Becoming Researchers: Making Academic Kin in the Chthulucene

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Abstract   Graduate students are often plagued by stress and anxiety in their journeys of becoming researchers. Concerned by the prevalence of poor graduate student wellbeing in Australia, we share our experiences of kin-making and collaboration within #aaeeer (Australasian Association for Environmental Education Emerging Researchers), a collective of graduate students and early career researchers formed in response to the Australian Association for Environmental Education (AAEE) conference in Hobart, Tasmania, in 2014. In this article, we begin to address the shortage of research into graduate student wellbeing, led by graduate students. Inspired by Donna Haraway's work on making kin in the Chthulucene, we present an exploration that draws together stories from the authors about the positive experiences our kin-making collective enables, and how it has supported our wellbeing and allowed us to work collaboratively. Specifically, we find that #aaeeer offers us a form of refuge from academic stressors, creating spaces for 'composting together' through processes of 'decomposing' and 'recomposing'. Our rejection of neoliberal norms has gifted us experiences of joyful collective pleasures. We share our experiences here in the hope of supporting and inspiring other emerging and established researchers to 'make kin' and challenge the potentially isolating processes of becoming researchers.

Graduate students have traditionally learnt to *become researchers* by assimilating themselves into certain ways of being, knowing, doing and relating, so as to 'make it' in the academy. This andragogy — the method and practice of teaching adult learners (Pratt, 1988) — of graduate research, a form of enculturation that involves students gradually acquiring the cultural norms of the field, perpetuates competitiveness, individualism and hierarchy, which are hallmarks of the contemporary neoliberal university system (Ball, 2012; Olssen & Peters, 2005). Concerned by such andragogy, this article stories a model of 'refuge' found in an organically growing collective of

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graduate researchers: #aaeeer (Australasian Association for Environmental Education Emerging Researchers),[1] which emerged out of the 2014 Australian Association for Environmental Education conference in Hobart.

Here, we share our experiences of becoming researchers in the field of environmental education (EE). Specifically, we share our involvement in the #aaeeer collective and contend that it is a site for making kin that can lead to positive social and cultural changes in the academy and the wider world. We argue that such change is effected by environmental education graduate researchers, not only through our environmental education and sustainability education research projects that are the basis of our doctoral studies, but that through our practices and actions, graduate researchers have the potential for being change-agents within the academy. We develop this argument through the example of our own experiences of becoming researchers. In this article, we discuss how our collective enacts an alternative andragogy to that of the competitive world of mainstream, neoliberal academia (Raaper, 2016). Specifically, we engage with Donna Haraway's most recent work on 'making kin in the Chthulucene' (2016, p. 4), arguing that our collective has enacted a form of refuge from the status quo, allowing us to compost — that is, to decompose and recompose together — and experience joyful collective pleasures that are meaningfully changing relationships.

This article argues that for graduate students to participate in processes of social change for environmental education, to overcome feelings of isolation and to engage in EE discourses, they need to figure ways to 'join forces to reconstitute refuges' (Haraway, 2015, p. 160). As emerging environmental education researchers, we have found a way to do so collaboratively and generatively with-kin through multiple technologies, creating our own assemblage of 'space-based' environmental education. Through our online collective, we have been able to do the very work of writing this article, which in part involves working with new and developing theories that are becoming more established in the field of environmental education, such as Haraway's theories in the more-than-human space. We deploy Haraway's cyborg (2004) and companion species (2016) approaches throughout the article in recognition of the collaboration between human and other-than-human components of our assemblage. While some of our own projects in EE are conducted through more 'conventional' methodologies, our online collective allows us to think together about these emerging theories and concepts, and moreover, put them to work. In so doing, we learn our way with new ideas, supported by our kin, and at the same time, perhaps we forge a trail that other new arrivals into the EE field can join up with.

Our central contention is that making kin to enact refuge should be an integral process in a world facing an uncertain future. For Haraway (2015, p. 162), 'kin is an assembling word' that means 'something other/more than entities tied by ancestry and genealogy' (p. 161); that is, 'it matters how kin generate kin' (p. 162). Making kin is a process of learning to live with others of various kinds and of learning to live otherwise. We want our research in environmental education to contribute to what Haraway (2004) calls a 'serious historical effort to get elsewhere' (p. 330); that is, away from the neoliberal worldview of self-interested individualism. We understand that research products embody the politics, ontologies, and epistemologies of research practices. With this in mind, we seek to enact the process of becoming researchers as a fluid and ongoing journey of lived inquiry, one that is best travelled with kin.

