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## Abstract

Through the ongoing violence of settler-colonialism and climate change, Australia faces ecological disaster and collapse. Any serious mitigation of the worst socio-environmental effects demands a fundamental redefinition of the relationship between settler society and nature. Informed by more-than-human geography, Indigenous and settler-colonial studies, and post-Foucauldian appraisals of subjectivity and power, I examine whether settler conservation volunteers provide pathways to developing more harmonious relations with land. Interviewing 14 volunteers across two community conservation organisations, I argue they demonstrate an ability for settler Australians move away from possessive logics of land ownership, towards affective, relational modes of more-than-human care. However, these relationships are also violent and reveal tensions between reproducing colonial logics and genuine attempts to reverse the environmental impacts of colonialism. Settler Australians must continue to foster reflexive modes of environmental governance, and collaborate actively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations to build new ways of living with the land.

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## List of Abbreviations

CRPC: Cooleman Ridge ParkCare

KICLA: Kangaroo Island Conservation Landowners Association

The Ridge: Cooleman Ridge Nature Reserve

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## 1. Introduction

The 2003 Canberra bushfires consumed 99% of Namadgi National Park, just south of the Australian capital (Rigby, 2015). Their habitat destroyed, white-winged choughs fled to the city in search of food and shelter. As usual, Cooleman Ridge ParkCare (CRPC) conservation volunteers were working on Fencepost Hill on a Friday morning, when they noticed that the choughs had moved into the big eucalyptus tree next to the dam. As the ParkCarers diligently weeded, they built up piles of organic detritus, providing a habitat for invertebrates. Nearly two decades on, when ParkCarers congregate to work on their ‘patch’,<sup>1</sup> they find joy in witnessing the descendants of these choughs picking through the previous weeks’ weed piles in search of an easy meal. The ParkCarers and choughs entered into a symbiotic relationship, in which both play a role in nourishing the other – food for the birds, joy and more-than-human community for the volunteer. This vignette provides a snapshot into the labour and affect of more-than-human care (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017), the volunteers’ connection to land, and the power of fire to shape these relationships. In this dissertation I explore the worlds produced by conservation entanglements in contemporary Australia. I discuss what settler society can learn from how volunteers care for their patch in a conservation landscape complicated by the ongoing violence of settler-colonialism.

### 1.1. An Uncared-For Country

Australia, the driest permanently inhabited continent on Earth, has been radically changed through settler-colonialism. From the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, European settlers have disrupted modes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander land management practices; in particular, the use of fire (Pyne, 1991; Bowman, 1998; Bliege Bird *et al.*, 2008; Jones, 2012). According to Anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose (1996), hand in hand with an intimate knowledge of one’s terrain, or ‘country’, fire was and remains a key tool with which Aboriginal people care for the land. As Marrithiel and Marranangu Elder April Bright (1994) stated: ‘If we don’t burn our country every year, we are not looking after our country’ (p. 59). In the decades following the arrival of European settlers in 1788, First Nations peoples were displaced, forced into settler society, or passed away through disease and conflict (Plumwood, 1998; Moreton-Robinson,

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<sup>1</sup> Tsing *et al.* (2019) define ‘Anthropocene patches’ as the localised consequences of “the uneven conditions of more-than-human liveability in landscapes dominated by industrial forms” (p. S186). While this description is often apt in my usage, I imitate the vocabulary of my research participants and use ‘patch’ to refer to the local environmental space that one cares for through their conservation efforts.

2015). The settlers, driven by extractive colonial ideology and lacking the millennia of local knowledge of Aboriginal peoples, did not know how to care for the land. Soils became degraded and introduced species wreaked havoc on native ecosystems (Rose, 1996, 2011). As the forest understory became dense, fire ceased to signify a well-managed country, becoming a ‘monstrous foe’ (Rigby, 2015, p. 124). Bushfires now engulf grass and bushland with increasing frequency and ferocity, exacerbated by a warming climate (IPCC, 2021). The 2019-20 bushfire season – ‘Black Summer’ – burnt nearly 19,000,000 hectares of bush, causing the deaths of billions of animals (Bonney, He and Myint, 2020; Filkov *et al.*, 2020). Following Rigby (2008), I use the constant presence and threat of fire as a catalyst to investigate the human-nature relations of settler Australians trying to care for a hot, dry and fire-prone country.

Developing harmonious modes of living with and in Australian country is therefore imperative. Crucially, the predominantly white settler Australian society, of which I am a member, must learn to break ties with destructive colonial modes of environmental governance and embrace symbiotic more-than-human relations if Australia is to avoid the worst consequences of environmental collapse (Cameron, 2002; Plumwood, 2002). Indigenous modes of caring for country, which I engage with in this thesis, provide crucial lessons here (Rose, 2011). However, this also risks committing a ‘settler move to innocence’, in which settlers co-opt the language of decolonisation and indigeneity to reinforce their occupation of Indigenous land (Tuck and Yang, 2012). Aware of this danger, I maintain that the immediacy of the environmental crisis and the reality of ongoing settler presence mean that a radical shift in relating to land must develop from within settler society, in active collaboration with First Nations peoples.

## 1.2. Conservation Volunteering in Australia

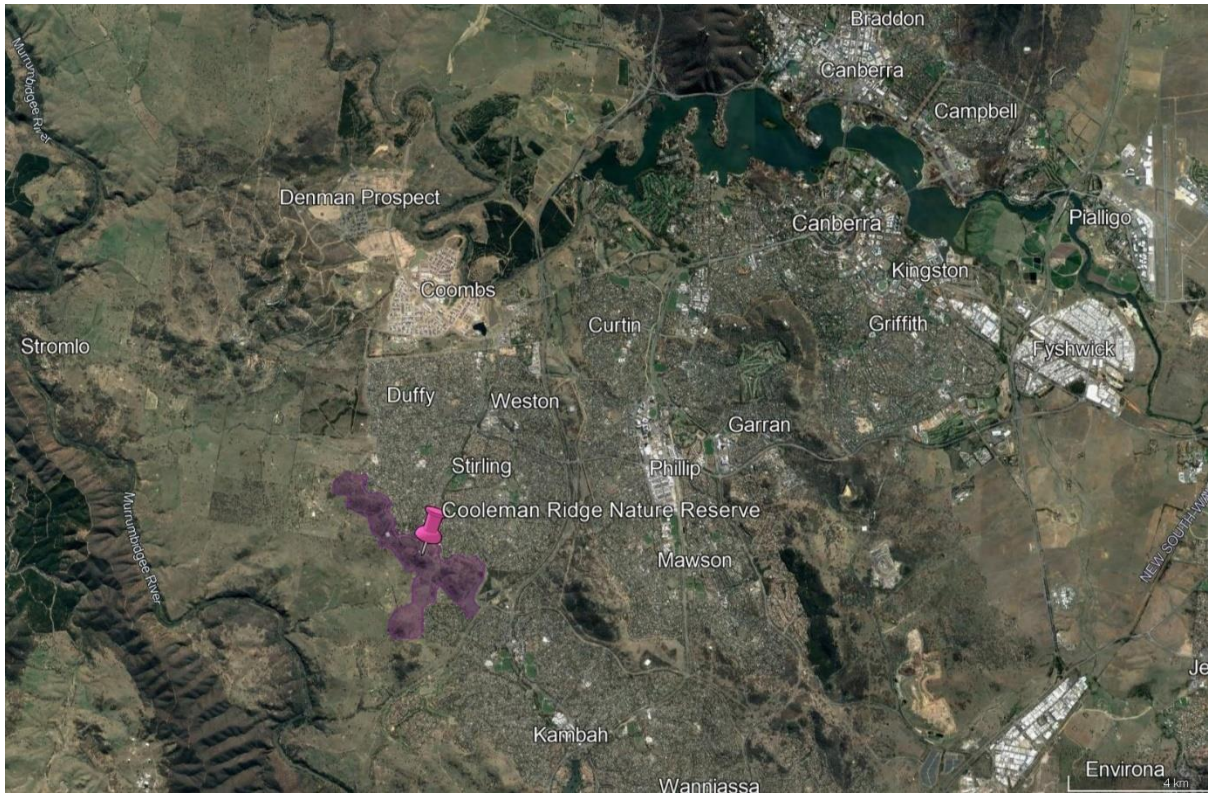
Cognisant of critical appraisals of ecological restoration (see Plumwood, 2002; Adams and Mulligan, 2003; Jørgensen, 2015; Ward, 2019), I look to volunteer conservation for inspiration into what these harmonious settler-land relationships could look like. Driven by the rise of the LandCare movement in the 1980s, community-led conservation groups are common and numerous across Australia. I engage with two community conservation organisations in southern and south-eastern Australia (see Figure 1).





*Figure 1: Location of Kangaroo Island and Cooleman Ridge. Source: Google Earth.*

First, the Cooleman Ridge ParkCare (CRPC) group is one of 22 ParkCare groups in and around Australia’s capital city, Canberra. It was founded in 1991 by three local women passionate about protecting and regenerating the native habitat of a 187-hectare ridgeline of public nature reserve – Cooleman Ridge – overlooking the suburbs on the western edge of the city (see Figure 2). The ‘Ridge’ was completely burnt in the 2003 Canberra bushfires, which also destroyed 500 homes in the suburbs below. CRPC’s roughly 50 members engage in weeding, planting, and monitoring across the length of the Ridge, with working sessions scheduled weekly and monthly. I have a personal connection with CRPC. Growing up five minutes’ walk from its slopes, I volunteered weekly with the group over a period of four months from May to August 2020.



*Figure 2: Cooleman Ridge (shaded purple) on the edge of Canberra. Source: Google Earth.*

The second group I engage with is the Kangaroo Island Conservation Landowner’s Association (KICLA). Founded in 2017, KICLA’s members are owners of conservation properties – private land purchased for the purpose of ecological restoration and conservation – on Kangaroo Island, South Australia. The Island, extending 145-kilometres from east to west, is a biodiversity hotspot, a mosaic of old-growth nature reserves, cleared farmland, and wooded creek-lines (see Figure 3). Beyond connecting a community of like-minded conservation landowners, KICLA provides a voice for its 55 members in local environmental politics, as well as providing an avenue to apply for funding and other support. Around half of Kangaroo Island’s 440,500 hectares were burnt during the 2019-20 bushfire season (Bonney, He and Myint, 2020). Since then, KICLA has been busy providing support to members, securing government funding, and engaging in post-fire environmental recovery.





