



Unruly grasses: Affective attunements in the ecological restoration of urban native grasslands in Australia



Lesley Instone*

University of Newcastle, Callaghan, NSW 2308, Australia

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores affect as an 'angle of approach' for re/considering the work of ecological restoration in urban spaces. My focus is on the more-than-human affective dimensions of the reintroduction of native grasses in Melbourne's (Australia) urban parklands. Sara Ahmed suggests that 'affect is what sticks or sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values and objects' (2010, 29), and here I extend this notion to think about the restoration of grasslands not as primarily material transformations (to which we might react), but as the recomposition of the 'ideas, values and objects' that constitute urban park naturecultures. The paper highlights the role of affective relations in the inheritance of landscapes that do not attract widespread positive affection. It employs Sara Ahmed's concept of the affect alien as a figure of nonconformity, to uncover how the affective resonances of grasslands might open new possibilities for attuning to the complex and multiple naturecultures of postcolonial lands.

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Most Australians have never seen a flourishing native grassland (Kirkpatrick et al., 1995: 11), and when they do, some see a complex and fragile ecology, but many see an untidy and undesirable 'weedscape'. Temperate grasslands in southeast Australia that were once extensive and flourishing are now over 99% destroyed or highly modified (Williams, 2007; Kirkpatrick et al., 1995). In Victoria for example, less than half a per cent of the plains grasslands of central Victoria thrive today (Australian Government, 2011). Likewise the grasslands that originally spread from the western edge of the Melbourne CBD are today reduced to small fragments, the most intact of which are now threatened by urban expansion (Williams et al., 2005: 36). Some grass species are extinct and some are listed as threatened, but more importantly the complex multispecies assemblage that previously bound grasses, humans, animals, insects, grazers, and more, into flourishing native grasslands are largely in tatters. These circumstances highlight efforts to protect and restore grasslands, and attention has focused on developing scientific and technical practices of grassland revegetation. However, mobilising conservation interest, the general public and government authorities towards grasslands has proved challenging in urban areas. The disregard of grasslands by many

raises questions about the future of landscapes that do not attract widespread positive affection.

This paper focuses on the affective relations of grasslands by reflecting on efforts in inner urban Melbourne, Australia's second largest city, to restore and revegetate the precolonial grassy ecosystems that originally covered what is now the western edge of the CBD and much the western and north-western suburbs. It derives from qualitative fieldwork in Melbourne, drawing on field notes, site analysis, photographs, observation, media reports and management documents. The complex overlap of cultural and biophysical dynamics that constitutes ecological restoration often generates a high level of contestation over restoration goals and practices (Robertson et al., 2000; Trigger and Head, 2010). This is the case in Melbourne, where strong and often opposing emotions, for and against grasslands, provide the catalyst for this paper. My aim is to extend exploration of the less tangible aspects of restoration activities and to investigate the more-than-human dimensions of the affective qualities of urban grasslands and their restoration.

The recognition that restoration is as much cultural as biophysical is growing. Issues of difference, identity and belonging drive restoration activities as much as ecological assessments (Trigger et al., 2008). Sentiments and passions permeate preferences about nature and such cultural dimensions can influence the choice of one type of nature over another, which may favour certain groups and certain activities over others (Gobster, 2010: 229;

* Tel.: +61 2 49216637.

E-mail address: Lesley.instone@newcastle.edu.au.

Palamar, 2010). These observations have stimulated growing attention to the emotive dimensions of ecological restoration, especially in urban areas where the intersection of social and restoration actions are heightened and social acceptance is key to project success (Gobster, 2010; see also *Nature and Culture Special Issue*, 2010). Attention has focused on the emotional investments that motivate people to become involved in, or support, ecological protection and restoration, and how emotional attachment to a particular desired state of nature accords with restoration outcomes (DiEnno and Thompson, 2013). Likewise Frey (2008) shows the role of emotions in making judgments about what constitutes 'good' ecological restoration. Trigger and Head (2010: 235) note the ways in which plants forge emotional connections that attach us to place. Researchers also emphasise the emotions as a conduit towards a more respectful relationship with the planet (Cornforth et al., 2012), and towards apprehending the agency of the nonhuman world and its affective dimensions through 'reciprocal relations of consequence' (Seaton, 2013: 24).

Shifting thinking beyond the emotional attachment (positive or negative) of individual subjects, and beyond the mobilisation of emotional attachment to foster the preservation of nature, Smith extends emotional ecologies to the more-than-human world suggesting a prepersonal sensuous affection where we are called into relation with the Other (2013: 2). Drawing on the work of Levinas, Smith gestures towards an affective emotional ecology where humans and nonhumans are drawn into and constituted by 'patterns of worldly illeity, the traces and the responsibilities to the otherness of the "natural" world that calls us, despite our-selves' (2013: 2). Emotional encounters, he suggests, can both involve and alienate us without conscious choice and these encounters 'echo through and continually disturb our lives' (Smith, 2013: 3). Such an approach shifts thinking from nature 'out there' with which we might form an emotional attachment, to emotion as a constitutive element of entangled naturecultures (Haraway, 2008).

