





ARTICLE

# Activating the Climate Child Imaginary: Intergenerational Collaboration as a Long-term Strategy for Climate Justice Education

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(Received 11 September 2024; revised 14 March 2025; accepted 15 March 2025)

## Abstract

This article explores the potentials of intergenerational collaboration as a long-term research strategy for shifting social and political imaginaries around climate change. It brings together academics and youth researchers who began working together on the *Climate Change and Me* project in 2014, along with colleagues who joined them for a public panel, book launch and exhibition ten years later. *Climate Change and Me* was the first large-scale study of climate change education applying a child- and youth-framed methodology, and has led to numerous exhibitions, curriculum resources, digital platforms, and publications co-created with children and young people. This article gives voice to young people's reflections on the impact of their involvement with this project a decade on, drawing on the transcript of a public panel conversation at the Design Hub Gallery in Naarm (Melbourne). It explores how young people's early experiences as child researchers have intersected with political, social and educational change across time, while opening new conversations with intergenerational colleagues working in related areas of climate justice education, activism and research.

**Keywords:** Climate change; climate child imaginaries; child and youth voice; intergenerational learning; longitudinal studies; participatory research

## Introduction

In 2014, a team of educational researchers joined forces with 135 children and young people (ages 9–14) in Northern New South Wales, Australia to explore the impacts of climate change in their everyday lives. This project, entitled *Climate Change and Me*, was the first large scale study of the social and educational implications of climate change using a child- and youth-framed methodology. Over a three-year period, child and youth researchers engaged in professional training in ethnography and arts-based methods under the mentorship of practising researchers. They were introduced<sup>1</sup> to the Anthropocene as a threshold concept for describing and understanding the irreparable impacts of human societies on the Earth's climate and biosphere (Lewis & Maslin, 2015; Steffen et al, 2007), while also exploring theoretical tools for critically interrogating the Anthropocene concept's inherent assumptions and exclusions

<sup>1</sup>See Rousell and Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles (2023) for further details on how this theory was introduced and explored with the children and young people in the Climate Change and Me project.

(Chakrabarty, 2014; Malm & Hornberg, 2014; Todd, 2015). This was conducted in full day research training workshops which utilised films, select readings and participatory arts activities to create research playspaces through which children and young people could explore complex theories and concepts in relational dialogue and creative play (Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles & Rousell, 2019). Child and youth researchers were then encouraged to develop their own research projects exploring questions and methods for investigating the impacts of climate change and the Anthropocene in their own lives.

The work that ensued from this open-ended investigation took numerous angles and directions, ranging from scientific analyses to philosophical manifestos, ethnographic studies, experimental films and illustrated speculative fiction (Rousell & Cutter-Mackenzie, 2023). Over the past decade this work has been shared with the public through curated exhibitions, curriculum resources, digital platforms and peer-reviewed publications that feature children and young people's research (see, for instance, Cutter-Mackenzie & Rousell, 2019; Rousell *et al.*, 2023). This has enabled global engagement with children and young people's thoughts, feelings, sensations, political consciousness and aesthetic imaginings of climate change within their own lives and situated communities.<sup>2</sup> By inviting children and young people to engage with critical research concepts and methods and take them in their own directions, the Climate Change and Me project established a new methodology, platform and evidence base for child- and youth-framed research, community engagement, and social, educational and political action on climate change.

In the 10 years since the initial Climate Change and Me project was completed, climate change has continued to accelerate (IPCC, 2022). Intergenerational tensions have also increased as political fault lines have grown between fascist political movements and justice-oriented youth movements calling for governmental action on climate change, genocide, and the structural racisms that underpin global economic and social policies (Trott, 2024). Widening inequalities, entangled with the injustices that climate change undoubtably amplifies, mean that those most devastatingly impacted by the causes and effects of climate change are often those who have done the least to contribute to global emissions (Sultana, 2022). In response, millions of young people have significantly advanced social movements toward climate justice through large scale orchestrations of school strikes and demonstrations in cities and major political conventions over the past six years (Mayes & Arya, 2024; Verlie & Flynn, 2022; White *et al.*, 2022). New assemblages of planetary governance and political desire have emerged in the wake of these strikes (Rousell & Sinclair, 2024), calling for a new social contract which repositions education to address the global priorities of climate change, biodiversity loss and unequal access to health services, food, energy, water, technology and security (UNESCO, 2022).

The IPCC's Sixth Assessment Report (Pörtner *et al.*, 2022) cites the Climate Change and Me project as a critical step toward bringing young people's political voice and agency to the fore of global discussions on climate justice, while the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (2015) and UNESCO Futures of Education report (2022) cited above reinforce the urgent role of education in forging effective climate action, both now and into the future. However, a recent global policy review suggests that only very few nations have legislated climate change education into governmental policy frameworks (McKenzie, 2021). In the Australian context, investment in climate change education clearly intersects with Australia's Long-Term Emissions Reduction Plan (Commonwealth of Australia, 2021) but has yet to be explicitly included in any federal policy agendas. While the urgency of acting on climate change was widely considered a major turning point for Australia's 2022 federal election (Mallapaty, 2022), the significance and urgency of

<sup>2</sup>We acknowledge the particularity of this cohort of children and young people in Rousell and Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles (2023), where we outline the specific demographics, history, and geography of the coastal region of Northern New South Wales where the original study was conducted. We acknowledge that children and young people are not, by default, interested or alarmed by climate change, and that the climate imaginaries within which children and young people are webbed are intergenerational – including, at times, intergenerational webs of climate denialism and/ or scepticism.