We begin by introducing the #aaeeer collective, followed by a brief overview of graduate student wellbeing as reported by recent research. We then outline our methodology of storying our experiences using Haraway's (2015, 2016) figure of Chthulu, and then discuss how #aaeeer assembles refuge, makes academic kin, and composts for joyful collective pleasures.

#aaeeer

#aaeeer began as a group of early career researchers and graduate students who connected at the Australian Association for Environmental Education (AAEE) Conference in Hobart, 2014. A relaxed, informal pizza and beer night quickly evolved into the beginnings of this supportive, collaborative collective. A foray into processes of collaborative writing soon followed, resulting in the publication of co-authored articles 'Perspectives From Emerging Researchers: What Next in EE/SE Research?' (#aaeeer, Aguayo et al., 2016), and 'Evolution or Revolution in EE/ES Research? A Collaborative Dialogue From First-Year PhD Students' (Beasy, Page, Emery, & Ayre, 2016).

Next, funding was sourced for an initial gathering together at a writing retreat near Launceston in Tasmania. Here we presented our research in creative ways (storybooks, poem, acting, short film, narrative) and participated in writing workshops with respected academics whom we invited along as mentors. Outside our writing sessions, we cooked, laughed, and sat around the fire together, tried but failed to swim in the river, sheltered from rain in a bus stop, wandered through the bush, played guitar, and took vegetable scraps home for the chooks. Through these diverse activities, we came to know each other and our research interests, and offered supportive feedback and advice about our developing research projects that investigate a diverse array of environmental education and sustainability education topics.

Leveraging off our own individual research project conference presentations, collaborative presentations about #aaeeer have been given by various members of the collective, including at the World Environment Education Congress in Sweden (2015) and the New Zealand Association for Environmental Education conference (2016). Those who could not travel the distance often participated by recording contributions or joining in via video-conferencing platforms. Presenters in New Zealand collaborated on an article: 'The Role of Identities, Online Platforms, and Collaboration in Knowledge Generation in EE/SE Research' (#aaeeer, Higgins, Aguayo & Boulet, 2016).

More recently, #aaeeer members collaborated on two panel presentations at the 2016 AAEE Conference in Adelaide: Building Communities for the Emerging Researchers of Tomorrow and Emerging Researcher Perspectives in EE/SE and Identities in Online Collaborative Research. Through these presentations and publications, the invitation has continued to be extended to other graduate researchers to become part of the collective, and as a result, membership of #aaeeer has grown to 32 graduate researchers and includes people from Uganda, Iran, Chile, Papua New Guinea, New Zealand, as well as Australia.

Given our dispersed locations, we typically collaborate using online platforms such as Skype and Google Hangout, and at self-organised writing retreats and national and international conferences. While meetings generally centre on producing some type of professionally beneficial output, such as a joint conference presentation, an article, or conducting peer workshops on research methods, nourishing conversations with each other always occur. Through these endeavours, #aaeeer has become a supportive collective through which we have learned to relate differently, to 'become researchers otherwise' by prioritising graduate student wellbeing and our relationships with each other, for the benefit of current and future graduate students.

Graduate Student Wellbeing

Wellbeing is described as a 'multi-faceted concept that encompasses social, cultural, physical, spiritual and psychological dimensions, recognizing both the collective nature of wellbeing, and the holistic processes of restoration and healing' (Burrows, 2009, p. 73). The journey of becoming researchers through graduate research is challenging

intellectually, physically, and psychologically. Graduate research requires an extended, focused commitment to a research project that averages between 4.4 and 5.5 years in duration (Bourke, Holbrook, Lovat, & Farley, 2004; Group of Eight, 2008). During their candidature, many graduate researchers will experience emotional ups and downs, and variable states of wellbeing (Hyun, Quinn, Madon, & Lustig, 2006). Mental health issues during candidature have been cited as a reason why some graduate students discontinue their doctoral studies (Turner & Berry, 2000), and it has been estimated that attrition rates in Australia for graduate research may be as high as 30% (Bourke et al., 2004). Accordingly, the mental wellbeing of graduate students should be a matter of serious concern for Australian universities.

