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Welcome to our November 2009 issue of Australian Humanities Review.

In our Target Essay ‘Grizzling about Facebook’, Meaghan Morris brilliantly and provocatively tackles the grievances and forebodings, often issuing from print journalism, about the impact of the online environment on everyday life, the future of sociability and possibilities for political change. As a response to what she calls ‘grizzling’—fretful or helpless responses to technological and cultural power shifts—Morris delves into the complex realities of online social interaction. While she reminds us of Facebook’s complicity in processes of commodification—its simultaneous promotion and limitation of consumer ‘choice’—she ultimately insists on the political effectivity of the ‘grizzling’ of Facebook users as exemplary of a new dynamics of collective action within what is essentially a corporately-owned and controlled social domain.

The question of sociability is also central to Ken Gelder’s essay, ‘English, Autonomy, and the Republic of Letters’, which broaches the question of the future of literary studies in an age of competitive funding and disciplinary fragmentation. This essay situates current debates about literature’s identity, autonomy and political potential in the context of its disciplinary history and its roots in the petite monde of the seventeenth-century ‘republic of letters’. Gelder asks whether literary studies continues to be delimited by this historical antecedent, which orients it in secular, socially-progressive but fundamentally inward-looking ways; and whether its habitual defence of its autonomy not only ensures its marginality in contemporary models of knowledge production, but also continues to characterise its critical potential?

We also present a selection of papers from The Art of the Real, a conference dedicated to Creative Non-Fiction held in Newcastle in May 2008. Introduced by Keri Glastonbury and Rosalind Smith, each of the three essays explores different questions about the representation of the ‘real’. Ross Gibson’s keynote ‘Extractive Realism’ explores the art of eliciting connective structures from seemingly random details, his conjunction of haiku and Lúkacs itself exemplary of the practice. Cameron Muir’s ‘The Opera House of the West’ takes the reader on a tour of the massive and neglected Burrendong Dam, in a meditation on
the environmental costs of nation-building, while Patricia Pender’s ‘The Perfect Electrometer’ reads Dorothy Wordsworth’s *Grasmere Journals* as uncannily exemplary of the rhetorical repertoires of Roland Barthes’ *A Lover’s Discourse*.

The Ecological Humanities features a special issue on ‘Writing in the Anthropocene’. The term ‘Anthropocene’ was coined by Nobel laureate Paul J. Crutzen to designate the new geological epoch, following the Holocene and conventionally understood to begin with the invention of the steam engine in 1784, in which human activities begin to have a significant impact on the planet’s life-support systems. Each of the six essays in this section responds to Val Plumwood’s challenge to find new ways of writing in the Anthropocene that take us beyond anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism.

In the Book Reviews section, Deborah Madsen reviews Ouyang Yu’s *Chinese in Australian Literature, 1888-1988*; Nathan Hollier reviews a special issue of *Journal of Australian Colonial History* dedicated to historian Russell Ward and his enduring figure of the ‘Australian Legend’; Christine McPaul reviews Chris Healy’s *Forgetting Aborigines* while Healy himself reviews Robert Kenny’s *The Lamb Enters the Dreaming: Nathanael Pepper and the Ruptured World*. 
ESSAYS
Grizzling about Facebook
MEAGHAN MORRIS

You’re all crazy. Every one of you. You just sit here, in your cosy little house, with your cold sodas and your Facebook pages, like it all matters. Like it’s even real. But it’s not! It’s all going to burn and you’re going to be nothing but bleached skulls. Don’t you get it? You’re dead! All of you are dead!

(Riley in ‘Strange Things Happen’)

Procrastinating one Sunday, I set aside a pile of print-outs from on-line media stories on the perils and inanities of Facebook and settled in for a serious read of the South China Morning Post (in hard copy, of course, with hot coffee on the side). You may need to know this great newspaper to appreciate my shock at finding therein a sententious editorial about Facebook (‘Facebook no substitute for real world contact’). While it is a Murdoch property, criticised at times for a willingness to accommodate the pressures of Beijing, the SCMP is still a hard news-focussed paper, full of serious analysis of events around the world: it does not feature frothy columnists, and celebrity wardrobe malfunctions rarely make the front page. Yet here, with no context beyond a slight story about phishing attacks on Facebook, was one of those loopy, furious moral blares that in recent years I have come to associate with Australian newspapers: ‘there is always superficiality to networking on the Web’, the writer opined. If Facebook ‘perhaps’ helps us keep in touch with friends in faraway places, ‘making new friends and maintaining old friendships requires effort, emotional commitment and contact in the real world. Facebook is no substitute for face time’.

My print-out collection is full of attempts like this to adjudicate what is and isn’t real in the lives of hundreds of millions of people. Many of these pieces must be written (I surmise) by stressed-out journalists with no more access than I have to lots of personal ‘face time’. As a Facebook user whose loved ones are often very far away, of course I disagree with the editorial’s premises; anyone who thinks that social networking is a ‘superficial’ matter of clicking should explain to me (to begin with) in just what world the effort of making a photo album for friends and family does not involve emotional commitment; and in what kind of real world it counts as an evasion of contact to have an on-line party, or to send gifts, humour and words of comfort or affection to people across space and time. It would have to be a world without regard for writing
and reading, obviously: no love of letters, no emotional responses to rock art and cathedrals; no crying over novels and poems, either. Come to think of it, it might be a world without great newspapers (a prospect which some pundits no doubt have uncomfortably in mind).

Irritating as media grizzles about the failings of mediation may be (and the locution ‘face time’ bears witness to their sentimentality; what happened to the rest of the body?), I do not save these articles in order to disagree with them. For one thing, they’re not that rational. Strong affect sprays about when older media attack new media that threaten their markets, and in particular when Murdoch newspapers wage culturally high-toned war on just those social networking sites that have been thumping MySpace, the site belonging to their proprietor (see Knight). A couple of weeks before the SCMP stooped to conquer Facebook (and a month before the use of Twitter to get news out in Tehran became a global story), the on-line Australian gloated, ‘Time is Up for Twitter’. Hooking to a story that 60 per cent of new users give up tweeting within a month, this spiteful piece compared ‘transitory technologies’ to swine influenza; people ‘build up resistance’ to ‘diseases that must mutate to infect ever most hosts’ before ‘spluttering out’. Print, in contrast, is a ‘robust and portable’ technology, ‘information rich and never crashes—the platform for the online information age [sic] that you are reading now’. If the part about robustness and portability is true enough (while bringing to mind old jokes about the excellence of newsprint for wrapping fish and chips), the platform punch-line makes no sense except as a syntactically mangled blur of techno-clichés. There was a time—in another economy and before Mr. Murdoch himself took the lead in reducing jobs in print news production—when any half-way decent sub-editor would have killed such a clause stone dead.

What really interests me is the stories that older media (including television and the on-line versions of print media) tell about social networking, and the slightly nutty fervour that so often drives the telling. Given the now mainstream success of social networking sites, with people friending and following their Nannas and with Barack Obama’s 2008 election campaign symbolically marking a new era of global-popular participation on-line, the commentariat are, in part, caught up in an apocalyptic moment of their own rhetorical making; in journalistic as in policy spruiking usage, new media talk has long proclaimed that one set of innovations will displace another—‘death’ of print, ‘end’ of the book. As anyone who works with media should know, reality is more complex. With technological change, old media find new uses or are reinvented interactively with new ones; arguably the most influential medium for politics in Australia at the end of the twentieth century was a telephone-radio hybrid, ‘talk-back radio’. This is not to dismiss the sense of crisis engulfing the profession of journalism,
especially investigative reporting (Davies; Nichols and McChesney). However, at the user’s end their relative cheapness and accessibility to ordinary people continues to give old media a key role in narrating the advent of social changes related to new technology, and in shaping at least some of the initial popular understanding of new technologies themselves: once upon a time, people acquired their first ‘memories’ of cyberspace from a novel, William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* (1984).

I am by no means a new media scholar and my participation in on-line culture is enthusiastic only within a very limited zone. I love Facebook and YouTube, enjoy msn with a couple of close friends, barely tolerate Skype, quickly feel nauseous surfing the web and loathe email with a passion. However, since all media are mixed in their cultural make-up and social uses, it behoves me as a student of history in popular culture to observe how the tales being told of new media at any given time draw on familiar generic and rhetorical reserves that help render change intelligible to us as a mode of continuity. An example of this and one of my favourite Facebook put-downs is the outburst quoted above from Riley, the undercover girl from the future in the second season of the Fox network TV series, *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles*. Cracking under the strain of impersonating an alienated, pre-Judgment Day American teenager, Riley wheels on her bemused foster family in the kitchen one day and, with four viciously delivered metonyms (‘just sit here’, ‘cosy little house’, ‘cold sodas’, ‘Facebook pages’), pours scorn all over their lives. In this moment, Facebook is absorbed into the store of belittling stereotypes of mindless suburban complacency that print media, film and, superbly, television (the suburban medium par excellence), have been producing—and donating to critical culture—for more than fifty years.

A swelling number of Facebook stories is available on-line. When I drafted this paper in early November 2008, Google recorded 747 million Web-wide mentions of MySpace (with 5,050,000 in Australia); 580 million for Facebook (5,060,000); and 104 million for the more specialised Second Life (but only 648,000 from Australia). I didn’t think then of checking Twitter. By 19 May 2009, the respective figures were 858 million for MySpace (22 million in Australia); one and quarter *billion* for Facebook (37,500,000 in Australia); 177 million for Second Life (25,700,000 in Australia, a significant increase); and 511 million for Twitter (15,100,000 in Australia). There is no way of interpreting what the relative changes mean, or how many finger-wagging Murdoch editorials the Facebook numbers include, but the size of the overall increase in just a few months is impressive. At the same time, it has become rare for a day to go by without the major Australian newspapers featuring on-line at least one Facebook or

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1 For a review of Davies with a sceptical view of the model of journalism’s history assumed by accounts of its imminent death, see Preston.
Twitter story. Sporadic checks while I was writing pulled up stories including a ‘teen’ saved from suicide by a Facebook friend, Facebook and cyber-bullying in girls’ schools, Facebook and sexual ‘recruitment’ for NRL players, Facebook as a tool for Arab militants recruiting spies against Israel, the uses and pitfalls of Facebook for small business, and Facebook as a haven for Holocaust deniers.

