time, reaching far away places, possibly turning into

ice, or rising into the sky to begin again the movement of water from heavens to earth.

If we can learn to think fluidly through space and time we can develop what some have called a 'watershed consciousness' (Merchant 1992). This awareness reconceives geography as 'bioregions' rather than as arbitrary zones of human utility, zones routinely created by drawing lines on two-dimensional maps that can only crudely represent the terrain and hint at the complexity of overlapping biotic communities. How different would our cities look if meandering creeks were allowed to reassert themselves over the linearity and homogeneity of roads? It is not a question of *replacing* one grid with another, but of recognising the extent to which the grid of technological control has dominated all others. Floods and violent storms remind us that water – in its various guises – has the power to transform much of what we construct. Similarly, a watershed consciousness can transform some of our mental constructs about the nature(s) of urbanised lifeworlds. To be fully conscious of water's own meanings is become curious once again about our participation in the broad hydrological cycle and the localised lifeworlds it lubricates. It is to engage in *eco-imagination*. It is to draw upon individual, communal and cultural sources of imagination to become more aware of and attuned to the complex world of co-dependencies, co-evolution, and co-creation we inhabit. With the poet Michael Patterson³, we might stand near the source of a river and let our imagination flow so far downstream that we can 'kiss the lips of whales'.

Eco-imagination frees us to travel into the truly evolutionary dimensions of space and time. The indigenous North American writer Joseph Bruchac's celebration of the music of water is one such moment of liberation (Bruchac 2001, pp.38-39):

First silence
and then
almost like a sigh
the gentle
harp note plink
of a raindrop
that fell from so high
we can barely imagine
its sparkling journey

down
from

the
sky

It is the beginning,
the very first
note of a melody
older than breathing.

Long before we
who walk, swim or fly
arrived
this pond was singing.

As Rothenberg points out (Rothenberg and Ulvaeus 2001, p.xv), it is imagination that makes exploration possible. So, if we can imagine a world in which connectedness and inclusivity are valued more than competition and exclusivity, we might start to open up and explore spaces in which we can experiment about what they might mean in our everyday and political lives.

Overflowing the boundaries of democratic discourse

As many contributors to this book stress, the meandering motion of imagination can broaden and enrich our interest in the ideal of democracy, breaking the constraints of the prevailing stale and procedural focus on competing human rights and responsibilities. Democracy is, of course, an essentially and necessarily contested ideal that defies universal definition (Connolly 1983). But at the very least it directs our attention to the question of what we share with one another, and what we don't, and how we demarcate our social and ecological reality into 'mine', 'ours' and 'theirs'. Democracy names the processes that maintain individuality and collectivity, diversity and interdependence, in healthy, co-evolutionary tension.

However, the practices of technological progress and consumerist freedom have long taught us that our being warmed by the same sun, washed by the same water, and built of the same atoms provides no basis for juxtaposing the idea of private freedom with that of public freedom. 'Nature' as mindless, meaningless and machine-like 'stuff' was merely the Cartesian backdrop upon which the drama and triumph of reason has been played out (Plumwood 2002, pp.16-20): a drama no less than the quest for divine transcendence through technology (Noble 1997). Nature, as untamed, uninhabited, and sullen wilderness, demanded to be subdued and civilised. The practices of democracy, for industrial socialism and

industrial capitalism alike, have been lopped to fit within the quest for freedom *from* nature. The democratic possibilities of human freedom *in* nature are as endangered, yet also as intrinsically resilient, as is the green and gold bell-frog, a critter near to extinction that has recently started to thrive in the midst of an industrial zone in Sydney (Low 2002, pp.22-24).

Inevitably, then, ecological degradation has gone hand in hand with the demise of a truly public imagination about what constitutes the good life. In responding to this loss, the powers of democratic imagination are vital in the search to find a new language and a new technology in which to embody the fact of our social and ecological co-existence, thereby dissolving mutually exclusive and practically unsustainable explanations of the cultural and the natural. Ecological thought has converged on the ideal of democracy since the late-1980s to the extent that it has challenged the long-standing modernist story that our solidarity with nature is irrelevant to culture (Plumwood 2002, pp.196-217; also Doherty and de Geus 1996; Mathews 1996). Through a process of historical recovery and late-modern imagination, ecological theorists have much to offer in displacing modern alienation from nature by narrating the sense of belonging, the sense of citizenship, to earth that comes through the specificity of our emplacement in ecological and social systems.