The *Graduate Student Happiness and Wellbeing Report* (Graduate Assembly, 2014, p. 1) advises that 'balanced, happy people are more productive, more creative, more collaborative, better at long-term goal pursuit, more likely to find employment, more physically and psychologically resilient'. We contend that these are qualities all universities should be actively seeking to foster, yet the neoliberal university model is one in which efficiency is prioritised ahead of wellbeing (Harvey, 2005). There is emerging evidence that suggests the neoliberal model of tertiary education is harmful for the mental wellbeing of university students generally (Eisenberg, Hunt, & Speer, 2013; Wang, Lee, & Wahid, 2013) and graduate students specifically (Garcia-Williams, Moffitt, & Kaslow, 2014; Hyun et al., 2006). This research evidence has been reported widely in mainstream media. In 2014, for example, *The Guardian* newspaper highlighted the rising prevalence of mental health problems among graduate students ('There is a culture of acceptance around mental health issues in academia', 2014), an issue that has been more recently reported in *The Australian* (Hare, 2017). Articles in *The Conversation* ('Depression common on college campuses', 2015) and *The Times Higher Education Supplement* (Grove, 2016) further drew attention to graduate students' high level of stress. Without adequate mediators or intervention, the cognitive strain associated with stress and anxiety can lead to depression (Graduate Assembly, 2014).

Thankfully, there is increasing recognition of the need for, and value of, sharing and working collaboratively in academia. Esteemed academic Ali Black (2016, para. 4) notes, 'we need to share our findings on what matters to us, and how we might cultivate kindness in the academy, foster care-full work, and count that which is not being counted'. Promoting the need to shift academia towards 'ethics of care and caring across our personal/professional lives and work' (2016, para. 13), Black touches on themes surrounding the value of working closely with colleagues to enrich personal and professional lives. Black is a member of The Women Who Write, a growing group of women she invited to share stories, write with, and connect with on a deeper level. The Women Who Write challenge and trouble 'the auditing of the academic assembly line' and instead value 'meaning, wellbeing, relationship and connection' (Black, 2016, para. 12). We were inspired by The Women Who Write.

Although this emerging evidence of a greater focus upon wellbeing is useful, there is a paucity of qualitative research into experiences of graduate student wellbeing led by graduate researchers. We believe that this article makes a small but novel contribution to this literature. In the next section, we outline our approach for exploring how we, through #aaeeer, respond to these issues.

Storying the Chthulucene

The #aaeeer collective is founded on an understanding that 'knowledge is produced and enacted in relationships with others; that is, through communities' (#aaeeer, 2016, p. 21). We wanted to investigate what it is that we are doing well in our organic

collective and how it has enabled us to work in ways that enhance our wellbeing as emerging researchers. This exploration of our experiences may be valuable for understanding the processes and challenges of becoming researchers and for environmental education researchers more broadly. We believe our collective experiences offer an andragogy of collaboration and social, intellectual and psychological support that can help to improve the wellbeing of researchers. We are guided in our theorisation of collaboration and kin-making by the concepts introduced in Haraway's (2015) article 'Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin'. Specifically, concepts of assembling refuge, making kin, composting and joyful collective pleasures were found to enrich our living narratives.

For Haraway (2015), 'Anthropocene' is a poor name for the ecological mess we find ourselves in, as she considers it too anthropocentric, and lacking aspiration. She proposes we term our ecological time the 'Chthulucene'. Chthulu is a figure — a performative image that can be inhabited. According to Haraway, a figure 'embodies shared meanings in stories' and 'collects up the people' (Haraway, 1997, p. 23). That is, we humans 'are storytelling species' (Atkinson, 2007, p. 224), and '[s]tories lived and told educate the self and others' (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. xxvi). Stories and figures are thus both methodological and pedagogical tools. Figures should enable 'connectivity thinking' (van Dooren & Rose, 2016, p. 24) necessary for alternatively storying worlds. For van Dooren and Rose (2016), the aim is to 'tell our own stories in ways that are open to other ways of constituting, of responding to and in a living world' (2016, p. 24).

