5: Risking Attachment in the Anthropocene

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The notion of risk is now commonplace. For Ulrich Beck (1992) who introduced the term "risk society" in the early 1990s, contemporary ecological crises are not questions about the destruction of nature, but rather ones of how modern society deals with self-generated uncertainties that are no longer limited by time or space. These are dangers that escape and elide risk, calculation and insurability. In the face of permanent material threats, Beck argues that modern industrial society normalizes risk, and we become blind to side effects and consequences. Most of the time those of us in developed countries carry on our daily lives as if everything is insurable, as if we're neither causing environmental damage nor being affected by it, a sort of amnesia to the wider implications of ordinary action. For example, where I live, the mining and export of coal is a commonplace and everyday activity. Despite the challenges of climate change, coal trains deposit their loads, in ever increasing quantities, to the port of Newcastle (Australia) to be exported to power stations in China and elsewhere. The ethics of "deplete, destroy, depart" (Grinde and Johansen 1995 in Weir 2009, 119) go on in a way that becomes ordinary, everyday and unremarkable, and the dangers of dust, environmental degradation and climate change, are in Beck's terms, normalized.

Figure 1. Coal Trains, Newcastle, Australia. Photograph by Lesley Instone.

Inherent in Beck's notion of the risk society are the impulses of denial and surprise. Beck contends that in modern technological society risks are opaque—we can't easily see or identify them without the aid of scientific experts to help reveal the facts of the matter. This opaqueness leads to surprise when apparently benign things—certain foods or everyday activities, for example—turn out to be a risk to health and wellbeing. So, in the face of risk, we turn to the twin compensations of calculability and certainty. The irony of risk, says Beck (2006), is that the more we attempt control, the more likely we'll be surprised by the very things we think we're managing. Beck's analysis suggests that when faced with the "gargantuan agency and an almost unbearable level of responsibility" that the Anthropocene heralds (Gibson-Graham and Roelvink 2010, 2), we're likely to react with numbness, disconnection and resentment.

The disabling dynamics of risk as danger seem pervasive, but science studies scholar Bruno Latour suggests another prospect. Rather than reducing risk or insuring ourselves against it, Latour (2004a) suggests we focus on cultivating relations that embrace the possibilities that risk affords. This is how I understand Latour's notion of "risky attachments". For Latour, "risk-free objects, the smooth objects to which we had been accustomed up to now," the "matters of fact" of insurability and control in Beck's terms, "are giving way to *risky attachments*, tangled objects" (2004a, 22, italics in original). Risky attachments are not so much about danger, but about possibility; the possibilities that emerge from acknowledging our entanglements in and with things. There are no "side effects," externalization of dangers, risk free objects, or simple "matters of fact" for Latour, everything, he says, is tangled up in messy imbroglios that can't be reduced to constituent parts. So risky attachments, are "matters of concern," rather than "matters of fact", that gather up a mélange of humans, non-humans, technologies and the like in constituting the relations that compose the Anthropocene. This isn't to say that there are no dangers or problems, but to start from the idea that embracing our attachments and embeddedness in complex networks offers hope rather than menace. Such a stance means different ways of thinking and doing that connect us as one among the many actors and places that enact the world.

For example, the practice of risky attachment resonates with Jess Weir's (2009) shift of register from despair to repair. Weir suggests that the generative practices of engaging with loss (rather than denying it) can be a positive motivating force for renewal and repair. From her work with the Indigenous Yorta Yorta people along the Murray River, she calls for communicative relations between people and country that recognize the capacity of country to act, and the appreciation that country is alive and speaks for itself when people choose to listen. Likewise, Margaret Somerville points out that the dominant story of the Murray-Darling Basin as a system in distress and hopelessness, is only one among many possible

stories. The dominant story positions the river as an object in need of intervention, as a problem of calculation that requires modes of control that insure against risk. But the Indigenous stories that Somerville works with suggest a different world of intimate attachment, of being present *with* the land (2009, 212–214, emphasis mine). This is a world of connections and flows where the embodied experience of place transforms the story of despair about the Murray-Darling Basin to a story of collective responsibility to "sing it back to life, together, all of us" (2009, 221), and a willingness to enact a shared postcolonial politics of place.

Postcolonial place is implicit in Val Plumwood's (2008) concept of shadow places. These denied places highlight the spatiality of risky attachments and the relations of detachment on which they are built. Plumwood argues that a harmful disconnection underpins consumer society, creating shadow places as sacrificed or denied spaces, "all those places that produce or are affected by the commodities you consume, places consumers don't know about, don't want to know about, and in a commodity regime don't ever need to know about or take responsibility for" (2008, 146–147). As risky attachments, shadow places are not places "out there," instead they're part of "our" place, not separate but intimately interlinked with who and where we are. When we risk attachment to shadow places, we enact a critical ecology of place recognizing the other not as danger, but as related.

Risky attachments cut across the modernist categories of nature and culture, they stretch out to make connections with unlike and unlikely others, they cross boundaries between humans and nonhumans, the organic and inorganic, and displace humans as the only actor. As a risky attachment, coal, for example, would no longer be imagined as an isolated mineral, but thickly embedded in complex networks of lives, lungs, climate, multinational corporations, government revenues, biodiversity, and the like. Imagine large lumps of coal polished to a high sheen, glistening and gorgeous, displayed on shelves or bejeweling a mini Ferris wheel. Such a transformation is part of Andrew Drummond's engagement with

coal, that archetypal modern commodity whose risky attachments continue to bind 19th-century industrialism to the Anthropocene. From his converted powerhouse home, Drummond listens to the thundering of coal trains as they pass by, and ponders the meaning and potent energy of this ubiquitous mineral. His art probes the metaphorical power of coal and the complex relations between land, body and the transformative potential of the material.