While forming a very small part of the on-line discussion of social networking sites, these stories arise from news media efforts not only to catch a wave of popular interest while reporting actual incidents but also to shape collective perceptions of a wider phenomenon. In the process, journalists often draw on their rich professional reserves of reductively metonymic realism (‘setting the scene’, the ‘character sketch’) to cast social network users as types whose ways of acting are symptomatic or productive of diverse social ills: alongside terrorists and sexual predators there are always students uploading their mobile pics of boorishly drunken parties, ‘stupid girls’ sharing every detail of their vapid daily routines, and workers who boast about bludging but forget that they’ve friended their boss. As in folklore, each of these figures is sustained by a dense field of concrete examples both stellar (Hugh Grant and Bono for Facebook party uploads, MySpace’s Paris Hilton or Twitter’s Ashton Kutcher for cosmic triviality) and ‘it-could-be-you’ mundane (Kyle Doyle’s ‘SICKIE WOO’ Facebook status update). Simultaneously grounded in and abstracted from the real history of on-line culture, such figures ‘stick’ in media memory, powerfully eliciting recognition (the party animal, the princess, the slack worker) while drawing attention away from a myriad other practices thriving on the sites. Stereotypes are forms of apprehension rather than bad representations, and their force is to mobilize familiar knowledge to explain and absorb unfamiliar experience (Morris, Identity 143-44).

While the limitations of a morphological critique of popular culture have been argued many times (Morris, Too Soon; Morse), formal typing is a generative principle in popular culture itself. Media editorializing thrives on it and, as hard news-gathering receded as a journalistic practice during the Howard era, the readily available technique of consensus assertion through type (‘the’ ethnic lobby, ‘the’ Aboriginal industry, ‘the’ politically correct) organized columns of what became in those years a major genre of Australian social debate: grizzling, or ‘fretful complaint’. The fretfulness is important. Most of the grizzling that

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2 For tip of the iceberg indications of the Grant and Bono coverage see, respectively, Simpson and Bruce; Claburn. Parodied in the 2006 Pink music video ‘Stupid Girls’ and the inspiration for several pop songs about girly mega-narcissism, Paris Hilton’s style of chronicling the micro-events of her affective and material consumption is canonical for the ‘rich and famous’ genre; Ashton Kutcher (husband of Demi Moore) is an actor whose use of Twitter is now metonymic of its trivial uses, thanks to the number of media stories that have been written about him. See ‘Facebook “Sickie” Guy Facing Investigation’ for the Story of Sydney AAPT call centre worker Kyle Doyle, whose boss reportedly spotted “Kyle Doyle is not going to work, f*** it I’m still trashed. SICKIE WOO’ on Doyle’s profile; the incident is now an exemplary case for Human Resources training discourse on Facebook in the workplace (see Stokeley).
made it to press or to air in Howard’s day was majoritarian complaint about the perduing cultural power of social minorities (Morris, *Too Soon* 219-33), and the *Macquarie Dictionary* reminds us that the first meaning of ‘grizzle’ is ‘to become grey’, a metonym of ageing and thus (in this social logic) of fading power. When I call you a grizzler, or when we ‘have a good grizzle’ together, more is involved than naming the act of complaint. The idea of grizzling includes an evaluation of the act itself as ineffective except at the level of emotional release. The release itself may be strong: grizzling is more aggressive than the also annoying but more pathetic acts of whingeing and whining. Grizzlers may have a bit of right on their side: when my Nanna said, ‘stop whingeing’, she meant, ‘don’t be a sook’, while ‘stop grizzling’ meant, ‘all right, now shut up and get on with it’. But the release is devalued as inadequate to the real or imagined provocation; to call a speech act ‘grizzling’ suggests a helpless as well as reiterative mode of criticism.

‘Facebook no substitute for real world contact’ is a grizzle in this sense. What on earth is supposed to follow from a declaration like that? If parents are being incited to pull the plug on their children, or to seize their mobile phones, will millions of adults also rush off-line to chat in a neighbouring office or across the back fence? What would happen in the ‘real world’ of our working lives if we did so? Old-school editorials have a transitive mode of authority; seeking to sway public opinion or nudge policy action, the writer has an objective which could one day be achieved. When an upscale paper like the *SCMP*—read by educated, over-employed, middle to upper class expats and locals working 15-hour days and more in a city that runs on financial services and transport logistics—makes a wildly inoperative call for its readers to abandon on-line socializing for more ‘face time’, a curiously sub-cultural mode of address conflicts with the mode of authority. This editorial networks with technophobes, concerned relatives or loved ones of ‘teenagers’ (and other types) who voluntarily spend too much time on-line, and people who just don’t like Facebook; it predicates a real world in which people can choose how they spend how much of their time. Yet overwhelmingly in Hong Kong, as in many cities today, middle class people have borderless working lives and we spend most of our time, wherever we are, with computers. Facebook for me is real world contact. It’s not the only kind I have but (*pace* Riley) it matters. In a day consumed by memos, reference-writing, refereeing tasks, managerial compliance chores and a never-ending stream of email, Facebook is my bit of heaven, a haven of warmth, silly fun and friendliness I can enter in an instant from my screen; contact there is real because it is diverse and unpredictable (unlike much of my work). To argue that another site is better for this purpose could make good critical sense, and to propose a legally enforceable maximum 40 hour week for ‘knowledge workers’
would be even better. However, to urge me to spend more time off-line ('making
new friends and maintaining old friendships') for the sheer good of my soul is a
grizzle from those fairies at the bottom of the garden.

I certainly do not mean to suggest that all criticism of Facebook is grizzling.
Serious legal, ethical and political issues are arising from or being intensified
by the ‘Facebook’ phenomenon (to use a typifying metonym myself), in the
process sharpening some of the challenging debates of our time; free speech and
its limits, censorship, the right to privacy, the negotiation of social protocols
for a transnational economy that thrives on difference as well as inequality, the
relations between semiotic and other modes of violence, tensions between legal,
communal and performative models of identity, the foundations of community,
the power of corporations in our personal lives, and the technological
transformation of work are just a few of these. Anyone who doubts their political
import in many parts of the world might consider the case of Fouad Mourtada,
a 26 year old IT engineer beaten and jailed for 3 years in Morocco for placing
a spoof profile of Prince Moulay Rachid on Facebook,3 or, on a different scale,
China’s disabling of Twitter, YouTube, Flickr, Blogspot, Tumblr, Live Journal,
Hotmail and Bing in the lead-up to the twentieth anniversary on 4 June, 2009, of
the massacre in Tiananmen Square (Flumenbaum). Given this range of weighty
issues to address, grizzling is of interest for its capacity to foreground unsettling
worries and questions that trail along in the mix unresolvably, like an insistent
and recurring malaise.

For example, one familiar set of worries concerns the sociable personality and
what it ought to be doing in the writer’s world; does Facebook impair our
ability to enjoy life and care for others off-line? Extensively debated in relation
to manifest sub-cultures such as Hikikomori (see Jodice and Karmen) and Otaku
(Lamarre) in Japan, anxiety about what it should mean to be human on an
average day is hard to formulate plausibly now for larger populations. Thus
an early grizzle by Bugeja about the implications of Facebook for university
life (distraction in class, unwitting self-disclosure, inappropriate pictures,
surveillance, commercial data gathering and identity theft)4 suggests in the
course of a generally moderate discussion that there is a direct link between

3 See ‘Three years for profiling a Moroccan prince on Facebook’. After an international campaign about
the violations of Mourtada’s rights during arrest, he was reportedly freed by ‘royal grace’ after 43 days of
detention; http://globalvoicesonline.org/2008/03/21/moroccan-blogosphere-on-fouad-mourtada-finally-free/.
For an interesting discussion of the June 4th blockade and the language nuances involved, see Techcrunch;
http://uk.techcrunch.com/2009/06/02/china-shuts-down-twitter-and-bing-in-lead-up-to-tiananmen-
anniversary/
4 By ‘early’, I mean that the publication of the article in early 2006 preceded the opening up of Facebook
to mass use. Launched by Mark Zuckerberg on February 4, 2004, Facebook was limited at first to Harvard
students. It expanded membership eligibility first to other Ivy League schools, then other universities, then
high school networks in September, 2005, before opening to everyone over the age of 13 with a valid e-mail
address on September 26, 2006.
the size of the university IT budget, a corresponding loss of faculty jobs, and a Facebook-driven proliferation of distracted, ‘egocasting’ student personalities: ‘unless we reassess our high-tech priorities, issues associated with insensitivity, indiscretion, bias, and fabrication will consume us in higher education’ (‘Heads Up’). The night of the living dead is close at hand.

A related anxiety cluster invokes ‘real’ friendship in an effort to achieve an impossible norming of intimacy. Brusquely handled by the British judge who ruled in a 2008 harassment case that Facebook friends do not have to be friends ‘in the traditional sense’ (Emerson), concern about the authenticity of Facebook friendship is not only circulated in the press but relayed by ambivalent users of the site itself—like the sad case from Toronto with 700 Facebook friends who ended up drinking alone when he tried to organize a party (Niedzviecki) . While this confession may simply tell us something about Toronto, or the author (I don’t know that I’d drink with him either), narcissistic, instrumental or desperate friend-accumulation is also the subject of widely posted YouTube clips and a recurring discussion topic across the hundreds of ‘Addicted to Facebook’ groups on the site5—eliciting on one of these a well-turned, 14 stanza ballad, ‘Can I be your Facebook Friend?’:

Can I be your Facebook Friend?
Friendship’s new reality
And we’ll celebrate our union
For all cyberspace to see

Can I be your Facebook Friend?
Cause this friendship is unique
We can hold a conversation
And we never have to speak

If you add me as your friend
I’ll accept of course, and then
I will sit here on your profile
You won’t hear from me again

This poem nicely catches the nuances of the ‘Facebook addict’ type: an anti-social, agoraphobic, ‘low maintenance’ lurker who is also a passive-aggressive and voyeuristic stalker accumulating useless social capital.

Were this to be taken literally as a realistic portrait of the average Facebook user, human community as we know it might really be at risk. As I write, Facebook claims more than 200 million users (averaging 120 friends each), of

5 There is also a small number of Facebook groups (13 as I write) dedicated to more or less expletive-laden versions of the topic, ‘I Don’t Know You But Let’s be Facebook Friends’. Most of them show little or no sign of activity.
whom more than 100 million log on at least once a day, spending more than four billion minutes daily on the site worldwide.6 As one of those users (need I say?), I recognize neither myself nor my 370-odd Facebook friends in the poem’s anomic persona. True, after the initial contact I rarely hear directly from the large number who are my ex-students or professional acquaintances, but I am sporadically aware of their lives and we are there for each other if the need or desire arises. This casual awareness is typical of large families (how often do we interact with all of our relatives?) and also of small communities; I spent my first twelve years of life in a town of 2,000 souls where absolutely nobody, not even the newsagent, was on regular speaking terms with everyone else. Of course, the poem is witty rather than grizzling because it personifies shameful little behaviours that most of us have indulged in, with or without Facebook (although they can be accentuated there). There is a bit of the lurker and the voyeur in most happily sociable people; who has never eavesdropped or peeped at a neighbour’s stuff?

