

Moving Beyond a Strange Spectatorship: Stories of Nonhuman Road Trauma in Australia

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Introduction

What can nonhuman road trauma, more commonly referred to as ‘roadkill’, teach us about ecological crises and human culpability? Incidents of nonhuman road trauma could be described as strange encounters, revealing the shared trauma of the nonhumans and humans involved while simultaneously highlighting the supposed inevitability of such events. I argue that the choice to check the rearview mirror – to exhibit attentiveness and care in self-reflection – is an act of radical correspondence with the more-than-human. Such correspondence functions as a kind of non-spoken letter to both nonhumans and other human drivers; a letter calling for acts of care and attentiveness that acknowledge the nonhuman experience, mourn losses, and possibly instigate radical change when it comes to how nonhuman road trauma is thought about now and hopefully avoided in future. In her work on the ‘Anthropocene noir’, Deborah Bird Rose speaks of ‘the Anthropocene parallel’ in which humans are spectators of the suffering of nonhumans, and also spectators of a suffering that is our own. Written as both an essay and a personal log of my own experiences with nonhuman road trauma, this work draws on Rose’s idea in an attempt to reconcile the concept of what I term a ‘strange spectatorship’, in which humans observe, are implicated in, and turn away from the phenomenon of nonhuman road trauma and what such trauma reveals about human-nonhuman relations, particularly for settler-colonial Australians. Reflecting on anecdotal experiences as well as the representation of roadkill in Australian literature, I explore the strangeness perceived in how settler-colonial Australians are both actors and spectators in nonhuman road trauma. I grapple with the idea of such trauma as a means of better understanding the settler-colonial impact on Australian natural environments, and the consequences for both humans and nonhumans if we do not better address the ethical and ecological consequences of our modern road infrastructure.

I. Turning away from nonhuman road trauma

We're on the road to Bendigo and it's one of the first hot days of the 2020 summer. A dead kangaroo speaks from the road, lying prostrate in the midday heat. My partner swerves slightly to avoid hitting the body but as we continue down the highway something tells us to turn around; we should check for any pouch young. After 200 metres, we do a U-turn and move slowly back towards the animal. Pulling over safely, we exit the ute and go to pull the body off the road.

The roo is still alive, a young male that kicks out its back legs and squirms off the road to safety – not away from the oncoming cars, but from us. His fear and pain emanate from his body like the heat of the bitumen and surrounding scrub. His movements appear discordant as he jolts away from us, shifting himself further off the road as his breathing quickens, most of his body obeying but one of his legs – completely snapped – drags behind. After a terse phone call with our local wildlife carer – one we have gotten to know well these past few months since moving to central Victoria – we're as sure as we can be that he needs to be euthanised.

We cry in the car, our dog in the back excited and confused. We're angry at the driver who left him on the road, trying not to judge their reasons but so blinded by the emotions of the situation that we find it hard to understand what reason they would have for leaving an animal on the scorching asphalt, not even stopping briefly to check if he's dead.

Feelings of guilt follow us that day and the subsequent weeks. Because we couldn't save this nonhuman person and because, as drivers ourselves, we know we play an ongoing role in this everyday trauma. Perhaps worse, though, we feel shame because we feel sadness. Sadness for the death of an animal that we have just met and shame because while we can recognise the violence of roadkill, we're made to feel that there is some absurdity in mourning a victim. We speak to others about what happened – friends and family – and while sympathy is expressed, it largely feels performative. I think strange and uncertain thoughts about the nature of grieving in this circumstance: how do we mourn a nonhuman death, and why does this grieving feel so anomalous?

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This incident on the roads of so-called Australia, and many others like it, have had me thinking about what I term a 'strange spectatorship', in which humans observe and inflict, but often turn away from, the phenomenon of 'roadkill'. Incidents of roadkill are strange encounters because they reveal the shared trauma of the nonhumans and humans involved while simultaneously highlighting the supposed inevitability of such events. They also reveal the strangeness of mourning the nonhuman deaths that are so prevalent on Australian roads; a strangeness that at times feels overwhelming given the huge volume of death and the lack of acceptance around such mourning practices.