A 'reconnection' with suppressed lifeworlds can pose a radical challenge to the ways in which we have arbitrarily imposed borders of human utility on a more complex world. Presently dominant interpretations of liberal democracy not only sustain the privileges of wealthy elites in wealthy and poor nations alike, they also downplay the importance of mutuality and co-dependencies within the dynamic evolution of living systems. They are based on a 'skin-encapsulated sense of self' (see Seed et al. 1988; and Mathews 1991). In contrast, the idea of ecological democracy implies a relational sense of self that acknowledges the boundary between human and non-human, culture and nature as malleable, permeable and finite. Amongst others, Joanna Macy (1993) has argued that the Buddhist notion of 'mutual co-arising' could enrich our impoverished senses of community and solidarity. In an era of increasing intolerance it is paradoxical, yet not surprising, that Buddhism is the fastest growing religion in Australia.

The chain of global events that has followed the terrorist attacks within the USA on September 11, 2001, has dramatically raised the stakes in our need to both think beyond borders and learn how to deal with genuine 'others'. An escalation of violence – based on a manipulation of a simplistic rhetoric about the fight between 'good' and 'evil' and a dangerously parochial and distorted version of liberal democracy in which Jeffersonian freedoms are

wedded to deeply iniquitous and neo-colonial forces within global capitalism (see, e.g., Albert 1993; Luttwak 1999) – has made a compassionate response to the underlying conflicts both more difficult and more urgent. Heightened public fears have fostered a shift from tolerance to insularity, a shift compounded in Australia by the 2001 election campaign. The Howard government's rhetoric on 'strong border protection', just as they dismantle any remaining such borders in the area of economics, has not only tried to insulate us from the global refugee problem, whilst making us a more probable target of anti-western terrorism, it has also fostered a growth of intolerance and racism within Australia. Against this, we need vigorous sources for the articulation of compassion and tolerance. Eco-imagination, flowing from a sense of reconnection with local lifeworlds, can be one of those sources and a widely accessible starting point for an alternative, long-term vision of an inclusive society. We seek a society founded on reflexive awareness that democratic practice is nourished by the dialectical interplay of individual and collective liberties, of public and private goods, and of human logics and the ecological logics that create and bind together diversity and interdependence.

In the light of the need for a democratic interplay of human and ecological logics, Tim Low's new book – *The New Nature* (2002) – is an important and timely example of how we can begin on the task of re-imagining earth's wildness in its attempt to shift public perceptions about the co-existence of people and nature in all the landscapes of Australia. Low, a biologist, provides a well-informed challenge to prevailing attitudes about how to preserve endangered indigenous species and reminds us that some indigenous species have long thrived in habitats that humans have dramatically reshaped – sometimes thriving on our 'waste' – while others have been exterminated or driven into isolated remnant communities under siege from aggressive plants or animals like lantana, foxes and feral cats. Low stresses the fact that human settlement practices have changed the dynamics of plant and animal communities to create both winners and losers, even if the *number* of losers exceeds the number of winners. We need a detailed understanding of our impacts on different plant and animal communities to know how we can nurture more mutually beneficial co-existences. Low's book is full of the most surprising stories of ways in which plants and animals have adapted to life in our cities; implying that we need to shift our gaze to the details of 'wild' nature in our midst, rather than look to wilderness in remote parks and reserves, which are, at any rate, quite inadequate to preserve biodiversity. Henry David Thoreau's famous dictum, 'In wildness is the preservation of the

world,' has often been misread as a celebration of 'wilderness' when Thoreau wanted to stress that the wildness of nature is all around us if we can adjust our gaze to see it. As Schama points out, Thoreau eschewed travelling to exotic locations in order to study nature in and around the town of Concord, Massachusetts, and he said, famously, near the end of his life that he had 'travelled a good deal in Concord' (1995, p.576; see also Botkin 2001).