Familiar as they may be to people with wide-ranging lives on-line, these arguments need to be made; not everyone who uses email and visits web-sites is at ease with social networking. However, merely bristling at anti-Facebook stereotypes or mocking the malaise that prompts them risks buying in to an exaggerated view of what is new and distinctive about the experience the site provides, while ignoring the increased cross-cultural complexity of such malaise today. Concern about the future of sociability has been evolving in the West for more than a century, as the spread of a consumption-driven economy has distributed imperatives of self-marketing and self-display to ever-widening populations. Today, the deliberate inculcation of what Henri Lefebvre (1984) called ‘controlled consumption’ to drive economic growth in developing countries is carrying those imperatives across multiple societies with historically differing concepts of what counts as proper subjectivity. With a little adaptation, Veblen’s 1899 work on the leisure class provides us with ample material for a rip-snorting essay on vicarious consumption and the ‘predaceous temper’ on Facebook. However, it is more illuminating to reread Veblen alongside detailed accounts by worried Chinese critics of the PRC’s strategic production of consumerism and ‘popular culture’ after Deng Xiaoping’s Southern Tour (see Wang) in 1992; Bao, for example, examines how behaviours, tastes and interests befitting new urban personality types were minutely modelled for the readers of a popular newspaper, Shanghai Weekly.

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As a check on the reality-effect of the ‘student orgy’ stereotype, it is also worth noting that Facebook claims that more than two-thirds of its users are now outside of colleges, that about 70 per cent of users are now outside the United States, and that the fastest growing demographic is 35 years old and older.
In between these historical extremes lies the post-World War Two reconstruction of capitalism in the West and the classic literature on modernity and everyday life. In his Introduction to the 1984 edition of Lefebvre’s *Everyday Life in the Modern World* (1962), Wander points out just how much Lefebvre’s account of consumerism as a bureaucratically ‘controlled’ terror spreading its principles of anxiety, repetition and compulsiveness through all aspects of life and into the soul learned from the earlier work of Fromm (1947) on ‘the marketing orientation’:

> The modern world fosters a childlike personality, a person who constantly seeks and needs approval. … Aimless, over-reactive, inconsistent, face aching at the end of the day from the ever-present and required smile, the marketing persona is of a piece with the modern world. (Wander in Lefebvre xiv)

At least one thing to be said for Facebook and other mobile socializing modes is that they take the ache out of smiling (‘like’), although unfortunately they also transfer it from the face to the wrist or, in my case, the thumb: ✋

For Lefebvre, the febrile tedium of everyday life routines (‘the quotidian’) forms the underbelly or the ‘verso’ of the modern understood as ‘what is novel, brilliant, paradoxical and bears the imprint of technicality and worldliness’ (Lefebvre 24-5). I have no doubt that social networking sites are ‘of a piece’ with the modern world in Lefebvre’s sense; given the vastness of his theory’s horizon, how could they not be so? However, if we reduce Facebook or any other massive phenomenon to a pretext for revising classic theories of commodification and alienation, the question does arise why an ethnographically challenging 200 million people world-wide invest their energies in an activity that any adroit critic can easily portray as of a piece with their everyday pain and oppression (not to mention that of the workers who make computers and cope with the toxic waste). ‘False consciousness’ seems more than ever insufficient as an explanation; always vulnerable to the charge of implying (from a masterly position) that masses of people ‘have yet to authentically experience their own lives’ (Grossberg 365), ideological analysis has trouble accounting for the degree to which popular culture can incorporate its own ideological diagnostic—a topic that no doubt arises on the 500 Facebook groups devoted to aspects of ‘Marxism’.

Within the great tradition of modern cultural critique, an aesthetically-minded alternative is to follow Lukács via Jameson (*Signatures* 9-34) or de Certeau (16) in seeking a utopian impulse in popular culture that reaches (even in Facebook) for a better future from the heart of reification, giving us pleasure in the process. The more creative Cultural Studies move today draws rather on sociology and aspects of ethnographic method to ask questions within a concrete and carefully
delimited social context about our often ambivalent involvement in popular culture—an approach that admits of empirically anchored and thus potentially surprising answers (Couldry; Gregg). Having a bet each way at the level of methodological principle, I lean far enough towards that old utopian quest to wonder whether Lefebvre’s excoriating account of the modern everyday as it displaces a culturally if not materially rich traditional life of ‘style’ (Practice 38) does not direct us now towards the wrong historical vast horizon.

Everyday life is not a human universal. For Lefebvre, the everyday is a modern historical product that wondrously ‘erupts’ into literature with the overwhelming triviality of that ‘epic twenty-four hours’ (3) recounted in Joyce’s Ulysses. A regime of living thickly composed of petty recurrences (‘gestures of labour and leisure, mechanical movements’ [18]), everyday life has a time-tabling, programming, numbering drive that divides up human experience; lived time, for example, splits into the ‘pledged’ time of work, ‘leisure’ (an allocated ‘break’ from the everyday), and steadily increasing ‘compulsive’ time spent satisfying ‘various demands other than work such as transport, official formalities, etc’ (53). Apt for fostering consumption as it multiplies our tasks, this distributive force breaks up the ‘unity of form, function and structure’ that for Lefebvre characterized ‘style’ in all the humble objects and social practices of traditional living (29-30). While French peasant cupboards varied in form and construction from place to place, their fitness for a cupboard’s purpose did not vary. I think of the Australian bush ‘meat safe’: my grandmother’s was cream and my mother’s cacky green, but they worked the same way, they were not obsolescent, and they kept the blowflies at bay.

Yet even as the destruction of style-based ways of life continues and as many millions of people struggle (not least in China) for a modicum of consumer comfort, perhaps in the over-developed world today it is everyday life rather than ‘style’ that is slowly breaking down—along with its repetitive, minutely layered routines that differentiated the gendered space-times of modern domestic and working experience. Invoking the Incas and Aztecs along with Greece and Rome, Lefebvre envisaged ‘the total absence of everyday life in a given community at a given time’ (29) and not all of his examples were from the ancient world; adolescents and students in particular, he noted, fear everyday life as a ‘vague potentiality’ known only through their parents (74). Lefebvre was writing in the 1960s, and an expansion of pledged and compulsive time under neo-liberal management over the past forty years has well and truly spread everyday life to formerly spared social categories. At the same time, though, I’m not sure that anyone who hangs round the house all day, a-rhythmically working and playing on-line in the same sloppy daks and trainers we wear to the shops, the gym or

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7 Exemplary of this is Gregg’s forthcoming study (Work’s Intimacy) on the impact of being always available on-line on the lives of middle and lower middle class workers in Brisbane.
a meeting (or fluidly passing from E-bay to Wii Fit to compulsive email without leaving our screens) actually has an ‘everyday life’ in Lefebvre’s divisive sense. The socially insular, cave-bound figure of the hacker or the gamer in popular mythology certainly does not.

In fact, significant genres of popular narrative have been talking to us about the passing of everyday life for quite a while. In our great paranoid epics about technologies of surveillance and perception, the hero must first be wrenched from a routine life that he finds either a little dull (Will Smith in Enemy of the State) or unbearable (Keanu Reeves in The Matrix). His quest is then either to retrieve the normality that he now values more deeply, or to transcend it and to access the truth behind those meticulously programmed appearances; the Matrix is a totalisation of the everyday as Lefebvre understood it. In the overture to the Matrix trilogy (which, in passing, reveals just how much of a Platonist Jean Baudrillard can be), Neo needs only to conquer fear and jump out the window to leave ‘Tom Anderson’ and office life behind. In hundreds of lesser action films (a recent example is Eagle Eye), this physical leap of faith literalizes the passage from everyday life to a new reality, while the recurring line of dialogue, ‘I just want my life back’, marks the passage of a question about the stability of the everyday.

Zombie and vampire stories also share the central premise of an assault on everyday life. Differently preoccupied as they are with sustainability, both genres feature the losing battle of the uninfected to preserve a semblance of ‘normal’ life before joining the war for brute survival that fills the world of post-apocalyptic fiction, in which no everyday life remains (The Road Warrior, the Resident Evil series). The zombie apocalypse canon is the more absolutist about the relentlessness of this drift; if Romero’s Night of the Living Dead (1968) adapted the Afro-Caribbean folklore marked as such in White Zombie (1932) to the setting of an American farm house under siege, Dawn of the Dead (1978) memorably locked the remnant bearers of everyday life in the temple of Lefebvre’s ‘controlled consumption’, a shopping mall—with an out-of-control consumption principle ravening outside. Revisionist vampire stories have a more nuanced historical vision, holding out hope for an evolution in everyday life. Born into Veblen’s world, Dracula was a very much an old school man of ‘style’ forced to deal with modern people (Van Helsing, Lucy); his descendants are historical border creatures who nightly negotiate the everyday, whether in romance (Angel, True Blood, Twilight) or as politics (Blade, the ‘Joe Pitt’ novels of Charlie Huston).

And then there is the Terminator franchise, with its eschatological framing of a girl’s moment of contempt for a cosy little house, cold sodas and Facebook pages. The film series temporally stretches the mundane double consciousness of consumer modernity (knowing this way of life is not sustainable into the future,
we want this way of life to survive) into a war over history’s direction between contending forces in both the present and the future. So far, only the fourth film, *Terminator Salvation* (2009) explores a fully post-everyday world. *Terminator* (1984) and *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines* (2003) are ‘wrenching out’ stories, with Sarah Connor dragged in the first film from her big hair and ankle-warmer ordinariness, never to know everyday life again, while her son John is hiding out in Los Angeles at the start of the third. However, in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991) everyone except the monomaniacal Sarah (and, of course, her liquid metal T-1000 enemy) is immersed in the everyday; under the tutelage of John Connor as a child, even the T-800 helper (Arnie) learns some of its routines. Linking to this film in particular, *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles* TV series makes John Connor’s adolescence a study in psychic conflict between longing for an ordinary suburban life and knowing that (as Riley puts it) ‘it’s all going to burn’. What sets John apart as a leader here is not his awareness of the fire to come; in a fuzzy way, there is common knowledge around him of the unsustainability of our world. Rather, this version of John Connor stands out from his helpers (with the partial exception of Cameron, his studious Terminator guard) because he knows why people *care*, none the less, about cold sodas and cosy houses, ‘like it all matters’. I doubt that John Connor could risk having a Facebook page, but I’m fairly sure that he’d want one.