The notion of an affective emotional ecology alters register from individual emotions to encompass a broader and generative palette of relations between humans and nonhumans that does not reside in the body and is not possessed by the person (Anderson, 2006: 735). 'Life', says Lorimer (2008: 552), 'is composed in the midst of affects' and it is in the sticky, complex, unfixated and fleeting mix of 'properties, competencies, modalities, energies, attunements, arrangements and intensities' (Lorimer, 2008: 552) of humans and nonhumans that worlds are made in specific times and places. As Anderson (2006: 736) notes: 'The emergence of affect from the relations between bodies, and from the encounters that those relations are entangled within, make the materialities of space–time always-already affective'. Grasslands, bodies, insects, weather, conservation management plans, feelings, movement and more, together affect and are affected by each other. As entangled relations they unknot subjects and objects and 'instead attune to how affects inhabit the passage between contexts through various processes of translocal movement' (Anderson, 2006: 736).

To explore urban grassland restoration within affective registers, I draw on the work of Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour and Sara Ahmed. From Haraway I adopt the notion of inheritance as the affective and agentic qualities of worlds received and worlds made: the things we have to grapple with beyond our choosing and to which we remain accountable (Gane, 2006; Haraway, 2007). Inheritance composes and animates naturecultures, shaping the orientations of bodies to pasts, presents and futures (Haraway, 2008). Thinking with the agentic and affective qualities of inheritance situates discussion within the here and now of specific grassland relations. In exploring the possibilities of Haraway's (2010) question of 'how to inherit' (see also Gane, 2006), I also engage with Latour's notion of 'learning to be affected' (2004),

which I take to mean the practices through which bodies of all kinds open to being reconstituted through affective attunement. It emphasises that learning occurs in collective and mutually constituted relations, and that worlds are re/made through engagement and encounter across all manner of difference (Latour, 2004). In this sense ecological restoration signals more than a physical environmental change, but rather a practice of re-orientation, a 'learning how to inherit' and a 'learning to be affected', through which humans, grasses, insects, and all manner of things come to articulate new patterns of materiality and affect. Most centrally I draw on Sara Ahmed's work on affect (2010a,b, 2008), and translate a number of her related concepts into the more-than-human realm. Ahmed's notion of orientation (2006) provides a link between what we inherit and how we attune to its affects in various ways. Most importantly, I develop Ahmed's notion of the 'affect alien' (2010a,b), a figure of nonconformity, to provide insight into the complexities of restoring ecologies that may arouse negative judgements and adverse human passions, such as urban native grasslands. I situate the affect alien in a post/colonial inheritance of messy relations to develop a richer more complex story about ecological restoration and the bodies and affects it assembles and is assembled by.

Naturecultures are always situated and particular, and the paper begins with the notion of inheritance, with its particular 'orientations' and 'contingencies of contact' (Ahmed, 2006), as a conduit to understanding the contexts shaping the affective resonances encompassing contemporary Melbourne grassland restoration.

1. Inheriting grass/lands

Present day Australians live with a meagre inheritance of native grasslands, an inheritance complicated by colonisation, Indigenous dispossession, pastoralism and conservationism. Donna Haraway argues that history is inheritance and that things are never simply there; we are deeply implicated in the conditions of inheritance in personal, political and intellectual ways (2008, 2010; Gane, 2006). But more than this, inheritance is never just material, never only human. Inheritance is agentic; it moves bodies, shapes stances, mediates vision, influences preferences and directs choices. As much affective as material, inheritance is an ongoing project (Derrida 1994 in Haraway, 2010: 1). For Haraway the notion of inheritance poses the question of accountability which she sees as a 'coming to terms with the world we live in' in ways that force 'the question of "what is to be done"' (Gane, 2006: 145). Haraway's notion of inheritance provides a fresh starting point for rethinking ecological restoration as affective and agentic. She reminds us that there is never just one story, and that tracing inheritances provides 'resources for making connections rather than imagining that we can start from scratch' (Gane, 2006: 151).

Engaging with Haraway's notion of inheritance, Ahmed (2006) highlights the bodily stances and attunements, the mix of social and biological, that constitute inheritance as 'the contingency of contact where things coming into contact with other things shapes what we receive' (Ahmed, 2006: 196 n8). The range of emotions, bodily postures, aesthetic orientations, contestations, fears and pleasures that constitute the 'contingency of contact' between humans and urban grasslands shape the specific affective attunements that are materialised in restoration practices. In these terms, the specificities and varieties of human–grass encounters 'matter' in learning how to inherit in respectful more-than-human ways, where 'fleshy' inheritance is not always human nor is it deterministic. Native grasses are thus an active inheritance and their affective dimensions both mobilise and hinder efforts to restore damaged ecologies.

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