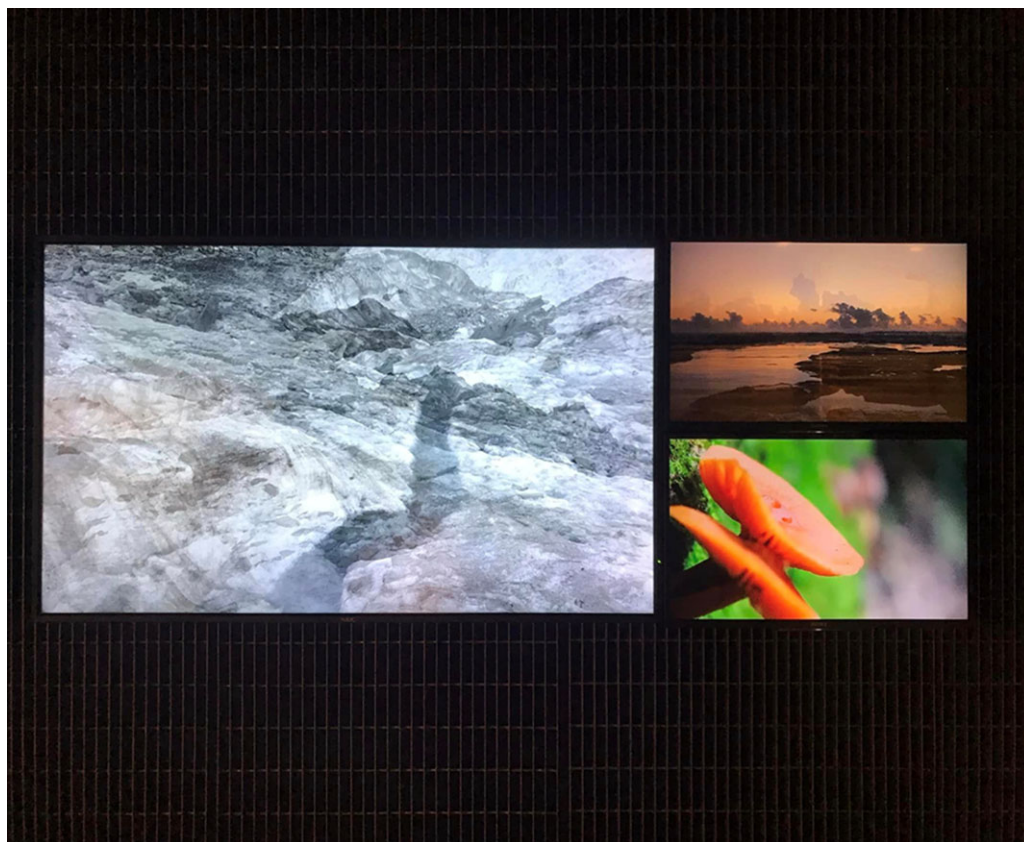
*climate change education* remains largely overlooked by governmental policy, news media and public discourse in the Australian context.

In 2023, ten years after *Climate Change and Me* was first initiated, we convened an intergenerational panel to discuss the significance of climate change education within the Australian policy context and celebrate the publication of *Posthuman Research Playspaces: Climate Child Imaginaries*. Written by co-authors David Rousell and Amy Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles, the book is the first long-form publication of the methodological and theoretical contributions of the *Climate Change and Me* project to policy, practice, and research across the humanities, arts, and social sciences.

Central to the book's premise is the construction of "climate child imaginaries" as a figuration of the material, affective and social conditions through which climate change becomes entangled with childhood. Imaginaries can be understood as sensory, conceptual, and emotional structures which are collectively embodied and relationally interwoven with the fabric of everyday life. Rousell and Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles (2023) define the climate child imaginary as a massively distributed assemblage of concepts, affects and sensations which include multiple ecologies, varied sciences and fictions, along with the myriad social practices and policy discourses arising from differently situated geographical and historical contexts. Their inquiry into the climate child imaginary looks to pluralise the scientific, cultural, political, philosophical and creative perspectives that might be considered at the intersect of climate change and childhood, while simultaneously drawing attention to structures of power through which certain perspectives gain dominance while others are marginalised or even extinguished. They describe this as a practice of collectively attending to how the climate child imaginary "shifts with each experiential encounter with the world, as a rapidly mutating confluence of matters of ecological fact, value, care, feeling, thought, and concern" (p. 7). We believe this shifting image of the climate child imaginary is key to thinking and working intergenerationally, because it takes seriously the proposition that new and different imaginaries can provide the critical impetus and direction for transformative action in times of uncertainty and upheaval.

Our open-ended engagement with the climate child imaginary serves as the conceptual touchstone for this paper, which asks: How can the climate child imaginary be activated through intergenerational relationships, and how do we register the changes these activations produce in the public sphere? The launch of *Posthuman Research Playspaces: Climate Child Imaginaries* provided a novel opportunity to explore these questions across a range of media and modes of public address. The event took place at RMIT's Design Hub Gallery in Naarm (Melbourne), on the unceded Country of the Eastern Kulin Nation, as part of a curated exhibition titled *Wild Hope: Conversations for a Planetary Commons*. Curated by Naomi Stead, Fleur Watson, Wendy Steele and Katrina Simon, the exhibition featured work by contemporary artists, architects, and designers addressing an urgent and radical shift toward planetary thinking which understands "oceans, air, rivers, soil, minerals, forests, glaciers and species biodiversity ... as beyond borders and therefore a collective responsibility" (Design Hub Gallery, 2024).

Our contribution to this exhibition was a three-channel video installation titled "Climate Child Imaginaries". The installation was composed of children's photographs of glaciers, rainforests and intertidal zones from the *Climate Change and Me* project alongside their critical writings on climate change (Figure 1). Crafted using an elemental approach to digital arts and eco-media design (Rousell et al., 2023), the video installation slowed the speed of transition between children's photographs and texts below the threshold of human perceptibility. This created a sense of barely detectable change taking place as viewers encountered the work, akin to the humanly imperceptible denudation of glaciers, forests and waterways which, in geological and biological timescales, are nonetheless degenerating at unprecedented speeds. Alongside this installation of children's visual and textual research, the book launch also featured an intergenerational panel talk about the book's contributions and implications for climate change education and policymaking (Figure 2). Co-authors Amy and David were joined by Finn Ball, Riley Ball, Kairo



**Figure 1.** Installation view of 'Climate Child Imaginaries', 3 channel video installation of children's photographs and writing at *Wild Hope: Conversations for a Planetary Commons*, Design Hub Gallery, Melbourne, 2023.

Byrne, Jasmyne Foster and Sam Lucena who had originally worked on *Climate Change and Me* as child researchers, along with colleagues Netta Maiava, Eve Mayes and Annette Gough who are practising researchers and climate activists across different career and life stages.

### Centring the ethics of collaboration in environmental education research

This article pivots on our panel conversation at *Wild Hope* as an example of how intergenerational collaboration can become a long-term strategy for reshaping social and political imaginaries around climate change in public spaces. It focuses on how young people's early experiences as child researchers have intersected with political, social and educational change over the past decade, while opening new conversations with intergenerational colleagues working in related areas of climate justice education, activism and research. Here we build on work by Indigenous scholar Lewis Williams (2022), who uses the terms *Indigenous-to-place* and *no-longer-Indigenous-to-place* to "convey peoples' varying states of intergenerational connection and disconnection from ancestral lands" (p. 4). Williams foregrounds concepts of intergenerational resilience cultivated through ancestral relations with lands, skies and waterways across time, an approach which "recognizes ecology as an animating force and that all people develop from ecological origins" (ibid).