What, I wonder, can stories of roadkill, or what I refer to as ‘nonhuman road trauma’, teach us about mourning the nonhuman? I use this terminology because I would like to move away from the dehumanisation implicit in the term ‘roadkill’. Like humans who suffer injury and death on our roads – what is often referred to as road trauma or, in Australia when referring to human deaths, the road toll – nonhumans also suffer immensely from road infrastructure – an infrastructure that is designed and built by humans, for human use alone.¹ By using the term ‘road trauma’ to also refer to nonhuman injuries and deaths, I hope to position such tragedy alongside and in relation to the human experience, rather than as mutually exclusive events that bear no consideration when one thinks of human road trauma.

My exploration of nonhuman road trauma shifts from anecdotal commentary on what I myself have experienced on Australian roads, to explorations of Australian texts that explore nonhuman road trauma, to discussions of how current scholarship in the environmental humanities might provide pathways to increased attentiveness and care surrounding these tragedies. I consider how responses to this trauma might be indicative of how some humans in the West are problematically ‘spectators’ of nonhuman suffering; both in an everyday sense, such as on our roads, and in a broader sense in relation to the climate crisis. Moving beyond such a spectatorship means acknowledging the dire need to shift settler-colonial relations with the nonhuman to a more ecologically considerate and humane place; to engage in a more attentive correspondence with the more-than-human. Roads may indeed be a productive place to begin here. I consider this correspondence a kind of non-spoken letter⁵ that, as I will go on to describe, functions as a conversation between human drivers and the nonhuman; a conversation that reveals the strangeness of being a spectator to nonhuman road trauma and highlights what is needed to engage in deeper ecological care and attentiveness.

I also emphasise that I consider my experiences here through a settler-colonial lens. As an Anglo-Celtic Australian, I am largely considering notions of blame and responsibility when it comes to nonhuman road trauma as intimately tied to settler-colonial exploitation and devastation of Australia’s natural environment. The ‘we’ and ‘our’ that I use throughout this piece therefore refers primarily to settler-colonisers in Australia (particularly those with Anglo-Celtic backgrounds who have benefited from Australia’s colonial systems of domination, both now and in the past). By using these collective terms, I do not wish to homogenise all human experiences on Australian roads, nor am I neglecting the important cultural relationships between Indigenous Australian peoples and the myriad nonhumans that are affected by road trauma across this country. Rather, I am attempting to emphasise and understand my own responsibility as a settler-colonial Australian who benefits from road infrastructure, and what my encounters with nonhumans might teach me and others about human-nonhuman attentiveness. I apply what is a primarily postcolonial critique to understandings of nonhuman road trauma in Australia, with the recognition that this view is limiting and does not encapsulate the complexities of all Australian people’s relationships with the nonhuman. I argue that Australian

road infrastructure and the attitudes of some drivers to the nonhumans that are forced to share these colonised spaces, often to their detriment, are representative of broader Western, settler-colonial views that disregard the subjectivities of the more-than-human when undertaking urban expansion and road construction.

With an estimated four million mammals killed on Australian roads every year (Englefield et al., 'A Review') as well as many birds, reptiles, insects and other animals, one might perceive a sense of public denialism regarding the ecological and psychological impacts of roadkill, and yet it is something that many drivers are implicated in every day. In response to finding increased numbers of nonhuman road trauma on South Australia's roads, environmental educator Kris Messenger told ABC Radio Adelaide that she 'could be driving back a semi-trailer of dead wildlife, and that's happening every week on our roads' (Sutton). Bruce Englefield, a wildlife rescuer and developer of the Roadkill Reporter App (Englefield et al., 'Australian Roadkill'), has spoken about the sad paradox that exists for those who rescue and care for nonhuman victims of road trauma. Rescuers often drive extensively on country roads for their work, and in the process sometimes end up hitting more animals as they head out to rescue others – something that Englefield has experienced first-hand himself (Gibson).