Chthulu is no mere metaphor; Chthulu is a method. We deploy Chthulu as a more-than-human practice of making kin through telling our story. As research practices are performative, we play with Chthulu as a figuration, as a storytelling tool to open possibilities to telling different stories, to enable different ways of relating (Reinert, 2016). And in this sense, Chthulu is andragogical, a composted and composting subjectivity that we can aspire to, rehearse, and iterate. Thus, our kin-making efforts are not presented as complete, or successful, but rather as a striving and yearning for ways to live, research and become, differently — to get elsewhere, to be otherwise. More than 50% of the world's population live in cities, as do most of us (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 2015). Thus, many of our inter- and intra-actions are with 'humans'; that this story largely focuses on our intra-human kin-making is not to be read as a prioritisation of those relationships or an erasure of others, so much as a modest acknowledgement of our urban positionality and connection through academia.

The process of formally storying our experience through Chthulu began when Haraway's (2015) article was circulated via email to us all. Sherridan initially shared the article because of the ways in which the theories resonated and connected with her experiences of becoming researcher. Sherridan asked members of the #aaeeer community to engage with the experience of becoming researchers in response to Haraway's concepts. Four members of the collective responded to the call, reflecting upon the concepts of refuge and making kin in relation to their journeys of becoming researchers, and sharing these personal narratives in a Google document.

These were then decomposed and recomposed through the process of writing the article collaboratively. Blanche volunteered to assemble a first draft of the article, drawing upon our meeting notes, Maia's data analysis and additional reflections shared in the Google document. Others also contributed to writing the draft article, editing and reworking ideas to story the shared experiences of some members of the #aaeeer community. Anonymous reviewers added their generous insights and critique, and became an absent presence (Shilling, 1993) in the ongoing storying and reconfiguration of this article.

In line with storying as a practice of inhabiting Chthulu, some of the original narratives are embedded within the collective voice of the article, while others are quoted explicitly. Chthulu is a squirming figure that can accommodate collectives and individuals — although all are understood to be continuously co-emerging, not fixed or separate. We focus our story around four practices: assembling refuges, making kin, composting, and joyful collective pleasures.

Assembling Refuge

In response to the ecological conditions that we are facing, Haraway (2015, p. 160), drawing on Anna Tsing (2012), contends '[r]ight now, the earth is full of refugees, human and not, without refuge'. Haraway (p. 160) argues:

> *our job is to make the Anthropocene as short/thin as possible and to cultivate with each other in every way imaginable epochs to come that can replenish refuge … One way to live and die well as mortal critters in the Chthulucene is to join forces to reconstitute refuges, to make possible partial and robust biological-cultural-political-technological recuperation and recomposition, which must include mourning irreversible losses.*

Borrowing from Haraway, we feel a sense of urgency to 'get elsewhere' (Haraway, 2004, p. 330), away from neoliberal academic culture. As such, we see #aaeeer as a space that can assemble such refuge.

The majority of us are, however, citizens or at least residents of Australia. Given Australia's abhorrent treatment of asylum seekers and refugees, no discussion of ethics and politics in the context of refuge, can proceed without first making a genuine, heartfelt disclaimer. We in no way wish to contend that the graduate student experience (or at least, not ours) in any way compares to the experience of seeking asylum from political, cultural, military, ecological or sexual persecution, or climate change. Additionally, if it is not self-evident, our visions of 'refuge' are at odds with the Australian Government's policies of indefinite offshore detention. However, some of the forces we are seeking refuge from are similar, although very different in severity, scale and quality: power, competition, ego, hierarchy, and violence (which comes in many forms).

We know from our own lives that stress, anxiety, and panic are unwelcome yet unfortunately common experiences for those of us becoming researchers. Feelings of loneliness, disconnection, imposter syndrome, inferiority, and being overwhelmed are widespread. When writing this article, Sherridan shared feelings of isolation, lamenting the reality that friends and family cannot possibly understand the challenges of graduate research, 'especially those feelings when you're right "in it", drowning in data, not writing enough, not sure you've found anything of any use to the world, not sure if you'll have a job come the end of it'.

Our contention is not that our experience of suffering is similar to that of refugees. Rather, it is that by practising and enacting the conditions for refuge in our everyday lives, we can hopefully develop the capacities to cultivate refuge in the wider socio-ecological world as a means of 'meaningfully responding' to others and (re)crafting 'modes of living and dying' in this 'richly varied yet fundamentally shared world' (van Dooren, Kirksey, & Münster, 2016, p. 6). For us, #aaeeer is a safe space, a refuge where we feel comfortable opening up, sharing our challenges and successes, and seeking support from each other as required. In short, we perceive #aaeeer as generating refuge from neoliberalism in the university sector.