In bringing together voices from different generations and differing relations with ecologies near and far, we seek to explore place-based ways that intergenerational collaboration can work to

activate alternative imaginaries that disrupt mainstream discourses and policy actions on climate change. We acknowledge that frictions and tensions are unavoidable in conversations across embodied intersectional differences, particularly when we (and our intergenerational and more-than-human kin) are unevenly impacted by both the causes and effects of climate change in the places where we live and learn. As Lobo, Mayes, and Bedford (2024) note, intergenerational solidarities for planetary climate justice are contingent and polyphonous assemblages of power and desire which ask us to “pursue rather than gloss over dissimilarities and incommensurabilities” (p. 8). This means that the intersectional differences, ethical orientations and emplaced practices through which intergenerational collaboration is facilitated are just as, if not more, important than the contents or outcomes of the collaboration. It’s all about the question of ‘how’. This article therefore centres the practice of *how* to collectively facilitate and negotiate intergenerational collaboration in reciprocal and responsible ways as a significant and urgent area of environmental education research. With this in mind, we briefly introduce ourselves and our orientation toward this intergenerational work before describing our collaborative process in more detail.<sup>3</sup>

Finn Ball comes from the North Coast of NSW, a place that has given him both a love for the environment and an understanding of the importance of community. He is 23 years old and now lives on Gadigal land in Sydney studying a Bachelor of Laws and Economics (Hons).

Riley Ball grew up in the North Coast of NSW and is now living in Brisbane. He is 20 years old and studying a Bachelor of Biomedical Science and Marine biology at the University of Queensland. Riley is passionate about preserving the environment and loves exploring the natural world through triathlons, hiking and snorkelling.

Kairo Byrne grew up in the Northern Rivers in NSW, and was raised to respect and protect the many ecosystems we are all part of. Currently living in Meanjin, they are an undergraduate student at the University of Queensland. Kairo values community, mutual aid, and radical, creative action in the face of our uncertain future.

Amy Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles was born in Naarm (Melbourne) in 1977 (46) and is the youngest of six children. In later childhood her family relocated to remote Central Queensland on Western Kanguulu Country. She now resides on Wangerriburra Country, also known as Tamborine Mountain in South-East Queensland. Amy’s early career was as a primary/secondary school teacher, and she is now a professor of sustainability, environment and education. She comes to this collaboration as a listener, teacher, activist, and researcher deeply committed to honouring children and young people’s rights and voices, climate education and ways of living in deep relation with and on Country,

Jasmyne Foster originally from the Northern Rivers now lives in Brisbane. Always too busy drawing to pay attention she pursued her passion and is now a practising illustrator and part of the Brisbane community supporting the arts and other areas of ethical and slowly made practice.

Annette Gough was born in Naarm (Melbourne) in 1950 and she currently lives on the unceded lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Eastern Kulin Nation in Naarm. Her ancestry is British/Irish, with the first settlers arriving in Australia in the early 1800s. Her undergraduate studies were in biological sciences and education and she has worked in these fields for most of her career. She is a passionate environmental educator and feminist researcher who comes to this project with a concern for environmental protection and engaging young people in learning about and caring for the environment.

Sam Lucena was born in the Northern Rivers of NSW 22 years ago. His love for the outdoors tries to compensate for the time indoors spent studying a Bachelor of Software Engineering

<sup>3</sup>Our positionality statements are listed in alphabetical order in respectful acknowledgement of our shared thinking and work as intergenerational collaborators. Our authorship order is also alphabetical following David, whom the group elected as first author due to his overall convening and facilitation of the panel talk, launch event, and co-authorship process.



(Hons) at Brisbane. Sam values caring for the environment that we are lucky to be a part of and ensuring those after us can enjoy it as much as we can.

Netta Maiava was born in New Zealand and is 22 years old. She is of Samoan descent and is currently living on the stolen lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Eastern Kulin Nation in Naarm (Melbourne). She is currently working as a research associate for a participatory research project, looking into young people, climate justice and education. As the coordinator of the Pacific Climate Warriors team in the Kulin Nations, she is passionate about the connection to land, and Indigenous knowledge being key to solving the climate crisis.

Eve Mayes was born in Hong Kong, when it was under British colonial lease; she is 43 years old. She is a white migrant of Russian and British ancestry, currently living on the stolen lands of the Wadawurrung people of the Eastern Kulin Nation. She comes to this collaboration as a former English and English as an Additional Language teacher, now educational researcher. She is currently collaborating with young climate justice advocates on a four-year participatory project about young people, climate justice and education. In collaborating intergenerationally, she is concerned about the possibilities and tensions of research, particularly considering the historical and ongoing role of research in colonial violence.

David Rousell was born in Connecticut on the Atlantic coast of the United States and he is 45 years old. He is a migrant settler of mixed European and North American ancestry currently living on the unceded lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Eastern Kulin Nation in Naarm (Melbourne), Australia. He comes to this collaboration as an artist, writer and researcher who is deeply invested in place-based practices of co-facilitation and ethical negotiation across intergenerational communities, ecologies, histories and knowledge cultures.

As you can read from our descriptions above, we each come to this collaboration from different places, histories and ethical orientations. These differences shape our intergenerational collaboration as much as our shared interests or concerns, such as climate activism or climate justice education. Attending and valuing these differences is key to working toward culturally responsive and safe practices for intergenerational research, knowledge exchange and political action. The concepts of “intergenerational resilience” (Williams, 2022) and “intergenerational solidarity” (Trott, 2024) offer generative framings for our approach to working toward cultural safety across generations with care (Ramsden, 1990). While these concepts have many interpretations and usages, they broadly characterise approaches in which structural power imbalances and racial injustices are actively acknowledged and addressed through practices of mutual care, responsibility and reciprocity across generational and other forms of intersectional difference (Curtis *et al.*, 2019). Richardson, Carriere, and Boldo (2017) describe how, in their work as Indigenous educators, a sense of “safety can be enhanced through the energy that circulates . . . by the words and by the presence of each human being” (p. 192). This suggests that intergenerational resilience and solidarity is less a framework or set of protocols to be applied, and closer to a felt quality, attunement and reciprocal circulation of energies.

Working to cultivate and sustain intergenerational resilience and solidarity is an incomplete and ongoing project. Attending to intergenerational dynamics requires a constant recalibration of energies in response to the changing conditions of our lives, the differentiating histories and presences of the places we co-inhabit, and our varied patterns of relationship with others within these places (Whyte, 2018). Climate change offers a powerful example of this. How can we expect to uphold a static framework for collaboration when we are receiving new political, scientific, technological, aesthetic, sensorial and spiritual information about climate change with every passing moment? The challenge is to make our practices of collaboration responsive to the shifting conditions of the events we participate in, the places we co-inhabit, the contested histories and institutions that structure our work, and the planetary flows of relationality which animate our lives. This is the intergenerational challenge we set out in this article, and part of the message we send out to policymakers and the wider public.