And then there are the nonhumans less visible to drivers: the billions of insects, blips on windshields, that collide with vehicles mid-air,² as well as larger nonhumans that are invisible in other ways – the non-native animals of Australia like foxes and rabbits and the native brushtail possums and rodents that often bear little consideration in comparison to more iconic Australian species like kangaroos and wombats. These latter animals are often referred to as more charismatic nonhumans – nonhuman charisma being what Jamie Lorimer refers to as 'the distinguishing properties of a nonhuman entity or process that determine its perception by humans and its subsequent evaluation' (915). It is the more iconic, the more human-like mammalian nonhumans that are granted the status of 'charismatic', and are often more highly appreciated by a wider range of people as a result. Even as an Australian icon, though, the kangaroo as road trauma victim is a complex issue. Kangaroo-culling, a divisive practice in Australia but one that is accepted by many as being ethically acceptable for a variety of reasons, implies a disposability when it comes to these nonhumans; a few more killed on roads might be understood by some as no great loss.³ The kangaroo, then, bounds along the line between charismatic and disposable, which makes the high numbers of dead kangaroos along our roads all the more concerning – their worth, at least by settler-colonial standards, is symbolically validated by their presence on the Australian coat of arms and simultaneously invalidated by the way they are neglected as 'roadkill' along highways across the country.

When it comes to scholarship within the environmental humanities, there is surprisingly little that has been written on Australian roadkill from an eco-philosophical perspective. Some notable recent contributions include the work of law scholar Cristy Clark, who speaks to the 'existential lessons' of encounters with roadkill and, just published at the time of finalising this piece, the

work of Kate Rigby and Owain Jones, which laments the ‘everyday ecocide’ of roadkill and explores how one might more meaningfully attend to nonhuman fatalities on our roads. Otherwise, there appears to be little else that deeply engages with the topic in this philosophical light, particularly within the framework of multispecies studies. Like logging, mining and other extractive practices, road infrastructure plays a significant role in broader crises like colonisation and the climate emergency – in addition to the destruction of sacred Indigenous places,⁴ road infrastructure also irrevocably restructures and in some cases devastates many habitats. And yet little has been said in scholarship about what nonhuman road trauma reveals about the way settler-colonisers are still problematically navigating relations with the more-than-human in Australia. Speaking about roadkill in the Northern Hemisphere, Mike Michael identifies roadkill as a topic that warrants deeper enquiry ‘as a cultural artifact through which various identities are played out’ (277) and as a means of interrogating ‘relations between humans, nonhuman animals, and technology’ (277-278). Within the Australian environmental humanities, it seems pertinent to apply such understandings to road trauma also, and extend them so that one might better comprehend nonhuman suffering resulting more directly from the climate crisis – particularly given the obvious links with petrocapiatalism and extractivism in Australia that come to mind when one considers the impacts of transportation technology and infrastructure more broadly.

In the context of the Anthropocene, how do we best approach these issues of nonhuman road trauma? Such incidents are representative of larger environmental problems and are symptomatic of broader settler-colonial Australian attitudes toward the natural world, but it is also just what we say it is: a killing on the roads; momentary, fleeting and, while disturbing, something that is a part of the everyday. In her work on the ‘Anthropocene noir’, Rose speaks of ‘the Anthropocene parallel’ in which humans are spectators of the suffering of nonhumans, and also spectators of a suffering that is our own (211). I draw my thoughts on strange spectatorship from this idea and am particularly interested in the correspondence of suffering between humans and nonhumans in the context of road trauma – when we gather a dead more-than-human being in our arms, when those nonhumans communicate with terrified eyes as headlights round a bend – and what this correspondence means for practices of mourning and the problematic nature of spectatorship in the Anthropocene. In some sense, this correspondence is a kind of non-spoken letter that consists of both self-reflection on the part of the human driver and acts of care and attentiveness that provide space to acknowledge the nonhuman experience, mourn losses, and possibly instigate radical change when it comes to how nonhuman road trauma is thought about now and hopefully avoided in future. The term correspondence often denotes an idea of equality – that one has equal opportunity to respond to another in due course. With this in mind, correspondence might not seem like the most appropriate term for the moments of horrifying violence that define nonhuman road trauma. There seems to be no equality here. And yet all the same, these incidents provide opportunities for the nonhuman to speak – telling us ‘I am here’ – and for the human to respond, ideally with care and compassion.