Let me offer my own two or three cents about utopia and Facebook. First, Facebook is not all quizzes, ‘hey babes’ and pokes. Most negative media stories obsess about one or two features (photos and status updates in particular), but the point about Facebook is that it bundles together multiple functions and potential things to do. Most of us never use all of them, and other social networking platforms do some of these things better than Facebook does (MySpace for new music, Live Journal for communities, Ning for interest groups, Twitter for global converse and news as-it-happens …), but what Facebook does well is *combine*: you can write private letters, play games, send gifts, do quizzes, circulate news, post notes, music and clips, share photos or research, test your knowledge, join groups and causes, make haiku-like allusions to your state of mind and chat on-line with friends, all in one place and time—restoring or relieving, according to need, the pattern of an everyday life. Facebook is on-line culture ‘lite’: this makes it an object of scorn for digital elitists and ‘white noise’ haters (see Tuttle), but it is also a source of its mainstream appeal. Corresponding to this variety of uses is the diversity of kinds of contact Facebook allows, with the relation between ‘contact’ and intimacy also having the potential to vary over time within each singular friendship. In this respect it follows the rhythms of ‘real life’ as a whole: as Lauren Berlant puts it, ‘all kinds of emotional dependency and sustenance can flourish amongst people who only meet each other at one or a few points on the grid of the field of their life’ (‘Faceless Book’).
Nothing flourishes for people who join Facebook and do nothing with it; passive or un-giving use of any network is rewarded in kind (Strohmeyer). As Thompson points out, a depth dimension to ‘ambient awareness’ accumulates only with time and aggregation. It does grow over time; Facebook has increased my affective quality of life, and not only because it offers a break from my academic service work. The collective stream of posts brings me word of books, articles, music, films, video clips and news that I would otherwise never discover. At a time of life when new involvements become more rare, I suddenly have digital penfriends with whom I exchange old-fashioned letters through Inbox (one of the least remarked features of Facebook), while an acquaintance from decades ago has become a dear friend whom I contact almost daily. Retrieving a joy of my childhood, when my father would bring home a ‘two bob’ chocolate on a Friday night and we’d listen to The Goon Show and My Word on the ABC, I play variants of Scrabble with friends on four continents throughout the day. Facebook also nudges me to remember more of my past than I am wont to do, as other people’s actions unpredictably pull bits of our scattered lives together. There is more to this aspect than the nostalgia decried by Susan Dominus (‘sometimes it seems like Facebook is the most back-ward looking innovation ever expected to change the future’) and Steve Tuttle (‘Goodbye, William and Mary alums I barely remember from 25 years ago’). Facebook has utopian force for me because it gently undoes the dissociative patterns I learned as a girl in pugnaciously ‘real’ Australian country towns; it lets me have family on the same plane as my ex-students, my friends who talk books, my colleagues in Hong Kong and Australia and friends who also post in Italian, French and Chinese. Directly because of Facebook, I was able to speak by phone to a much-loved cousin just before he died. If Facebook vanished overnight, I would experience grief.

Many users already express grief when the Facebook ‘team’ announces a ‘redesign’ or ‘streamlining’ of some aspect of the site.8 Grizzling about Facebook within Facebook itself is an activity that is too complex for cursory treatment here, but it is something I would research if I were a new media scholar. I’m generally not active in Facebook groups, but over the past year I have twice felt so upset about ‘upgrades’ that killed cherished features of ‘my’ on-line world that I, too, signed petitions and joined multiple versions of ‘1,000,000 Against the New Facebook Lay-Out’. Apart from the anger endemic to living passionately in an environment that the owner can alter at will (a condition a bit like being in love and a lot like being a tenant), most obnoxious to me is the Facebook doublespeak that coos about ‘giving you more control’ over your page, while flagrantly reducing that control as we are nudged to push ever more content from other media providers.

8 Wikipedia gives quite a detailed and well-referenced account of the major intra-Facebook controversies and the mode of their resolution: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Criticism_of_Facebook#cite_note-43
The worse occasion for me was the September 2008 redesign; by forcing several added rounds of clicking, it separated the applications (and thus the display of signs received from friends) from the news feed, in time as well as visual space—thereby splitting memory and conservation from contemporaneity, the past from the flow of the present. Like most of my Hong Kong friends I had loved those gift-based apps and curated the images carefully as I once did scrapbooks of shoes and hairstyles from 1950s comics; some icons were beautiful and others were not, but all were mnemonic traces of events and personal stories. When Facebook began calling these ‘clutter’ (an aesthetic position shared by mostly American friends who always hid their stuff behind a corporate web page look), I realized that my affection for these apps was of a piece with growing up in what was once sniffily known in Australia as an ‘Irish house’—full of clutter, often dusty junk unappealing to behold but charged with the vitality of the souls who had given each object or left it behind. Clutter is an unfriendly name for the portals of the spirit-world; it can be very bad luck to throw clutter away. So I keep some of mine on Facebook, immured on that ‘Boxes’ page, but when I go there now it feels like visiting a cemetery rather than a home.

Groups formed to oppose Facebook initiatives can attract a couple of million people and they often complain of censorship and PRC-style technical interference from site administrators. The protests against the March 2009 remodelling of the Home page to make Facebook more like Twitter seem to have been a little more effective than those of 2008 in extracting modifications of an unpopular yet widely accepted site revision. Win or lose, though, perhaps it is this experience of joining with equally frustrated and grizzling strangers world-wide in a reiterative struggle with a transnationally effective corporate ‘state’ that exercises power through emotional blackmail (that is, hegemony; ‘if you don’t like it, leave!’) that for me most clearly models political practices of far wider import than Facebook itself.

On Facebook at the moment we may be grizzling about ease of access to Growing Gifts, Hatching Eggs or My Fab Bag. However, if it is more or less new for me to do this on-line, the mode of continuity that makes this small change intelligible is neither fictional nor derived from Western critical literature on the political potentials (and otherwise) of new media use. Rather, I understand it in an ordinary way through the growing power, in limited but I think expanding spheres, of the Chinese netizenry, which draws its effectiveness (in particular, against abuses of power in everyday life) as much from the culture of the political system that it inhabits and harasses as it does from the media it uses.9

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9 For a threshold Chinese case in June 2009 that was somewhat submerged in international news media by the events simultaneously occurring in Tehran, see ‘Fending Off Demands for Sex’ for the widely publicised case of 21-year old Deng Yujiau, who was freed by a court after killing a Communist Party official who had tried to assault her.
Over-supplied as we are with representative government, Australians have been accustomed to thinking of Chinese political culture as remote. Yet as our own system intensifies its reliance not only on deal-making and ‘spin’ but on public cynicism about the possibility of truth and integrity in politics, I note that it is during the often but not always fruitless exercise of opposing Facebook’s decisions and exposing what lies inside their rhetorical cocoon that Hong Kong’s ‘petitionary’ style of public pressure activism as exercised within an unrepresentative, undemocratic mode of governance becomes, however briefly, a transnational norm. Petitioning may or may not be effective but over time it is the shared experience of a form of collective agency enabled by a broad and amorphous imagined community (‘fellow Facebook users’) that has significant utopian and practical potential.\(^{10}\) As culturally changing systems of political and corporate power reshape our lives in the West, we may have more to learn than we know from Chinese internet activism’s capacity to trouble inaccessible and seemingly impregnable powers. In the meanwhile, having a good grizzle about Facebook can sometimes achieve a little more than we have learned to expect.

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\(^{10}\) My thanks to Russell Smith for this formulation.
Works Cited


In Raymond Williams’s *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1976), the term *Literature* is placed more or less in between the term *Liberation* and the term *Management*: which might also more or less capture the predicament of the professional study of literature—the various interests and practices that continue to gather together under the nebulous heading of English—at tertiary institutions today. Although Williams mentions *literary criticism* in his entry, he has nothing much to say about English as a discipline and a profession: its modern history, the range of interests it encompasses, and the ‘communities’ it fosters and depends upon. The question of what kind of discipline English is—what it does or should do, how it does it, and to what end—is certainly worth pursuing and I shall say something about this later on. But the question of English as a set of communities, a discipline defined by forms of sociality, is also important, both to its future and to its past. Of course, we routinely think of English today not as a community at all but as a fractured, fragmented and promiscuous practice that plays host to a range of methodologies, touching many other disciplines in the process, and covering a remarkably diverse array (or disarray) of texts and topics. It is methodology that fractures English most of all, as we know only too well when we are asked to define it in our ARC grant applications: where ‘Approach and Method’ is always the weakest section, the part of an application that seems to be the most difficult to articulate, not least because the discipline that the ARC broadly identifies as ‘Literature Studies’ has indeed been so methodologically porous, so entangled by the methods and practices of other disciplines it affiliates to generally at the expense of developing a discrete identity for itself.

This is not the view of Marjorie Garber, who in her book, *A Manifesto for Literary Studies* (2003), identifies literary studies through ‘the way it differs from other disciplines—in its methodology and in its aim—rather than in the way it resembles them’ (12). Literary studies takes literature as its object of study, obviously enough. But what this object can be made to signify—how it can be put to work, read and understood—is always negotiable. Garber speaks up for the relative autonomy of literary studies, relishing literature’s ahistorical resonances—‘style, form, genre … grammar, rhetoric, and syntax; tropes and figures; assonance and echo’—its playfulness and its irreducibility (12). But
she also thinks that the particularity of academic English lies in its prioritising of ‘human nature’ and human freedom. This is a humanist, secular and countercultural defence of a discipline, which is hardly new as a defence and in fact speaks to a long, complicated and often non-secular history of literary formations. It takes us back to the question of community and how we might think this through in relation to literary study and literary production. One point of origin might lie in the ‘republic of letters’, a term—as Anne Goldgar has noted—that first appeared in western Europe (in Germany and across the Continent) in the fifteenth century and was used more frequently in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to account for an increasingly affiliated group of literary writers and scholars (2). Goldgar’s focus is on French Huguenot scholar-refugees as they resettled in Protestant countries such as England in the early eighteenth century; but a notion of community—bound in this case by the predicament of exile and ‘an ethos of international and nonsectarian cooperation’ (9)—is central to her understanding of their literary imperatives. Her argument is that ‘the scholarly world considered itself to be in some ways separate from the rest of society’ (3), professionalised as some members might be: this is an early version of Garber’s sense of the relative autonomy of university-based English today. Habermas’s notion of the eighteenth century public sphere—as a site of sociality and institutionalisation that saw the formation of a politically engaged bourgeois civil society—provides an important point of contrast here (Habermas), because for Goldgar this earlier republic of letters was much more inward-looking and politically detached. ‘Their work was not primarily directed at public utility’, she writes, ‘their ideal society was not intended for general emulation, and the political aspect of their lives was to be divorced absolutely from their scholarship’ (Goldgar 6). Moreover, their sense of themselves was informal almost to the point of fantasy. ‘Unlike an academy or learned society’, Goldgar suggests, this republic of letters ‘existed only in the minds of its members. Its regulations and even its membership were nebulous at best, and any contemporary definition tended to be articulated in protest at the violation of these unwritten rules, suggesting, among other things, that they were as well-defined as they were usually unexpressed’ (2).

There is an familiar available narrative here which sees the transition away from the ‘old’ republic of letters as a process of modernisation and social engagement: through, for example, the transition from the ‘small and close-knit’ neo-Latin érudits in France at the end of the seventeenth century to the ‘relatively more public, open and democratic’ world of the philosophes (Shelford 3). Other scholarship, however, has troubled the contrast conventionally drawn between this older republic of letters and the Enlightenment. L.W. B. Brockliss’s Calvet’s Web: Enlightenment and the Republic of Letters in France (2002) turns to a later, minor figure in this literary community (a Catholic physician but also a man of letters, ordinary, provincial) in order to show that—politically disengaged
as it was—this community of érudits could nevertheless be critical of the ancien régime and was drawn to the modern, secular Voltairean notion of ‘civic patriotism’ (400) and cosmopolitan ideal. For Brockliss, the petit monde of the old republic of letters is not an anachronism, nor did it die away:

if anything, as the eighteenth century wore on the Republic went from strength to strength. … Although individual members might have their particular interests, the community remained a self-conscious entity, wedded to the pursuit of knowledge tout court. It was only at the end of the century that its members began to split up into disciplinary clusters, and specialist journals, especially in Germany, began to appear. (8-9)

Even specialisation brings with it not the end of a sense of community but—if I can draw on Durkheim’s account of the division of labour in modernity—new, institutionalised ‘organic solidarities’ that can also tolerate eclecticism. How ‘progressive’ all this might be is open to debate, of course: the kind of debate we still have around the nature of English in universities today.