Central to addressing this challenge is learning to articulate how we devise and enact intergenerational collaboration through an ethics of collective care and solidarity (Wrigley et al., 2024). Our approach to this collaboration began when David and Amy reached out to Sam, Jasmyne, Kairo, Riley and Finn as youth researchers from the original project whose work featured in the book. We had previously been in touch during the book's development and invited them to join the panel for the launch event. This group then extended the invitation to Eve, Netta, Annette as colleagues working on issues relating to climate justice and education from a range of generational perspectives. In preparation for the panel and book launch we convened online gatherings where we read and discussed chapters of the book as a group, and collectively devised a series of questions to structure the panel discussion. This enabled the co-development of a panel schedule and plan for who would ask each question and who might be interested to respond. This design explicitly foregrounded youth voices, with intergenerational (older) voices as facilitators and respondents. On September 5th, 2023, we gathered in-person at the Design Hub Gallery for the panel and book launch which was attended by approximately 40 members of the public. Attendees had the opportunity to ask questions of the panel and spend time engaging with the extraordinary range of creative works curated for the Wild Hope exhibition, including the *Climate Child Imaginaries* video installation. Following the panel we enjoyed a shared meal and discussed plans for this article using the recording of the panel talk as primary material. Over the coming months we transcribed the panel conversation into a shared online document and worked to organise the article's sections around concepts and questions that were collectively devised in our preparation for the panel: *Figurations of childhood and climate change; Curricular perspectives, knowledges, and values; Speculative aesthetics as affective activism; and Intergenerational affects*. What follows is the result of our collective process of crafting the transcript into a research article, through which each contributor was given the option to rephrase and contextualise what was said during the original panel discussion.

### Figurations of children and climate change

**Kairo:** The first chapter of the book explores how childhood has become entangled with climate change and the Anthropocene within social imaginaries and activist movements over the past two decades. My first question is about this first chapter, and how the figure of the child is central to the climate activism movement. Why do you think that is? Do you think this focus on childhood is potentially beneficial or detrimental to climate justice?

**Sam:** I feel like it's an interesting fact that the image of the child is so prominent in climate activism. Because climate change is part of the world we grew up in, and it's a very different world to grow up in compared to previous times. Seeing the progress of science and learning as an adult about the kind of problems we're facing as children born into the 21st century, these are problems that will affect our entire lives. We don't really know a world where this climate science wasn't known and taken for granted. So, the understanding we have of climate change is much more foundational in our knowledge as young people today. I can't imagine a world where we didn't know about the effects of climate change. And I can't imagine a world where those problems don't need to be faced right now, even though they're not being faced right now, or not being faced in the right direction, or as much as we want. For example, 55% of Australians do not want to face in the right direction. I don't know what a world looks like without this known reality of climate change and people's wilful ignorance of it. And it would be really nice to see many more children exposed to climate change in the ways that we were. I still think it was quite good for our progression as learners and as people. I guess it's good for us to learn about decline in this way.

**Netta:** Just adding onto your point, on how the child came into the movement as a poster child. It's definitely, I think, around the messaging of hope. Also, when you think about images of the future, it's usually children that you think of. And so I think that's how images of the child in the

climate movement came about. But I think putting children at the forefront or as the main image can be a bit dangerous. I think the more we move into the climate action movement, we've started to shift the accountability of the damages that happened in the past and make children responsible for making the change. But I definitely believe that children should be a part of the conversation. I think a lot of times when we talk about the climate movement, we are focusing on what we're doing, and how much work we have to put in. But I think we should look at who's to blame and who's making the damages and how to make them accountable. But hope is definitely a big message from the Pacific Climate Warriors, our biggest motto is "we are not drowning, we are fighting." And we definitely encourage messages of hope, because I think without it, we would be stuck here.

**Sam:** That kind of leads into the question that I had about this chapter as well, which was, around how the figure of the child is so compelling in these conversations. But this is a very open-ended question with no real answer. Why does the image of the child give such a huge amount of hope? Because generally, a lot of the really deep thought that's been done over a long time is by important scientists, or researchers, people who have been doing this for a lot longer than the children of the world. Why aren't they more of the forefront? Why is just the child sitting here, when important work is not necessarily done only by them in that moment, but has been progressed over decades?

**Annette:** I think it's being very cynical. We've got such distrust of anything that comes out of scientists' mouths at the moment, and that is terrifying. And I think one way of trying to influence people who distrust scientists, is to make them focus on the future, which is their children or their grandchildren. And I think that's a really strong vehicle for trying to get messages across. Because you're not necessarily thinking of just right now, you're thinking of the world that your children and grandchildren and great grandchildren are going to inherit. And I think that is one reason for the child being so central, because we've still got the climate sceptics, the 55% that still think we don't need to do something. So I think that that's one reason for the child.

**Jasmyne:** I think it's interesting that the child is associated with the idea that "it's for the children, this is for the future of the children." And yet simultaneously, there's this thought that people don't listen to the children, that children don't know what they're talking about. And it's not just children, I think it's young people in general. When they talk about children, they're not only talking about kids that are 12 and under, but they're also talking about young adults, teenagers, and those are people who are making movements with reasoning. And those are people who are aware of their surroundings and aware of the social and political climate. And yet, nobody's listening to them because they're young, and they think young people don't know what they're talking about, which is really interesting in itself. So it's great that Amy and David actually listened to us in the Climate Change and Me project, because otherwise we wouldn't have a platform to say this because nobody listens to young people, or people don't listen enough to young people to hear these concerns that we have.

**Eve:** Just to add on to what Jasmyne said, I think the way in which the book showed young people playing with these ideas is really profound. One of my personal favourite snapshots is from Daniel, who's age 10 at the time, who has his iPad videoing an interview that he's having with a tree. And he asks the tree, "what do you think about climate change?" And there's a three second pause. And then he asks further questions along those lines. I like the way in which it seems that the project enabled these creative lines of inquiry. I think you invited young people themselves to query: who gets to speak for the climate? Could we just ask the trees? Which groups are privileged: who do we invite to answer questions about the climate? Are scientists privileged in discussions of climate change? Shouldn't it be First Nations people first - First Nations justice - what we're talking about this year with the First Nations Voice to Parliament.<sup>4</sup> A lot of climate justice

<sup>4</sup>In October, 2023 the Australian public voted on a referendum to establish a permanent First Nations advisory body to advise the government on issues affecting First Nations peoples. The referendum did not receive enough affirmative votes to be passed on this occasion. See <https://ulurustatement.org/the-voice/what-is-the-voice/> for more information.



networks will foreground that the conversation has to be focused on First Nations-led solutions. What I love in the book is that it really foregrounds young people collectively experimenting with questions of who speaks for the Earth.

