

In Praise of the Worm

Before launching into my words on worms, it seems especially appropriate when talking about soil, and earth, to acknowledge that we are gathering on Wurundjeri land today. I pay my respects to elders past, present, and emerging, who have always, and will continue, to care for the land. Like myself and my settler-colonist ancestors, the majority of worms found in gardens and worm farms are not native. In fact, there are over 1000 species of native worms in Australia and only approximately 80 introduced species. But one thing we do know is that they are ALL beneficial for soil.

While today we are here to celebrate the humble garden earth worm for the duties it performs in eating our waste and fertilising our food, let's not forget we are also on the continent that has some of the largest native worms in the world. For example, the Giant Earthworm of Gippsland apparently can grow to 4 metres long – so long, that they have often been mistaken for snakes! Meanwhile the Squirter Earthworm of coastal New South Wales, which is a mere half a metre in length, squirts jets of fluid from a series of holes down its back if disturbed!

Worms are, literally, foundational creatures, in fact, as the great book says, “In the beginning, there was the worm!” Well, OK, in this instance, the “great book” in question is not the Bible, but a book by the French Philosopher Jacques Derrida called *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. Of course, Derrida's having fun, making a pun out of a holy text. But he's also got a more serious agenda. He's trying to figure out how we human animals understand and relate to non-human animals, and he's asking us, in the very roundabout and convoluted way of a French philosopher, to re-examine our preconceptions and prejudices about the animal kingdom.

Charles Darwin would agree with Derrida's phrase, as he too thought that the entire history of the world, would not have been possible without worms. In fact, he also wrote a great book, the very last thing he ever wrote, entirely about worms, called “The Formation of Vegetable Mould: Through the Action of Worms, with Observations on Their Habits”. (This was before the days of best sellers with snappy titles). This book was the summation of 40 years of experiments, in which Darwin played bassoon to his worms, chewed tobacco and breathed upon them, waved perfumes at them, and fed them all number of things, finding for example that they preferred wild cherry leaves and carrot tops to cabbage and celery. He was convinced that worms possess “a mind of some kind”, and that they even display individual character traits.

Long before Darwin was around, someone else realised how important worms were to soil fertility, and therefore, to life itself. In Ancient Egypt, none other than Cleopatra decreed that the earthworm should be revered and protected as a sacred animal. I think Cleopatra would have approved that this worm is gold in colour, which speaks to a divine nature (and of course, gold comes from the ground too, just like worms!) In Cleopatra's time, anyone caught removing worms from the land could be put to death! I wonder what punishment Cleopatra would have issued to those who have tagged the base of this statue?

Derrida made his pun “In the Beginning There Was the Worm” by substituting word for worm, and worms *do* worm their way into language. You probably know that Vermicelli means little worm-like noodles, but did you know that the colour vermilion comes from the Latin *vermiculus* meaning “a little worm” in reference to the cochineal insect from which crimson dyes were obtained. Sadly, the word “vermin” is also derived from the Latin word for worm – and that should give you some indication as to how they have been perceived. In those times, snakes were also called worms, and generally anything creeping or ground-dwelling was regarded with suspicion. My favourite theorist, Donna Haraway, wrote a recent book in which she celebrates the “tentacular” that is, anything that wriggles, and anything that is low-down and dirty, in the muddy, muddled, thick of it all. This, she says, is where the real thinking takes place. She has a bumper sticker that reads “Composting is so Hot!”

Like Haraway, I think Kathy’s work is so important, because it turns our expectations upside down, and challenges us to see the world differently. I’ve followed Kathy’s practice for a while now, and I first started taking notice of her when she made an installation of hundreds of hand-made flying fox sculptures in the Atrium at Federation Square. Flying Foxes, like worms, do great things for the environment, yet people either ignore them, or complain about them. They are even called pests, even though they are native and endangered. Like worms, flying foxes call for an upside-down view of the world, because they hang from trees, and fly at night. The Chilean theorist Macarena Gomez-Barris, who runs a research institute called the Global South Centre, talks about a “submerged perspective” which means “seeing from below”, appropriate sentiments for this antipodean nation. This is the point of view of that which takes place under the radar, and is reparative, rather than extractive. With the *Unsung Hero*, Kathy takes what is usually under the plinth, and puts it on top, a carnivalesque reversal which gives the spotlight to that which is usually hidden, and where we have to pay respects to that which we take for granted.

Worms are magicians, they are alchemists who turn our waste, our food scraps into black gold – so it’s apt that this worm here has turned into a golden symbol for the kind of wealth that can’t be quantified because it is about nurturing life itself. Worms not only allow us to continue to feed ourselves, they create topsoil which stops erosion, and also sequesters carbon from the atmosphere. Worms are our allies on this heating planet, and we need to combat global warming with global worming – more worms, most compost, more gardens, more veggies, and, most crucially, more respect! This sculpture is a wonderful reminder to pay our respects to the land upon which we stand, and to *all* custodians of the land, human, and more-than-human.

Tessa Laird, October 20, 2019