Significantly for us, refuge is not an escape or a closed space. Escapism or exclusivity does not change the conditions that give rise to the system from which we seek respite.

Refuge is not about disconnection; rather, it is about connecting differently. To assemble the conditions for refuge 'one must be in the action, be finite and dirty' (Haraway, 1997, p. 36). Refuge is perhaps better understood as a practice than a space. Connecting differently, as a practice, enables us to 'cast our lot for some ways of life and not others' (Haraway, 1997, p. 36). That is, while we applaud the efforts of institutions investigating and committing to improving graduate health and wellbeing (e.g., Graduate Assembly, 2014), we propose that efforts towards assembling refuge should include kin-making opportunities: building community; fostering nurturing relationships across difference; and supporting and encouraging care of the self and of others.

Making Kin

Professional and personal collaboration between and among members is at the heart of #aaeeer. We have noted that the strength of our connections to each other affords us the ability to verbally disclose our experiences with research-related stress and anxiety in safe and supportive environments. In essence, through #aaeeer, we are 'making kin' with each other, becoming researchers by sharing our experiences, including our vulnerabilities, and offering encouragement and support.

Making kin is an active revolt against neoliberalism's capacity to individuate and isolate us as researchers. Chthulu encourages a recognition of the inherent processes and value of mutual co-constitution and co-emergence that neoliberalism (unavoidably) erodes. As Wright (2014, p. 280) explains, neoliberalism does not disconnect us, but rather disables our capacity to acknowledge and work with the relationships that constitute us:

> *We can never disconnect from Earth's ecological community, because we are always becoming-with, in a living multispecies world composed of phenomena and transitions. But we can terribly damage our ability to respond to that world. Failing to attend to ecological connectivities does not break them, but leaves them disfigured.*

Neoliberalism leaves us enmeshed in networks of global capital, implicated in mass extinctions, beset with anxiety and engaging in 'self-care', individuating even as we try to resist (Penny, 2016). Through sharing our experiences in this article we hope to inspire other researchers to reach out and form collectives with diverse members, offer support, write collaboratively, and in doing so, defiantly yet respectfully push back against the ingrained hierarchical, competitive and unsupportive conditions often found in academia (Raaper, 2016). As Bianca conveyed during our conversations, working collaboratively had helped her accept the uncertainty that is a hallmark of graduate research: 'I think because I've been an "emerging researcher" for a while now, I'm more at peace with "not knowing". I understand now that doing research is to learn and adapt and to grow based on interactions with others.'

Of course, we don't just make kin with other humans. #aaeeer is a cyborg collective (Haraway, 2004), situated in and constituted by specific historical and ecological techno-worlds, as the hashtag (#) in the name of the collective indicates, representing our assemblage of space-based EE. We have had to make kin with technology, which has been challenging for a number of us. And making kin with Google+, Google Drive, and Google Hangouts implicates us in transnational capitalist networks.

In consequence, making kin is not politically neutral or ecologically innocent. For us to make kin with each other, we have flown across the nation and sometimes the planet, meaning we have to acknowledge our complicity in contributing to greenhouse gas emissions. Making kin with climate change is an important, if challenging, task

for environmental educators (and Earthlings of all kinds). In this sense, making kin is not necessarily about forging *friendly* connections, so much as about recognising connections and the tensions that they imply, in order to cultivate collective subjectivities capable of responding with/in/as/to them. Through making kin as #aaeeer we can support ourselves to more fluidly respond to our multiple specific, emplaced conditions through our research in environmental education.

Our call for the development of collaborative networks similar to #aaeeer mirrors an invitation by Black, Impiccini, Crimmins, and Jones (2016) to 'consider the value of creating nurturing, responsive, reciprocal spaces that support connections and collaborations across distances and regions'. We find great value in an article by Mountz et al. (2015) that pushes back against current neoliberal imperatives of institutions. The authors advocate for slow scholarship and a feminist care ethic that values care of the self, colleagues, and students (Mountz et al., 2015). These authors talk of the benefits to their work and life from having the support of colleagues during life events. Hannigan, Raphael, White, Bragg, and Clark (2016) similarly discuss how the ability to gather together at a writing retreat enabled relationships to deepen and solidify, which led to improved research collaborations and sharing of teaching practices.