**Finn:** Reflecting on why the figure of the child is so compelling, from my perspective, I could break it down into three key categories. The first thing is that children are the impetus for creating climate reform, because they're the ones who will have to deal with this in the future. So that's my category one. The second would be that young people are not just passive victims in this, they actually are agents of change. We saw in the school climate strikes that children and young people can act as advocates. My third category would be children acting almost as a mechanism to create change. I mean, when we were doing the Climate Change and Me program, we were going to school, we were heading into the University, we were talking about climate change, and then we were bringing those conversations home. And we start to notice things like the lights being on and the recycling and things like that. And so in my mind, getting back to Sam's question, yes it's important that science remains at the forefront of discussions about climate change. And people might say kids don't really have a voice in this matter, because they haven't had the lived experience and they don't have the scientific qualifications. But in my head, children still play an incredibly important role as the impetus, the advocate and the mechanism. If we have scientists who can offer children meaningful information, then children can then go out and make meaningful action through those three ways. That's how I see it.

### **Curricular perspectives, knowledges and values**

**David:** Chapter three looks at the methodology of co-design, co-production and genuine collaboration with children and young people as researchers, artists and theorists of climate change and the Anthropocene. It explores how we did that work by co-creating "research playspaces" as methods for intergenerational collaboration around these ideas. I'm interested in how different members of the panel see the value of climate change education in society, because our project was about co-developing a new form of climate change education that would integrate different knowledges and different perspectives. I'm wondering what the panel thinks is or should be valued within climate change education in terms of different knowledges, areas of focus, identities, cultures and relationships.

**Riley:** In terms of the first part of your question, I find that climate education is like a bit of hope. I am quite passionate about the environment. I care and I try. I'm a vegetarian, I try to look out for pollution and my impact on the environment. But I'm often frustrated by other people. I don't know if it's due to a lack of knowledge, or if it's just due to maybe their belief at the time, or their lack of passion and lack of interest in the idea of preserving the environment. I think the thing that I find interesting and important about the Climate Change and Me curriculum is that it kind of gives me hope that maybe in future generations, the knowledge can evolve to a way where everyone is making meaningful contributions and moving to a better future.

**Kairo:** I think that climate change education, and I can only speak for what I went through myself, is pretty lacking. What we had in school was just a scientific overview of what was occurring. I think an area in which we're really lacking is the history of climate change, and just general knowledge. Even now, quite a lot of people I talk to are surprised that climate change has been recorded and discussed for a long time. Obviously, our generation has grown up with the knowledge that climate change is real, but it's interesting to me that no one knows about Exxon's own research and subsequent denials. That's one of the main things that I think we're missing. And additionally, intersectional perspectives on climate issues – First Nations perspectives, and keeping in mind wealth inequality, and who climate change will disproportionately affect.

**Jasmyne:** Like Kairo said, education is very lacking. I think within the schools, obviously this project was probably the biggest source of education we got about climate change, or at least

probably the biggest that I got about climate change, before researching myself. And it's very interesting to see that there's this lack of acknowledgement. And I think that's part of why there's no action, there's no action to change it, because not everybody is aware of what it is. I think there's this pervasive sense that if you don't know what it is, then it's not your problem. And then it's not real. And you can just ignore it with blissful ignorance. But it's not true. And I think that there does need to be a reform of the education system, especially with regards to teaching young people about climate change and its impacts. And it shouldn't just be taught through television and the news and all these polarising events and the climate change strikes. Like it shouldn't just be, oh, this ozone tax. I remember when I was 10 years old, seeing news about the Co2 tax for businesses, and I was so confused about what it was. And then I found out that there was a hole in the ozone layer, and wondered, what is that? Why is there a hole there? And then I never heard anything about it ever since. It's so interesting that there was just this radio silence. And then suddenly, it came back into the public zeitgeist after all these protests happened. The problem never went away, we just stopped acknowledging it. We have to start acknowledging this all the time, instead of when it's convenient, or when it's newsworthy.

**Sam:** Pretty soon I'm going to be able to call myself an engineer. So a lot of these problems I look at with a reasonably practical hand. One of the things I really value in what I've learned about combating climate change, and how to protect the environment, is the notion of the "lifecycle analysis" which comes from the engineering world. And so, for a product, one of the things that's happened in recent history is REDcycle, the plastic recycling initiative run by Woolworths and Coles, has collapsed its ability to recycle soft plastics. And that's been a pretty big change in how I've thought about what I use in my household. Because no longer can I just think, "Oh, it's fine for me to buy this thing that's wrapped in plastic, because I'll just be able to quickly recycle." It turns out that is not how it works. That kind of knowledge is really valued to me. And it's valuable, because it means you can really investigate what kind of things you consume, and the kind of products and services that you use and how, even though you have convenience and ease of use through soft plastics, it's not a good thing. Alternatively, not wrapping things in plastic in a grocery store might also be a downside, because it means more food will spoil. That kind of practical knowledge is really valuable to me. And it's something that I've continued throughout my educational career in learning.

**Netta:** I think at a young age, the first knowledge I had of climate change was a concept surrounding Caring for Country, which is an Indigenous concept here. But I think it runs through a lot of other Indigenous cultures around the world, in different formats. So I think I truly believe and advocate that solutions for climate change are all in Indigenous knowledge. And I think that's what's really lacking in dominant systems of knowledge and the education on climate change. And on top of that, we have science. You've mentioned in the book about scientism, and how it's this concept about putting science on a pedestal, and it has become this system of knowledge that kind of comes beyond all other sciences, definitely forming the colonial and Western system of knowledges of today. And not only that, but science isn't very digestible or accessible. It's so hard to understand. I think having the voices of First Nations, especially when people are benefiting off stolen land, will definitely make a lot of key changes to the movement.

**Eve:** Yeah, and just building on that, Netta and I and the Striking Voices research team have had the privilege to be talking to young people in school now about what they're learning. And I wish they had the curriculum outlined in the book. What I love in the book is the way in which you co-design the curriculum, and you have these incredible artistic aesthetic products from young people created by them, and then you backward map them to the curriculum areas. So this reverse curriculum process that then hits all the curriculum areas, you know, imagine that! A joined-up curriculum that can join up history with art as well as English. And I think what is really striking to the Striking Voices research team, in some of the conversations we're having with young people involved in climate justice activism, is that a lot of young people still say, "we only learn the science that makes us anxious." Or "we watch a David Attenborough documentary, that



**Figure 2.** The panel discussion and book launch at the *Wild Hope: Conversations for a Planetary Commons* exhibition, Design Hub Gallery, Melbourne, 2023.

might be briefly inspiring, and then it's business-as-usual again." Young people we've spoken to want a joined-up curriculum, where they learn about the history of colonisation and capitalism, of how we got in this mess, and who is responsible and how we are part of this, and to then be able to have an aesthetic way to express their concerns beyond just "Okay, I'm an individual who needs to recycle more" or something like that (see Mayes et al, *under review*). I was cooking at a training camp for the Tomorrow Movement<sup>5</sup> a couple of weeks ago. And their first session was about white supremacy culture. And that was first and foremost, and they talk about the Master's House and colonialism and capitalism and white supremacy, as an unlearning of those habits (see Abhayawickrama, Mayes, & Villafana, 2024). And the young people who are there, including school students, are saying, "this is what I want to be learning. This is not what I'm learning at school."