In my book, Subcultures: Cultural Histories and Social Practice (2007), I look closely at the concept of community and suggest that it shares some structural features with the concept of a subculture, but that it is also different to that concept in several important ways. We might ask: is the petit monde of English a community or a subculture? And the answer would be in part: it depends on who or what it affiliates to or distinguishes itself from. Subcultures do not as a rule have something equivalent to class consciousness; they float either above class—since subcultures are generally elitist and self-absorbed (rather like conventional accounts of the érudits)—or below it, as Marx had noted when he identified the literati with the lumpenproletariat in the Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte (1851-52): and of course, literati remains a pejorative term even now, among some journalists for example. The beginning of the eighteenth century saw the values of the old republic of letters reaffirmed by emerging literary conservatives in Britain such as Swift and Pope, with their high Augustan ideals: tied to what Paula McDowell calls ‘courtly, manuscript literary culture’(4) and linking itself to the ‘paternal, stable, and rational figure of the landed [i.e. propertied] citizen’ (Ingrassia 3). On the other hand, the early eighteenth century also saw a rapidly developing culture of literary production which, far from being courtly and stable, instead threw itself into the everyday commonplaces of commercial transaction. This unstable and often illicit realm of literary production and commentary was popularly referred to as Grub Street and we think of it—especially after Pat Rogers’ important, early book on the subject (Rogers 1972)—not as a community but as a subculture: a ‘brotherhood’ of ‘Scribblers’, hack biographers and plagiarists, publishers, print workers, street-hawkers and ballad-singers, living in close proximity to counterfeiters, beggars, prostitutes and refugees from the continent: all of whom, for Rogers, were more or less united in their relationship
to the law (which harassed them) and their distance from the Augustans (who satirised them and called upon the law to police them). Women participated in Grub Street, too: Paula McDowell suggests that participation in commercial print culture enabled ‘a new mode of association for women’, although she argues that they probably formed a ‘series of heterogeneous collectivities, rather than a homogeneous “subculture”’ (11, 31).

The usual account of the transformation of the republic of letters in Britain in the eighteenth century is that it became less disinterested, less inward-looking, and more concerned with its growing social obligations as well as its relationship to commercial literary practices. Paul Keen, in *The Crisis of Literature in the 1790s: Print Culture and the Public Sphere* (1999), in fact draws these two features together: ‘This redefinition of the republic of letters in terms of its relations to its wider context was reinforced by the increasingly commercial nature of British society’ (31). For Keen, the literary subculture of Grub Street was more representative of modern literary trends than the high Augustanism of Pope precisely because it tied literary activity to ambitious professional and commercial practices. The dominant image of the author in the 1790s was not the Romantic fantasy of the author as social outcast, remote from the banalities of the everyday commercial world. Instead, he writes, it was closely tied to what was perhaps the most powerful ideological achievement of the long middle-class revolution: the prestige of the professional. … The struggle to define literature according to various social and political perspectives (a struggle whose implications we are still living with today) was inseparably related to the professional ambitions of authors to establish the prestige of their position. (78)

The social prestige of literary culture was defined not only in terms of its connection to the ‘polite classes’ (although this remains important) but also through its ‘intellectual industriousness’ (79): the kind of industriousness that Carlyle later on worked into a rigorous program of austerity and self-discipline as a way of defining the critic as a masculinist hero-figure and, of course, the kind of industriousness that academic English today knows so well as its practitioners are ranked within a framework of high-level research indicators.

This articulation of social prestige distinguished itself from both the aristocracy and the lumpenproletariat by *not* becoming parasitic or dependent on state patronage, even though it appropriated some of the privileges of the former and some of the anti-bourgeois bohemianisms of the latter. The political role of the republic of letters, however, was still of concern, with literary culture seeming to be both peculiar— with its own rules of conduct and idiosyncratic values—and yet open to almost anyone: specialised and eclectic simultaneously. Isaac D’Israeli, the father of the Conservative British Prime Minister Benjamin
D’Israeli, was the son of a Jewish merchant who had emigrated to England from Italy. A neglected figure in literary history these days, his *Curiosities of Literature* (1791–1823) went through many reprints and made him a celebrated literary figure at the time. Becoming increasingly conservative himself, D’Israeli came to see the republic of letters as an elite, politically disengaged, secular social world. ‘Literary investigation’, he wrote in *Miscellanies*, ‘is allied neither to politics nor religion; it is a science consecrated to the few; abstracted from all the factions on earth; and independent of popular discontents and popular delusions’ (cited in London 2005, 356). On the other hand, D’Israeli also gave almost the exact opposite view in *Curiosities of Literature*, where the republic of letters is seen by contrast as open and dispersed, cosmopolitan and vernacular, and—far from being abstracted from factions—just as factional, and fractured, as anything else:

Never was a republic greater, better peopled, more free, or more glorious: it is spread on the face of the earth, and is composed of persons of every nation, of every rank, of every age, and of both sexes. They are intimately acquainted with every language, the dead as well as the living. To the cultivation of letters they join that of the arts; and mechanics are also permitted to occupy a place. But their religion cannot boast of uniformity; and their manners, like those of every other republic, form a mixture of good and of evil: they are sometimes enthusiastically pious, and sometimes insanely impious.

The politics of this state consist rather in words, in vague maxims and ingenious reflections, than in actions, or their effects. This people owe all their strength to the brilliancy of their eloquence, and the solidity of their arguments. Their trade is perfectly intellectual, and their riches very moderate; they live in one continued strife for glory, and for immortality. Their dress is by no means splendid; yet they affect to despise those who labour through the impulse of avarice or necessity.

They are divided into many sects, and they seem to multiply every day. (D’Israeli)

I have been talking about these early formations of literary communities—these republics of letters—because it seems to me that this is where we find the origins of the academic discipline of English as we know it today, and where we find articulations of exactly the issues and problems that English continues to be plagued by: how inward-looking it is and what kind of relative autonomy it can lay claim to; how disinterested it can afford to be and, conversely, what levels of social and political engagement it might play out, what its relationship to ‘popular discontents’ might actually be; what kinds of affiliations it draws on to shore up its sense of itself as a community; and alongside this, how sectarian...
or factional it can become before it loses its identity as a discipline altogether. It wasn’t long ago that Edward Said, in a piece called ‘Restoring Intellectual Coherence’ (1999), felt that university English departments were places where the study of literature as a thing-in-itself had all but disappeared: as if the discipline is now so sectarian and fractured (simultaneously insular and dispersed) as to be unidentifiable. Michael Bérubé, in his book *The Employment of English: Theory, Jobs, and the Future of Literary Studies* (1998), has noted that, as the academic study of literature integrated into wider systems of communication and signification such as cultural studies, film studies, gender and sexuality studies, ethnicity studies and so on, it did indeed lose its ‘closeness’ to literary works even as it increased its bid for contemporary relevance and enabled its graduates to become more employable. On the other hand, English (even after the onslaught of theory) continues to commit itself to the human and humanist values that Marjorie Garber calls for, as if this is the thing that still continues to make it what it is: as we see, for example, in J. Hillis Miller’s recent book, *Literature as Conduct* (2005), which returns to Henry James to tell us that the study of literature is a necessary ‘part of the conduct of life’ (2): a humanist rephrasing, surely, of Ian Hunter’s earlier, more austere view of English as, literally, a discipline, a particular form of politico-ethical training.

We can think about the recent turn to ethics in literary studies as a reaffirmation of the republic of letters’ socially progressive and increasingly secular project: pitched somewhere between Plato’s proposition about the civic role of literature in a just republic (to illustrate the ‘virtuous life’) and the Enlightenment view of reading as reflection and self-reflection, a way of comprehending otherness. But the encouragement of reflection and self-reflection can often do little to change the discipline’s perceived inward-lookingness, and it does not really change the prevailing sense of English as a relatively autonomous community still preoccupied with the expression of its own uniqueness, the special aspects of its specialisation. Edward Said—who was one of the more outward-looking examples of a literary scholar—nevertheless reaffirms the relative autonomy of the discipline when he writes at the beginning of *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) that ‘I have availed myself of the utopian space still provided by the university, which I believe must remain a place where such vital issues are investigated, discussed, reflected on’ (xxvi). This is again resonant of the Habermasian notion of an idealised public sphere, forming itself embryonically in coffee house discussions and debates during the eighteenth century. It might be overstating the matter to draw on Michael Warner’s term and call the petit monde of university English a ‘counterpublic’, although it has indeed, from time to time, been characterised by ‘alternative dispositions’ built around an often anxiously-registered sense of both its prestige and its subordination (Warner *Publics*, 56). William R. Paulson, in *Literary Culture in a World Transformed: A*
Future for the Humanities (2001), speaks of English as ‘a guild that fancies itself a counter-culture’ and writes about the ‘drive for autonomy’ in academic literary studies that plays itself out through a scholar’s suspicion of a colleague who writes for nonacademic audiences, in the “serious” writer’s disdain for the success of the best-selling novelist, and in the literary and artistic assumption that creative individuals should break free from middle-class taste and morality. (186, 4)

These hierarchies of taste (already apparent in the Grub Street conflicts) certainly work to structure English which, as a teaching profession, produces linguistic capital through training in reading and writing, and symbolic and cultural capital which then operate as identifiers of social prestige or distinction (to draw on Pierre Bourdieu). But they also ensure its social marginality. One of the problems for English is that its relative autonomy pulls it in both directions. It continues to stage its prestige in a variety of ways: promoting the virtues of pure research (‘curiosity’) over the more labour-intensive but lower-division task of teaching; keeping itself at one remove from the pressure to justify itself vocationally; turning to abstraction and theory (primarily responsible for the fracturing of English over the years, although the ‘turn to theory’ is now more or less over); distancing itself from mass media (areas of interest for media studies and cultural studies, not literary studies); and, in spite of D’Israeli’s sense that the republic of letters is composed ‘of persons of every nation’, remaining more or less monocultural and monolingual, still tied primarily to the literature of Britain which continues to be taught and researched by British- Australian- or US-educated, invariably white academics, with only a few notable exceptions (including Said). It remains relatively independent from social, economic and political relations precisely because it doesn’t affect them—or affects them only in the slightest sense. Yet in Australia and elsewhere government bureaucrats make funding available to ‘Literature Studies’— albeit modestly—in spite of the fact that the discipline is far from clear about its identity and purpose. Indeed, the disinterestedness of academic English may help this to be so; its social and political disengagement may be precisely the thing that allows it to continue to receive money from the state. As Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht has noted, ‘politicians and administrators are more deeply convinced of the existential values inherent to literature than we are’ (Gumbrecht). It may be the sublime, rather than the worldly, aspects of English that earn it the money that it gets today.