As Rose describes in her account of Val Plumwood's theory of philosophical animism, it is both a humbling and enriching experience to 'be a member of a wider community of persons'. In the act of 'turning toward nonhumans with openness toward the unexpected', Rose says, we are making ourselves 'available and attentive to the worlds and multifarious "voices" of others' ('Philosophical Animism,' 99). This idea of the 'unexpected' might correspond to those encounters we have along roads – like the seemingly dead kangaroo we met on the way to Bendigo, who was in fact alive. An increasing attentiveness to the places and livelihoods of more-than-human kin along our streets and highways allows us to listen to those others who are detrimentally affected by these human-centric structures. Such attentiveness is an opportunity to experience empathy for those nonhuman persons killed on our roads and perhaps has the potential to decrease the possibility of hitting these persons while driving, as we keep in mind the other ways of being at play as we travel to and from our homes.

In this sense, I believe correspondence is an apt term, and it is a compassionate, attentive correspondence we should aim for rather than a hostile correspondence⁶ or indifference – indifference representing a failure or unwillingness to enter into any kind of correspondence with the road trauma victim, whether they are dead or alive. Correspondence and attentiveness towards the more-than-humans on and alongside roads is a means of moving beyond the strange spectatorship of being both privy to and implicated in such horror, and provides opportunities to feel how some of us affect and are affected by the road infrastructure that is a product of colonisation.

II. Storying nonhuman road trauma

In her 2013 novel *The Swan Book*, Alexis Wright describes 'places on the roads not hit by heavy traffic where long grasses grew' (209). There are places like this on my road – a dirt track leading to our bush block home on Dja Dja Wurrung Country, high grass on either side undeterred by the few cars that pass this way every day. In the early heat of spring we find ourselves swerving to avoid stumpy-tailed lizards, basking on the red dirt, sometimes stopping the car and gently moving these reptiles to the verges when we can. Despite the general absence of traffic here, I've recently seen two lizards dead – one, killed by a reversing truck on our own property delivering dirt for our vegie boxes, which I'm distraught to discover later while walking in the garden. Another I find flattened on the dirt road – the road we'd thought of as generally safe for most wildlife, as so few people venture down it. Even with such little traffic, these stretches of gravel bordered by tall grasses remain a death trap for so many of the nonhuman persons that traverse it.

I begin obsessing over every rock and stick I drive over, checking my rearview mirror in case it's actually a lizard or bird left injured by the car before me. Or, in my neglect, perhaps I'm the one who has done it, leaving them to die alone on the road, the mirage of midday heat shimmering above them. More than once I find myself turning around, even if I'm certain I haven't hit

anything, and I return to a section of road I've just passed to check that no suffering animal is left behind. I'm no saviour, though, and the exhaustion of checking often overcomes me – I can't always turn back – and the foreboding sense of how many other nonhumans have been hit and left to die each day is palpable.

How, I wonder, do wildlife rescuers stomach this every day? When I call them up from the side of a local road with a report of an injured animal, I know that my call is one of so many others and I feel bad asking for help. But they always help, and I'm left passing my grief over to them, eager to throw it away, emptying myself of the story of how this dying animal came to be there.

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Thinking about stories, and not just my own, I wonder about the representation of nonhuman road trauma in Australian fiction. What understandings of these 'encounter-events', as described by Bracha L. Ettinger (220), are conveyed in different stories of and along Australian roads? I am particularly drawn to the idea of spectatorship and the abdication of responsibility implicit in terms like 'roadkill' and 'road trauma' used in such stories. There is the idea of the road itself as killer – that death is primarily circumstantial, and that we human drivers and the choices we make are not the responsible parties. I still struggle to find a term that best encapsulates both – the circumstantiality of the human need to travel on roads in the modern era and the simultaneous culpability implicit in this choice to drive.

