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# A political ecology of ecologies: Walking in Glen Almond with students and immanent ethics.

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## Abstract

In this short paper I discuss a day spent with a group of students in Glen Almond, Perthshire, in 2018. As I write this now, in 2021, I have the opportunity to situate my present thinking in the story and to think with the idea of a political ecology of ecologies, derived from an immanent ethics. I speculate that competing ecologies are themselves ecological as they perform materially in the world, and that creative research of the everyday enactments of multiple ecologies provides a form of critical environmental and social education.

## Keywords:

Immanent ethics, political ecology, life writing, walking, environmental education

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*Sma' Glen, Perthshire, 2018.*

It's early. I'm a little blurry. And I'm not quite sure of the route. Past the boarding school and the Roman Fort, and left onto the A882? Yes, there's the turning. The valley narrows as I drive up into the grey of Sma' Glen. I pull the minibus into the layby by the river, and stare ahead through the rain-dropped windscreen.

*Ok.*

The students tumble out of the van. They jostle and joke – throw stones – some even get ready for the walk. They're participating in an 'Outdoor Activities' programme. It's a one-year college course, vocationally focused. I've been teaching on the programme for a few months. It's different to the work I've been doing the last few years – finishing my PhD<sup>1</sup> - about concepts, the environment, education, Deleuze, and living - and teaching postgraduate courses – and I'm not finding it easy. The commute, the different way of working, the students. The paradoxical, difficult, hilarious, cynical and optimistic students.

I've brought them here, to the head of Glen Almond, ostensibly to learn mountain navigation, but I know the day holds more in store than this. The glitchy relationships. The banter. The wanting-not wanting. The inside jokes and looks to interpret. The always weather. The valley: a palimpsest of tectonic upheaval, glacial grating, and the amalgamation of shifting concepts of being – of place, land, people, nature - and the material effects of these concepts.

I lock the van. *Careful across the bridge! Right side of the road, single file!* As we climb into the cloud I settle into a rhythm and my thoughts are strung between foot placements and theories. Thinking about what my academic work has to do with being here, in this place, with these people. Worrying about the walk. Who will struggle? Who will act out? Why? How to manage the frictions? And through it all, thinking about how to live ethically in confusing times, with these students and the worlds we are inheriting and creating together. And how does this place help with that? The visibility. The route, if there is one, fading in and out of sight with wisps of haze. The risk.

We're climbing the back of Dùn Mòr, heading to explore the old hillfort. The valley is deep green, thick cloud opaquing the summits. I like to be at the back of the group as we walk. I can see everyone. I can make sure the last person is ok. I can hide that I'm probably a bit too unfit to be up here. Finn is walking with me, as he often does. His working-class gait makes him stand out. He's an odd fit for the rest of the group, who often make subtle jokes at his expense. It's not clear if Finn gets these jokes, and if he does, I'm not sure he'd admit if they hurt – I speculate on his home life, but I don't ask. He likes to talk to me and I enjoy his company. I think he finds me, what? *Constant? Here, Dave*, he'll start, before bringing up a dilemma that's been on his mind through the week, trying it out on me. Finn believes in global conspiracies related to the Rockefellers which he's garnered from YouTube. He's concerned by the lack of critical thinking by the general public on this topic. He's asking about my family.

*You're English?! I thought you were Scottish!* Finn stops and stares at me. *What are you ... doing here?* I try to grasp the threads that could lead to an answer to his question, but they tug me in different directions. *I'm not sure.* I say. It's clear Finn doesn't like the English. He says it's because they're rich.

We continue up into the clouds and as the visibility decreases we practise walking on a bearing. After some toing and froing, we find the summit and hunker down in our shelters - *Time fo' scran!* - before reaching the fort - just an outline of some rocks, and then dropping down the valley towards the giant Ossian's Stone. As we walk we're joined by Amelia. She is also something of an outsider to the main group, being older, and she also prefers to walk at the back. Finn has been talking about what he wants from the future. *A home with a fire. A good wife who'll have my meal ready when I come home from work.* Amelia is enraged. They enter a heated debate which remains good spirited, and then Finn says *It's natural for a woman to do domestic things. They're better at it.*

John Lundy<sup>2</sup> describes living Deleuze's ethics as akin to going for a stroll. As an improvised practise of radical openness, eschewing plans – it's like jazz. You meet things that happen. I like this idea. The immanence of it, and the exploration and expansion of our own capacities. It's a complicated business, of course, there are several things to try to hold at once – Deleuze's reinterpretation of difference as becoming over being, desire as a productive force driving worldly material flows – including ethics, and that the business of philosophy is really the business of concept creation, rather than the tackling of transcendental problems. Lundy is aware of the potential apoliticalness of all this. These risks, including the difficulty of it, the incompressibility, and the need to find the politics, make me wonder if a better analogy might be a mountain climb than a stroll – where one wrong footing can limit your degrees of freedom, sometimes fatally so. Again, I worry about my fitness for this.