Figure 2. Coal Wheel. Andrew Drummond, 1997-98. Brass, coal, bearings 1600mm diameter x 300mm various. Collection of the artist. Photograph by John Collie.

Paradoxically, Drummond's shiny polished nuggets of coal could be stand-ins for Latour's smooth risk-free objects whose slippery surfaces eschew any attachments: coal as separate, singular, a matter of fact. But Drummond has crafted risky attachments of coal to land and bodies, to the rhythms of industry, and brought to life though kinetic sculptures a mundane but potent commodity. "It's one of those really banal things," he says, "things that people walk past and don't even see. I find that really fascinating" (Drummond in Blundell 2006). Drummond's installations enact the multi-

plicity of coal's agency in mines, in chemical reactions, and his kinetic works conjure alchemical potentials and shifting forms that link the bodies of miners, laboratory staff, engineers, and landscapes in webs of destruction and potential. As a "matter of concern" coal is intimately bound up in our lives and the lives of non-humans. Drummond's art reveals coal as an active element in us, outside us and alongside us and demonstrates the shift from coal as an inert object to coal as a risky and active entanglement. From the small everyday deposits of dust in lungs, depletion of biodiversity with mine expansion, to the multinational mining and shipping companies, and so on, coal is entangled in the distributed networks that unevenly knot together humans, nature and technology.

Risky attachments also stretch time. Musician and artist Brian Eno (2000) invokes a temporal dimension of risky attachments with his concept of "the long now." "'Now' is never just a moment," says Eno. "The Long Now is the recognition that the precise moment you're in grows out of the past and is the seed for the future. The longer your sense of Now, the more past and future it includes" (2000). Eno's "Long Now" risks the connection of past and future and the responsibility this implies for our actions in the present. To exemplify a new temporality of the Anthropocene, the Long Now Foundation is working on a 10,000-year clock that encompasses the principles of simplicity, going slow, expecting trouble and restarts, and easy reparability.[1] The "long now" percolates into the future and challenges us to think and act differently. As a risky attachment the 10,000-year clock generates new rhythms of time and new networks of risky thinking.

Risky thinking, in Isabel Stengers' terms, is to think possibility against probability; the transformation of risk to hope. Against the sort of insurability and calculation at the center of the "risk society," Stengers advocates an "experimental stance, an adventure in life": the risk of possibility, the risk of

[1] The Long Now Foundation, http://www.longnow.org/clock/.

"laughter and joy in the face of uncertainty" (quoted in Zournazi 2002, 244). Life, for Stengers, isn't built upon certainty and insurances, "but upon the situation or events that make them possible" (quoted in Zournazi 2002, 244), and it is in the interstices of encounter that, for her, hope is to be found. Stengers insists that risk is not an abstraction, not a romantic gesture of "risking everything," nor something that can be done on behalf of others. Instead, for Stengers, risk is a concrete experience that slows us down enough to take time, value experience and hold onto hope and joy. So, in Stengers' terms "risky attachments" are events, they're active relations of hope and connection in which we cannot predict the outcomes, where we risk opening ourselves to possibility, and risk letting our thinking spill out beyond our questions and theories. In the act, she insists, we risk ourselves, and the possibility of putting our own ideas at risk in the "hope that something could be produced" (quoted in Zournazi 2002, 248). From this perspective, it's not the risk of danger that is central but the risk of hope, of feeling and thinking, that in Stengers' words, "oblige me to think and feel in a new way" and that induce "the powerful sense that something else is possible" (quoted in Zournazi 2002, 246, 248).

Writing this from my home next to the coal loader in the world's largest coal port, it's easy to feel the inducement of despair and disconnection, to rigidify thinking, to favor control against hope, to disregard the shadow places up the valley being devastated by open cut mining, and to ignore those shadow places in Asia overwhelmed by pollution from burning coal. We're all too familiar with disconnectedness as a practiced strategy. But things are shifting, people are making connections, they're thinking beyond the limits of a blinkered "now." For example, ex-coal miner Graham Brown now campaigns against coal expansion, saying that many in the industry are "interested in where they fit into the situation" (Manning 2009). Another, a fifth generation coal miner, anonymously tells a journalist that he's anxious that pits may have to close, but, he confides, "there is no life on a dead planet" (Eastley 2009).

For me, an ethics for the Anthropocene calls for an ecology of risky attachments. The shift to recognizing our entanglements in the imbroglios of the Anthropocene—biodiversity loss, global warming, social injustice—is an important first step. But more than this, is the act of *risking* attachment, the active search for different and interconnected practices of feeling, thought, and action. Paradoxically the dangers and risks that the Anthropocene heralds may be best addressed not with insurance and control, but through reaching out and risking attachment with all manner of unlike others. In risking attachment we risk our thoughts and feelings, and plunge ourselves into a world of matters of concern; a complex, hybrid and multi-species world where uncertainty reigns. Latour, Stengers, and others remind us that feeling and thinking are mutually constituted, and that assembling tangled objects and risking attachment are generative events "whose outcome cannot be anticipated" (Stengers, quoted in Zournazi 2002, 265). To meet the challenges of the Anthropocene, scientist Will Steffen (2009) argues that the "future will depend on the nature of human aspirations, values, preferences and choices … nothing less than a transformation is needed." Such a transformation will not be abstract or grand, it will be multiple, ordinary and everyday, forged in the unfinished and hopeful work of risking attachment.