As a literary studies researcher, I am particularly interested in how literature responds to the question of what it means to affect and be affected by ecological crisis. In my PhD research on Australian crime fiction, I came across the following sentence in one of these works, Chris Hammer's *Scrublands*:

the two men are silent, lost in their internal remonstrations, while the world around them grows increasingly apocalyptic, the sky closing in, the light fading, ash falling, some of it glowing orange at the edges... They round a curve; two wallabies are standing in the road.... one animal thundering off the roo bar, the other crushed beneath the wheels.
(99)

I am stirred by the juxtaposition of an all-encompassing bushfire, difficult to look away from and near-impossible to escape, and the encounter between the human characters and these unlucky wallabies. This passage from Hammer's work seems to illustrate the complexity of this feeling of being both implicated in and impacted by environmental disaster and violence. This is reflected in Timothy Morton's contention that 'We "civilised" people ... are the narrators of our own destiny'. Ecological awareness can be understood, Morton says, as 'that moment at which these narrators find out that they are the tragic criminal' (9).⁷

Subsequently, the way we story roadkill matters. It should not simply be a means of passing on the grief to someone else or an opportunity to gasp in outrage at the horror and violence. Rather, we need to form relationships through these stories with the kin we see on our roads, as difficult as this might be. My own stories, as described above, are just some of many and reflect my perspective as an Anglo-Celtic Australian who drives, lives and works on stolen Indigenous land. My feelings of responsibility that stem from these moments are not simply feelings of a human killing a nonhuman, but of a settler-coloniser affecting the stolen lands around me, reminding me of the exploitation and devastation of these lands in the name of colonisation, and the lived experiences of the nonhumans – the animals, plants, fungi, and otherwise – who inhabit these places that have been so drastically altered through colonial processes, including modern urban expansion. My involvement in nonhuman road trauma feels like, and indeed is, an extension of this devastation.

The storying of nonhuman road trauma in Australian film and literature could be a generative albeit confronting means of understanding this paradox of culpability. Do nuanced stories of nonhuman road trauma exist in Australian cultural expression, though? George Miller's *Mad Max* (1979) is a well-known example of Australian film that depicts roadkill victims strewn along the post-apocalyptic roads of Max Rockatansky's reality. Kenneth Cook's *Wake in Fright* (1961) and Ted Kotcheff's film adaptation (1971) of Cook's work feature violent scenes of roo-shooting in the Australian outback, portraying Anglo-Australians sitting high on the backs of utes as they speed towards the helpless marsupials. While not strictly an example of roadkill, the use of the utes to undertake this kind of hunting – particularly the terror invoked in the film by the disorienting headlights and blaring motors – alludes to the menacing power of vehicles and their role in the settler fight for control of the more-than-human. Donna Mazza describes how the kangaroo is treated particularly badly in Australian fiction – recently published works, such as Tim Winton's *Breath* (2008), often portray the kangaroo as either roadkill or dog food (94). While such works might recognise how horrifying nonhuman road trauma is, few works, at least recently published texts within the Australian settler-colonial literary tradition, seem to approach a nuanced exploration of what such road trauma says about human-nonhuman relations in the Anthropocene. Laura Jean McKay's *The Animals in That Country* (2020) is one text that stands as an exception to this, with several mentions of nonhuman animals killed on roads – killings that shockingly occur despite people's new-found ability to understand nonhuman voices, the result of a devastating flu pandemic.

Do we need more complex literary interrogations of what nonhuman road trauma reveals about human-nonhuman relations, both now in the time of climate crisis and historically in the context of settler-colonial devastation of colonised lands and waterways? For such a ubiquitous sight across Australian landscapes, it seems unusual that there is not more engagement in Australian literature with this violence and what this might represent about Australian, particularly settler-colonial, relations with the nonhuman. While we are seeing more nuanced understandings of the nonhuman in some Australian environmental fiction, including shifts in the works of some

settler authors such as those addressing themes of bushfire, drought, and habitat destruction,⁸ there is little of note when it comes to an engagement with the millions of nonhuman victims of Australian road trauma every year.