*Figure 3: Kangaroo Island. Source: Google Earth.*

### 1.3. Aim and Research Questions

Interviewing 14 volunteers across these two groups, in this dissertation I attend to Kiik's (2019) call to investigate the subjectivities and human-nature relations of conservation. Informed by more-than-human geography, settler-colonial studies and post-structuralist literature, my aim is both analytic and teleological; I analyse how volunteers engage with their patch and enact environmental governance through the practice of more-than-human care, in order to gain insight into how settler Australians can develop urgently needed reflexive and durable relations to local environments. While developed in Australia, these lessons are applicable to any country, settler or otherwise, where developing care-based connections to land can improve human and more-than-human wellbeing. Through this analysis I attempt to 'stay with the trouble' (Haraway, 2016) of building connections to place as a non-Indigenous person in a settler-colonial country, as well as to celebrate the ways in which this is being done in a constructive way.

I address this aim by engaging with three research questions in turn:

1. In what ways do conservation volunteers enact forms of more-than-human care?
2. How do these human-nature relationships further our understanding of developing new forms of 'connection to country' in settler Australia?

3. What do these findings reveal about the regimes of environmental governance practiced by these conservation organisations?

Through these investigations I argue that conservation volunteers demonstrate a nascent ability for settler Australians to move away from possessive logics of ownership, towards affective, relational modes of caring for land. While promising, this ongoing transformation entails violence and a colonial genealogy. In response, I offer an analytic tool for volunteers to increase decision-making reflexivity, and call for further engagement with allies, especially First Nations communities.

This argument is informed by a broad, though interrelated, range of academic literature. I situate this dissertation in relation to these bodies of work in chapter 2, before discussing methodological processes and limitations in chapter 3. In chapter 4 I address RQ1, drawing on more-than-human care scholarship to unpack the labour, affect and ethics of volunteer conservation practice. Chapter 5 responds to RQ2, engaging with Foucauldian subjectivities and settler-colonial studies to argue that volunteers demonstrate some progress in developing non-possessive ways of relating to land. In chapter 6 these findings are analysed as modes of environmental governance. Addressing RQ3 with post-Foucauldian readings of power and politics, I build on this analytic tradition to unpack how conservation groups can improve their reflexivity as socio-environmental contexts change. Drawing this together, I conclude with a discussion of the practical value of these findings and provide avenues for further action and research.

## 2. Literature Review

This review is divided into three sections, with each body of literature informing the analysis of one research question. I begin with a discussion of the trade-offs involved in caring for more-than-human worlds in less-than-perfect conservation conditions. The second section combines subjectivities with Indigenous and settler colonial studies literature on Aboriginal and settler connection to place, with a view to situate participant subjectivities in relation to these conflicting worldviews. Finally, the third section engages with the analyses of biopower and geontologies, with a view to deconstruct the modes of environmental governance practiced by participating conservation groups. This broad spectrum of literature, much of which has been aptly developed in the Australian context, provides key analytic tools to discuss how conservation volunteers can help settler Australians develop urgently needed, reflexive, care-based connections to land.

### 2.1. More-Than-Human Care

I begin by exploring more-than-human care. In this theoretical intersection, the more-than-human aspect adopts and builds on relational ontologies in which people are actants in entanglements of material-semiotic relations (Law, 2008; Giraud, 2019).<sup>2</sup> The care aspect is rooted in feminist critique, highlighting that care, even more-than-human care, has a gendered dimension (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). While I do not focus on gender in this dissertation, one must remain critical of whom care labour falls to, and of the gendered and racialized economic and political power structures this may reinforce.

I centre the conceptual framework for this section around Maria Puig de la Bellacasa's (2017) *Matters of Care*, who builds on Latour's (2004) *Matters of Concern* to investigate the radical potential of more-than-human care. Puig de la Bellacasa draws on Tronto (1993) to define care as 'everything we do to maintain, continue and repair our world so that we can live in it as well as possible' (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 3). For Puig de la Bellacasa, this definition interweaves multiple agencies, 'a politics of care engages much more than a moral stance; it involves affective, ethical, and hands-on agencies of practical and material consequence' (p. 4). These three ontological elements – labour, affect, and ethics – provide an analytic structure with which I unpack how participants enact care in less-than-ideal worlds.

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<sup>2</sup> Indigenous scholars have critiqued new materialist ontologies for failing to recognising (Todd, 2016) and insufficiently representing Indigenous (TallBear, 2017) worldviews.

This investigation draws on work on multispecies erotics to better engage with the embodied, affective nature of care (Lorde, 1984; Alaimo, 2016; McLauchlan, 2019). For Australian author Laura McLauchlan (2019), the term ‘erotic’ refers to any form of ‘deeply-felt bodily satisfaction and pleasure’ (p. 514). McLauchlan explores how hedgehog conservation volunteers develop non-possessive modes of ‘wanting like’ the animals they care for. Their labour ceases to be a chore, becoming a deeply affective, sensual experience as volunteers learn to be responsive to hedgehogs’ needs. Similarly, Lorimer (2015) talks of conservation as a more-than-human process of ‘learning to be affected’ (p. 35) (see also Lorimer, 2008). Affective entanglements are not just embodied experiences but connect to broader processes of ‘becoming with’ one’s environment (Bondi, 2005; Haraway, 2008). As Alaimo (2016) posits, ‘pleasurable practices may open up the human self to forms of kinship and interconnection with nonhuman nature’ (p. 30). However, feminist thinkers have long deconstructed the gendered myth that care is warm and pleasant (see Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, pp. 2–3 for an overview). Likewise, more-than-human care-labour can be physically and emotionally draining, and lead to precarious situations for both carer and cared-for (van Dooren, 2014; Parreñas, 2018). Parreñas (2018), for example, critiques the fetishization of conservation labour, highlighting the danger to conservation workers and violence committed against the cared-for animal. In this dissertation, I unpack how volunteers embody such affective relations as empirical evidence for a broader critique of how settler volunteers build relations to land in chapter 5.

Ethics also play a key role in my analysis of more-than-human care. Drawing on Mol’s (2008) conception of caring as an unfolding process, Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) emphasises that care is political, ‘because speaking of “good care” – or of as-well-as-possible care – is never neutral’ (p. 6). The ethics of care are therefore situated and indeterminate (Haraway, 1988). For Thom van Dooren (2014), this is particularly true in our current era of ecological collapse, arguing that entanglements of care at the edge of extinction are inevitably violent. Known as ‘violence-care’, such entanglements involve the coercion, suffering and death of certain individuals in the name of prolonging the process of extinction. These ‘sacrificial lives’ are rendered invisible by conservation discourse (Rose and van Dooren, 2011). Hence, conservationists must walk the fine ethical line between the violence of extinction and the violence of care (see also Giraud, 2019). These trade-offs conflict with Aboriginal understandings of care. For Deborah Bird Rose’s (2011) Aboriginal teachers, one can only kill to sustain oneself and promote ‘good country’, and never with a view to ‘eradicate a species or

wreck country' (p. 26). Thus, the European concept of conservation through the indiscriminate eradication of unwanted species does not fit within an Aboriginal conception of caring for country. Putting these authors into tension, I engage with Rose's warning to conservationists conducting van Dooren's (2014) violence-care: uncritically categorizing life into wanted and unwanted species can lead to more-than-human genocide – exterminating a being for who it is, not what it does. With this I trouble the ethic of care involved in volunteer efforts to eradicate invasive species in order to allow other species to flourish,<sup>3</sup> the findings informing later analysis of the modes of conservation governance practiced by these groups.

## 2.2. Relating to Land in a Settler-Colonial Context

In this section I seek to situate volunteer connection to place within Australian settler-colonialism. To assist in this analysis, I draw on Foucault's (1984) concept of subjectivity – the form of one's relationship to oneself in relation to an action, event or state-of-being. Shaped by many factors, such as contextual influence, introspection and conscious behaviour, subjectivities are never static nor pre-determined, but continuously created in a process of becoming (McGushin, 2012). This concept has been used to investigate how people develop personal relations to their environments through local socio-material entanglements (Agrawal, 2005; Sletto, 2005), and to propose new environmental subjectivities to aim for (Lorimer, 2015; Büscher and Fletcher, 2019). I draw on this literature to analyse how volunteers come to see themselves in relation to the land they care for, in comparison with settler-colonial and Aboriginal conceptions of ownership.

The distinctions between, and consequences of, settler and Indigenous relations to land have received significant academic attention. While some have argued that settler desires to dominate nature relies on a Euro-American nature-society dualist ontology (Cronon, 1996; Plumwood, 2002; Rigby, 2008), others have focused on the violence caused to Indigenous people by settlers through the imposition of European property regimes (Rose, 1996; Plumwood, 1998). Settler-colonial studies authors have also critiqued the possessive nature of white settler connection to land, including Aboriginal scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2015), who critiques settler conceptions of land as reproducing a possessive patriarchal logic that contributes to the ongoing erasure of Indigenous peoples. In my analysis I particularly draw on Kai Bosworth's (2021) investigation of property in the maintenance of settler

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<sup>3</sup> While I focus on the ethics of these biopolitical choices, many authors have discussed the tensions between 'invasive', 'native' and 'exotic' designations (e.g. Warren, 2007; Salomon Cavin and Kull, 2017)

subjectivities in North American environmental activism. Bosworth explores how white landowners, allied with First Nations peoples against the laying of an oil pipeline, reduced their argument into a 'populist demand for the recognition of exclusive possession' (p. 680). Bosworth argues that settlers renewed their commitment to a possessive colonial logic when their sense of freedom and control was threatened by outside forces. I apply these insights to analyse whether interviewed volunteers reproduce such logics regarding their conservation patch, in comparison with Aboriginal modes of relating to country.

The human-land relations of Aboriginal peoples have been explored by Indigenous (Morgan, 1987; Bright, 1994; Moreton-Robinson, 2003, 2015; Dodson and McDonnell, 2017), and non-Indigenous scholars and activists (Rose, 1996, 2009, 2011; Dudgeon and Bray, 2019). In this thesis I particularly draw on Deborah Bird Rose, a non-Indigenous anthropologist who lived and worked with Aboriginal communities across Australia for over three decades. With the help of her Aboriginal teachers, Rose (1996) explains Aboriginal connection to land through the Aboriginal English concept of 'country'. Country is a 'living entity with a yesterday, today and tomorrow, with a consciousness, and a will toward life' (Rose, 1996, p. 8). It comprises the biotic and a-biotic materials and processes within a geographical boundary, with which people are ontologically and ethically entangled, meaning 'there is no self-interest that concerns only the self' (Rose, 2011, p. 27) Epistemologically, Aboriginal local knowledge is owned by the people of a country. In *Nourishing Terrains*, Rose (1996) clarifies this point: 'Ownership of country and knowledge is manifested through rights to be asked' (p. 45). As Elder April Bright (1994) argues, interfering on another's country without for asking its people is a breach of law, and can cause serious damage to 'good country' relationships. By situating volunteer subjectivities in relation to colonial and Aboriginal conceptions of ownership, I problematize the process of building settler care-based relations to land. I highlight decolonial progress and flag areas that still require work, while remaining cognisant of the dangers of settler calls to innocence (Tuck and Yang, 2012).