The New Nature also displays the political ambiguities inherent in the 'new' discourses about the pervasiveness of earth's wildness – an ambiguity about which Low himself seems largely unaware – and thus highlights the need to link the idea of nature firmly to democratic practice. Without such a link, the celebration of nature's capacity to reclaim sewerage works as refuges for endangered species or to develop symbiotic relationships between indigenous and feral organisms collapses easily into the comfortable solipsism that no human activity, from an atomic weapon to a trailer-load of litter, is ecologically unsustainable. For this reason the shift from 'wilderness' to 'wildness' must be employed to simultaneously dissolve the metaphysical categories established to separate 'pure' and 'artificial' nature, acknowledging that reality is both more complex and rather more inspiring than this, and to make explicit the political possibilities of people-in-place relationships, or what Freya Mathews has called the 'politics of re-inhabitation' (1999). This convergence of metaphysical and political imagination is vital if we are 'to find creative and forceful ways of both re-establishing and proclaiming ourselves as natives in the midst of the industrial and urban devastation of the world today' (ibid., p.17). It is also vital to ensure that ecological objectives do not come to serve, as they undeniably can, authoritarian, elitist and racist political interests (see Hage 1998).

Given the political ambivalence of 'nature discourses', it is inspiring that the Australian Greens, under the leadership of Senator Bob Brown, have taken the lead in criticising the insular and inhuman policies pursued by both the major political parties in their efforts to herd public insecurities within notions of 'strong border protection'. In the post-September 11 atmosphere in Australia of growing intolerance towards Muslims, asylum seekers, and non-Western immigrants in general, compassion is a human quality under siege: indeed, as one Australian citizen has remarked, 'compassion has become a vice' (Meres 2001, p.193). Green political movements, that have long warned of the dangers of unrestrained population growth and advocated restraints on immigration, have recently displayed a compassionate inclusivity, arguing that the biggest test of such compassion is whether or not we can extend it to the traditional 'others' of

modernity – other-than-human beings and the other-than-Western cultures. We suggest here that the term ‘empathetic engagement’ is a useful one in making explicit the need for this broadening of our circle of compassion to avoid the monological and passive elements of mere pity by linking it to a dialogical relationship between the one and the other with its necessary commitment to care-full action.

Democracy beyond borders

As discussed earlier, politically inclusive ecological thinking challenges the idea that difference is maintained by rigid borders with the awareness of how diversity is maintained through the processes of mutuality and relationality. Just as a bordered concept of physical space – which contrasts sharply with Aboriginal Australian conceptions of people-space relationships (see Mulligan 2003) – has given rise to environmentally unsustainable attitudes to ‘property rights’, a bordered conception of where our compassion should begin and end can lead to everything from NIMBYism (not in my backyard) to the heartless treatment of refugees. We need to remember that the very notion of nation-states is quite recent in historical terms and has exacerbated rivalries between competitive religious and political fundamentalisms (Ali 2002), now characterised so dangerously by George W. Bush as the rivalry between the ‘civilised’ world and an ‘axis of evil’.

White Australians have a long history of drawing a boundary of compassion around whiteness and now our much-vaunted multicultural society is being put under enormous strain by the paradoxical hand-in-hand advance of globalisation and xenophobic nationalism (a paradox partly unravelled if late-modern globalisation is understood as a monocultural and neo-colonial, rather than a multicultural, political project – see Brett 2003). Farmers and rural communities have often questioned the capacity of urban Australians to think beyond the city limits and there are few signs that this division is subsiding. More generally, many environmentalists critique what they see as a widespread Western incapacity to consider moral values beyond the boundaries of humanness – creating a dangerous lack of empathy with other living things – and many ecophilosophers have argued that our anthropocentrism blinds us to a much deeper understanding of what it means to be human (e.g., Weston 1999).

A bordered conception of our identity forces us to spend a great deal of time ‘mending fences’, as the poet Robert Frost noted while observing a neighbour constantly patrolling his stone fences to carefully replace any

stone that had fallen to the ground. This neighbour had told the poet that 'good fences make good neighbours' but the poet wondered at his attempt to defy a more profound law of nature, writing:

Something there is that doesn't love a wall
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it
And spills the upper boulders in the sun
[as cited by Kingsolver 2002, p.10]

Nature itself offers very few precise boundaries and none that are immutable. Any place that can be conceived for some purposes as a boundary – as in transition zones (ecotones) between neighbouring ecosystems – can also be seen as another kind of centre – a meeting place of different species where creative adaptations are most likely to occur. In contrast to the colonial desire to categorise landscape types, Aboriginal people saw every single place as being unique (see Mulligan 2003). Boundaries, no matter how embodied in concrete, are, in their essence, abstract constructs or maps (see Bradshaw in this volume) that serve specific, limited practical purposes and that encode, always, political and moral perspectives about our selves and our world. Eco-imagination enables us to move across and redraft such boundaries. Better still, it allows us to appreciate the value of having multiple, overlapping maps (perspectives) that expand our awareness of the multiple scales embedded in our multiplicitous world. Eco-imagination mimics the transboundary mobilities of earth's processes themselves in which water flows continually through the economy of life, from liquid to gas to solid, from aquifer to oceans to heavens, from carrot to blood to brain.

