If, as Val Plumwood (2002) suggests, we can no longer behave as isolated and masterful human individuals, nations or species, but need to act in accordance with those earth others enabling our existence, what does this mean for the activity of research? One answer might be to seek out those who are already transforming their relationships with the more than human world, to learn about and tell their stories, and to help multiply, magnify, legitimate and proliferate their practices. If one looks for them, there are many who are engaged in learning from our climate changed earth in such a way that they themselves are transformed and are prompted to create new ways of living with earth others. Bruno Latour (2004b) calls this process that co-transforms the learner and the world “learning to be affected.” Central to learning to be affected is a process whereby one becomes sensitized to (affected by) a world that in turn becomes more highly differentiated (see Latour 2004b; Gibson-Graham and Roelvink 2010). In this essay I want to tentatively suggest that by connecting with those already affected by the manifestations of climate change academic researchers too might learn to be affected.

Australian farmers have long been engaged in modes of learning that aim to increase their store of scientific knowledge and promote more efficient farming practices.
Agricultural research and extension involves farmers in participatory learning with experts and practitioners exchanging knowledge within established agricultural science paradigms. But rarely do we hear of farmers who, by observing and listening to the land and by empathizing with plants and animals, are driven to go against the prevailing scientific wisdom and farm in new ecologically sensitive ways. John Weatherstone and Peter Andrews are two such farmers. Central to their radical shifts in agricultural practice has been their affective experience of the Anthropocene, in particular their witness to ecological devastation (Roelvink and Zolkos 2011).

John Weatherstone (2003) recalls the “day from hell” when he went out to survey his land as a dust storm blew away the remaining fertile topsoil (see fig. 1). By embracing this moment of devastation, Weatherstone was able to notice that while the wind was blowing fertile topsoil off his farm the neglected and weedy nature strip along the highway that borders his property was able to retain soil. That is, he became attuned to the diversity of grasses on his farm. He identifies this as the moment he decided, “I’m going to do everything in my power to see that this farm never looks like this again” (Weatherstone 2010, personal communication). At an early age farmer Peter Andrews was similarly affected by witnessing the devastation of his father’s outback farm. Watching the dust storms he realized that, “without the scrub that had always protected it, the land was exposed to the weather. The winds could now rip and tear at the earth. It was my first lesson in how, within a decade or two, people could drastically affect a landscape that had been operating successfully for tens of thousands of years” (Andrews 2006, 16). The motivation for both farmers to transform their farms is intimately linked with their relationships to other species and the landscape in a changing environment. Importantly, the new farming practices developed by Peter Andrews and John Weatherstone are guided by a recognition of the needs of the environment and animals, and working with the capacities of earth others for resilience (Rose 2004).
Andrews’ and Weatherstone’s (2003) stories demonstrate the radically transformative practices that can be generated through learning to be affected. After his experience of the day from hell Weatherstone went on to experiment on his farm by diversifying agricultural practices. He reduced livestock, planted a variety of trees, improved pastures and reduced chemical use. Rather than choosing trees on the sole basis of efficiency and profitability, he has planted trees that attract birds, provide shade and fodder for cows and provide for his own need for seeds to generate an income. Likewise, Weatherstone ensures that the soil has the organic matter it needs to survive through “the creation of smaller paddocks and the use of perennial pastures, rotational grazing, reducing cropping, and no stubble burning” (8). In doing so Weatherstone is taking other species into account in his livelihood decisions, thereby ensuring that his agricultural practices meet both his own needs for survival and those of the landscape and other species. Today his farm looks like an

1 Previously published in Weatherstone 2003, 5.
oasis in a landscape of bare pastoral land and native birds that have not been seen in the area for decades have returned to Weatherstone’s farm.

While Weatherstone has taken an experimental approach on this farm, Peter Andrews has conducted historical geographical research into the Australian landscape, giving particular attention to records of natural systems existing prior to European colonization (see Andrews 2006). Through his research, Andrews discovered that while the journals of early European explorers “are filled with descriptions of swamps and marshes . . . today ninety per cent of wetlands have disappeared” (6). Comparing these historical descriptions to the state of his property, he became increasingly concerned by the way that water was channeled through deep stream incisions, creating erosion and salinity problems and reducing nutrients. This research has led Andrews to develop Natural Sequence Farming, an innovative approach to farming that slows water flows across land to increase water retention (2006).

*Figure 2. Cows grazing under a honey locust plantation on John Weatherstone’s property. Photograph courtesy of Weatherstone.*

2 Previously published in Weatherstone 2003, 10.
The new farming practices arising from John Weatherstone’s and Peter Andrews’ experimentation and historical geographical research were radical and initially left them isolated from the agricultural community. For example, a cattle carrier picking up stock from John Weatherstone commented that “I used to drive past John Weatherstone’s place regularly, and when he first started planting all the trees I thought he had rocks in his head. I now know it was me who had rocks in my head for not planting trees” (Weatherstone 2003, 7–8). After many years of neglect, the practices of farmers like Andrews and Weatherstone have attracted the attention of other farmers and scientists. Academic researchers have begun to theorize and value what these farmers are doing. There is growing interest in diversifying the range of agriculture possibilities and moving away from over-specialization and monoculture. Some scientists are helping to shift the unorthodox farming practices of Andrews and Weatherstone from “cult status” into the mainstream. How have these academic researchers connected to these innovative farmers and might they provide lessons for researchers more generally?

Land ecologist David Goldney, who travelled with a group of bureaucrats to meet Peter Andrews, remembers that they:

laughed about Peter all the way there and … derided him all the way back … . But I saw something there that just kept drawing me back. And then I had to try and fit this stuff in to my existing scientific understanding. That took me ten years to do it. Now I think we can explain the process, you know in half an hour or less, ten minutes given the right sort of video help. (Goldney 2005)

There was something about Andrews’ farm that kept drawing Goldney back until he could understand what Andrews was doing. It seems that Goldney was deeply affected by his experience of Andrews’ farm; that is, by his experience
of seeing farmers connecting in a new way with earth others and by bearing witness to the resilience and capacities for action of these new ‘farmer-earth other’ collectives. These stories suggest that we, as academic researchers, might look to such collectives of humans and earth others that are already learning to be affected in the Anthropocene. We might then join with them and work to proliferate the practices they are initiating.

These stories also demonstrate, I think, that one does not necessarily need to visit these farms to be affected and moved to transform one’s research agenda (Gibson-Graham and Roelvink 2010). As testimony to their experience of ecological devastation, John Weatherstone’s, Peter Andrews’ and other stories in this volume call on us, the audience, to take their experiences seriously. The testimonial nature of these stories is important because it conveys an experience as it was lived and embodied rather than aiming to moralize or educate the audience in the value of a particular kind of agricultural practice (Roelvink and Zolkos 2011). This means that as recipients of their testimony we are offered possibilities to be affected by them in a profoundly personal way, in such a way that we too become implicated in these stories (Roelvink 2010). What they highlight, then, is the role that storytelling can have in linking us with those who are creating new ways of living in the Anthropocene.