### Speculative aesthetics as affective activism

**Kairo:** My question also touches on the scientism point: how do you think we can make climate change a more affective issue, and make people really care about it, instead of just sort of memorising scientific facts? What do you think the way forward is in terms of that?

**Jasmyne:** I think the way forward is through activism, speaking, being heard, having people listen, getting the message out. And also, I think a big part of it is media coverage and how media is made about climate change. I think artistic expression is one of the best ways to convey a message because people consume art. And sometimes they passively consume it, like we'll watch a show on Netflix, and we'll be cooking dinner. You can consume your passion passively and still get the message. And I think it's the best way to effectively communicate things. And I think that we should really be encouraging more media about it, more media coverage, news stories, media that's specifically made on issues of geological change, and things like that. It's about changing the way that people view it. Instead of it being this scary, ominous thing, I think we need to change the climate and the way that it's talked about in the way that it's visualised. And I think that media does a really good job of making it seem less scary than it is and making it more hopeful.

<sup>5</sup>The Tomorrow Movement is a political activist organisation coordinated by a collective of young people from across Australia. See <https://tomorrowmovement.com/> for more information.



**Figure 3.** Photograph taken by Sam Lucena during his trip to Franz Josef Glacier in 2014, and cover image for *Posthuman Research Playspaces: Climate Child Imaginaries*.

**David:** That segues into our question around children's creation of images in the project, and how that became a vehicle for affective modes of expressing impacts and responses to climate change. So I'm wondering, Sam, do you want to talk a little bit about your photography, which ended up being on the cover of the book, and also, in this exhibition?

**Sam:** I'm an avid partaker in nature, and I visited Franz Josef glacier in New Zealand while I was working on the Climate Change and Me project. Franz Josef glacier is a beautiful place on the South Island that over the last few decades has retreated kilometres back up the mountain. It used to be such that you could walk in from the start of the glacier and then go over the top, but now it's more of a 6k hike to even reach the glacier. That's even if you can still do the hike. We had to get helicoptered into it. During the few hours we spent walking around and getting guided through the glacier we were talking about the environment and climate. And I took some of these photos (Figure 3). The experience that I had gotten from the Climate Change and Me project helped me digest what I was looking at, and really appreciate what the effect of everything was, as I took these photos. They're kind of just abstract photos of ice, but the feelings I had while taking the photos were very mixed feelings of sadness and compassion, but also being compelled by what I was seeing. The photo they used for the cover of this book has a picture of an archway, a hole in the ice. And on the glacier we were told that these structures appear and disappear very, very quickly. So this one would melt and another would appear and then that one would be gone within a week or so. And a few of the other larger crevices and caves that we walked into would all be gone very quickly because it's part of the movement and fluid nature of a glacier. And I found that to be a reasonably apt way of thinking about the glacier as an allegory for climate change. The whole way that things change and move regardless of the actions of a few people, but as a conglomeration of the actions of a whole and the actions of humanity as we've arrived here. I was thinking about all



**Figure 4.** Illustration by Jasmyne Foster from her speculative fiction novella *The Changes*, created during the *Climate Change and Me* project (2014–2016).

these things as I was going through Franz Josef glacier, and I continue to do so today, thanks to the teaching and the expression that we did in the project all those years ago.

**David:** This links nicely to a discussion of chapter six, which looks at speculative fiction as a method of engaging with climate change that emerged from the project through Jasmyne's work.

**Jasmyne:** It's interesting to look back. I hadn't read it in a while. And when you contacted us about coming here and talking about it, I reread it. And found it very interesting what I wrote ten years ago. It's very sad with a lot of post-apocalyptic imagery. I wouldn't write it like that now. But it's interesting to see that kind of doom and gloom that we were discussing before about climate change and about how our world is currently, it kind of permeated into what I was writing (Figure 4). And it's interesting to examine speculative fiction as a way to convey messages about preserving our environment currently, and looking forward to the future of our environment where we have hopefully made steps to fix it. I think that at the time, there was a lot of apocalyptic dystopian media. And now I think that we've kind of shifted away from that. We're out of our doom and gloom phase. And now we're in our, oh, it's actually nice to think that media can be happy, and that we can be happy currently. So let's have some more positive outlooks on what we're doing and things like that. You see it in works of fiction, older works of fiction, also touching on that dystopian view. But current works of fiction are starting to get to the root of how nature is beautiful. You see this in the newer Disney movies where people are kind of coexisting with the natural environment and encouraging a love of nature, rather than this fear of what's going to happen to our world, in the future. And so I think we kind of need to keep with that positivity.

**David:** So would you write it differently now?

**Jasmyne:** Definitely, I would write something much more positive. Now that I look back at my writing I think 'That's really sad'. I think we need more messages of hope. And I think that we need to tackle the idea that there is a way to fix this. And we can have a future that we can look forward



to, one that's not just decimated. We need to look forward to something, otherwise what's the point of doing anything? We need to have something to look forward to and make it worth doing.

### Intergenerational feelings

**Netta:** Pacific Climate Warriors is an intergenerational organisation, we're a youth-led movement, but we have space for our Elders to work with us. Our Indigenous and cultural values rely heavily on respecting your Elders and making sure that you respect where you've come from. But in saying that, this youth movement that is coming in, is really driving the conversation. So where does that leave our values for our Elders, and looking back at where we come from? But in saying that, I had a conversation with my coordinator. And she said - I wrote down: "whatever changes that happens, it's always the youth that's going to change it. It's always young people that are changing what happens in the world." And even though it is very much the youth that pushes change, what they do depends on the nurturing of what has come before them and those around them. Because young people are also very vulnerable. So they need that support. And I think that intergenerational connection is so productive, it is very productive and very useful for the movement. I think having that relationship, that strong relationship between Elders and youth, enables a child or young person to be nurtured in the right way forward. You know, the youth *will* make the changes, it will definitely lead to changes, and it will be on behalf of all of us.

**Jasmyne:** I suppose another thing is, there's also been this change in the cycle. With earlier activist movements the cycle was that you tried to do things, you were hopeful about the future, and then you got fatigued. But I think it's the opposite for us now. I think we all started out scared and like, "Oh, my God, our environment is dying." And now we're like, "well, actually, if we think about it, we can probably do something about it. And we should actually really move to do something about it." And I guess, hopefully, by starting earlier with that kind of dread will hopefully give us the time within our lifetimes to be able to move forward to that place of hope and actually make the action while we're in this hurtful stage. While we've got the energy to do it. Of course we're building off intergenerational relationships with previous movements. We're building off the generation that came before us and the work that you all did before us. And we'll continue building and we've got to keep teaching the new generations that and eventually something will change. Something's got to break.