Aside from this slight analogical tweak, what might this open ethics have to do with being here, in 'the outdoors' with these students? 'The outdoors', as well as related concepts of nature and the environment, is of course a contingent concept. It has a political genealogy. Acknowledging this, and digging into that genealogy can become an ethical act. Of 'not to be unworthy of what happens to us'<sup>3</sup>. The subject – me, the students – arrive with a body-full of concepts to the places we stroll. We're products of genealogies of concepts forged by those before us, and we carry these concepts to the places we interact with. Indeed, these concepts push us collectively and individually *to* these places. It's like we're full of landsliding conceptual sediment which gnaws away at the world through our bodies and speech. And the world, filtered through our conceptions of it, gnaws back as it is realised in places. We find ourselves between this play, challenging both the notion of the within and the notion of the without as our very becoming becomes the relation. For Deleuze, it is when we don't recognise the world before us, when it doesn't fit into the concepts of difference we have created-inherited, that learning occurs.

Finn's words are bouncing around my body as he and Amelia continue to debate the naturalness of women's domestic role, and I think about interjecting. Noel Castree says that concepts of the natural are not natural<sup>4</sup>. They have social histories. But of course, these histories *are* natural, in the widest sense of the term. In a more *Deleuzian* sense. In a sense that does not take the human out of the world, to some abstracted, unnatural, space. Deleuze's ideas of concept creation can help rattle the obligations inherent in sexist, classist, ableist, racist views of the natural: bigoted ecologies. Bad concepts. Concepts that don't expand the world's flourishing. Ecofeminism is just such a critical concept<sup>5</sup>, enacting political interventions in the present<sup>5</sup>, as are Black ecologies, Indigenous ecologies, queer ecologies, prismatic ecologies, feral ecologies, and all manner of social ecologies. Perhaps something Deleuze offers is a justification for a multiplicity of ecologies. Ecology as becoming, rather than being. A political ecology of ecologies. A move which takes us away from trying to tell

the final ontological story of nature, and instead creates room for the caution that multiple perspectives brings. The caution needed for a mountain walk. Indeed, Herzogenrath<sup>6</sup> suggests that the most fruitful way forward for Deleuze and environmentalism is through the creation of multiple concepts of ecology. Deleuze's philosophy is built for just such a political and necessarily creative endeavour.

We reach Ossian's stone and the students start trying to climb the Mesolithic bolder. I place my hands on the stone. The stone acts with my thoughts to send me tumbling through time. I move back 6000 years, watching the shoulders of the valley around me subtly rise, as tree cover ebbs and flows, reaching and finally settling up the gullies. I become a relational ecology at play in this place, where the animists hoist this stone atop the burial of a dearly loved elder. I loved them too, as I feel my hand entwine with my cousins. For us the stone is not stone, but is ourselves expanded from within-without, as we take place of time, following the line of life. Our song is of life, of living in water and building our homes, the warmth of stone and the beauty of the movement of our language. We sing the song of the capercaillie. I lift my throat, arc my tail and leap.

*You ok, Dave?* I look up. Finn is on top of the stone, grinning at me.

There are always multiple ecologies at play, and their interaction is always political. Even when the Romans moved through these valleys, they brought their own queer ecologies, their own Black ecologies, their own ordered and feral ecologies, and, of course, their Roman ecologies. These ecologies dance, battle, and combine as we try to navigate our way through the ever-shifting sense of the normal – the dominant, hegemonic or majoritarian ecology. What is the point of an ecology of ecologies? Not knowing what the future holds, I am nonetheless aware that it likely holds trouble. For many this trouble is long underway. The various destabilising crises we face contain the potential for conceptual ecological eruptions and acts of capture in the public imaginary. The 'Nature is healing' and 'we are the virus' hashtags, which proliferated online during the Covid pandemic, seem to comprise a latent misanthropy in this imaginary. A misanthropic ecology. I wonder how this ecology might creep up and meet up with other ecologies; the ecofascist ecology, peddled by some political groups, in which a call to 'Keep Britain Clean and Tidy' is easily connected to anxieties of immigration. Populist politicians make this link. It's in their bodies. Perhaps something a multiplicity of ecologies allows is a lessening of anxiety, where the risk of losing one's most prized ecologies (perhaps England's green and pleasant land) is outweighed by the value seen in multi-cultural, multi-species, multi-gendered, multi-coloured, multiplicitious ecologies. Achieving this, of course, is a huge challenge, but I wonder about the little changes that might be attempted on days like this, and in creatively researching and sharing them.

As we walk back to the minibus along the river the heat of the argument is gone, and we chat idly, finding seriousness in silliness. The day is light now, the warmth of the sun congratulating us for our efforts; of rising early, of climbing this hill, of being together. I unlock the van and the students pile in. There's the stench of Lynx sprayed in the air, and my obligatory berating *Some of us want to breath in here*. My seat is warm. I think I remember the way back.

*Ok.*

<sup>1</sup> Clarke, David A. G. *Practising immanence:(still) becoming an environmental education academic*. (PhD diss., The University of Edinburgh, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Lundy, John. "The stroll: Reflections on Deleuzian ethics." *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge* 26, (2014).

<sup>3</sup> Deleuze, Gilles. *Logic of Sense*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

<sup>4</sup> Castree, Noel. *Nature*. (London & New York: Routledge, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> Gough, Annette, and Whitehouse, Hilary. "Challenging amnesias: re-collecting feminist new materialism/ecofeminism/climate/education." *Environmental Education Research* 26, no. 9-10 (2020): 1420-1434.

<sup>6</sup> Herzogenrath, Bernd, ed. *An [Un] Likely Alliance: Thinking Environment [s] with Deleuze/Guattari*. (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009).