In emphasising that boundaries are mental constructs we are not saying that they should not exist for specific purposes in specific times and places. Every time we use words and language to delineate some aspect of the complexity we are immersed in, we create conceptual frameworks that delineate boundaries. When we use words like 'ecosystems' to describe discernible patterns within seamless nature, we construct boundaries for a particular purpose. At any moment in time a water catchment can have fairly precise boundaries, in that we can trace the movement of a single drop of rain into a river system. But, as we have noted, moving water will transform the catchments over a longer span of time. Even the boundary between land and air is more 'porous' than we might imagine when we consider the flow of various molecules, including water.

The boundaries of our lived experience can resemble the boundaries between the known and the unknown. Any exploration will involve an interaction and movement between the known and unknown and, as

T.S. Eliot famously wrote (1944), the end of such an exploration might be to arrive at where we began and know that place for the first time. As most travellers know, an understanding of local, lived experience can be deepened by travelling beyond the boundaries of that experience. A centred or 'grounded' view of the world does not begin and end with borders.

Chaos theory and complexity science have made powerful use of a boundary metaphor by constructing the interplay between chaos and order as 'the edge of chaos' (Waldrop 1992). Deep chaos and excessive order can both lead to entropy and decline, but the edge of chaos is where new patterns might emerge, clustered around 'strange attractors'. New, emergent patterns might grow into complex adaptive systems that have been invigorated by the creative power of chaos. This metaphor appeals to field ecologists who have long observed that new adaptations are likely to emerge in transition zones between established patterns (ecosystems) because the edges of stability are where different species meet in some unpredictable ways.

Bringing ecology back home

To recapitulate, the broad agenda furthered in this chapter is that of dissolving the hegemonic dualism between culture and nature upon which the modern project of progress has been so substantially structured, with the aim of re-imagining our inhabitation of our local earth. This task of dissolution is not an abstract search to replace one conceptual framework with another. On the contrary, it demands a return to the particulars of embodied experience in which the cultural and the natural are inextricably enmeshed in the human habitat, regardless of what theorists claim. It is also not primarily a deconstructive task, but one that is hopeful and creative for, no matter whether we are breathing in the beer-stained air of a jazz dive in Sydney's Rocks or striding out over the plateaus of Tasmania's wild mountains, our lived inhabitation of place offers many possibilities for learning about our deep spatial and temporal embeddedness within (with and in) earth's life-story. Such a renewed capacity to articulate the bodily and cognitive lessons of our experience is an integral part in the healing of the physical, psychic and social damage that has been done in modernity as we have sought to make incarnate a world in which culture is freed from the nourishment and prescriptions of nature, mind is freed from the knowledge and mortality of body, and technology is freed from the inspiration and specificity of ecology.

The interaction between 'city' and 'wilderness' provides an important transboundary zone where the possibilities of nature can gain novel forms of dialogical and technological expression. The wildness of more-than-human logics pervades all aspects of our existence, whether we remain aware of this or not. Even in the midst of our cities, nature remains intimate, although the eco-imagination of late-modern cultures needs much stimulating and reviving before this truth will be widely accepted. This, then, leads us to the crucial importance of 'bringing ecology back home' to our urban habitats, for the environmental movement has some responsibility to bear for the widespread failure of late-modern culture to understand and respect the city as a fully natural space.

To date, Western eco-imagination, especially in the 'new world', has been largely delimited by attempts to invert colonialist narratives about the need to tame wilderness by venerating land precisely for its untamed purity, its remote, uninhabitable countenance. Much ecological thought has thus implicitly reaffirmed the founding modernist assertion that the natural and the cultural are incommensurable and irreconcilable. The wilderness preservation movement that emerged in the USA around the turn of the 20th century, in often-bitter opposition to the management aspirations of conservationists such as Gifford Pinchot, continues to provide environmental movements with its archetypal explanations of 'nature' (Dowie 1995). This movement drew heavily upon the earlier romanticism for a pastoral, Arcadian 'nature' provoked in literature and the visual arts in reaction against 'industrial revolution' in Europe and especially England (Hay 2002, pp.4-10). The modern ecological imagination has thus been poorly equipped to articulate the late-modern condition of our planet in which the ecological and the technological are no longer, if they ever were, separate realities. As Bill McKibben noted famously in *The End of Nature* (1989), every aspect of our planet has been transformed by human agency. Ecosphere and technosphere now coevolve. But this does not mean that the fecundity, creativity, and intentionality of earth's life forces have ended. What has ended is the ability of modernist narratives about nature to explain our biotic reality (Davison 2001, p.66).