It seems that many academics are questioning the status quo in academia and posing solutions that centre on coming together. Badenhorst et al. (2016, p. 2) ask: 'How can competitive, hidden barriers be broken down and replaced by open, encouraging spaces?' We believe that the #aaeeer collective is answering this call, personally and professionally, enriching our lives through our collaborative efforts. With each new member, paper presentation, writing retreat or supportive Skype session, 'our collaborative webs thicken' (Haraway, 2015, p. 163). This potential for making kin to break down barriers and build new worlds brings us to composting.

Composting: Composing, Decomposing, and Recomposing

In describing conditions for refuge Haraway (2015, p. 161) employs the practice of composting, arguing that 'we are all compost'. Composting is a process whereby invertebrates and micro-organisms 'eat' organic materials (Hird, 2010) through which 'matters break down and re-emerge as new matters' (Composting Feminisms, n.d., para. 3). That is, composting encompasses processes of composing, decomposing, and recomposing. Composting is fundamental to ecological recycling and regeneration (Haraway, 2015, p. 161) and is critical for kin-making and surviving in the Chthulucene:

> *Who and whatever we are, we need to make-with — become with, compose with — the earth bound… [we need to] compose and decompose, which are both dangerous and promising practices.*

Composting Feminisms (n.d., para. 3), a reading group dedicated to feminist environmental humanities scholarship, describe 'the process of reading and writing as composting'. Similarly, we in the #aaeeer collective see composting as an andragogical practice whereby through our relationships with each other, we decompose and recompose ourselves in the refuges assembled by #aaeeer.

In our conversations, we have noted that the very individualism, competition, and hierarchies that contribute to our ecological problems are also deeply embedded in fields of academic research. We have found our approaches of 'composting' can in some small ways decompose these deeply ingrained, traditional divisions in ways of 'being together'. Composting is a process of decomposing–composing: simultaneous unlearning and learning. Through decomposing and consciously unlearning some of these practices that are hegemonic within academia, we are able to compose otherwise. Part of this

decomposition of hierarchy includes the opportunity to decompose our professional or academic identities. A comment in our personal narratives document recalled how during a recent Skype meeting, four of us spent the first couple of minutes unravelling, sharing how we were falling apart mentally and emotionally, before we gathered ourselves again and started composing plans for our collaborative presentation at AAEE (2016). Sherridan commented that 'being permitted to unravel or decompose in a safe space (even if it's some weird techno-refuge) and then recuperate together has been so good for me'.

Elaborating upon our earlier explorations of this concept of refuge, we feel our virtual-physical-emotional-collective space is a refuge from the hierarchy, individualism, and competition (in other words neoliberalism) of academia, and the anxiety that it produces. We feel safe to decompose together. We recognise that such quick and observable processes of decomposition of 'the academic self' can serve as a catalyst for a slower but perhaps more significant process of composing alternative academic selves. We are learning how to be(come) less neoliberal, less hierarchical; to become researchers differently. This desire to 'get elsewhere' (Haraway, 2004, p. 330) towards kinder, more collaborative and nourishing practices is expressed in our attempts to enact such a collective. In essence, we are seeking and striving to be part of 'authentic and vibrant communities that sustain us ecologically and spiritually' (Orr, 2004, p. 8).

We feel that the idea of composing and decomposing really encapsulates the graduate student journey. It encompasses 'the highs and lows, the makings and unmakings that we are continually facing and wading through' (Kim). Some of our composting has resulted in an increasing recognition of our own capacities. Through sharing, being open, honest and real as we compose together, we learn about each other's lives, commitments, challenges, and successes. The fact that we have not had a chance to contribute our section to the article because our child is in hospital, or we have 100 papers to mark, or 15 interviews to transcribe, or we are desperately applying for that next short-term contract, highlights to us that 'graduate students HAVE LIVES, have families, have other jobs, perhaps even some hobbies/interests outside their PhD' (Maia).

Maia voiced an observation that although some of us lack confidence in our own abilities, we are certain of the intelligence, creativity and capabilities of our peers, and somehow our association lends us confidence that we *all* have something to contribute in academia. Composing together affirms our place as learners, as researchers, as academics, as people, without the façade of perfectionism, or focus on high achievement, pressure for on-time milestones or performance outcomes. We have found that our differences enrich our writing and enable us to be influenced by a wider variety of ideas and sources of inspiration. Furthermore, 'composing as a group has given us the confidence to embark upon writing tasks that I [we] would undoubtedly have shied away from otherwise' (Maia).