This analysis is enriched through an appraisal of the impact of eco-disaster, in this case bushfire, on volunteers' environmental subjectivities. Investigating the power of Australian cultural narratives, Rigby (2015) argues that underlying colonial logics can resurface in times of disaster. In particular, the 'Aussie Battler' myth pitches the hardy colonial frontiersman against an unwieldy nature. Following the 'Black Saturday' bushfires in 2009, in which 173 people lost their lives, conservative media blamed the disaster on insufficient hazard-reduction burning, arguing that old-growth bush should be thoroughly scorched every winter. Rigby



argues that this narrative only gained public traction because the trauma of the fire had ‘stirred up an underlying, culturally conditioned ecophobia’ (p. 12). In contradistinction to this attitude, Deborah Bird Rose (1996) describes her Aboriginal teachers’ response to the ongoing disruption of care-based human-country relationships: ‘Damage to country hurts people. It hurts them emotionally and spiritually, and may also hurt them physically’ (p. 46). Of course, one’s reaction to eco-disaster is not culturally determined. Working with settler Australians, Albrecht (2005; Albrecht *et al.*, 2007) developed the concept of ‘solastalgia’ to refer to the emotional distress caused by local environmental change, demonstrating that settler Australians can build non-ecophobic affective relations to land as well.

I put Rigby, Rose and Albrecht into tension with one another to investigate how volunteers’ experience with fire influenced their relationship to their local environment. If volunteer subjectivities are to provide a pathway towards promoting durable care-based modes of connecting to country, they will have to be able to withstand repeated eco-catastrophe.

### 2.3. From Biopower to Geontopower

Having distinguished the forms of more-than-human care enacted by volunteers, and the subjective relations to land this care produces, I will examine CRPC and KICLA conservation as a mode of environmental governance. This allows for greater critical reflection on conservation decision-making as volunteers develop new forms of relating to and managing their environments. Such reflection will be vital for navigating ongoing and future environmental challenges. To this end, I enlist the conceptual assistance of biopolitics and geontologies.

Foucault explained the transformation of European modes of governance during the industrial revolution as a shift from a pre-modern sovereign power; the sovereign governs by ‘exercising his right to kill, or by refraining from killing’ (Foucault, 1990, p. 136), to disciplinary power and biopower – modern forms of regulation that govern life at the population level. While disciplinary power refers to the constraining of the population through behavioural nudges and correctional interventions (Taylor, 2012), biopower governs populations through the power to ‘foster life or disallow it to the point of death’ (Foucault, 1990, p. 138). The concepts of discipline and biopower have been extended to analyses of environmental governance (Luke, 1995; Lorimer and Driessen, 2013; Lorimer, 2015, 2017). Following this tradition, I explore volunteer conservation through the lens of biopower as volunteers attempt to govern their patch

to foster ‘valued life’ and degrade ‘unvalued life’. These findings are complemented by an appraisal of Povinelli’s (2016) thesis on geontopower.

In *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism*, Povinelli (2016) argues that undergirding the exercise of power – sovereign, bio, or otherwise – are geontologies and their political application: geontopower. Etymologically stemming from geos (non-life) and ontology (being, life), geontopower is a ‘power of differentiation and control’ (p. 21) that refers to the maintenance of a fundamental distinction between Life and Nonlife (see also TallBear, 2017). Rather than a direct governance through life and death (e.g., biopower), Geontologies are a ‘set of discourse, affects and tactics used in late liberalism to maintain or shape the coming relationship of the distinction between Life and Nonlife’ (p. 4). Povinelli argues that geontologies are most visible in the late-liberal settler governance of spaces and markets. Having spent years working with Aboriginal people and communities, she criticises settler governments and corporations that govern Indigenous places through the maintenance of a distinction between Life as biological organisms and Nonlife – the inert – as everything else. This ontological enclosure of Life-as-bios (biontology) erases Aboriginal conceptions of a living country, and the lively significance of various spaces and existents within country (see Rose, 1996, 2011). By maintaining this Western geontological distinction as axiomatic in the dominant settler population, Indigenous views are branded as ‘backwards’ and ‘false’, legitimising the destruction of, for example, sacred rock formations in the pursuit of extractive capitalism.

I use this theory to deepen my analysis of environmental conservation governance by identifying the geontological regimes maintained by CRPC and KICLA, as well as exploring threats to their maintenance. Povinelli (2016) provides analytical tools to help with this analysis, distinguishing three figures that are ‘diagnostic and symptomatic’ (p. 15) of the ‘trembling architectures’ (p. 16) of late liberal geontological governance. First, the Desert is a figure that represents the drive to maintain one’s distinction between Life and Nonlife. The Desert is a conceptual space that was once Life, and is now devoid of Life, yet can become Life again through human intervention. The Desert is encapsulated in the Carbon imaginary, the idea that carbon is the distinguishing feature for Life, and thus represents the desire to maintain ontology as biontology. Second, the Animist figure renders any geontological distinction meaningless by collapsing Nonlife into Life, recognising all existents as lively. Encapsulated in the Indigene imaginary, the Animist is expressed in certain Indigenous cosmologies, such as the Aboriginal concept of country (Rose, 1996, 2011), as well as in

material-semiotic ontologies found in academia (e.g. Law, 2008). The Desert and the Animist therefore pull in opposing geontological directions. Third, the Virus is the chaos that seeks to disrupt any existing geontological regime – Life and Nonlife become irrelevant terms because the Virus is not contained by either. The Virus, with its Terrorist imaginary, is an active antagonist to geontopower, it ‘copies, duplicates, and lies dormant even as it continually adjusts to, experiments with, and tests its circumstances’ (p. 19). In practice, the Virus is the target of governing action to prevent it from destroying the predominant geontological regime.

With these figures I deconstruct the geontological apparatus of CRPC and KICLA governance. I further reflect on the applicability of geontological critique to environmental conservation governance and offer ways that the theory can be tweaked in light of this case study. This analysis can help volunteer organisations make better conservation choices, as well as pre-empt shifts in their decision-making processes as environments change. This can facilitate a smoother, more impactful practical application of developing reflexive care-based settler relations to land.

### 3. Methodology

In this section I discuss the epistemology and methods of this thesis. I begin with a discussion of how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted research design development, including case and participant selection, before outlining data collection and analysis methods. This is followed by a discussion of researcher accountability, focusing on my solicitation of feedback on research findings from participants, as well as a reflexive appraisal of limitations of the study and my positionality as a researcher.

#### 3.1. Research Design in a Pandemic

Disrupting my original plan to conduct fieldwork on Kangaroo Island, the inability to travel and engage in participant observation due to the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a change in research design epistemology. The challenge was how to gain insights into the embodied affective, ethical and physical relations between volunteers and the natural environments they care through a digital medium (Longhurst, Ho and Johnston, 2008). The answer was to focus on narratives (Wiles, Rosenberg and Kearns, 2005). The stories told by participants convey the emotions and context of their volunteer work, shedding light on the more-than-human entanglements between volunteers and their environments

##### 3.1.1. Case Selection and Participant Recruitment

As Sayer (1992) notes, meaning in social science research is always context dependent. I therefore defined selection-criteria to ensure that participants are able to address the research questions. My recruitment criteria were as follows:

- I. Participants should be adults who are active regular volunteers in a community-led conservation group working in or near areas affected by fire.
- II. In order to understand how volunteer subjectivities are impacted by bushfire, participants should have been intimately familiar with their conservation site since before the relevant fire event.

To investigate short and long-term consequences of bushfire on human-nature relations, I sought to recruit volunteers impacted by both recent and historical fires. This was facilitated by the move online, as I was no longer beholden to one research location. I therefore recruited participants from two conservation groups: Cooleman Ridge Park Care (CRPC) in Canberra, site of the 2003 Canberra bushfires; and the Kangaroo Island Conservation Landowners

Association (KICLA) on Kangaroo Island in South Australia, the site of devastating fires during the 2019-20 bushfire season. As I had volunteered for CRPC for several months in 2020, gaining access was relatively straightforward; the group president helped me to locate participants that fit the selection criteria. Finding participants on Kangaroo Island posed a greater challenge. After emailing four conservation groups and receiving non-committal responses, the founders of KICLA agreed to be involved and act as gatekeepers. With the help of these contacts, I recruited 14 participants: 10 from CRPC and four from KICLA (See Table 1).

<b>Participant No.</b>	<b>Group</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age Range</b>	<b>Volunteer/Conservation Landowner For</b>
1	CRPC	F	61-70	12 years
2	CRPC	M	61-70	11 years
3	CRPC	M	71-80	15 years
4	CRPC	F	71-80	16 years
5	CRPC	F	51-60	<1 year
6	CRPC	M	41-50	<1 year
7	CRPC	M	61-70	2 years
8	CRPC	M	71-80	22 years
9	CRPC	M	71-80	4 years
10	CRPC	F	71-80	18 years
11	KICLA	F	51-60	11 years
12	KICLA	M	71-80	11 years
13	KICLA	M	61-70	12 years
14	KICLA	M	41-50	>10 years

*Table 1: Interview Participants*

### 3.2. Methods

For this project I conducted 11 online, semi-structured interviews with 14 participants through a combination of one-on-one and three-way interviews. Following a thematic and narrative analysis of interview transcripts, I presented my findings to six participants in an online focus group setting to hear and incorporate their feedback.

### 3.2.1. Semi-Structured Online Interviews

I chose semi-structured interviews as my main method of data ‘creation’ (Cope and Hay, 2021), a relational process in which the researcher plays a productive role in data production. Interviewing is a useful method of gaining insights into places, opinions and experiences, while allowing the researcher to learn what themes are most important and recalibrate the focus of the project accordingly (McDowell, 2010; Dunn, 2021). Furthermore, semi-structured interviews allowed conversation to flow naturally, following the most-interesting lines of inquiry (Longhurst, 2016). This was successful, even over video conferencing software Zoom.

Conducting the interviews via an online medium allowed me to conduct research with participants in multiple locations. Callegaro (2008) posits that synchronous online video interviewing ‘closely mimics face to face interviewing’ (p. 947), allowing the researcher to follow non-verbal cues. This produces data of comparable quality to in-person interviews (Deakin and Wakefield, 2014). I found that online interviews promoted ease of access, as participants felt relaxed talking from their own homes (Adams-Hutcheson and Longhurst, 2017). On an ethical level, online interviews allow for effective ongoing consent, as the participant is able to terminate the interview with the click of a button. However, the abrupt beginning of online calls meant that building rapport prior to commencing the interview was more difficult – especially in the two cases where my participants’ camera did not work (Weller, 2017). Apart from these isolated camera issues and one instance of moderate internet lag, the technology worked well.