The predominance of an anti-cultural ideal of wilderness has left ecological thought vulnerable in three ways. First, its apparent staunch ally, the science of ecology, has increasingly aired the view that the dualistic concern for 'original' wilderness denies the flux and malleability of ecological processes (Botkin 1990; Low 2002). Second, increasing awareness of the ways in which most pre-modern landscapes, especially in North America and Australia, were profoundly artefactual has exposed

both the superficiality of many environmentalist ideas about a primal harmony between indigenous culture and ecology as well as the potentially neo-colonial thrust of many wilderness preservation policies (see, eg., Head 2000). Third, ecological thought is vulnerable because the influence of a basic distrust of 'culture' has left it with remarkably little to celebrate in our everyday technologised environments (Light 2001; Mathews 1999). Urban and, to a lesser extent, rural landscapes understood primarily as 'unnatural' have been neglected as places of ecological value and inspiration. Although there is considerable interest in the environmental problems, such as dry-land salinity and air pollution, that beset such cultural landscapes, the well-spring of what Peter Hay (2002) calls 'the ecological impulse' has remained largely in the wilderness. Indeed, in many industrialised countries, environmentalism has developed hand-in-hand with the rise of anti-urbanism. 'As a state of mind,' declared Yi-Fu Tuan a generation ago, 'true wilderness exists only in the great sprawling cities' (1974, p.112). Yet most of us live in cities and our interaction with wild nature begins there.

As a result of these dualistic narratives of the natural, late-modern urbanites are likely to believe that the frontier between 'wild nature' and human 'settlement' is somewhere quite remote. We think in terms of a continuum from the 'wilderness' to the 'country' where nature has been 'harnessed' through to cities where nature has been largely excluded. Our presumptions of orderliness can be disturbed by the occasional 'intrusions' of things like bushfires and violent storms, but these are mostly seen as momentary lapses of control. However, as any gardener can confirm, the 'war on weedy wildness' is endless and ubiquitous (and, as with all wars, there are always more productive alternatives). A large early-twentieth century industrial site at Newnes in the Blue Mountains, now completely engulfed by bush, is a reminder of what can happen when vigilance is not sustained; a timeless cartoon by Ron Cobb depicts a homeless street-dweller, smiling at the sight of a flower reaching for the light through a crack in the pavement.

Many children seek out wild places in a city – remnants of bush, 'overgrown' land alongside a railway line or on an abandoned block, creeks that have not been 'tamed' – to feed their imagination of nature at work. And if we can adjust our gaze in order to observe more closely the worlds of birds, lizards, spiders, and other insects, we can be amazed at the extent and complexity of their activities. The air we breathe and the soil beneath our feet are filled with a huge diversity of micro-organisms in overlapping and interacting communities.

Although wildness can never be fully suppressed, we should not lose sight of the damage done through the imposition of absolute and universal order, control and predictability – especially in cities. We have tried to simplify and homogenise complex systems, often causing mass extinctions and a loss of vigour. Yet still, the resilience of the wild remains, in urban worlds as elsewhere, and as we seek to nurture rather than to crush this resilience, degraded systems will reinvigorate, restoring an adaptive complexity that will not reproduce some pre-colonial purity, but will testify to the ongoing dance between human and non-human forms of agency in this land. ‘Marginal’ zones can become the centre of attention for ecological restoration work. Drained ‘swamps’ can be revitalised as vibrant ‘wetlands’; remnant bush cleared of the most invasive, dominating, ‘weeds’; creek banks revegetated where creeks are liberated from concrete encasements; smelly estuaries can be brought back to life by simply allowing the mangroves to regrow. Community-driven restoration work on Melbourne’s Merri Creek had some immediate benefits in the early 1990s when Sacred Kingfishers, not seen in the city for many decades, were able to return from their exile. For nearly a decade the local community has been able to celebrate this unexpected return on an annual basis with a popular and colourful Return of the Kingfisher Festival. Yet that conservation community must remain eternally vigilant for earlier plans to build a freeway along the path of the creek have not yet been abandoned. The battle continues.