Composting for us, then, has been a process of bringing together our inter- and transdisciplinary approaches. Our collective is supportive, accepting of diverse ideas, and open to exploring suggestions whether or not they are immediately fully formed and eloquently expressed. We feel that our ease with which we are able to compost what elsewhere in academia might be seen as competing or oppositional approaches is due in part to how we are 'a bit more in the dirt' (Sherridan). Rather than experiencing our varying backgrounds/fields/research interests as some sort of challenge or division to overcome, we seem to easily move through boundaries to share ideas and spaces linked by values, ideas and ethos. We have also engaged in composting more literally by feeding drafts of our PhD to the worms! Such experiences of being and working together have led us to experience joyful collective pleasures, and some of these will now be explored.

Joyful Collective Pleasures

Haraway (2015, p. 164) cautions that the issues we face require 'difficult, unrelenting work' and talks of the need for kin to be 'abundant, unexpected, enduring and precious' (2015, p. 163). As environmental education and sustainability education researchers, we can each relate to the often emotionally challenging nature of work in environmental education. We therefore seek to feed and nurture such enduring kin-making, thus increasing our collective experiences of joy and pleasure, as Bianca's comment attests: 'Being with other current PhD candidates is so much better for my wellbeing as we share the same space and understand each other.' Feelings of helplessness and being overwhelmed in the emerging researcher space, coupled with the commonly felt sense of isolation experienced by graduate students, compel our search for new ways of being and becoming researchers. In this pursuit, we are encouraged by Haraway's (2015, p. 164) emphasis on the need for 'joy, play, and response-ability to engage with unexpected others'.

Engaging in this #aaeeer space in diverse ways (online, at conferences, via Skype, Google Hangouts, in pubs, at beaches, in the bush, beside the scar tree at Yarra Park as a respite during a recent research conference) has facilitated collaboration that is genuinely joyful, kind, light-hearted and supportive. We have organically been able to 'just be' with others, rather than succumb to ego, hierarchies and elitism. As Blanche recounted: 'I love that this group enables us the opportunity to experiment with a non-hierarchical, non-egotistical, collective effort at knowledge making, because I think it makes it easier for us to enact those practices elsewhere.'

Some of us are undoubtedly more experienced. Some have read more of Haraway's work, or have collected more data, written more articles, or taught more classes. What is so joyful, so nurturing and pleasant is that none of these differences matter: we are equal. In this amiable process of collaboration, we are making kin across gender, race, geography, age, stages of graduate research, and stages of life. As emphasised throughout this article, our aim is to share the joys and pleasures of this supportive culture, in the hope of encouraging similar collaboration.

Kevin shared her joy around the opportunity to meet, interact with, write with and learn from people she may otherwise have never encountered beyond the first meeting at AAEE in Hobart. Maia expressed the pleasure that came from real conversations with people who actually understand the realities of life as a graduate student, 'these people know, understand, can empathise, provide useful advice or a knowing nod. And that understanding in a world of confusion brings such relief and joy'. Maia described spending time together — talking, writing, and being — as 'incredibly nurturing, inspiring, enjoyable and intellectually stimulating'.

Decomposing the norms of what we are supposed to do, know and be, has enabled the rapid formation of genuine friendships, 'We are a group, a clan, a collective, a little family, a redefined version of kin — honest, open and trusting and trustworthy' (Maia). Furthermore, 'we are saying that the professional can be personal and that, in fact, this is enriching to research and to our lives! When we break free of dualistic ideas of work/life, professional/personal, friend/colleague we are free to re-imagine' (Kim). It is within this process of kin-making that we become researchers differently.

As opined by Blanche, 'we're entangled within lots of networks, so potentially this has influence beyond just us'. This collaborative, collegial practice of unexpected kin-making has already inspired other collaborative groups: an international environmental education online group (#EEER); an international write and Skype group; and a diverse collective of Honours, PhD and Masters students from different disciplines that meet monthly. The potential exists for other groups to arise from these new configurations. We encourage you to reach out and make kin.

Conclusion

In this article, we have shared our experiences as graduate researchers of making kin in #aaeeer as an example of encouraging andragogy for becoming researchers. The andragogy we propose challenges the norms of neoliberal academia (i.e., competitiveness, hierarchy, and individualism) and instead enriches, supports, and nourishes graduate students in their journeys of becoming researchers. Drawing on Haraway's (2015) concepts of refuge, making kin, composting, and joyful collective pleasures, we have storied our collective experiences.

