

Kate Fletcher



Multi-centered Worlds

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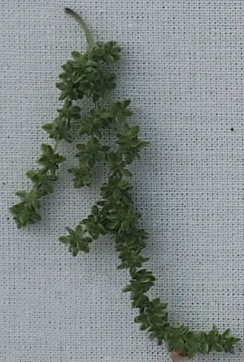
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## Multi-centered Worlds





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## Introduction

Design actions rely on the gifts of the Earth. These collected gifts have their own ways of being, their own intentions and contributions to the world and their own rights to live. Economists often call the Earth's gifts 'natural resources', as if they were human property, as if they were just materials, energy, inspiration, and capital waiting to be transformed. This thinking places human interests at the centre, along with the question, how to keep on taking?

This pamphlet explores a different question as part of a search for a different outcome. It asks, how can we humans shift our relationship with Earth to make ourselves smaller and less central? The pamphlet's starting point is simple: we can start doing this by not making everything all about us.

What follows are five short pieces that locate action, awareness and experience in tree, sheep, stone, nettle and bird. In each, the Earth's intentional and mindlike qualities and its agency are met through sensory description and without human metaphor. In portraying the animate lives of other beings without human reference points or assumptions of human usefulness, nature is experienced as a means to its own relational ends and not as a resource for the achievements of human reason, culture and design.

To shift the human relationship with Earth is to invite us humans to act as if we are just a part of nature, one of many centres of striving rather than the main one. In writing as tree, sheep, stone, nettle and bird, common materials used in design: timber, wool, stone, plant fibre and feathers, carry forward their gifts and surround us with intelligences other than our own. Granted, such writings are but a small step towards a life-centred worldview for design. Yet to work in this way, leading with sensory experience, is to feel these intelligences alive and close. They teach us differently to the ways many of us have been taught before. Their lessons are about appreciation, complexity and the hope and possibility of right relationship with Earth.



## Tree-centered

This day, like every other day,  
we live as pure sensation.

We are racing, seeking, sinking. We are small and big movements. We are stillness. Noise. Touch. We live where we stand in a series of slow poses. First this one. Then this. Then this. Time moves in decades. Our trunks swell. Leaves bud and fall.

The quiet depths of shadows press coldly into our bodies. Moisture drops out of cool air, settling itself into gradients along our branches. The vapour has little energy left. It descends into our bark and tissue, cooling us to the same ice crystal temperatures as the night sky. Above, the moon's light is pale, old ivory. It falls across our high branches, laying there, tender.

Heaviness, solidity, rootedness. Reachingness, branchingness, light. Gravity holds us, it guides us down, deeply. The sun, then, by contrast, gives us wings. In between the two, the tearing hands of the air and the wind grab and caress our bodies in movements of many pauses and then, suddenly, of passion. The downing of a limb, the shimmering of an entire forest of aspen leaves, the clacking of branches one against the other; these things ululate through our lands as messages. And then there is the flow of water. It tugs hard on every fibre, every cell. We shape towards it, craning our roots to its rumblings, its vital music.

Bird language bubbles up. It claws through our tops and our middles. The songs cross our bark thresholds as vibration. Felt sound. We feel the feet of birds as pressure. Their nests as heat. When a buzzard lands on a leading shoot, our tops bend. The bird lifts off, our shoots straighten.

Colour passes into our bodies as radiating energy. Arsenic-green lichen is a cool diffuse breath. The mauve of winter leaves, a quiet hum. The blanket grey-white light of winter sun, a day-long exhale.

## Sheep world



At night we sleep apart. We tuck ourselves against a wall, lie on a path, in the reeds. The dark sky spins above us, bodies separate but somehow together. Our weight flattens stems. Icy surfaces tear fibres from our coats when we rise. We wake with the light, with a call, a cough, the bark of a pheasant.

We graze like we sleep, apart. We are near but not close, our flanks not touching. We tear at the grass, rasping it with our hunger. Then an alarm is raised, one of us hears a sound and our separateness dissolves. We start to move, to run, to bunch. As we flee, we are one body, a herd. As we have always been.

Our nerves keep us alive. Panic is what coils the wool on our backs, fries it into springs, makes us jumpy. We stare at the world through pill-shaped pupils, holding our gaze like we hold our vulnerability, tight. We process all against nervy instincts. And then our babies come. The most ancient, primal force arches our backs, turns our eyes upwards and we stop running. We birth where we stand and lick our young into life, butting and nuzzling them to the teat. Protectors now, we stamp a foot, hold some ground. Providers now, we sleep together, bodies spooned, as close on the outside, as we were in the womb. As our young grow, so does their fear. But not until the sun is hot and we search out shade and claw the hot fleece off our bodies on hawthorn bushes. In our rest we are still on edge and call for them, our children, when the alarm comes. We call them to our sides as our pulses race and our bodies skit. Then there is a time when they do not come. We call through dark and light.