A fine line between inclusivity and assimilation

A desire for some kind of engagement with the otherness of nature manifests itself in many ways – for example, in the massive interest in gardening and pet keeping (Franklin 2002). Similarly, an interest in wildlife documentaries and in books and films that try to imagine the world of the non-human grows as the processes of global capitalism colonise the ecosphere ever more completely. These public narratives can be a starting point for a deeper understanding, but they are often very limited in terms of building relationships and making us think more deeply about what it means to be human. More generally, widespread social phenomena in Australia – including wilderness recreation and eco-tourism, as well as a more general urbanite ‘sea-change’ and retreat from the city to the pastoral idyll of ‘hobby’ farms, ‘the bush’, coastal retirement havens, and intentional exurban communities – need to be understood not simply as a rejection of urban environments but in a paradoxical light as intrinsic to, as completing, the character of late-modern urban experience.

Is it then, as Robert Thayer has suggested, 'no coincidence that the increasing stature of wilderness at the expense of reverence for the city parallels the growth and diffusion of ... technological expertise and the emergence of guilt for the 'sins' of technology as well' (1994, p.64)? Is the veneration of 'untouched' nature in part a response to what Thayer calls the 'landscape guilt' we have buried deep within us, just as we have buried the polluted, diminished creeks that once ran freely and noisily through the urban landscapes we now so ambivalently call home? Does the liberation of these waterways prefigure the liberation of those of us caught in the paradox of feeling alien in the habitats that we ourselves have built? Can we too run freely from the lonely heights of the wild mountain through the city streets and headlong into the rivers and bays?

To cultivate the compassionate generosity, the inclusivity, such liberation demands, we need forms of imagination that respect the essential difference of the needs of 'others' as well as our essential interdependence, our undeniable commonality, with them. When it comes to non-human others we can only ever imagine what those needs are and this kind of imagination can only ever be based on a depth of empathy that can go beyond language. Such imagination will always be in flux, always arriving, never fixed. Lacking the power of proof, it has the power of resonance. Judith Wright stands out as an Australian who crossed many frontiers – as writer, conservationist and pioneer for 'reconciliation' between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians (Mulligan and Hill 2001, pp.91-105). Her art and her other work were equally driven by an expansive empathy for the experiences of those on the 'other side of the frontier' as demonstrated in the following 1984 poem about life within a rainforest:

The forest drips and glows with green.
The tree-frog croaks his far-off song.
His voice is still, moss and rain
drunk from the forest ages long.

We cannot understand that call
unless we move into his dream
where all is one and one is all
and frog and python are the same.

We with our quick dividing eyes
measure, distinguish and are gone.
The forest burns, the tree-frog dies,
yet one is all and all are one. [Wright 1994, p.412]

An ethical engagement that is based on this kind of expansive empathy requires constant negotiation across difference and competing needs as well as a willingness to engage with unpredictability and the limits of our control. There is no easy or permanent resolution to such ongoing negotiations; mutually beneficial outcomes are not always possible. We have to deal with compromise, loss, and grief. We require an ecological framework in our ethical engagement because it will enable us to imagine the totality of our relationships and broad consequences of what we do.

We can't be selective in our engagements. We need to engage with effluent and wastewater as much as we like to contemplate wild rivers or a glass of Evian, smelly drains as well as babbling brooks. We need to see ourselves in the midst of many cycles between life and death, gain and loss, balance and disturbance. In our cities – as in our bodies and our relationships – we are at the centre of such life cycles rather than being remote from them as we *try* to project an ecological footprint elsewhere.

Our impacts on nature are heaviest in urbanised spaces and the ecological footprints of our cities extend far. Here we need to work harder to nurture wildness and recognise our participation in changing lifeworlds that include much that is 'more-than-human'. We learn more about what it means to be human by abandoning our desire to be in control. And as the poem by Joe Bruchac, cited earlier, demonstrates, eco-imagination enables us to travel beyond even the boundary between life and non-living matter. This is another boundary that molecules of water tend to dissolve and in Bruchac's poem we travel with a raindrop through vast space and time.

If democracy requires the articulation and negotiation of diverse – often competing – interests then the inclusion of the non-human in such negotiations requires advocates of the interests of the non-human to use an empathetic imagination because, as stated above, we can only imagine the deepest needs and experiences of non-human others. However, if we can succeed in imaginatively entering some way into the world of other living things, then our capacity to empathise with the experiences of other humans will surely be enhanced; our grasp of what compassionate inclusivity means greatly expanded.