We see creating refuge, making kin and composting as Chthulucenic practices — ecological, aspirational, and extensile — that can propagate collective joy and pleasure beyond the collective in which they originate. In this way, refuge, making kin and composting are pedagogical, or, in our case, andragogical — in the sense that they are ways of becoming-with the world that can be learned and shared. Our experiences with #aaeeer are not to be read as complete, but as efforts to learn how to become researchers differently through making kin with human and more-than human others. In other words, we reiterate that this is an evolving journey, an approach we have by no means mastered. This ongoing process has helped us as environmental educators replenish our optimism. Furthermore, it has increased our capacities and will to work together as environmental education kin in the complex task of responding to the conditions that create ecological destruction.

We hope to continue fostering joy and pleasure. We invite others treading in these uncertain waters to join us at #aaeeer. We also encourage other emerging and established researchers to make kin by establishing their own collectives, working collaboratively, supporting each other. We encourage pushing back against the often stressful demands of academia, so that our research practices enable us to foster beneficial conditions elsewhere — a key goal of environmental education.

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Conflicts of Interest

None.

Endnote

[1] The name 'Australasian Association for Environmental Education Emerging Researchers' acknowledges that the Australian Association for Environmental Education conference in 2014 was when we first met and formed our loose collective. We have adopted the descriptor 'Australasian' in favour of 'Australian' given that many of us are not Australian residents or citizens.

Keywords: community, qualitative, higher education, experience, story, narrative

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Author Biographies

#aaeeer is a supportive collective of PhD candidates and early career researchers. Given our dispersed locations, #aaeeer members typically collaborate using online platforms such as Skype and Google Hangout, at self-organised writing retreats and national and international conferences. While meetings generally centre on producing some type of professionally beneficial output, such as a joint conference presentation, an article, or conducting peer workshops on research methods, nourishing conversations with each other always occur. Through these endeavours, #aaeeer has become a supportive collective through which we have learned to relate differently, to 'become researchers otherwise' by prioritising graduate student wellbeing and our relationships with each other, for the benefit of current and future graduate students. We choose to publish with #aaeeer as the lead author, in order to reflect the collaborative nature of our writing endeavours. We invite interested environmental and sustainability education researchers to join #aaeeer by searching for 'AAEE Emerging Researchers' on the Google+ platform.

Blanche Verlie is a PhD Candidate at Monash University, researching climate change education. She is actively involved in community environmental education programs, and is a facilitator at Climate for Change.

Sherridan Emery is a PhD candidate, a tutor in the Faculty of Education and an active researcher across a range of school and community-based research collaborations at the University of Tasmania. Her PhD project explores teachers' perspectives of cultural wellbeing in classroom communities within a Tasmanian context.

Maia Osborn is a PhD candidate at Southern Cross University. Maia's research explores the philosophies and pedagogies of environmentally conscious teachers, with a specific focus upon how and why they utilise community partnerships. Maia also teaches an environmental education elective to pre-service teachers. Maia draws upon her childhood experiences living on a sustainable farm to inform her values, beliefs, research and practice.

Kim Beasy is a PhD candidate, a tutor in the Faculty of Education and a Sustainability Officer at the University of Tasmania. Kim's research explores the understandings and practices of sustainability across diverse social contexts.

Bianca Coleman is an Associate Lecturer in Curriculum Studies (Primary) within the Faculty of Education, University of Tasmania. Bianca's PhD research is interested in how teachers can use geospatial technologies to teach geography and environmental education.

Kevin Kezabu Lubuulwa is currently a PhD student in the Faculty of Education at the University of Tasmania in Launceston. Her Participatory Action Research project is entitled 'Intersections of indigenous knowledge and place-based education: Possibilities for new visions of sustainability education in Uganda'. She has a Master of Arts in Literature and Bachelor of Education degree from Uganda Christian University in East Africa.

Jennifer Nicholls recently completed her PhD investigating Queensland teachers' personal and professional beliefs about climate change and education and how these shaped their approaches to climate change mitigation and adaptation education. Jen is a member of the Centre for Research and Innovation in Sustainability Education (CRise) and the Managing Editor of the *Journal of Environmental Education*.