In recent years, Australian visual artworks have arguably approached more nuanced and attentive understandings of roadkill than many Australian novels and films. Indigenous poet and artist Judith Nangala Crispin's series *The Dingo's Noctuary* features photographic prints of recently deceased animals, often roadkill victims. Crispin views this as a means of 'honouring the life of that animal' – she doesn't create the prints for people but for the animal themselves (Hennessy). Shaun Gladwell's *Apologies 1-6* is an audio-visual piece which shows a motorbike rider stopping along Australian highways to cradle dead kangaroos and wallabies found on the side of the road (Museum of Contemporary Art). Where are these similarly sensitive portrayals of what might be termed 'roadkill relations' in Australian literature? Understanding the issue of spectatorship and the hesitancy to mourn such victims may explain this absence.

III. Mourning victims of nonhuman road trauma

I'm driving home from Naarm/Melbourne⁹ and am on the final stretch of highway before I turn off onto the dirt road to our house. A bird, what looks to be a raven, has been hit by a car and lies in the middle of the road. I keep driving but as I check in my rearview mirror, one wing appears to flutter slightly, raised into the air by what I assume to be a gust of wind. But something looks and feels off here. I turn the car around, for the second time in a month, and drive back to the raven. They're still alive, and so I bundle them into my car and drive home.

My partner names them Odi, a reference to the Norse god Odin because this particular raven has only one working eye (a violent reminder of their collision with the car). When we drop Odi off at a local wildlife carer, the carer gives the impression that there isn't much to be done for them but that they might pull through. 'You never know,' she says. 'With birds, they either make it or they don't'. Odi survives the weekend but dies a few days later.

The next week, another raven appears on our doorstep. We're not sure if they've been hit by a vehicle, been injured by a predator or are simply unwell. This one is remarkably friendly but they can't fly and have trouble walking, so we take them in, thinking we'll call the wildlife carer again. Not long after, they have what looks like a seizure and die.

We bury them outside, under a young box eucalypt next to our carport. I lay down a posy of lavender, the only flowers blooming at the time, and say some quiet words of remembrance, for both this nameless raven and Odi, who we had encountered so recently. While perhaps not a victim of road trauma, the opportunity to grieve this second raven in the context of the other deaths provides some kind of respite for us both.

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Spectatorship is in many ways representative of the human, and more specifically Anglo-Western disinclination to express grief. As Lori Gruen describes, it seems common to ridicule someone else or indeed ourselves for the act of grieving nonhuman animals. Gruen says

even acknowledging the death of animals, let alone mourning those deaths, leads us into the realm of either the comic or the crazy (136).

To honour the dead nonhumans on our roads means recognising and attempting to move past this discomfort of grief and towards an attentive correspondence through personal and, as Gruen describes, communal mourning practices for nonhumans (139). As Donna Haraway contends, part of the ‘recuperation and recomposition’ processes necessary to tackle modern ecological crises is the act of ‘mourning irreversible losses’ (160). This arguably extends beyond the irreversibility of species extinction to the extinction of individuals, including those nonhuman persons who live and linger on the verges of roads – complex spaces considering ‘verges’ are of settler-colonial making but can also be biodiverse refuges for some nonhumans, plant and animal alike (see Helen Murphy and Stephen van Leeuwen). In mourning, we are no longer simply spectators of more-than-human deaths but must contemplate both our active role in bringing these deaths about and the general hesitancy amongst some people to participate in what should really be an essential grieving process – essential, that is, if we are going to approach the devastation of anthropogenic climate change and other ecological crises head-on.

While such mourning can be debilitating, taking the time to grieve attentively and recognise culpability where it is due is also liberating. This is because mourning often invokes self-reflection – not just reflection on ourselves as individuals, but on actions that are taken more broadly, as communities, as nations, as colonisers. The choice to check the rearview mirror – to exhibit attentiveness and care in self-reflection – is an act of radical correspondence that involves taking stock of what has brought us to this point: why modern road infrastructure is considered more important than nonhuman life; why sacred cultural sites and ever-diminishing native habitats are bulldozed in the name of expansion, particularly with the knowledge that both humans and nonhumans will inevitably die on these newly built roads; why broader ecological issues like the climate crisis are still not being properly acted upon. Of course, revolutionising the way roads are used and valued is no simple task and I do not want to perpetuate the problematic ideal of an Edenic ‘Nature’ that ignores the true complexities of human-nonhuman relations – particularly such relations that are constantly evolving in ever-changing urban settings.