Earlier, we suggested that the notion of an ecological sense of self needs to be extended into a broader notion of 'ecological citizenship'. Some – including some environmentalists – will argue that any notion of a community of interests that includes the non-human will be too intangible to be of any practical relevance. We would counter with the observation that the notion of 'ecological citizenship' is no more abstract than the notion of 'global citizenship'. Both require the exercise of imagination.

Prevailing liberal discourses on democracy and citizenship have manifestly failed to meet the global challenges of ecological disintegration and widespread social mal-development. We turn now, then, to the question of whether democratic compassion for humanity is convergent with a broader compassion for life in all its myriad and interdependent forms.

Can compassion be stretched too far?

Many humanists will argue that we have enough work to do in creating a more compassionate human society without diluting this concern by stretching our compassion to include the non-human in any meaningful way. Some environmental theorists (e.g., Hayward 1998) suggest that the desire to include the non-human must continue to rely on the goodwill of those humans who are prepared to advocate for the rights and interests of the non-human, since no workable theory of democracy can incorporate voiceless participants. The best we can hope for, these theorists argue, is a weak form of anthropocentrism in which humans, acting out of self-interest, will recognise the need to protect the rights and interests of the non-human as well. This argument ignores the fact that many humans are effectively voiceless in any negotiation of rights and interests. Furthermore, an appeal to self-interest – no matter how ‘enlightened’ it might be – seems an inadequate basis on which to build the sort of compassionate inclusivity we have advocated here.

Our argument is that compassionate inclusivity must be open-ended and borderless if it is to be ‘authentic’, even if we need imagination to take us beyond the barriers of language. A democratically inclusive ecological framework emphasises relationships and co-dependencies, rather than the negotiation of individual rights and such relationships cannot be defined in purely human terms. We need to hone our skills in eco-imagination and begin with a reconnection with our local lifeworlds. But is this a path to compassion that is too long and indirect for a world in the grip of escalating violence?

A recent essay by the popular US novelist and nature writer, Barbara Kingsolver (2002), addresses the question of whether nature lovers have something relevant to say to a world shocked by the events that have unfolded since ‘September 11’. She began her essay with a story that she had come across on the Internet on the very day that she had read the first account of the terrifying bombing campaign that her government had unleashed on the populace of Afghanistan as revenge for the ‘September 11’ atrocities. It was a story, she wrote, that came to her as a parable –

causing her to think deeply about its unarticulated 'message' – because it told of an 'impossible act of grace' that had occurred in a mountainous province of Iran, bordering Afghanistan. The story concerns the disappearance of a 16-months-old baby that had been in the care of a neighbour's teenaged daughter while his parents were at work in the fields. After three days of frantic but fruitless searching in the near vicinity of the village, a party of villagers headed towards the mountains where bears are plentiful, fearing the worst. At the mouth of a cave, five kilometres from the village, the searchers heard the unmistakable cry of a human baby and they made their way into its half-light to find a large she-bear with her arms wrapped around the child to protect him from these human intruders. The baby had survived for three days on the milk and love of the 'mother' bear and was returned safely to his parents.

The 'miracle of Lorena Province' seemed particularly poignant to Kingsolver in that it had occurred so close to where the bombs were raining down on the hapless people of Afghanistan. Kingsolver concluded her essay on what we might learn from this 'small wonder' about how to respond to a growing cycle of violence by writing:

Political urgencies come and go, but it's a fair enough vocation to strike one match after another against the dark isolation, when spectacular arrogance rules the day and tries to force hope into hiding. It seems to me that there is still so much to say that I had better raise up a yell across the fence. I have stories of things I believe in: a persistent river, a forest on the edge of night, the religion in a seed, the startle of wingbeats when a spark of red life flies against all reason out of the darkness. One child, one bear. I'd like to speak of small wonders, and the possibility of taking heart. (2002, p.21)

Back to the creeks

We now return to where we began – neglected and degraded urban creeks. There are, of course, plenty of other starting points for contemplating more deeply the ways in which we can engage more ethically and compassionately in the worlds we are immersed in; for example, what we eat and consume and how we shop; what we do with our gardens; how we might be able to enrich local biotic and human communities. However, we have focused our discussion in this chapter on water and waterways because water offers a powerful symbol of our need to dissolve the constraints on our eco-imagination and because watershed consciousness can help us to reimagine our cities and our participation in local lifeworlds. In order to engage empathetically with the non-human,

we city-dwellers need, first, to *see* what we have previously linearised or buried under tons of concrete and neglect. We need to enhance our skills at looking *through* the world we have manufactured to be able to see the landforms and other life-forms that share those spaces with us. We need to dig more deeply into the cultural and natural stories embedded in the landscapes in which we dwell to see below and beyond the most obvious manifestations of city life.