Written consent was obtained from each participant via email prior to commencing the interview. Following Dunn (2021), for each interview I prepared a semi-structured schedule, comprising themes and questions tailored to the participant, based on information they had provided in pre-interview communications (see Appendix A for a generic interview schedule). As the interviews progressed, I adapted the basic interview framework by modifying, removing, or adding questions. Notably, I changed the wording of several questions to begin with ‘walk me through’, to elicit narrative responses.

As my primary source of data, I sought to ‘enrich’ (Dowling, Lloyd and Suchet-Pearson, 2016) my interviews by varying the interview format. Of the 14 participants, I interviewed eight individually in one-on-one interviews, while the remaining six were interviewed in pairs (two pairs from CRPC, one pair from KICLA). Through these three-way interviews I sought to foster discussion and contradiction between interviewees. This successfully provided rich data.

The average length of one-on-one interviews was 48 minutes, while three-way interviews lasted an average of 72 minutes. Finally, two interviews were also enhanced through visual methodologies – in one case a discussion of photographs of the participant’s conservation property shared prior to the interview; and in another, the participant’s use of the share-screen function in Zoom, displaying Google Maps as an aid when describing the geography of their conservation work on Kangaroo Island.

### 3.2.2. Thematic and Narrative Analysis

Recordings were transcribed and imported into NVivo. The transcription itself began the analytic process, I highlighted passages that jumped out at me, such as themes, outliers, commonalities and differences between participants and between the two conservation groups (Cope and Kurtz, 2016). In NVivo, I began coding the transcript into descriptive, then analytic categories (Belotto, 2018). As Cope and Kurtz (2016) and Given (2008) warn, this was a sporadic, messy, iterative process. I eventually organised the data under 129 different categories, many of which had between 10 and 20 transcript references. As I coded, I organised the categories into hierarchies, while also annotating certain passages with initial interpretations. The development of themes was both an inductive and deductive process. I began coding with broad themes in mind, based on pre-reading of more-than-human care literature. In developing themes, I followed Vaismoradi et al. (2016) in postponing a large portion of the literature review until after my data analysis, allowing themes to develop from the data itself. The theme of volunteer connection to country in settler Australia, for example, was raised through the analysis process itself.

While coding and identifying themes, I also conducted a narrative analysis of the data. I gained inspiration for this method from van Dooren’s (2014) *Flight Ways*, in which the author uses narrative as an engaging window into the more-than-human processes of extinction and care. Further, Wiles et al. (2005) recommend narrative analysis for researchers seeking to ‘interpret the ‘in place’ experiences of different individuals and groups, how they understand and attach meaning to situated experiences, and produce the places in which their experiences occur’ (p. 98). When I identified a narrative in the data, I saved it. Following initial coding, I revisited these narratives, breaking them down using Labov’s (1972) narrative analysis structure.<sup>4</sup> This allowed me to attend to volunteer’s own reflections on the meanings of their conservation work,

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<sup>4</sup> Labov (1972) suggests analysing narratives by breaking the story down into elements: abstract, orientation, complicating actions, evaluation, resolution, coda.

as well as gaining rich data on volunteers' experiences (Gibbs, 2014). Epistemologically, the narratives of the volunteers anchor the significant breadth of theory engaged with in this dissertation.

### 3.3. Researcher Accountability and Reciprocity

According to Longhurst (2016) – the personal connection created through interviews provides an opportunity to solicit feedback from participants during the study. Seeking to practice an ethic of reciprocity (Taylor, 2014), I offered participants the chance to respond to my analysis as part of the research process. Finding a time in which most participants were available, I conducted a focus group feedback session with 6 participants from Cooleman Ridge Park Care group. In this session I outlined my theories and facilitated discussion. This session was immensely helpful, leading to a significant refinement of my analysis. As only 6 out of 14 participants attended, following this session I drafted and shared a five-page summary of research questions, theories, and findings with all participants. I received several responses, one of which held extensive useful feedback.

The decision to maintain this productive relationship through the thesis process was driven by a strong desire to minimise the extractive nature of my research (England, 2006). Building on this, in an attempt to 'be useful' (Taylor, 2014) in a more profound way, I have organised to present my findings to the broader KICLA organisation (around 55 members), following the completion of the thesis. Furthermore, I will contribute several articles for the CRPC group newsletter on my research over the coming months.

### 3.4. Methodological Limitations and Researcher Positionality

The volunteers and landowners I interviewed are white Australians with the time and financial security to become involved in conservation volunteering. As a well-educated, white Australian male from an upper middle-class family, I also fit this privileged demographic description. My familiarity with this context, as well as my previous volunteering with CRPC, likely render me uncritical of certain perspectives that I take for granted (Haraway, 1988; Rose, 1997; Shapin, 1998). On the other hand, my prior knowledge of CRPC and its context led to rapid rapport building with interviewees and allowed me to spend more time discussing richer themes (Weller, 2017). From an ethical point of view, my closeness to CRPC demanded I walk a fine line between positional bias, critical analysis, and care for participants (England, 2006). I follow Halvorsen (2015) in maintaining that critical research from within is important for a



movement to learn and improve. In the interest of providing useful analysis for CRPC and KICLA volunteers, I do not shy away from offering critique.

Further, the narrow demography of both researcher and interviewees limits the generalisability of my findings. As participants are white, generally older, and economically secure, they are neither demographically nor economically representative of broader Australian society. Thus, my analysis on developing new settler Australian connections to land are based on findings from a small, socio-economically and geographically situated sample, and must be understood within these parameters (Haraway, 1988, 1991). Furthermore, the use of gatekeepers and snowball sampling to recruit volunteers necessarily introduces further selection bias, as gatekeepers approach members who they believe to be most suited to the research. Thus, I do not purport to represent all members of these groups, and sought feedback to best represent the perspectives of volunteers I did interview (Rose, 1997). Finally, although I analyse volunteer subjectivities in relation to literature on the historical and continuing Aboriginal connection to land, I did not interview representatives from local Aboriginal communities. This was due, in part, to this paper's specific focus on volunteer activities and perspectives, as well as the narrow scope necessitated by time constraints. I acknowledge this as a limitation of the paper, and I hope my interpretation of the relevant literature is fair and just. Despite these limitations, this paper nonetheless heeds calls to investigate conservation practitioners as affective, complex human subjects (Redford, 2011; Larsen, 2016; Kiik, 2019). Following Kiik (2019), only by going into qualitative detail can I attend to the affective lives, environmental worldviews and decision-making processes of conservation practitioners.

## 4. More-Than-Human Entanglements of Care

*‘Coming back completely covered in dust is perfectly okay’*

*(CRPC volunteer)*

In this section I lay the empirical groundwork for the following sections by addressing the first research question on how volunteers enact more-than-human care. Understanding how people care is the first step in developing new care-based modes of relating to and governing the land. Through the stories of volunteers and conservation landowners, care comes to be understood as a complex labour-intensive and affective mode of engagement. Furthermore, far from upholding an arbitrary or universalizing ethic, volunteers make situated, context-dependent decisions of deciding how to care for their patch.

### 4.1. Labour: Caring For

Labour, the physical maintenance of the cared-for subject (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017), is central to CRPC and KICLA activities. The willingness to engage in physical exertion was starkly present in all participant responses. When asked about the purpose of their organisation, nearly all CRPC volunteers responded through the lens of labour. The purpose is to turn up each week or month to engage in embodied labour – mostly weeding, but sometimes planting and monitoring – in order to promote the regeneration of native ecosystems.

This work is often physically strenuous. One participant told a story from early last year, following the end of the last drought: ‘A lot of the dams were empty, and all of a sudden, they were overflowing. They were clogged up with fleabane, with other exotics. So, one of the jobs we did early last year was pull out a lot of fleabane from the dams around the place’ (Participant 9). With further prompting, the participant explained that this involved getting into the muddy dam (a small waterhole) and spending ‘a couple of eight-hour days ripping them out’ (Participant 9). Similarly, KICLA members spend weeks at a time planting trees from dawn until dusk during the Autumn planting season. While some participants enjoy this physical aspect – ‘one of the attractions is the hard work; it’s better than going to the gym’ (Participant 9) – others find the physicality challenging. One long-term ParkCarer recounted how they had injured themselves through the use of heavy tools: ‘[when I started] I wasn’t particularly in good shape. I nearly bugged myself completely – to use a good Australianism – doing too much heavy work with a mattock’ (Participant 4). Not only is the work demanding, but the physical geography of the land presents its own challenges. Recounting the difficulties of controlling

woody weeds such as briar rose, pyracantha and hawthorn, one ParkCarer exclaimed that these species ‘are in areas which are very difficult to get to - and the Ridge is a very difficult place, it's a very dangerous place, actually - physically’ (Participant 8).

Responding to Parreñas’ (2018) critique of the fetishization of care labour, these findings indicate that conservation volunteering involves more physical risk than one might imagine. Furthermore, references to ‘ripping’ weeds out of the ground and the dangerous geography of the conservation site indicate the relational violence-care that care labour entails (van Dooren, 2014). Despite this, volunteers continue to carry out ‘the concrete work of maintenance’ (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, p. 5), often well into their retirement. I argue that the drive to continue to commit oneself labour is due to a strong affective element of care.

#### 4.2. Affect: Caring About

Caring for one’s patch is an intensely affective experience. Following McLauchlan’s (2019) work on the eros of volunteer conservation, I argue that volunteers become not only physically, but emotionally entangled with their patch. This ‘becoming with’ (Haraway, 2008) creates strong relational bonds, providing an emotional incentive for volunteers to return.

My findings support McLauchlan’s (2019) argument that, over time, volunteers learn to ‘want like’ the cared-for flora and fauna on their patch, attuning their care to respond to the needs of these nonhumans. Through their embodied labour, they learn to recognise different species and how they live, gaining immense pleasure from spotting and, importantly, understanding their behaviours. One ParkCarer tells the story of discovering a legless lizard on the Ridge: ‘I turn over a stone to try and get out a weed, and under it there’s a pink tailed worm lizard – OHH! (*exclamation of joy*) And I know what it is! (*excitedly*) And the ants that they live with – because the lizards cohabit with ants...’ (Participant 4). This and many other examples demonstrate the ‘deeply felt bodily satisfaction and pleasure’ (McLauchlan, 2019, p. 514) experienced by volunteers, as well as their localised ecosystems knowledge. With this knowledge CRPC and KICLA volunteers try to create spaces that cared-for flora and fauna can thrive in. One KICLA member talked of their joy seeing echidnas visit small baths they had created to attract these creatures (see Figure 4). These affective encounters help volunteers maintain the motivation to care for their patch (McLauchlan, 2019).