**Eve:** I just want to quickly add that I am also a bit sceptical about hope. But I love *collective joy*. When you're in the midst of a collective action, that's where you feel that joy: amidst your despair or amidst your hopelessness or the tangled concoction of feelings that you might have in that moment.

**Amy:** I agree with that, even when you were talking before Jasmyne about your speculative fiction, and it took quite a dystopian pathway. It was challenging in that regard. But at the same time, I think about the thousands of images that we received from children and young people and what they really focused on was relationality. And this project, remember, was about climate change voices and I think ontologically it went right back to the relationality of humans as one of many species, not the dominant species. And in that sense, intergenerationally we arrived back at this posthuman research playspace that the young people themselves took in that direction. Hence, the interviews with the trees and the rocks and the dogs. They weren't actually just interested in young people's perspective, they were interested in inter-species perspectives, even alien perspectives in your case Jasmyne. And so, I think in that regard, I find hope challenging, too. And, sometimes it feels like a burden that we place on young people. But I do actually think it's a collective intergenerational joy, rather than burden.

**Kairo:** I find that the thing that motivates me most to go and participate in any collective action, any kind of activism, is this intense and mobilising (but also crushing) disappointment.

Not in the generations before us – I don't want to sound like an "OK, Boomer" type – I mean in the power structures that have been put in place. That's definitely the biggest motivator for me.

**Jasmyne:** I think, yeah, frustration is another part of it. There's a lot of emotions that you feel about these things. I think like Kairo was saying, there's certain structures that allow you to be cognizant of your environment. And there are certain things like capitalism that don't allow you the luxury of being able to look after the environment. If you're not making enough money to buy, let's say, good clothing, that's going to last a long time. So you have to keep buying cheap pieces of clothing that are made of polyester, and then you are contributing to fast fashion. And that's not particularly your fault. If you can't afford to buy sustainably sourced fashion, you're doing the best you can. And so I guess we need to make ways for people who aren't monetarily able to make these changes. We need to give them other options, not trap them in thoughts like "I can't do that because it's too much effort, it will cost too much money for me to make that kind of contribution". I guess it's managing that frustration, managing that anger and channelling it into something more productive. Because us just being angry, although it is a great motivator for some, I think there's only so far that anger can get you before you feel defeated. And you feel like what's the point of continuing if all this frustration is building to nothing?

**Netta:** Just another emotion I wanted to add is love. Because, though a big part of the reason why I'm doing this is because the islands in the Pacific are slowly sinking or rapidly sinking - when people ask me, "oh, why are you doing this?" - it's very simple. It is because I love Samoa, which is where I'm from. And so I think, we have happiness, we have sadness, we have anger, but I definitely want to throw love in there, because it's so powerful. You know, love is such a powerful message, and it drives you. I think, you know, when things are down, I think my love for my country and my home comes above all. I think if everyone had that for something that they love, they will move, they will move mad. So yeah, that's just my ambition.

**Sam:** I can really attest to the love of the nature around us, it's about being able to be met. I love nature and I love being in the outdoors. And I love having the experiences that a vibrant environment allows you to have. I love being able to walk on a glacier, or being able to go hiking throughout the Australian bush, or to really do anything outside is amazing. And that love drives a lot of the climate change activism that I partake in, or even, for instance, the appreciation of the ability for us to make good choices. I've been able to go to Switzerland and do some amazing hikes there. And their recycling management system in Switzerland is incredible. And I'm really appreciative of that. And I'm frustrated that it doesn't exist in Australia. The best we get is a yellow bin that will probably recycle what we can do, but maybe not. Those kinds of emotions are the ones that drive me and I think drive a lot of other people as well.

**Amy:** This takes us back to the whole point of this exhibition around Wild Hope. And I know in environmental education, there's often been a lot of criticism around romanticism. But there's something really there because, like Aldo Leopold (1949) said, there's a vividness and sharpness to his childhood memories that none of his career ever added to. And that is love, essentially. And from hearing you just talk now Sam, it really reminded me of that. That you're still out on that glacier, in some sense, and that vividness never fades.

### Concluding thoughts and alternative imaginaries

All researchers enter a project hoping that it will have an indelible impact on the future. The Climate Change and Me project commenced in 2013 well before the global 'Friday for Future' youth climate strikes. At that time youth voice was largely absent in climate policy, climate education, climate justice, and associated public discussions. This large-scale project afforded a public platform for children and young people's voices to be heard as they researched, speculated on, and played with complex figurations of childhood, climate, politics, and culture. When we reconvened as an intergenerational collective ten years later, it became apparent that this

platforming of child and youth climate voices has made a vivid mark with rippling affects across many different publics, social movements, cultural and education sectors, and policy spheres. Key to this impact has been the co-creation of public spaces where intergenerational collaboration can grow and flourish (Mayes, 2023), and it is this practice of creating open knowledge infrastructures for regenerative action that we invite environmental educators, researchers, activists, and policymakers to take with us into the future.

As intergenerational custodians of educational research and activist movements for climate justice, we are often asked by colleagues what we would change about the project if we were to begin again now, under current conditions. On one hand, it would be interesting to replicate the entire process exactly and compare how the climate child imaginary has shifted over the past decade. This would allow us to test how intergenerational collaboration functions as a long-term research strategy and whether the process is robust enough to register and withstand changes in global climate politics. On the other hand, we currently live in a very different world than we did ten years ago. The situation is worse now than most of us could have possibly imagined at the start of the project. Are today's children and young people aware of the political and climatological precarity of their situation? Are they largely responding to fears or opinions expressed by the adults around them? Are they given fact-based education on climate change, or are their opinions formed by cultural osmosis? How do these learning processes affect their concepts, feelings, and imaginaries of climate change, and how to combat it? Do children today see the education system as a valuable tool for learning about climate change and how to fight it? Or are they more inclined to consciously tune out or boycott schooling as a demonstration against various forms of disinformation, scientism, and a lack of political action?

Our panel conversation gives some clues as to how we might devise research that responds to these questions collectively. Some of the most impactful learning experiences that children and young people had in the original project were in places where the effects of climate change could be sensed and felt by them directly. This points toward current and future studies focusing on research and creative practice in climate disaster and adaptation zones as a priority for the next generation of work (Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience, 2020). Our research has shown that stories shared from direct experience of climate impacted places can influence wider shifts in climate awareness and re-imagining, which can in turn inform adaptive strategies and community resilience.