Urban creeks were early victims of colonisation and have been treated with contempt; yet they can connect our urban spaces with the non-urban and with the wild. What we have linearised and entombed can sometimes be liberated or at least properly remembered and we all live near creeks which can become the centres for the regeneration of vibrant biotic communities. By re-engaging with local waterways we can be reminded of the extraordinary powers of water and its centrality to all life.

As mentioned earlier, the Merri Creek in Melbourne has benefited from some long-term restoration work that enabled the exiled Sacred Kingfishers to return, prompting the local community to inaugurate an annual Return of the Kingfisher Festival. In 2002 that festival drew a link between the compassion shown for exiled species and the compassion that needs to be shown towards human refugees arriving in Australia. Like migrating birds, we all seek safe havens in local places and many Australians have experienced the traumas associated with migration and resettlement. If we can learn what it takes to make space for the return of exiled and endangered species we can act more compassionately towards displaced people as well.

Peter Sauer, a long-time resident of New York's West 78th Street, was more aware than most urbanites of the 'resilient gypsy biota ... constructing its own urban Galápagos' around him (1999, p.252). But it wasn't until the discovery that a creek had once flowed through the basement of his apartment building and he was launched into a revelatory journey through the space and time of his landscape that the apparently disparate and unrelated 'biota of street, museum and park' united into a coherent understanding of his culture's story in *this* place (ibid.). Like the best stories, Sauer's journey invites a visceral sense of sadness at the loss of loved and lovely things, as well as tenacious hope at the realisation that few losses are absolute. We are invited onto that brink of an acutely felt sense of a thing's preciousness as it slips from a once assured and complacent grasp. Our choice is to step back into the comforting, simplifying ache of nostalgia – for instance, softening our murder of Tasmania's tiger by 'branding' its image into the logo of our beer and

bureaucracies, and savouring in advance the creator's triumph of bringing this beast back through the portal of the laboratory – or to step forward to accept the sharper ache of holding precious things close in a wounded and wounding world. Our choice is to turn our back on our habitats because they are flawed and transient, as we are, and instead to gaze longingly at televised images of a fading flawlessness, or to wade deep in waters polluted and weed-choked, but with the force of life-birth in them still.

Choosing to embrace our wounded world, and embrace our pain in the knowledge that we hold still in our hands the weapons of its destruction, the city streets become once again truly eloquent forms. Rain slicked bitumen. Nose tingling pollen loosed from feral grasses. A blot of unmolested scrub, too badly sited to have interested the bulldozers. Rare sightings of a resident, the Black-shouldered Kite, who settled in before clocks began. The dissonance created by a mob of blackfellas reasserting the publicness of the space held open by a street mall. A place with a pulse, erratic and feeble in parts, but with wide arteries also, running deep under our streets and our consciousness; arteries waiting for renewed contact with the oxygen embedded in sky and sea.

As responsible ecological citizens, let's imagine our way to a future in which the creeks have been liberated and can teach us how to participate in the flow of water through land, ocean, and sky, through bodies 'black' and 'white', human and non-human.

Application forms for joining the Australian Creek Liberation Movement are available on request!

Notes

1. In his Australia Day address of 2002, biologist and environmental history writer Tim Flannery called for an official renaming of Sydney Harbour as Cadi – the name used for the waterway by the indigenous Cadigal people.
2. An argument strongly rejected by Tim Flannery, spokesperson of The Wentworth Group, a group of prominent Australian scientists. A strongly interventionist approach to water management has found some favour with the Federal Government, however, with Agriculture Minister Warren Truss reported in the Australian Financial Review of 12th October, 2002 as saying the following on the subject of 'drought-proofing': 'if the open drains could be closed in, that would reduce evaporation and, if the great artesian bores could be capped, water could be stopped from flowing away into the sands', available at <http://www.afr.com/austrlia/2002/10/12/FFXZOJVZ47D.html>, accessed 9th Feb, 2003.

3. Michael Patterson is a poet who currently resides in the Blue Mountains. The poem that contains this thought is unpublished.

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