*Figure 4: An echidna stops for a drink. Source: Peter Hastwell.*

Volunteering for CRPC in mid-2020, I experienced the practical importance of sensory affect when I was invited to join an experienced volunteer on their monthly water quality monitoring of two dams on the Ridge. Aside from checking turbidity, pH, dissolved oxygen, and other measurements, part of the job was to record any fauna encountered around the dam. The experienced volunteer just listened, identifying with ease the calls of several species of bird and frog. In our interview, I asked how they had learned to recognise these sounds. As well as learning from recordings, they explained that ‘you’re sort of there, just learning various things. And you hear this call, and you think: Oh, that’s a corella’ (Participant 3). Through years of experience, the volunteer had ‘learned to be affected’ by these animal calls (Lorimer, 2015, p. 35), strengthening their relationship with the land, as well as improving the effectiveness of the care they provide.

The strength of this relationship raises another key observation: the mutual nature of more-than-human care. During the feedback focus group, participants were adamant that in caring for their patch, volunteers feel cared-for in return. Although this connection tends to strengthen over time, the positive impact can be immediate. One volunteer illustrated this with the story

of a woman who, after suffering a personal trauma, joined a ParkCare session for the first time: ‘And at the end of her session on the Ridge, I think with a couple of the older women ... the total transformation of that woman's face. That brings tears to my eyes now’ (Participant 4). Analysing this story as a matter of care (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017), the interactions between this person, the other volunteers and the aesthetic beauty and vitality of Cooleman Ridge produced an entanglement out of which flowed solace. Indeed, many participants stated that spending time caring for their patch was beneficial for their mental health.

However, as Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) argues, the relational nature of care means that carers can be negatively affected when the cared-for-subject is harmed, for instance by fire. A KICLA landowner shares their emotional struggle after the 2019-20 fires: ‘I was really traumatised by the fires... I think it was just a loss of wildlife. Just, you know, millions and millions and millions of animals. Yeah, I found that really hard’ (Participant 11). Similarly, many CRPC volunteers were impacted by both the 2003 and 2019-20 fires. Here’s one volunteer speaking of the aftermath of the 2020 fire in Namadgi National Park, just south of Canberra: ‘There are some areas that really are struggling to recover. So that's very sad. It's very sad. You know, what species we've lost, particularly, you know, animals and insects’ (Participant 1). However, the affective connection to one’s patch meant that the solace could also be found in the bush. ‘I called it bush immersion therapy – I would just go and sit in unburned bush and just breathe, and I found it really helpful’ (Participant 11). Others found solace in engaging in volunteer activities, such as weeding exotic species regrowth, aiding both native species and themselves in the process of post-fire recovery.

Volunteers come to truly love their patch, the basis upon which a committed caring relationship is formed. The broader critical implications of this connection to land are further explored in section 4.2. For now, affect is a key reason why people view their labour with satisfaction, rather than as a chore, and choose to invest time and energy, over so many years, in the practice of more-than-human care. Thus, allowing people greater opportunity to engage with their local natural environments, if only recreationally at first, can help foster these care-based more-than-human relations. However, these relations must be built on a comprehensive yet nuanced ethic of care.

#### 4.3. Ethics: Deciding How to Care

This chapter has established the roles of labour and affect in entangling CRPC and KICLA volunteers in care-based relationships with their local environments. For these efforts to pull



in the right direction, volunteers must base their activities on an ethic of care that supports their goals. Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) argues that caregiving always involves trade-offs, as caring for one world means not caring for others. I do not seek to evaluate whether volunteers' ethical decisions are correct or incorrect. Instead, I seek to identify and unpack the ethical trade-offs and level of nuance involved in CRPC and KICLA care. This is important as understanding how care decisions are made can be leveraged to strengthen settler care-based connections to land.

The ethic upon which both CRPC and KICLA engage in conservation can be broadly defined as the promotion of healthy native ecosystems, mostly through the attempted eradication of species labelled 'invasive'. This is achieved through the manual weeding – 'chopping them out' (Participant 7) with hand tools, as well as the use of herbicides. On Kangaroo Island, KICLA members also trap and destroy feral predators, in particular cats, to protect native marsupials (see Figure 5). Drawing on van Dooren (2014) and Rose (2011), this raises several ethical questions regarding how 'invasive' is defined, as well as the violence-care paradox of killing in order to save.



*Figure 5: A feral cat enters a trap on Kangaroo Island. Source: Peter Hastwell.*

According to van Dooren (2014), violent trade-offs are inevitable when caring in difficult conservation situations. The cared-for spaces in this dissertation have a long and ongoing history settler-colonial violence: the loss of Indigenous land management regimes (in the CRPC case), the advent of European grazing and agriculture, the proliferation of invasive non-native species and the increasing prevalence of uncontrolled bushfires (Plumwood, 2002; Rose, 2011; Rigby, 2015). CRPC and KICLA volunteers walk a fine ethical line between the violence already committed through settler-colonialism, the violence of care, and the potential future violence of inaction. Entanglements of decision-making are shaped by past violence, and no option avoids violence (Giraud, 2019). In this contentious space, they take a strong position against the proliferation of non-native plants and animals, deciding that attempting to reduce the ongoing environmental impact of colonialism and promote native species morally outweighs the violence of killing invasive species. This ethical position is visible in this comment made by a CRPC volunteer:

*‘All of Canberra was pastoral country, you know, sheep country – all of the areas basically have had that impact of white settlement and the degradation that has come to natural grassland systems and woodlands. So, I think we would all see our job as restoring – trying to restore [native ecosystems]’ (Participant 10).*

This is particularly interesting given that no participant believes that the eradication of exotic species is practically possible, even locally. One ParkCarer mentioned that if they managed to restore the ridge to 50-60% native vegetation, ‘you’d be doing very well’ (Participant 8). This indicates that care is not undertaken to completely transform the Australian landscape, but to achieve modest, localised long-term goals. Possibly the symbolic act of ongoing care, and the benefits this provides to the carer, are important ethical goals themselves. While the implications of this are beyond the scope of this dissertation, this phenomenon merits further research (see Nixon, 2011; Pottinger, 2017; Liboiron, Tironi and Calvillo, 2018). However, even with modest objectives, this care involves significant violence – an issue which I explore further.

As volunteers commit violence-care through the removal of invasive species, the criteria through which ‘invasive’ is identified become ethically important. Rose (2011) argues that genocidal violence, even against non-human others, is defined by taking life based on what a being is, rather than what it does. Based on the findings so far, one may believe that volunteers make these decisions through a universalised ‘native versus exotic’ lens, where exotic species

are to be categorically eradicated. If this were so, it could fall under Rose's definition of more-than-human genocide. However, through further analysis it becomes clear that identifying invasive species is context specific and involves multiple criteria. Many of these are present in the following story about the decision to remove the Cootamundra wattle from Cooleman Ridge:

*'One of the native things that get out of control is the Cootamundra wattle ... it infests areas that bugger-up the ecosystem under trees because they just sort of form scrubbed patches of pure Cootamundra wattle. They're short lived and highly combustible, so you end up destroying your old trees, because you have not managed the understory. The understory is incredibly important to have enough variety of habitat for a variety of animals'* (Participant 3).

This disrupts the native-exotic dichotomy in several ways. First, this wattle is native to Australia, but not to the immediate Canberra area, blurring the boundaries of plant indigeneity. Rather than universally labelling all Australian plants as acceptable, this designation is based on its function in the ecosystem – the wattle dominates and homogenises the understory ecosystem – as well as the level of fire risk it poses. At the same time, certain non-native plants are sometimes encouraged if they provide specific animal habitats, especially for birds. Indeed, when asked to define 'invasive species', several participants responded with variations on the age-old adage: 'A weed is any plant in the wrong place', with 'wrong place' defined by how the species behaves locally. This decision is never absolute or uncontested, but a compromise between group leadership, local government directives and individual volunteers on the ground. Moreover, deciding what species to target is further confounded by practical, day-to-day considerations. For instance, the difficulty of identifying certain invasive species, especially for newer volunteers, or how physically accessible a patch of weeds is. Therefore, while exotic species are indeed viewed as generally unwanted, and local native species generally welcome, this does not do justice to the complexity of the decision-making involved.

Therefore, this violence-based care does not appear to have been taken unreflexively or with a goal towards more-than-human genocide, as Rose (2011) warned. However, despite the nuance involved in this decision-making process, volunteers still make a dichotomous decision with each plant or animal they encounter – to kill or to nurture. This returns us to Puig de la Bellacasa's (2017) contention that care is the affective, embodied maintenance of the cared-for subject that people manage to achieve under trying circumstances. It will always involve trade-



offs and will never be perfect. As van Dooren (2014) argues, each person's story of environmental decline is distinct. Hence, I argue that ParkCarers and KICLA landowners do the best they can, based on the information and capacities they possess. Through this, each volunteer becomes physically, affectively and ethically entangled with their patch. Despite the violence, these care-based entanglements are important to understand because they give rise to strong feelings of responsibility over the flourishing of local environments. I now turn to an appraisal of these settler-land relations.

## 5. Connection to Country as a Settler Conservation Volunteer

*‘We are the watchers on the hillside, you know, we see things happen.’*

*(CRPC Volunteer)*

In the previous section I established that volunteers develop strong physical, affective, and ethically nuanced care-based relations to their local environments. I now address the second research question by situating these relations within Australia’s settler-colonial context. There are two important contextual differences between CRPC and KICLA for this section. First, while CRPC volunteers care for a public nature reserve, KICLA members legally own their conservation properties, potentially influencing their feelings of ownership. Second, while Cooleman Ridge lies in Ngunnawal/Ngarigo Country, some of whose people continue to live in Canberra, after millennia of Aboriginal habitation, Kangaroo Island’s First Nations people vacated the Island around 4000 years before the arrival of European settlers. This influence how CRPC and KICLA manage the land and their respective ability to collaborate with Aboriginal communities.

I argue that while volunteer connection to land reproduces certain settler-colonial logics, they do not enact possessive colonial modes of ownership (Moreton-Robinson, 2015; Bosworth, 2021). Instead, through their engagement volunteers develop a relational connection characterised by a responsibility to care for the land, as well as a ‘right to be asked’ (Rose, 1996, p. 45) grounded in embodied local knowledge. These subjectivities are reinforced by the trauma of bushfire, in opposition to ecophobic settler-colonial narratives (Rigby, 2015). Therefore, with greater assistance from First Nations communities and leaders, volunteers may offer a pathway towards developing more harmonious relations to land for settler Australians.

### 5.1. Questioning Settler Subjectivities of Ownership

During the interviews I was struck by the recurrent use of the term ‘ownership’ by CRPC volunteers when referring to Cooleman Ridge. Exploring this further, these feelings of ownership are entangled with CRPC’s conservation strategy, the Bradley method (Bradley, 1971). Rather than engaging in expensive, large-scale plantings, this method involves designating ‘caretaker patches, where a group or person who lives nearby could take on that patch, and care for it’ (Participant 10). Each volunteer chooses a small section which they return to regularly, removing new weeds while slowly expanding the area. This allows space for native flora to establish themselves. I argue that this strategy fosters a unique sense of

ownership as individual volunteers develop strong affective connections to their patch. The longer one keeps returning to the same place, the stronger this relation becomes (see Figure 6). Closer analysis of the resulting sense of ownership reveals tensions between the ongoing enactment of settler-colonial logics and the development of new care-based connections to land.