This is not entirely true, of course: the state can invest in English as a matter of national ideology, too, and it has done so for some considerable time. The recently-filled, federally-funded Chair in Australian Literature at the University of Western Australia was an initiative developed as a response to the previous Liberal government’s call for a national curriculum, where Australian Literature (much like Australian History) is given a role to play in the formation of Australian
citizenships and the development of a national consciousness. The ties between a modern nation and its literature—something that Raymond Williams also discusses in his entry for Literature in *Keywords*—have been usefully chronicled in the United States where Michael Warner, this time in his book *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth Century America* (1990), has argued for a ‘perfect reciprocity’ (71) between print culture, the public sphere and nascent politics in America: as if the republic of letters and the ideals of republicanism seem literally to go hand in hand. The republic of letters is the public sphere in this account, with literature—in Gerald Graff’s words—seen as ‘an extension of public forms of speech and argument’ (Graff 19). The shift from this early sense of an American republic of letters to actual American Literary Studies as a university discipline was traced out in Graff’s important book, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (1987). Once upon a time in America, literature was seen to be ‘social in point of view, not egocentric’, a means of illustrating not just grammar and rhetoric and style, but ‘civic and religious ideals’ (Graff 19). But the professionalisation of literature in English departments, underwritten by specialised and often esoteric topics for research, meant that fewer people could join in the discussion. Literary scholarship detached itself from topics of general interest and from generally shared social and political ideals, and in the process (wittingly or otherwise) frustrated rather than upheld the cause of cultural nationalism (Graff 13). Various moments of increased American patriotism (during the First World War and the Cold War) saw American Literary Studies recover its social mission; but as we know, New Criticism, as it developed in the late 1930s and ran through at least to the 1960s, disengaged literary criticism from social and political imperatives pretty much altogether, mystifying the author and emphasising the purer aesthetic practice of close reading. A polemical anthology of essays edited by Frank Lentricchia and Andrew Dubois with the awkward title, *Close Reading: The Reader* (2003), returns to the New Criticism as an influential point of departure for academic English, and ties it to the ‘post-New Criticism’ emphasis on close reading that we find in, say, Derrida with its emphasis on linguistic play, signification and performance. But although they want to recover close reading as the proper disciplinary practice for literary studies, Lentricchia and Dubois are also uncomfortable with the implication that—as it concentrates once more upon its lost objects, literature and its authors—English must therefore once again be inward-looking and autonomous, directed not to any kind of community (not even a community of scholars and readers) but only to the self, to self-reflection and self-realisation. So they make some space for political close reading:

Political reading is also capable of fulfilling the humanist promise of reading as self-education, as a tutorial on the self (perhaps paradoxically so, insofar as politics is essentially interpersonal. Reading itself, with or without an explicit politics, is paradoxical in the same way). In
reading politically, the reader may find a more elaborate or compelling articulation of what was otherwise only felt. This process can make the initial felt politics more effective, since what is felt needs articulation to allow for practical collective action. (31)

This venture into the literary-political, however, seems somehow to confuse or conflate the distinctions one might conventionally draw between the ‘self’ and the ‘interpersonal’: self and community. It retains a mystified sense of the prestige of literary studies (as if prior to close reading we are somehow politically inarticulate) and makes a quantum leap from close reading as ‘self-education’ to the real possibility of ‘practical collective action’: considerably upping the ante even on Warner’s thesis that the republic of letters in America provided the necessary foundation for U.S. republicanism. It also reminds us once again of the contradictory predicament of English as a discipline, wanting autonomy and collectivity to inhabit each other even as it drives them apart: retaining something special for itself that might (or might not) enable the scholar to return better equipped to the realm of the social-political; and in the process, simultaneously articulating and obfuscating its purpose.

The introduction to this anthology about close reading ends by invoking Franco Moretti, well known nowadays for thinking not about national literatures but world literature, and for advocating not close reading but (in order to do at least some justice to the massively increased literary field the concept of world literature brings with it) what he has called distant reading (Moretti 56-8): all in the name of renovating the discipline of English, of making it literally more ‘worldly’ and globally engaged. We know, of course, that the ideal of world literature is not new: as Moretti reminds us, we find it advocated by Goethe in 1827 and by Marx in 1848, both of whom saw world literature as a way of transcending national ‘narrow-mindedness’ and providing access to some sort of global literary community: the kind of republic of letters D’Israeli had imagined around the end of the eighteenth century, ‘composed of persons of every nation’. It can still seem as if the notion of world literature is a new one, co-opted recently and a little pretentiously by cultural studies through Rob Wilson and Christopher Connery’s anthology, The Worlding Project (2007), which looks at some cultural uses of ‘world space’. But world literature has a longer history, tied to Philology and Comparative Literature: two of the more marginal subdivisions of academic English today in Britain and Australia, although not in the United States where Comparative Literature still flourishes (with English at Princeton, for example, as just one program among a number of others participating under this broad heading). William L. Richardson and Jesse M. Owen’s book, Literature of the World: An Introductory Study, was published in 1922 and began with a chapter on ‘Literature of the Orient’: ‘Literature’, they tell us, ‘frees us from provinciality. … Through literature we become citizens of the world’
Joseph Shipley’s *Dictionary of World Literature* was published in 1943 and Shipley had gained his PhD in comparative literature from Columbia University in 1931. Albert Guerard’s *Preface to World Literature* was published in 1940; he was a Professor of Comparative Literature at Stanford University who reputedly discovered the American novelist John Hawkes, and wrote an important book on Joseph Conrad. Conrad was also the favourite novelist of Edward Said, whose PhD and first book in 1966 was devoted to this ‘internationalist’ author, someone who for Said was ‘outside the English centre’ and who possessed, rather like those French Huguenot refugee-scholars who were part of the old republic of letters, a ‘strange sort of exilic consciousness’ (Said, *Power* 246), an important figure for comparative literature not least because Conrad wrote in English as his third language (after Polish and French) and because his fiction played out a predicament of exile alongside a capacity for global mobility. Emily Apter has traced the current interest in world literature back through Said to the German-Jewish philologist Erich Auerbach—whom Said had praised in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (1983) as a key secular literary intellectual—and the Austrian-Jewish philologist Leo Spitzer. Both academics had fled their countries, going into exile initially to work in Istanbul and then to emigrate to the United States, with Auerbach arriving at Pennsylvania State University (he was Fredric Jameson’s PhD supervisor) and Spitzer going to Johns Hopkins. In Istanbul, Auerbach wrote his seminal study *Mimesis* (1946), while Spitzer began his projected magnum opus there, *Classical and Christian Ideas of World Harmony*: the title reminding us of philology’s (and comparative literature’s) emphasis on resemblance amongst diversity, on the things that different language groups and different literatures share. For Apter, the University of Istanbul in the 1930s was a real point of origin for comparative literature as we understand it today: ‘a site where East-West boundaries were culturally blurry’ and a place that—remembering that Spitzer spoke around twenty languages—continually disturbed what she calls ‘monolingual complacency’ (56, 61). But Apter’s own discipline, Translation Studies, has little hold on most English departments today which, as I have noted, remain more or less committed to a monolingual approach to literary texts, taking London, not Istanbul, as their key metropolitan centre and point of departure.

I began this article by thinking about what kind of petit monde academic English might be, and about the ‘republic of letters’ as one way of giving this topic a material history. I now want to conclude by mentioning another recent study of world literature, this time by a Parisian academic: Pascale Casanova’s *The World Republic of Letters* (1999; English translation 2004). For Casanova, Goethe’s ideal of a Weltliteratur as a kind of cosmopolitan literary gathering—much like D’Israeli’s view—is unrealistic, because it ignores the pressures of competitive markets: it is too high Augustan, too polite. The fact is that literary circulation is not so much global as transnational, the result of deals done between nations...
in relation to which some nations do well and others do badly to the extent of being excluded altogether from the global literary system. Casanova identifies three authorial responses to this predicament. Firstly, some authors might opt to stay at home or return home, investing in their local literary system. Second, some authors assimilate into the cosmopolitan logics of world literature and are therefore critical of literary and cultural nationalism, such as Rushdie or V.S. Naipaul. And third, some ‘revolutionary’ authors (and Casanova’s primary example here is Samuel Beckett, on whom she has also written another book, *Samuel Beckett: Anatomy of a Literary Revolution* [2006]) reject both of these positions and so remain permanently in a state of exile. In doing so, they recover the kind of autonomy that is, for Casanova, the essence of literature. As Christopher Prendergast puts it, this third group of authors is heroic for Casanova because ‘in besieging the citadels of the literary imperium, they succeed in conquering not only for themselves but also for the institution of literature a certain ‘freedom’ and ‘autonomy’; literature not only becomes fully international (as distinct from inter-national), it also becomes ‘literature’, a practice finally freed from its subjection to national imperatives’ (10). We see values that are historically familiar to the republic of letters being championed once again here: in particular, some kind of autonomy from the pressures of cultural nationalism. Now, although we can debate just how ‘revolutionary’ this might be, academic English for better or worse also partakes of this kind of autonomy, and continues to do so; even in Australia, where the pressures of cultural nationalism are apparent to us every time we fill in the National Benefit section of our ARC applications, or on the few occasions a federal minister endows a Chair in Australian Literature and asks English departments around the country to bid for it.

It is true that literature has lost much (but by no means all) of its prestige alongside other media and that it jostles for space and relevance in the present-day education system. It is also true that academic English, which has always been politically weak inside universities, has never been more marginal than it is now—even though, its residual monolingualism and monoculturalism notwithstanding, its horizons have never been broader (with Moretti’s notion of ‘world literature’ remaining for the moment, at least, an unrealised ideal). The relative autonomy that English claims for itself is always contingent, of course, and we know that it can hardly be free from the structures of management, the obligations of professionalism and the pressure for results and outcomes—including employment outcomes for our graduate and undergraduate students—that drive the modern university today. A version of the ‘intellectual industriousness’ that Paul Keen had associated with the republic of letters in the 1790s underwrites the discipline of English right now, which needs to be defined by high-quality as well as high-quantity production, much of which will indeed be devoted to pondering the function and definition not only of its
key object, literature, but of English itself. This means it has to remain inward-looking and disinterested, at least to a degree, as it continues to advocate the virtues of close reading and literary scholarship; while, as it grapples with the emergent problems of distant reading, it also reactivates the older republic of letters’ dispersed, cosmopolitan ideals. The relative autonomy it claims for itself also, I think, lends English a special capacity to be critical: which is why I still see it, in spite of everything, as a progressive discipline, at least in principle. This gives us precisely one of the contradictions of English: that the ill-fitting qualities of disinterestedness and critical capacity inhabit the same domain, pulling at each other in such a way that neither of these things can ever realise their full potential (which is why, like literature itself, it can never be ‘revolutionary’). The relative autonomy of English both enables its critical capacity and severely limits or reduces its effect; along the way, the discipline’s prestige becomes indistinguishable from its marginality. At least this means that English, as it constantly reassesses its place in the world, is rarely hagiographic, which is why some work in Biographical Studies, as well as the kind of writing we see from Harold Bloom and conservative literary critics and reviewers in praise of literary genius and so on, can be something of an embarrassment to it: since this kind of work hopelessly over-invests in autonomy for its own sake. Perhaps English today should offer up just two cheers for autonomy, which has always been something of a mixed blessing. In the process, it could also remind itself that its fate relies on the forging of larger communities of scholars and readers much in the tradition of those older republic of letters, whether we think of this in terms of the sharing of specialised interests among an audience of peers or, more fashionably these days, national and global networks of collaborative research.