And again, we sleep apart.

Stone life



Cold

Old

Tough

Proud

Slow

Heat

Sun

Bake

Crack

Cool

Heat

Split

Tear

Fracture

Fissure

Open

Centre

Soft

Dust

Fly

Slip

Rumble

Fall

Drop

Crash

Echo





## Nettle heart

We hear that some smooth-bodied creatures, stung by our hairs, run home to their mothers crying for them to blow on the hurt and kiss it better. "Children", these creatures' mothers say as they comfort them. "know your neighbours".

This is us: We are weightless, a cloud of seeds shaken from our mothers' tassel heads. Suspended in the air, we float and drift, biological will-o'-the-wisps. As the breeze catches us, we waft this way and that; the draught's flurries playing in our skirts. All the while we feel a larger, magnetic force working on our bodies, pulling us slowly, inexorably, downwards. Then the rain, in a squall punch, knocks us to the ground. Ours is a silent arrival. Unheralded, unbidden. Our fertile grains, waiting.

We wait to sense it: the dampness, the blackness, the looseness of soil. We wait for the feeling of disturbed ground, the cool heavy dark of moisture and nitrogen. We wait to feel the hot breath of a rootling snout, the cold metal of a garden spade, the feet, the passage of humans as they scuff and turn the soil, making gaps into which we slip, into the depths.

In the black depths we split open. A root and a shoot. One thirsty for drink. One hungry for light. Others of our kind are here in the dark with us. Creeping rhizomes cousins, travelling distances below the soil. We meet and mingle. And above, in the light, aunties shoot in mid-air, rooting at nodes, stretching out feelers towards new ground.



We feel the ground, housing our upright wiry stems and from there we push up, to the light. It feels like inevitability. It feels like power, like history. We put out multiple pairs of serrated saw-edged leaves and drink the sun that catches in these first bowls of green. The sun tastes sweet. We drain the leaf bowls, syphoning off their verdant syrupiness and we pipe it everywhere.

The pumping sets the rhythm of our days. Its pulse, a wave to catch, a tidal bore of life in which we revel and feast. As we grow taller, our leaves flatten and reach wider, bowls no more, but trays, to carry away more of this ambrosia. Now as we drink we are like a fire in summer. Yet we know without knowing that it will not last. We taste a new dulling in the sun. It makes the green of our leaves tip towards brown. Our senses remain sharp.

Sharp too are our stinging hairs. Our leaves and stems covered in fuzz that we give up at the slightest touch. Here: take this. And this. And this. The transfer, from us to other, marks us indelibly. We feel our hairs' absence as coldness, as numbness, our senses stripped. We also feel their loss in other ways. Newly sleek, differently aerodynamic, the wind runs across our hairless surfaces, bending us, bowing us separate to all the rest. Quid pro quo. We give up these hairs to hold our ground, to protect our thickets and our pollen-heavy flowers.





## Being bird

The air is an ever-renewing block to be carved. We make of it what we will with our wings. We sculpt it with chisels of instinct. We cut through it with feathers and felt sensation. We bisect it, tangle with it, hold it, conduct it and it does that same to us. We exchange daring, energy and intimacy one with the other. We are familiar. We call each other by our names.

Around us the air is never still, its character and grain reforms constantly. It slides over itself with unseen knots of pressure. Splits form within it around branches of gusts grown by faraway winds, winds in which we find freedom. The news these zephyrs bring we read with our bodies. Its messages we decipher via our primary feathers and in the vibrations of our breasts. The storm on the horizon is never a surprise. The date of the mayfly hatching, the flowering of the linden trees, they are foreknown.

Our hearing is sharp as talons, radial, open as a net in which we catch danger and beauty both. We hear the thrush and know so many possible songs. We hear the curlew and know the wetlands are near. We hear a man and know to run, shouting out an alarm. We don't hear the owl.

Our sight is telescopic. It is ultraviolet. It is trained on movement, on shape; it is honed by hunger. Vole. Worm. Rabbit. Fish. Seed. We tilt our head and decide the odds. Worth it? Not worth it. We turn away, trimming our wings towards the turned-up earth after a plough. We circle, climbing higher and see shapes in the loose, large, expressive arcs of land, sky, sea. We see beyond them and into them, at what is becoming, heading towards it.



Kate Fletcher (PhD) is a Guest Professor at the Planet Lab, Design School Kolding. She is one of the most cited scholars in fashion and sustainability, and her work, including that on systems change, post-growth fashion, fashion localism, decentring durability and Earth Logic, defines and challenges the field. She has written and/or edited eleven books available in eight languages. Kate is a co-founder of the Union of Concerned Researchers in Fashion. She is also a Professor at the Royal Danish Academy, Copenhagen and at Oslo Metropolitan University in Norway. Her most recent work is about design, clothing and nature.



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