*Figure 6: Fencepost Hill on Coleman Ridge is weeded weekly. Source: Jenny Horsfield.*

These tensions are present, for example, in conflicting visions of volunteers' ontological position in nature. The ownership promoted through the Bradley method relies on an assumption that volunteers have the right, even the responsibility, attempt to fundamentally change the ecosystem on one's patch through the eradication of unwanted species. This resonates with a fundamental tenet of European colonialism, in which settlers feel entitled to transform occupied land to conform to their vision of a productive environment (Cronon, 1996; Plumwood, 1998, 2002; Adams and Mulligan, 2003). Moreover, as Rose (1996) argues, the conception of conservation through eradication is a modern invention that does not cohere with traditional Aboriginal conceptions of country. In their written feedback, one KICLA member posited that Aboriginal attitudes to pest eradication may have changed since colonisation, with

the arrival of invasive species. While this is undoubtedly true for some, Rose (1996, p. 13) maintains that Aboriginal councils rarely, if ever, call for species eradication. Rather, they call for promoting the health of the ecosystem as a whole. Thus, from this perspective, volunteers reproduce a colonial vision of land management. However, CRPC and KICLA volunteer subjectivities simultaneously disrupt the colonial conception of human domination over nature (Plumwood, 2002). For example, participants described gaining solace in experiencing their patch as timeless and ancient, decentring themselves in comparison to the land's longevity. Moreover, a shared value that unites KICLA members is that they 'enjoy just being the non-dominant species in a very low population density of humans... that's the preferred way to be' (Participant 11). Although participants feel decentred in this landscape, they are simultaneously trying to manage and shape them. Therefore, while volunteer subjectivities reflect a desire to coexist with these natures, they still reproduce a colonial logic of human control.

These conflicting logics are further revealed by the extent to which volunteers seek sole possession over their patch (Moreton-Robinson, 2015). It is important to mention that ParkCare has not sought sustained input from local Aboriginal groups, such as the United Ngunnawal Elders Council, to collaborate on caring for the ridge. Drawing on Bosworth (2021), this may be symptomatic of the settler tendency to fail to pursue productive allyship with Indigenous peoples. While I do not know whether such collaboration would be desired by Canberra's Aboriginal community, several interviewees agree that this would be worth investigating. As yet, however, this possibility has largely been off the CRPC radar. Contra to this finding, ParkCarers delight in sharing the Ridge with others. For instance, volunteers were happy to see more Canberra residents on the Ridge during COVID-19 lockdowns. The more time people spend in nature reserves, one volunteer argued, the more 'they'll value them and they'll support government moves to value them' (Participant 10). Moreover, volunteers find joy in sharing their knowledge and passion with newcomers. 'I love it when people come up and say, "wow... I didn't know this was out here"'. And I tell them about it and say, if you go along there, you'll see so and so' (Participant 2). Thus, while CRPC has not sought specific collaboration with the local Aboriginal community, neither do they desire exclusive possession of the Ridge. They take pride in sharing the Ridge other people, encouraging others to 'own' it as well.

These findings demonstrate the presence of hybrid subjectivities that express both colonial and non-possessive modes of relating to land they describe as 'owning'. As this evidence is inconclusive, these tensions are further analysed through the lens of knowledge.

## 5.2. Knowing Country and the Right to be Asked

Rose (1996) underlines the centrality and sanctity of embodied local knowledge in Aboriginal modes of relating to country. I argue that volunteer connection to their patch emulates this phenomenon to a certain extent. For new volunteers, this begins with learning from more experienced members, before choosing or being given a patch to ‘own’ and care for. When a volunteer takes over a patch, they continue to learn how to care for it through embodied intellectual interaction. For instance, plant identification is often an intimate sensory experience: ‘You basically have to put it right up to your face’ (Participant 9) to identify certain species. These interactions result in an increased sense of devotion to one’s patch over time. As one ParkCarer summarised: ‘Once you work there for a while, and you get so familiar with it, because you don’t know every tree, obviously, but it’s very familiar to you. You do have that sense of ownership’ (Participant 1). As a result of this familiarity, volunteers learn to provide better more-than-human care. For example, CRPC used to expend a lot of resources on tree planting. After experiencing low survival rates over several years, the group made an evidence-based decision to adopt the patch-based Bradley method. Thus, ‘ownership’ in this case refers to an affective connection to one’s patch developed through years of care-based interaction, characterised by highly localised, detailed ecosystems knowledge.

CRPC ownership of Cooleman Ridge often manifests in volunteers’ displeasure when other groups, namely local government actors, interfere with the ecosystems on the Ridge. The range of grievances is broad, from the building of rainwater infrastructure to the widening of walking paths. This obverse reaction provides nuanced insight into volunteer subjectivities of ownership in relation to Bosworth’s (2021) and Rose’s (1996) work. In Bosworth (2021), settler landowners felt violated by State and corporate incursion, demanding their rights to exclusive property ownership be respected. At first glance, the ParkCarers’ reaction appears to echo this sentiment – that when threatened by these incursions, they seek official affirmation of their emotional relationship to the land. However, the findings of this study appear to more closely align with Rose’s (1996) explanation of the ‘right to be asked’ in Aboriginal law. Rose explains that Aboriginal knowledge of country constitutes intellectual property, which must be respected by other groups. Similarly, nobody understands Cooleman Ridge ecology as intimately or thoroughly as CRPC volunteers. I argue that it is this local knowledge, not an abstract sense of entitlement, that volunteers believe ought to be respected. This is justified, as failing to ask can lead to severe consequences. For example, several volunteers spoke of a



controlled burn undertaken on the ridge by the local government Parks and Conservation Service:

*‘Despite them saying that they were going to look after everything and not burn a few areas that I thought were important not to burn, those were inadvertently burnt. And I was really very, very cross. So yes, that really impacts on you because it wasn't just that they burned it, it was the fact that they'd really ignored our expertise and our volunteering, that they had diminished it.’ (Participant 1)*

This volunteer’s primary frustration was not that the burn had been conducted, but that the authorities had not respected CRPC’s ownership of local knowledge, leading to the destruction of important areas. This story closely resembles an example provided by Elder April Bright, who described the pain felt when a neighbouring Aboriginal community burned on her country without permission, destroying a vital turtle habitat (Bright, 1994; Rose, 1996). Thus, while CRPC volunteers feel they ‘own’ the Ridge, the underlying subjectivity is shaped by the embodied development of local ecosystem knowledge (see also Sletto, 2005), with the primary goal of caring for their patch. As a tentative response to the second research question, I therefore argue that volunteers embody a potential pathway toward relating to land in a communal, care-based anti-colonial way. I do so tentatively because the question remains whether a settler connection to country can ever be truly anti-colonial – whether claiming such a relationship only serves to legitimise ongoing settler presence (Tuck and Yang, 2012). I therefore iterate that engaging with local Indigenous communities is key to achieving as-decolonial-as-possible modes of being in and knowing country.

As KICLA members legally own their conservation properties, their ‘right to be asked’ is rarely, if ever, violated. I therefore developed this argument in the CRPC context. However, KICLA members demonstrate the same kind of non-possessive modes of knowledge-based land custodianship. To literally trial this hypothesis by fire, I now turn to Kangaroo Island to investigate whether these subjectivities remain intact in the face of eco-catastrophe.

### 5.3. Caring After Catastrophe: The Kangaroo Island Bushfires

In late December 2019 and early January 2020, devastating fires burnt across half of Kangaroo Island. While all of the Island’s 4,500 residents were emotionally impacted by the experience, people’s reaction towards the remaining unburnt bushland differed. KICLA members distinguished themselves in horrified opposition to the ecocidal response of some sections of

Island society. In one story, several farmers pressured the Parks and Conservation Service to bulldoze a fire break around an oasis of unburnt bush in a heavily affected area:

*‘You just had a massive devastating fire go through the whole area - it's got the biggest fire break around it that's ever going to happen. And they went in and chained<sup>5</sup> this unburnt bush and it's just, it's just insanity, for the few remaining animals and stuff that we've got left that had survived out there - they will just be so reliant on all the resources that's coming from that area’* (Participant 14).

This ecophobic reaction demonstrates how people can turn inward towards protecting themselves and their own interests in the face of environmental threat, substantiating Rigby's (2015) warning that the ‘Aussie Battler’ colonial frontiersman narrative rises to the surface of settler culture in the wake of ecological disaster. Furthermore, drawing on Bosworth (2021), the desire to bulldoze some of the few remaining patches of unburnt bush demonstrates that the settler logic of protecting oneself and one's land against nature extends beyond an economic calculation. In the aftermath of this trauma, they doubled-down on a protectionist, even vengeful response against a perceived nature-as-enemy (see also Plumwood, 1998). The narrator of this story summarised the prevailing community mood: ‘I think people just want to see bush getting flattened’ (Participant 14).

In contradistinction to this reaction, the KICLA landowners I interviewed responded to the fires with feelings of sadness and more-than-human care. Participants admitted that they were deeply emotionally affected by the fires. One participant even mentioned Albrecht's (2005; 2007) concept of solastalgia by name, in relation to their emotional reaction to the fire. For this participant, the destruction of bushland and wildlife caused by the fire was traumatic. However, it was the aforementioned community reaction against the remaining unburnt bush that, ‘pushed me into feeling an absolute despair, feeling of a loss, even though I'm still in the same environment’ (Participant 13). The more-than-human compassion felt by all interviewed KICLA landowners indicates the presence of an environmental subjectivity that disrupts Rigby's (2015) ‘Aussie Battler’ narrative. Rather than seeking to gain vengeance against nature, they sought to care for the ecosystems that remained. While these participants were not harmed physically by the fire, they were definitely harmed emotionally and, in some way, spiritually (Rose, 1996).

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<sup>5</sup> ‘Chaining’ refers to the felling of trees with a tracked vehicle and chain.

It is important to note that I only interviewed four KICLA landowners out of a total membership of 55. Therefore, it is impossible to extrapolate these findings to all conservation property owners on Kangaroo Island. I was told that several landowners who had been directly affected were still struggling, and had understandably stepped back from KICLA engagement to focus on rebuilding their livelihoods. It is very important to respect the personal trauma caused by such events, especially when providing critique as a researcher (England, 2006). Thus, my interpretation must be considered in relation to the small sample from which they arise. Despite this limitation, the mindsets of KICLA landowners stories demonstrate that some settlers have learned to ‘dance with disaster’ (Rigby, 2015); eco-catastrophe can expand, rather than degrade, subjectivities of connection to land grounded in more-than-human care. This is a promising finding in relation to the aim of this dissertation.