However, I believe that reflecting on the ethical costs of road infrastructure is necessary in understanding settler-colonial impacts, such as the climate crisis, on human-nonhuman relations. Reflecting on these costs means looking directly at those nonhumans impacted, listening and speaking with them in an acknowledgement of their lives and ways of being. Importantly,

looking back on ourselves takes the form of a kind of correspondence with the past, but also with the future, taking into consideration not just human (in Australia's case, particularly settler-colonial) perspectives, but how more-than-human livelihoods factor into the choices that are made by the human users and designers of roads.

This is similar to Ettinger's concept of 'wit(h)nessing' which signifies the act of 'witnessing while resonating with an-Other in a trans-subjective encounter-event' (220). Through such an encounter-event, the 'nascent I and unknown non-I appear as partial subjects in co-emergence, in which no opposition exists between subject and object' (Powell 130). While Ettinger primarily uses the example of mother-baby relations to describe this (218), we might apply this thinking to the human-nonhuman relations that are both upended and strengthened through traumatic encounters such as road trauma.¹⁰ The act of wit(h)nessing provides space to consider the grievability of nonhumans, potentially facilitating the conditions of care that might strengthen and improve human-nonhuman relations.¹¹ Taking the time to grieve means paying special attention to the subjectivities of nonhumans injured and killed on roads, and perhaps enabling stronger convictions on the part of some drivers and transport experts when it comes to preventing such incidents.

The initial perception of the nonhumans described in my own experiences as dead on the road, when they were actually alive, is important in this context. We grieve for the actual dead, yes, but also the inevitability of nonhuman road trauma and the potentiality of an individual life, which is then lost in that moment the vehicle violently collides with a nonhuman being. In a similar vein, we nervously await the worsening effects of climate change here in Australia and elsewhere, and yet we are already experiencing them; many of us know that we are currently on our way to a future of extreme weather events and the possibility of mass human and nonhuman devastation, but these are also impacts that we know too well in the here and now. While we mourn for the species, habitats and connections that are already lost, we are concurrently grieving what *will* be lost – what may currently be alive and even thriving, but which will inevitably be destroyed should we continue down this path. This mingling of anticipation and mourning is fittingly represented by a 'dead' animal on the road that is actually alive; they may well die soon if we, the spectators, do not stop to help.

Related to this is Joanna Macy's reflections on the complexity of what it is to feel anger, fear and sorrow in the face of 'environmental despair'. These feelings, she argues, reflect the act of 'suffering with':

We are not closed off from the world, but rather are integral components of it, like cells in a larger body. When part of that body is traumatized – in the sufferings of fellow beings, in the pillage of our planet, and even in the violation of future generations – we sense that trauma too (Macy).¹²

Macy's thoughts aptly reflect the affective nature of nonhuman road trauma. In that moment a car collides with a nonhuman animal, there are two traumas that simultaneously occur – that of the animal and that of the human driver. The human trauma here is but an extension of the nonhuman's, whether one is able to consciously acknowledge this or not.

Traumatic encounters like these reveal the true nature of more-than-human entanglements. Rose describes how 'we are all tangled up in dynamics, edges, patches and zones of colliding uncertainties... We are tangled up in trouble' ('Anthropocene Noir' 207). We need to lean into these troubled nonhuman encounters; those ones, like nonhuman road trauma, that leave us with feelings of grief and hopelessness rather than renewal and hope, but that are also regenerative, as mourning can often be despite its challenges. While confronting, such experiences allow humans to honour our own animality, as James Stanescu suggests (136). But they also thrust us into the reality of everyday nonhuman trauma; as Rose would say, they symbolise the Anthropocene 'forcing the truth upon us' ('Anthropocene Noir' 209). Mourning nonhuman victims of road trauma presents an opportunity to move beyond a strange spectatorship – to no longer simply observe the trauma experienced by the nonhuman, but come closer to an intimate understanding of how we might better story this trauma, comprehend the nonhuman experience of it, and acknowledge the part some of us play in it.