Works Cited


Introduction: The Art of the Real
KERI GLASTONBURY AND ROSALIND SMITH

The following papers were originally presented at The Art of the Real: National Creative Non-fiction Conference, hosted by Newcastle University’s Writing Cultures research group in May 2008. The conference had two related strands, critical and creative, and essays by creative practitioners of non-fiction have been published separately as a special issue of TEXT. This is not to say, however, that the essays collected here are distinct from those works by creative practitioners, particularly in their use of form and in their meta-textual concerns with writing the real. While their dominant interest in the art of the real lies in the works of others, these critical essays also include subjective, experiential and practice-based engagements. All are concerned with ways in which ‘the real’ can be approached, interpreted and read, and the attendant problems that these textual representations of an order outside the symbolic create.

In the genres that deal with representations of the real, such as biography and autobiography, true crime and history, poststructuralism has problematised any straightforward representation of experience. Common to these genres now is the way in which fact and fiction, act and observation appear like one another. As Mark Seltzer comments, a text within one of these genres ‘marks or irritates the distinction between real and fictional reality, holding steadily visible that vague and shifting region between truth and falsity where belief resides’(2). The papers presented at the conference were consistently concerned with this construction of belief as a way of making convincing claims to truth. However, the ways in which belief was imagined or invoked differed according to genre, form and period, as well as disciplinary convention. The three essays published here reflect some of that diversity of approach to representations of the real, as well as the broad range of types of text under examination.

Ross Gibson begins his essay with an analysis of the haiku’s intimate and visceral effects upon the reader, teasing out through these texts broader debates between politics and aesthetics also being played out in the recent critical dialogues between the new historicism and the new formalism. He highlights formal representations of the real, in their most refined and ineffable instance in the haiku, as a way of accessing the ‘often covert connectivity that subtends and really arranges the world’. These texts become conduits to focussed observation, triggers to reading below the surface and outside the moment, in a practice in which form and context, art and the real, exist in productive
tension. The extract, or ‘the aesthetic of the detail’, incomplete and gesturing outwards, is key to this process of interpretation and becomes in this essay a way of negotiating modernity.

Cameron Muir’s article examines the Burrendong Dam as ‘a product of ideological and cultural desires’, desires that shape the way we perceive larger national questions of place and environmentalism. It traces a cultural and environmental history of the Macquarie Marshes and their management, from the building of the Burrendong Dam to its present state of neglect and failure. Harnessing the narrative resources of creative non-fiction, Muir uses the story of the dam as an example of the ways in which the humanities might be employed to interrogate conventions, assumptions and divisions such as that between nature and culture.

Patricia Pender’s essay also addresses an overlooked cultural icon, but one from nineteenth-century literary history. She examines the figure of Dorothy Wordsworth, provocatively reading her journals as love-letters through Roland Barthes’ *A Lover’s Discourse*. In this move, her essay constructs the revisionist, desiring Dorothy of Frances Wilson’s recent literary biography as both the subject of her own desiring writing and as the object, and measure, of different cultural investments in modes of the feminine.

From haiku to tourist brochure, the Burrendong Dam to Dorothy Wordsworth, these essays show the real’s provocative place in creative and critical practice. The real becomes a mode both of aesthetic and of political inquiry, as well as a way of marking and tracing genealogies of aesthetic and political investment. These essays share an impulse to convert specific instances of interpreting the real into ways of addressing broader questions of heuristic practice, ones that make their way back into the realm of lived experience. The tension between art and the real here, therefore, produces new ways of making sense of the text’s relationship with the world.

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**Work cited:**

Extractive Realism
ROSS GIBSON

Here is a fine haiku by the Japanese poet Seishi, a twentieth-century master:

The signal pistol
Echoes on the hard surface
Of the swimming pool.
(Blyth 346)

And this tiny gem is by the contemporary Australian writer Robert Gray, matching Seishi for precision even though Gray’s poem is fashioned from a much looser part of the world:

Torpid farmland afternoons.
A windmill stirs
as a bubble breaks in buttermilk.
(Gray ‘Twenty Poems’ 91)

Entire systems of reality are sketched quickly but exactly in these works. Shifts of scale spring from quickly conjured settings. Note all the perspectives offered in each poem, how in an instant your sensibility grabs several vantages on the scenes. Conjunctions of heat and smell and sound all shuttle across your cognitive frame, putting you here and there in a flash, giving you sudden and intense access to realities within the settings that are being witnessed. From the intimacy of your own witnessing body, you span out to encompass sharp details of large places—the hard acoustic slap in a swimming pool that’s big enough for tournaments; the almost-imperceptible transpiration across flatland paddocks that need more water than raw nature supplies. And then in the next instant, as the meagre syllables slip along, memories pulse suddenly within you to bring you quickly back close to yourself via past time. All this occurs in a rhythm that folds the larger world and you together unstintingly. Appreciating Seishi’s and Gray’s crystalline miniatures, you know closeness as well as vastness in a retinue of glimmering moments. Emphasising definitive details of lived experience so exactly, both poems are realist.

Seishi once explained why utterances as tiny as these can be so thrilling, so revelatory. In an aside made to acknowledge his admiration of the French symbolist poets, he quoted Mallarmé asserting that ‘[because] objects are
already in existence, it is not necessary to create them … all we have to do is grasp the relationships among them’ (Yamaguchi xix). This chimes well with Thomas Hoover’s vivid account of what happens in a successful haiku: ‘the mind is struck as with a hammer, bringing the senses up short and releasing a flood of associations’ (Hoover 205). In the moment of intensified perception and interpretation that gets laid out across three concise lines, messy existence can be rendered as an essence so that the gist of an experience is offered as a refined set of organised elements and shaping influences that hold a larger world intensified on a page and poised to expand again in your mind.

I remember being warned off traditional Japanese aesthetics in Graduate School, when I was being trained to assay the political affordances in all cultural processes and products. I recall being told that statements such Hoover’s and traditions such as Zen and the symbolist credos all peddled a belief in some illusory and immaterial essence that purports to float freely above the everyday struggles of citizens labouring in the messier world of material exigency. I remember being warned that aesthetes such as the old Zen masters and their modern apologists were haughty Platonists wrapped about with false consciousness and uninterested in the material work that politics must engender in the real world, in the objective realm of pragmatic action.

However, these condemnations missed the fact that immaterial relationships always insinuate the material componentry of the world, that combinative influences are coursing constantly amidst all secular experience, and that such systems combine to cause reality. True, it is tempting to assert that some patrician or ideal state beyond politics has been extracted in these tiny poems, rarefied and diamantine as they appear. But it is misleading—perhaps it is fair to say it is unreal—to insist that these reduced impressions of habitable scenes are so refined as to be ineffable and depoliticised. When Thomas Hoover declared that a haiku can provide a quick metaphysical jolt that helps a reader discern some larger connective pattern of valence in the everyday world, he was not arguing for the aesthetical transcendence of political affairs. Rather he was describing how the reader can be brought dramatically close to the often covert connectivity that subtends and really arranges the world.

Granted, I’ve spent these opening paragraphs chasing some esoteric concerns, but by clarifying this notion of the extract I’ve found a useful way to start thinking about ‘the art of the real’, particularly as it can be practised in my own society. Australia is a nation where much has depended on concealment—think of the landgrabbing, think of the withholding of payments and wages to Indigenous workers, think of the reluctance to acknowledge the damage that’s been caused by water wastage, carbon emissions and by imported systems of land-use. In such a society it is useful to deploy the trope of the extract provocatively because a well-chosen detail can act as the startling trigger that
releases the flood of associations for anyone who has been primed to perceive what lies beneath the surface of ordinary experience. An extracted detail might grant a focused observer access to the systematic understanding of a larger reality. Next question: how to turn oneself and one’s readers into focused observers?

I can begin to exemplify this extractive method with brief reference to three projects from my own research. Example 1: for many years I’ve been ruminating on the enigmatic notebooks of First Fleeter William Dawes, who recorded weather conditions and astronomical patterns as well as a tiny but hugely significant fraction of Indigenous vocabulary and grammar in the Sydney Cove district between 1788 and 1791. The evidence in the taciturn notebooks is truncated because Dawes was sent home to England just as he was beginning to grasp and extract the material components (vocabulary) and the essential organizing principles (grammar) of the local language. What we have to work with, therefore, is a set of intensely significant clues and a world of absences across which we must speculate imaginatively yet rigorously. In Dawes’ notebooks, a flood of associations can flow, but the reader needs to learn how to strike hammers on the limited set of keys that have survived the past via the meager transcriptions. In doing so, the reader is trained to get a sense of the relationships that held the world together even as it was beginning to fall apart. The reader is trained to understand the world of Sydney Cove relationally and always provisionally, with a postulative understanding always in process.

Example 2: a few years ago I wrote a book called Seven Versions of an Australian Badland. It examines a landscape where colonial landgrabbing and monocultural farming have plundered the environment until the place now appears like a defiled and exhausted thing. Over the past three decades I’ve crossed this broken country many times, with a growing conviction that it is a scree of evidence bearing witness to the unruly historical forces that have shaped it. In such landscapes—and they’re everywhere in Australia—we have to ask, what can be made of this scene now? Attending to relationships amongst a constrained array of details that were highlighted through the selective and combinative procedure of my writing in Seven Versions, I nudged the reader into asking questions. For example, what can we know about the ecologies that have gone feral in Central Queensland? What of the wrenched geomorphics, the weed-infested gullies and floodplains, the roofless towns with a dozen residents still hanging about? How can we overhear the pertinent gossip—the attempts at truth and the self-serving lies—that buzz about it? What of the journey-patterns, the shuttling rhythms stitching the country together in time, now and in the past? What can we make of the documents that have been generated in response to this country? And what of the absences blotting the retrieved documentary evidence—when are they meaningful, when are they nothing?
In the book I tried to use all these scrappy details to help people think about the absences and silences between all the pinpointed examples that made up the scenarios that I presented in prose that was designed to spur rigorous speculation rather than lock down singular conclusions.