This section sought to determine what volunteers’ entanglements of more-than-human care could mean in relation to developing harmonious modes of connecting to country in settler Australia. I found that while volunteer subjectivities retain a colonial sensibility to fundamentally transform ecosystems through the eradication of unwanted species, volunteers and their patches are deeply entangled in embodied local knowledge and care-based ownership relations, as well as a desire to share these relations with other people. These subjectivities were only strengthened by the trauma of bushfire, further distancing volunteers from colonial logics of exclusive possession. As subjectivities are constantly brought into being (McGushin, 2012), the volunteers will continue to develop their relational connections to country. These findings represent only a snapshot into the ongoing production of novel settler care-based relations to land. While these findings show progress away from colonial possessive modes of ownership (Moreton-Robinson, 2015; Bosworth, 2021), there is still work to be done to develop durable relational, yet human-decentred settler conservation ontologies (Tuck and Yang, 2012); in particular, seeking allyship and mutual learning with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (Escobar, 2020). Promoting these subjectivities is important, not only for supporting vital more-than-human care in an era of environmental chaos and in building durable settler-Indigenous partnerships, but as a pathway to more reflexive modes of environmental governance.



## 6. Shifting Modes of Geontological Governance

*'I see a shift coming in the value sets of our western economies, about the value of nature and what nature is.'*

*(KICLA landowner)*

This final analysis chapter draws on the previous two chapters to examine volunteer activities as an exercise of environmental biopower and geontopower (Povinelli 2016). I begin with a biopolitical reading of the volunteer conservation ethic of care discussed in chapter 4.3., before discussing how this mode of governance is contingent on and facilitated by geontological regimes. With the assistance of the three figures of geontology, I then explore challenges to the maintenance of this regime. Finally, I offer a modification to Povinelli's theory to better reflect my findings on volunteer conservation governance, before discussing the implications of this analysis for volunteer conservation decision-making.

### 6.1. The Geontological Basis for Conservation Biopolitics

Povinelli (2016) argues that governance involves the exercise of multiple forms of power. In the case of CRPC and KICLA, the biopolitical regime manages the distinction between valued and unvalued life at the population, or, in this case, landscape level (see Lorimer, 2015). Volunteers enact this biopower through their activities, nurturing or discouraging lively non-human assemblages according to these distinctions. This exercise of biopower is supported by other forms of Foucauldian power. Disciplinary power over volunteers serves to normalise these biopolitical distinctions, such as government directives on noxious weeds and plant identification knowledge-sharing between volunteers. Meanwhile, sovereign power, 'to take life or let live' (Foucault, 1990, p. 136), is exercised through the primary methods of achieving the groups' biopolitical goals – weeding and, in some cases, trapping (see Lorimer and Driessen, 2013). Building on the findings in chapter 4.3 on the ethics of care, the biopolitical boundaries between valued and unvalued life are locally situated and dynamic, shifting based on multiple factors such as ecosystem function, level of fire danger and the ability of volunteers to engage with them.

Further developing Povinelli's (2016) theory, I argue that guiding this exercise of biopower, simultaneously forcing and constraining the surface-level shifts to CRPC's and KICLA's biopolitical decision-making, is a constitutional geontopower. I argue that this geontopower is

built on a fundamental distinction between Life – conceptualised as some version of a healthy native ecosystem, and Nonlife – conceptualised as the absence of such an ecosystem. This conception of Nonlife refers not only to biological existent like weeds, but any existent that degrades the flourishing of Life, such as drought, mismanagement of the space, and so on. An example using Povinelli’s figure of the Desert will help to clarify my argument. In a CRPC volunteer’s exercise of geontopower, the Desert is the fear that Cooleman Ridge will become devoid of native vegetation and wildlife, becoming a homogenized, weed-covered space (Nonlife). This weedy Ridge potentiality is not akin to death, but rather the absence of a native ecosystem – Nonlife. Currently neither completely Life nor Nonlife, the Desert is the belief that with the right technological intervention – the labour of ParkCarers – the Ridge can be made to flourish with Life again.

While a (weedy or otherwise) landscape devoid of native biota is coded as Nonlife, the invasive species embodies the geontological figure of the Virus. The invasive species disrupts, feeds off and displaces Life. In doing so, it disrupts the geontological distinction between ‘healthy native ecosystem’ (Life) and its absence (Nonlife) by creating new carbon-based assemblages. Invasive species therefore attract severe repression from volunteers. For example, imagine the first ParkCare volunteer to code a Cootamundra wattle as an invasive species. Upon seeing the wattle’s dominating, homogenising behaviour, as well as the fire danger it poses, this ParkCarer changed their personal biopolitical categorisation of the wattle from ‘valued life’ to ‘unvalued life’, not only because it serves to proliferate Nonlife through the destruction of habitat, but also because of the threat the wattle poses to CRPC’s geontological distinction between Life and Nonlife, as it is both native and invasive. Seeking to maintain this distinction, and to promote species coded as contributing to Life, the ParkCarer proceeds to pull out or poison the wattle. The geontopolitics informs the biopolitics, which is exercised through sovereign power.

According to this reasoning, biopolitical decisions categorise species into valued and unvalued life, in accordance with how they conform to this geontopolitical distinction. I argue that occasionally, larger events occur where whole geontological regimes change, creating a paradigm shift that immediately upends the biopolitical management of a landscape. This occurred, for example, when Cooleman Ridge ceased to be grazing country, and became a nature park in the 1980s. One ParkCarer tells of the grasses encouraged by the previous farmer:

*‘He was following what were the practices then, you tried to improve the pasture. So, he aerial seeded with Phalaris and Clover, cattle like it. ... We were left with the remnant of that.’ (Participant 10)*

For the farmer, and much of the wider Australian population at the time, Life was defined in accordance with European farming practices, and the potential economic productivity of the land. The biopolitical decisions concerning which species to foster were shaped by an underlying distinction between economically productive fodder (Life) and the absence of such fodder (Nonlife). When CRPC was formed in 1991, the governance of life and death they pursued was informed by a vastly different geontology. Hence, ParkCarers found themselves trying to eradicate all the grasses that had been previously encouraged. One could argue that this only represents a biopolitical shift, as the definition of ‘valued life’ and ‘unvalued life’ at the population level changed. However, there is a deeper causal distinction between the category of desired assemblage, in opposition to its absence, that I argue is better described as geontological. It is fundamental dichotomous distinction of the world, maintained by a ‘set of discourses, affects and tactics’ (Povinelli, 2016, p. 4), which inform the biopolitical governance of the space. Maintaining this distinction, however, can be difficult.

## 6.2. Threats to the Geontological Regime

Povinelli (2016) argues that the geontological regime of settler late-liberal governance is under threat from the destructive forces of the Anthropocene. With assistance from the three figures of geontology, I argue that the continued maintenance of CRPC and KICLA’s Life-Nonlife distinction are rendered more difficult by ever-intensifying socio-environmental crises. Most importantly, bushfire disrupts this boundary in multiple ways. As the Virus, fire itself embodies many lively qualities, yet sustains itself by destroying life. It consumes both native and invasive species with impunity, revealing them to be made from the same combustible elements. This disrupts the native-invasive boundary, while promoting a traditional Western Carbon imaginary. A CRPC volunteer describes their bittersweet reaction to the first regrowth following the 2003 fires:

*‘It certainly made me feel a lot better ... it’s really heartening to see the little shoots growing out, you know, the epicormic growth, **and even the weeds growing probably.** It all just started to go green. And it’s gorgeous, but very, very sad actually’ (Participant 1, emphasis added).*

The newfound affective acceptance of weeds is a boundary shift not just at the biopolitical level, but more fundamentally at the geontological level because it represents a deeper dichotomy of the forms of being that are (un)desired. ParkCare efforts to reduce fire risk could be seen not only as a move to protect native biota and nearby dwellings, but also to suppress this challenge to the Life-Nonlife divide.

Soil erosion is another key disruptive force. As several participants mentioned, a severe failure of settler land management regimes has been the loss of topsoil. This is especially the case in the aftermath of a fire. Here is a volunteer explaining one erosion control strategy:

*‘One of the things we’re doing with weeds is to use them to hold the remaining soil and make the place less subject to erosion, which is one of the worst things really, for the transformation of landscape’ (Participant 4).*

Facing catastrophic erosion, weeds are encouraged to stop soil washing away in heavy rain. However, light rain is required to help plants regrow. Thus, fire further redraws the geontological boundary to include both soil and weeds as Life, while water becomes an agential force that can be a threat to Life, depending on how it falls. Here one finds not only the Virus, but also the Animist – all biota, including weeds, as well as non-biological materials that allow biota to flourish, are collapsed into Life (see Figure 7). Fire therefore throws the underlying geontopolitical regimes, and the resulting biopolitical decision-making, into chaos.



*Figure 7: Bushfire smoke envelopes Coleman Ridge in early 2020. Source: Linda Spinaze.*

While fire initially disrupts the ‘native ecosystem’ – ‘absence thereof’ distinction, it also produces a literal desert, which reembodies a figurative geontological Desert as plants regrow. Rigby (2007) identified that the radical hospitality shown to animals during the Canberra bushfires was followed by a re-establishment of human-animal dualism. Similarly, while volunteers’ geontological regime is disrupted by fire, it is re-established once species start to regrow. One’s patch again becomes a space upon which a native ecosystem can be made to flourish if managed effectively, although fire renders this more difficult. For example, on Kangaroo Island, the 2019-20 fires burnt through large areas of Tasmanian blue gum (*eucalyptus globulus*) plantation. As this species reproduces through fire, the blue gum regrowth quickly became invasive across parts of the Island: ‘They’re growing at an incredible rate, they’re already four meters high after just over a year, so massive amounts of money spent to pull them all out’ (Participant 11). KICLA members spend a lot of time trying to remove them, due to their threat to the regrowth of native ecosystems. CRPC volunteers reported similar transitions back to previous biopolitical distinctions once they could distinguish between regrowing plants and the threat of erosion had reduced.

Finally, I want to discuss the threat posed by competing geontological claims to legitimacy. While KICLA members have significant control over the management of their land, CRPC is one of several governing stakeholders on Cooleman Ridge. I argue that these groups' conflicting biopolitical visions – how they should govern life on the Ridge – are at least partly caused by divergent geontologies. To make this claim, I develop an expansive definition of Life and Nonlife. Essentially, stakeholders hold differing underlying conceptions of what Life and Nonlife means in relation to the Ridge's purpose as a nature park. This is demonstrated by the frequent disagreements between ParkCarers and the Parks and Conservation Service. For instance, one volunteer was particularly frustrated by government activities to widen and deepen the walking paths on the Ridge:

*'I mean, that's the sort of the parameters in which you work, you know, this, if you like, habitat fragmentation ... It's quite clear, once you bulldoze the place to the nth degree, then you have real problems – And that's what's happened'* (Participant 8).