With this in mind, I hope that the thoughts presented in this paper through both personal anecdote and scholarship bring some attention to the plight of individual nonhumans on our roads and begin some kind of deeper engagement with how incidents of nonhuman road trauma provide opportunities – albeit violently confronting ones – to be attentive to multispecies relations, particularly from a settler perspective. These traumas are concrete and everyday examples of the impact of problematic settler-colonial infrastructures, and what needs to be done (demonstrating care, attentiveness, and compassion rather than spectating) in order to address those cultural-ecological issues that are often implicit in the action of driving past a dying nonhuman on the side of the road. And while it is important to regard incidents of nonhuman road trauma as 'cultural artifacts' (Michael 277), we must also consider them in more material ways as involving individual, agential nonhumans who are violently injured and often killed. The reflection invoked via the rearview mirror speaks to a larger need for more meaningful correspondence with these individuals, as we choose to attune to their experiences and mourn their deaths in these instances and shift beyond being mere spectators to their pain. While this article does not provide a concrete solution to nonhuman road trauma (there are indeed many others currently undertaking generative work in this space),¹³ these anecdotes and thoughts hopefully offer insight into my own correspondence with nonhumans on Australian roads and open up opportunities for others to similarly engage in a more attentive dialogue with the nonhuman beings who inhabit these human-dominated spaces.

NOTES

- ¹ It is worth noting efforts to adapt road infrastructure to reduce the impact on nonhumans, such as the construction of fauna bridges over roads and exclusion fencing which may be effective in reducing nonhuman road trauma and enabling better habitat connectivity, although research into the effectiveness of these strategies is still ongoing. See Amy R. Bond and Darryl N. Jones; Rodney van der Ree et al.; and Luca Corlatti et al.
- ² A 2015 study revealed that there are possibly billions of pollinating insects killed annually on North American roads alone. See James H. Baxter-Gilbert et al.
- ³ It should be acknowledged that kangaroo-culling is by no means a morally black and white issue. Some conservationists argue that the cull is necessary to alleviate the suffering of starving individuals and protect endangered habitats, while animal welfare activists view the cull as inhumane, particularly when considering the commercial exploitation of kangaroos for meat and other products. For a summary of some of these perspectives, see Mehmet Mehmet and Peter Simmons.
- ⁴ The destruction of the sacred Djab Wurrung trees for the purposes of the Western Highway project in Victoria, Australia is one recent example. See Bell and Johnson.
- ⁵ Thank you to a generous reviewer for this term.
- ⁶ A driver might, for example, feel a sense of anger or derision that an animal, particularly larger animals like kangaroos, would run in front of their car, possibly damaging it and endangering its human passengers in the process.
- ⁷ I have discussed this in more detail in my work on nonhuman representation in Jane Harper's *The Dry* and Hammer's *Scrublands*. See Fetherston.
- ⁸ Some examples of fiction works by contemporary Australian settler authors that challenge established, problematic settler-colonial perspectives of nature and the nonhuman include Catherine McKinnon's *Storyland* (2017), Jennifer Mills' *Dyschronia* (2018) and Laura Jean McKay's *The Animals in That Country* (2020).
- ⁹ Naarm, which is often used to refer to the city of Melbourne, is the Boon Wurrung name for the nearby Port Phillip Bay. See Jack Latimore.
- ¹⁰ Thank you to Perdita Phillips for the suggestion of including Ettinger's work on 'wit(h)nessing' in this piece.
- ¹¹ Thank you to Alexis Harley for this valuable point.
- ¹² Thank you to Michael Chew for bringing my attention to Macy's work on environmental despair.
- ¹³ For examples of recent research in this space, see Nicholas Davey et al.; Bruce Englefield et al., 'A Trial of a Solar-Powered, Cooperative Sensor/Actuator, Opto-Acoustical, Virtual Road-Fence to Mitigate Roadkill in Tasmania, Australia'; and Dion Lester.

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