Our panel conversation also brought the affective dimension of climate justice education to the fore, emphasising the need to situate climate facts and evidence within a broader ecology of feelings, sensations, desires, and belongings. This has become increasingly relevant under current conditions where the gap between climate belief and denial is being further polarised and reshaped by affective affiliations rather than rational decisions based on verified evidence. If we were to redesign our project today, it would need to grapple with large contingencies of people who have come to embrace climate denial as a position of affective belonging that defines itself in contradistinction from what they may perceive as 'woke' environmentalist communities. We need to better understand the kinds of affective belonging that different publics are seeking, and also how and why people feel excluded or alienated from environmentalist positions and communities which could otherwise be a powerful means of support for climate justice action (cf Hickey-Moody & Rousell, 2024).

Lastly, our conversation has raised the critical importance of speculative fabulation as a battlefield on which the information wars over climate action are currently being fought. We live in a world where untruths and disinformation are being intentionally weaponised to consolidate reactionary blocs of power. Fascist social imaginaries are being engineered at the planetary scale using the powers of fabulation to rewrite the story of what matters and who wins. These movements cannot simply be countered by restating the facts, providing further evidence, or even appealing to values of decency and respect which may have previously been assumed as common ground (Johnson *et al.*, 2024). We need counter-fabulations which re-instate values of

intergenerational solidarity and collective mobilisation that are *more compelling, entertaining, inspiring, meaningful, and influential* than the calls to divisiveness and hate that have recently captured so many around the world (Rousell et al., 2017). The fabulative powers of art, media, and communication must be recuperated if we are to resist current movements toward fascism and nihilism (cf Rousell, Hickey-Moody, & Aleksic, 2024).

Action on climate change or any other social and environmental justice issue cannot proceed unless people see meaning and value in the stories they believe and the actions they are taking. Through the Climate Change and Me project, children and young people created counter-stories that continue to contribute meaning and value to the work of climate activists, educators, researchers, policymakers, and community members all over the world. This ability to produce collective meanings, values, and imaginaries of climate justice needs to be extended to those who have lost or given up the capacity to do so, and forms a core thread of the work we are taking into our next series of projects.

**Acknowledgements.** The co-authors acknowledge the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung and Boonwarrung language groups of the Eastern Kulin Nation as the traditional owners and cultural custodians of the lands on which the exhibition, book launch, and panel discussion took place. The authors would also like to acknowledge and thank the peer reviewers and editors who provided insightful feedback on an earlier version of this article.

**Financial support.** The authors did not receive additional Financial Support for the production of this article.

**Ethical standard.** All contributors to the book launch and panel discussion are co-authors of the article and have contributed to the conceptual, methodological, and empirical processes and outcomes described. This adheres to ethical protocols for authorship and intellectual contribution to research at RMIT University and Southern Cross University.

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## Author Biographies

**David Rousell** was born in Connecticut on the Atlantic coast of the United States and he is 45 years old. He is a migrant settler of mixed European and North American ancestry currently living on the unceded lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Eastern Kulin Nation in Naarm (Melbourne), Australia. He comes to this collaboration as an artist, writer, and researcher who is deeply invested in place-based practices of co-facilitation and ethical negotiation across intergenerational communities, ecologies, histories, and knowledge cultures.

**Finn Ball** comes from the North Coast of NSW, a place that has given him both a love for the environment and an understanding of the importance of community. He is 23 years old and now lives on Gadigal land in Sydney studying a Bachelor of Laws and Economics (Hons).

**Riley Ball** grew up in the North Coast of NSW and is now living in Brisbane. He is 20 years old and studying a Bachelor of Biomedical Science and Marine biology at the University of Queensland. Riley is passionate about preserving the environment and loves exploring the natural world through triathlons, hiking and snorkelling.



**Kairo Byrne** grew up in the Northern Rivers in NSW, and was raised to respect and protect the many ecosystems we are all part of. Currently living in Meanjin, they are an undergraduate student at the University of Queensland. Kairo values community, mutual aid, and radical, creative action in the face of our uncertain future.

**Amy Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles** was born in Naarm (Melbourne) in 1977 (46) and is the youngest of six children. In later childhood her family relocated to remote Central Queensland on Western Kanguulu Country. She now resides on Wangerriburra Country, also known as Tamborine Mountain in South-East Queensland. Amy's early career was as a primary/secondary school teacher, and she is now a professor of sustainability, environment, and education. She comes to this collaboration as a listener, teacher, activist, and researcher deeply committed to honouring children and young people's rights and voices, climate education, and ways of living in deep relation with and on Country,

**Jasmyne Foster** originally from the Northern Rivers now lives in Brisbane. Always too busy drawing to pay attention she pursued her passion and is now a practising illustrator and part of the Brisbane community supporting the arts and other areas of ethical and slowly made practice.

**Annette Gough** was born in Naarm (Melbourne) in 1950 and she currently lives on the unceded lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Eastern Kulin Nation in Naarm. Her ancestry is British/Irish, with the first settlers arriving in Australia in the early 1800s. Her undergraduate studies were in biological sciences and education and she has worked in these fields for most of her career. She is a passionate environmental educator and feminist researcher who comes to this project with a concern for environmental protection and engaging young people in learning about and caring for the environment.

**Sam Lucena** was born in the Northern Rivers of NSW 22 years ago. His love for the outdoors tries to compensate for the time indoors spent studying a Bachelor of Software Engineering (Hons) at Brisbane. Sam values caring for the environment that we are lucky to be a part of and ensuring those after us can enjoy it as much as we can.

**Netta Maiava** was born in New Zealand and is 22 years old. She is of Samoan descent and is currently living on the stolen lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Eastern Kulin Nation in Naarm (Melbourne). She is currently working as a research associate for a participatory research project, looking into young people, climate justice and education. As the coordinator of the Pacific Climate Warriors team in the Kulin Nations, she is passionate about the connection to land, and Indigenous knowledge being key to solving the climate crisis.

**Eve Mayes** was born in Hong Kong, when it was under British colonial lease; she is 43 years old. She is a white migrant of Russian and British ancestry, currently living on the stolen lands of the Wadawurrung people of the Eastern Kulin Nation. She comes to this collaboration as a former English and English as an Additional Language teacher, now educational researcher. She is currently collaborating with young climate justice advocates on a four-year participatory project about young people, climate justice and education. In collaborating intergenerationally, she is concerned about the possibilities and tensions of research, particularly considering the historical and ongoing role of research in colonial violence.

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Cite this article: Rousell, D., Ball, F., Ball, R., Byrne, K., Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles, A., Foster, J., Gough, A., Lucena, S., Maiava, N., & Mayes, E. (2025). Activating the Climate Child Imaginary: Intergenerational Collaboration as a Long-term Strategy for Climate Justice Education. *Australian Journal of Environmental Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1017/aee.2025.19>