The relative power of competing stakeholders becomes important. That is at least partly connected to the ability of groups to normalise their own Life-Nonlife distinction within the broader public. For Povinelli (2016), settler governments were able to desecrate rock formations sacred to First Nations communities because the normalised geontological designation of rock as Nonlife allowed them to ignore Aboriginal communities' protests that they were vital and lively. I argue that in a similar way, the entrenched view of Cooleman Ridge as a community recreational space allowed the government to bulldoze tracts of native vegetation, coded as Nonlife by the government in comparison to the lively utility of those spaces as walking paths. This was allowed to happen despite the opposition of CRPC volunteers who code this native vegetation as Life and not to be destroyed. This supports the findings from chapter 5, further demonstrating underlying divisions between a settler 'people first' vision of public property and CRPC's more harmonious conception of relating to land. A similar analysis could be made on Kangaroo Island following the fires between KICLA members' campaign to protect unburnt bush and others' desire to tear it down. The biopolitical decisions of valued and unvalued life rely on such underlying causal distinctions.

### 6.3. Theoretical and Practical Implications

In this section I analysed the biopolitics of conservation volunteering through a geontopolitical lens. While Povinelli's (2016) theory is very effective when analysing late-liberal governance in relation to First Nations people, in my case studies it is difficult to neatly disentangle the

biopolitics from the geontopolitics. How far can you stretch the definition of Life or Nonlife, and at what stage does that become a biopolitical, rather than a geontological distinction? I believe conservation volunteers can simultaneously code weeds as both unvalued biopolitical life and geontopolitical Nonlife. This requires a more expansive definition of Nonlife than Povinelli provides.

Rather than seeking to identify the conceptual point at which geontopolitics ends and biopolitics begins, I propose the utility of a broader definition for Life and Nonlife – similarly un beholden to biontology – for analysing modes of environmental governance. Such distinctions are often normative and always ontological, situated, and indeterminate. This may be less grounded in perceptions of Life’s subjectivity and agency, and more based on a perception of Life as a flourishing version of the universe, an entanglement one finds wholeheartedly desirable, as opposed to a Nonlife where this vision is not realised. Different stakeholders implicitly or explicitly compete to maintain their own version of this Life-Nonlife distinction, and promote the processes, ideas and materials coded as Life. These distinctions, such as ‘balanced native ecosystem’ (Life) versus ‘the absence of this’ (Nonlife), serve as anchors to shape and constrain practical downstream biopolitical, and other, decisions. While this moves somewhat away from Povinelli’s conception, the three figures of the Desert, Animist and Virus still apply. The Desert defines the drive to maintain one’s Life-Nonlife distinction, the Animist collapses Nonlife into Life so that all environmental assemblages are vital and flourishing, while the Virus disrupts the ability to maintain either of these positions.

Beyond theoretical implications, this analysis can help conservation volunteers make better-informed decisions. Due to their poststructuralist genealogy, biopolitical and geontological analysis allows one to deconstruct regimes of environmental governance. This provides a clarity with which volunteers can reflect on how they engage with their patch, to situate their decisions within histories of environmental management, and better understand why their vision for the governance of their patch may not match the visions of others. Such reflexivity can also help volunteers adapt to changing climates and contextual constraints into the future. Rather than resisting necessary changes because they clash with existing distinctions between valued and unvalued life, volunteers can be aware that these decisions are shaped by an underlying vision of what Life means to them. Such practical reflexivity would help volunteers to adopt the long-term view, as many of my participants already have, necessary for developing sustainable care-based relations to the land.



## 7. Conclusion: Developing a Reflexive Care-Based Settler Connection to Country

*'I don't see it as me versus nature, nor me as nature, but me and nature.'*

*(CRPC Volunteer)*

Australia, along with much of the world, is facing ecological disaster and collapse. Any serious mitigation of the worst effects of climate change and land degradation will entail a fundamental redefinition of the relationship between society and nature, between people and country (Rose, 2011; Lorimer, 2015; Büscher and Fletcher, 2019). Just as Povinelli (2016) argues that geontological governance exists everywhere but is most visible in the settler context, the necessity to develop symbiotic relationships with nature is starkly obvious in the degraded landscapes of settler Australia. I argue that community-led conservation volunteers provide an insight into one way that settler-land relationships can be redefined. However, this change must be undertaken with reflexivity, and in collaboration with First Nations communities.

In this dissertation, I have shown CRPC volunteers and KICLA landowners become entangled with the land they care for in laborious, affective, and ethical ways. Relations of care can be as cruel to some forms of life as they are loving to others. This ethic of care is not arbitrary, but built on a genuine desire to make a modest, localised difference in resisting the centuries of damage caused by the settler colonial disruption of country relationships. Committing themselves to labour in order to actualise this ethic of care, volunteers become emotionally and sensorially attuned to the life on their patch (McLauchlan, 2019). The importance of these more-than-human entanglements of care become clear when situated in relation to colonial and Aboriginal conceptions of ownership and connection to land. Caring for one's local natural environment would mean little if this connection reinforced colonial logics of human domination over nature. My findings suggest that while volunteer subjectivities of ownership demonstrate a shift away from exclusive, extractive colonial possession, colonial logics persist. Given this observation, all settler Australians must ensure that their connection to the land does not implicitly co-opt decolonial vocabularies as a means of legitimising ongoing settler presence in occupied land (Tuck and Yang, 2012). To minimise this danger, volunteer groups must forge allyships with local Indigenous communities wherever possible, and consciously act to uproot ongoing colonial logics (Bosworth, 2021).

Central to this reflexivity is the ability to deconstruct and examine the underlying value distinctions that guide a group's environmental decision-making. Seeking to expand the critical tools available to support this, I troubled the liminal space between biopolitics and geontopolitics in relation to CRPC and KICLA governance. I found that volunteers shape their biopolitical decisions, not strictly around a Life or Nonlife distinction (Povinelli 2016), but around a vision of a flourishing world in distinction to the absence of this world. Being conscious of the indeterminate nature of these distinctions can help volunteers pre-empt and adapt their modes of conservation governance as environmental realities change. Drawing on Halvorsen (2015), the discursive, participatory nature of this research project has already contributed to this goal of reflexivity. This project provided a space in which white Australians critically and openly discussed what it means to feel a connection to land in a settler-colonial country, discussions rarely held in settler society in my experience. The feedback focus group, in particular, was hugely beneficial; it not only allowed me to be more accountable to my participants, but gave participants an opportunity to engage openly with bigger issues, such as decolonization.

Despite this, the significance of this dissertation must not be overstated. As previously discussed, the findings were developed with a small sample of volunteers drawn from a narrow, elite section of settler society. Furthermore, the remote nature of this research, while providing access to geographically dispersed participants, limited my ability to understand many of the affective and ethical connections at play. Finally, while research and discussion with participants is an important step, this does not easily lead to change in broader society. Calls to renew how we view the land need to reach and work with other parts of society, as well as the formal structures of government. As my discussion of environmental governance regimes highlighted, one reason why systemic change is so difficult is that stakeholders hold fundamentally different visions of what good governance means. To help understand these dynamics, further research is also necessary.

While this dissertation focused on the relations between volunteers and the environment, an important next step would be to situate these phenomena in relation to broader regimes of environmental governance. This would involve an appraisal of how the other stakeholders seek to maintain their own vision of a flourishing world, and the economic and political power exercised to maintain the status quo or drive change. Furthermore, engaging properly with feminist critiques of care labour would allow an important investigation of gender and power within the structures of environmental conservation. Finally, this dissertation further reveals

the need for an appraisal of the economics of conservation volunteering, in combination with decolonial critique. Volunteers require a level of financial security to engage in unpaid more-than-human care labour, yet this security is built on centuries of the colonial wealth extraction from Indigenous lands. Further research must include the voices of First Nations communities, with the goal to develop pragmatic, as-decolonized-as-possible collaborations between these communities and settler conservation volunteers. Faced with the contemporary intersection of ongoing colonialism, environmental change, and conservation volunteers who seek systemic change towards more harmonious ways of relating to land, remaining critical, yet hopeful, is paramount.

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## Appendix

### Appendix A: Sample Interview Schedule

Demographic information: age, gender, ethnicity.

Background questions

- How long have you been a member of CRPC/KICLA?
- Take me through the process that led to you to join the group? Motivations?
- How would you describe the purpose of the group in your own words?

Descriptive conservation/bush regeneration activities (sensory and emotional details)

- Story: Walk me through an average day when conducting conservation activities.
  - o Detail about specific activities.
  - o Are there any other projects/activities that you do with the group?
- What are the striking sensory experiences that you associate with your conservation work?
  - o Specific sights, smells, or feelings?
- What kind of knowledge or expertise do you draw on to do these jobs?
  - o How did you come to learn these? Where are they applied?
- Opinion: what have been the conservation outcomes? How do you feel about this?

More abstract questions (relations and ethics of care)

- To what extent do you have the freedom to make your own decisions on how best to conserve your patch?
- Devils advocate: In the scheme of things, it doesn't matter whether a plant is native or not.
  - o Opinion on conservation through removing certain species.
- Are there any cases in your experience where conservation involves inaction?
  - o What are the justifications for not intervening in these cases?
- What does it mean to you to live near the Ridge/on your conservation property?
  - o Has this changed over time since you began volunteering?
    - Have the fires impacted this relationship at all?

Either: Impact of the 2003, 2019/20 fires (for CRPC participants)

- How did you experience the 2003 fires? What was your reaction?

- Do you think that the 2003 fires had any ongoing consequences on the attitude of volunteers towards conservation, or practical implications for ParkCare activities?
- What do you remember about the recovery process of the bush?
  - How did you feel about this?
- What are your most striking memories the 2019/20 fires?
  - In what way did they affect you – e.g. Smoke, burning, road to the coast.
  - Do you think that the 2019/20 fires shifted your perception of you conservation work?
- Do you feel that engaging in nature conservation and rehabilitation activities has influenced your own recovery process following either fire in some way?

Or: Impact of the 2019/20 fires (for KICLA participants)

- How did you experience the 19/20 fires? Striking memories?
  - Reaction – more to do with nature or people or property or?
  - Have the 2019/20 fires has impacted/influenced your conservation work?
    - Shifted your perception of your conservation work?
  - What do you remember about the recovery process of the bush, its impact on you?
- Do you feel that engaging in nature conservation and rehabilitation activities has influenced your own recovery process following the fires in some way?

Closing: Do you have anything else you want to say about these themes?