In Example 3—a series of computer-activated works of video art known collectively as *Life After Wartime*—viewers are given textual and musical prompts encouraging them to account for a salvaged batch of crime-scene photographs that no longer have any conclusive documents attached.¹ As *Life After Wartime* has grown, project by project, a cluster of imaginative and analytical responses to the photographs have aggregated into a database that works as a kind of story-engine proffering an infinite set of plausible but inherently contentious and restless speculations concerning the enigmatic scenes in the archive. Here is one little example from the ‘Life After Wartime’ suite, an excerpt from a 100-page poem called ‘Accident Music’:

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Everything is worth something—Make rust with blood—
A fact, blunt and material—Fluid on a breadboard & a smear on the doorstep—
You might wash your hands all morning, but they’ll never be clean again.

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¹ This is a long-running collaborative project with Kate Richards. See www.lifeafterwartime.com.
In each of these instances selected from my research portfolio, I try to draw some relational understanding out across a sparse array of essential evidence. I try to show how worlds that are usually riddled with concealment and absence can get provisionally and provocatively highlighted and integrated so that, in a flash of connective apprehension, people engaging with the work might know more fully the forces and flows that truly prevail in whatever reality the extracts come from. The details have the impress of the originating reality; and for all their fictional ‘panache’, the artworks that get brewed from the details still display a staunch allegiance to something real.

Restlessness is a crucial factor in these artistic investigations. By restlessness, I mean the way the artwork—be it a book, a database, a building, a garden—can activate your imagination by offering to your mind a system of artful imbalances and implied possibilities that are available for patterned completion within your own imagination with reference to what you already believe to be tested and true in reality. Supreme examples of this aesthetic of generative incompleteness can be found in Zen temples and gardens, where the visitor experiences environments that seem ‘charged’ with a powerful integrating ‘urge’, a flowing potentiality for overcoming incompletion. The urge presses in response to something that is implied rather than shown. To be precise, the urge arises in the visitor; not in the environment. The visitor often feels compelled to imagine a pattern cohering across and between the essential elements and the artful absences that have been offered or extracted for appreciation. Even though the larger pattern is not explicitly present in the deliberately ‘unresolved’ space, it is available because the abstemious offering of extracts prompts the viewer’s urge to complete the inherent pattern. This urge often helps the viewer feel inseparable from the environment, to feel responsible for and attuned to some flowing integrity in the domain under consideration.2

In Zen treatises this connective drive is often called ma (see Nitschke 117). Applied to contemporary Western experience it might be dubbed the forensic impulse. This compulsion to bring previously occluded factors into the public view of the forum (hence the adjective ‘forensic’) seems to be ubiquitous now in popular culture. Much verbiage could be spent arguing how distrust of the illusory surfaces skinning contemporary political and commercial systems has strengthened a vernacular desire to see behind the scenes, and to draw covert nuances out from concealment. Clearly this crisis in governmentality accompanies the emergence of online and interactive communication networks which allow citizens to seek out and ‘triangulate’ their knowledge and to coordinate their agitprop campaigns (think of getup.org.au and their effect on the Kevin07 electoral push) instead of passively receiving information in one uninterrupted

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2 See, for example, Carver 1955. Carver explains that in Zen architecture, ‘all relationships are abbreviated and subtle, encouraging the exercise of the imagination in grasping the whole’ (156).
flow of opinion. In such a restless world, never-ending scepticism gets aligned to continuous, rigorous postulation. It is a creative rather than a cynical impulse. Moreover, in schools and universities there is a shift away from the expectation that citizens are merely receptive, and it coincides with a general abandonment of didactic modes of teaching, to be replaced by the heuristic or discovery-based mode that encourages students into guided learning that is stimulated by curiosity and by the careful priming of essential clues prompting students into further inquiry. (In powerpoint shorthand, this shift is usually glossed as ‘The Sage on the Stage gives way to The Guide Alongside’.) Scholars and citizens are encouraged to become detectives seeking out an ever-expanding array of hammers for their minds. Attuned to this heuristic mentality, many artists are drawn similarly to resonant details, to essences and extracts that are designed to enhance active and sceptical speculation about the ever-building world.

Having pondered and practised this ‘aesthetic of the detail’ for a couple of decades now, I’ve begun to understand how to weld some of my late-acquired insights about the haiku onto yet another strand of criticism that I encountered at Graduate School, namely the realist analyses of the great Hungarian critic György Lukács. Whereas I once would have expected these two approaches to cancel each other out, I can appreciate the poetry in Lukács’s Marxism more readily now, just as I can see the sly politics in the Japanese aesthetics.

In Lukács’ bravura essay ‘Narrate or Describe’, he sets out a distinction between naturalism (which he finds alluring but diverting and suspect) and realism (which he admires and endorses because of its active and revelatory qualities). Lukács conscripts the work of Zola and Tolstoy to illustrate his polemic. Zola exemplifies an alienating style of naturalism because he is somewhat too adroit at petit-pointing details in a process whereby intricate scenes get ‘described from the standpoint of an observer’. By contrast, Tolstoy purveys a vital and stimulating realism because he always hacks out the definitive aspects and grabs the key vectors inside dynamically evolving scenes that are ‘narrated from the standpoint of a participant’ (Lukács 111). This selective and active realism causes a kind of Zen satori, an awakening blow to the mind of the reader. I like to think of it this way: naturalism is additive and diffuses focus as more and more details are supplied, which means that realism is bolder and more useful than naturalism because realism is extractive in the way it draws out the definitive, structuring elements of a scene. Whereas naturalist art casts gentle light on surfaces concealing a deeper reality, realist art helps us probe into the reasons and feel the shaping forces subtending reality.

Here is the connection back to the haiku and to the examples from my own research, cited earlier in this essay. In the Lukácsian mode of realism, because it is extractive, artists are determined to shuck away extraneous detail so they can learn how the relationships between essential elements all cohere contingently
to make the overall, dynamic experience that is everyday existence. The artist and the audience engage in a forensic process, seeking out and extracting the key elements or clues that will lead to fuller, more causal understanding of the scenes being represented.

Rather than risking too much subjectivity by propounding more examples from my own portfolio, let’s exemplify this practice of extractive realism more exactly by examining an artform that might at first seem misplaced here: Jamaican dub music. For me, alongside the centuries-old tradition of the haiku, dub is the other great example of essence-aesthetics, even though the artform is barely four decades old. One of the finest practitioners was Osbourne Ruddock, a.k.a. King Tubby (1941–1989). Tubby produced thousands of remarkable tracks. A brief soundscape called ‘Version Dub’ is one masterpiece among many. It is worth describing and analysing closely, to show how Lukács’s literary insights might be ported over to help with realist appreciations of other media.

In less than three minutes, ‘Version Dub’ builds a world, sets a stage, and on that stage Tubby arrays a set of powerful feelings and conducts a subtle argument about history and art and the place of subjects (be they vociferous, be they voiceless) within the legacy of colonialism and slavery. The tune commences with a quiet cymbal stutter that sounds like wind agitating seedy gourds hanging off jungle vines. This dry rattle lasts exactly one second before it gets settled by electric guitar that is highly reverberant, almost pedal steel, but more peppy with jazz tonics that stretch singing over a sonic bed of crackly distortion pushing up through the top registers. This crackle is no accident or problem in the mix. It is meant to be there. It might be the inserted sound of a stylus grooving on degraded vinyl or it might be grain in the ferrous oxide of magnetic tape that has been deliberately dubbed and over-dubbed and amplified a dozen times or more until the producer has heard and logged the ‘trouble’ he has in mind. There is wow and flutter in there too, purposefully included. As soon as we have understood all this, we get a few beats more of the grit, and then we hear some drawly, massed brass instruments blowing underneath the guitar, pushing between the plucked strings and the crackle. And now a bassline settles in—solid, dry, no reverb in this last burr of the sound.

Thus with the tune only twenty seconds old, Tubby has already sketched out a space for us: the reverb accords dimensions to a sonic world with audible boundaries, the crackle puts a dirty ground under our feet, the bass gives a dependable schedule and encourages trust that this ground will hold while, now and then, the cymbals will agitate and the horns will blow a flitting breeze that measures the atmospheric pressure. This world is an aural island of some kind, with edges, resonance, humidity and a localised sense of time and tone.
But is the island populated? Yes! There it is at the 30-second mark: a little falsetto vocal gulp. An emotional utterance rather than a semantic statement, this gulp anticipates Michael Jackson’s yelps in ‘Billie Jean’ but it also harks way back to African singing techniques as well as Caribbean church music and early American R&B crooners like Sonny Til from the Orioles. Clearly, the human voice has a place in Tubby’s world. Into his ever thickening soundscape, he has dropped this startling ululation by Yabby You, a vocalist renowned for silky melodies that smuggle politically and spiritually ‘conscious’ messages across to the local ‘sufferahs’. Constrained and intensified, the sound might be anguish or it might be rapture. Of course, in Tubby’s world it is both, it is complementary as well as contradictory.

Then, as if in response to Yabby’s call, we get a barely audible and deliberately thin and degraded skerrick of choral singing—perhaps it is an ensemble of singers, or perhaps it is one voice re-copied severally upon itself to form a slightly out-phased harmonic. This sound is not words you can decipher; rather it is a vocalised, aestheticised echo that has been conjured and shaped in response to the first voice. These ‘answering’ voices are a long way back in the mix, as if coming from across a river, off in a yonder valley, or drifting over the sea from out past the horizon. The distant call wafts a couple more times and then Tubby pulls all the environing sound down almost to zero for a moment so that in this lull he lets the faraway voices register unchallenged, as if they are carried on a pushing breeze or in a momentary wave of radio transmission.

Only fifty seconds into the song now, we have an aesthetic model of Jamaica—not just the geography, ecology and atmosphere of the island but also its history and ideology. Hearing the sound from the inside, from the standpoint of a participant and an inhabitant, we experience an extracted model of this place where absence is a defining feature, where influences drift in partially and perennially over the horizon, where radio programs come and go from Florida, Cuba and coast of Texas. We can sense how, in this place of traces, the ancient indigenes have long been obliterated and the contemporary inhabitants are migrants always searching for orientation, always harking back in memory to some elsewhere in their heads even as they know that this place here is their lot now, that they have no other home to make but here. With the aesthetics of seepage and submergence that define dub music, we hear and feel the silence, exile and cunning that often define a migrant’s life.

One and a half minutes into the song, the ‘sound weather’ that Tubby has been conjuring finds its full, stealthy shape. And straight away the song begins to form its finish. The distant voices are quickly engulfed again by the drums.

3 Listen especially to Sonny Til’s keening in ‘It’s Too Soon to Know’ (1948) on Sonny Til and the Orioles, Greatest Hits (Til 1991).
and horns, louder than ever, making a swell of larger elements momentarily washing over the human presence in this world of restless sound. Bringing the tune home now, Tubby waits for the symphonics to lull once more, wavelike, before cuing the humanity one last time. The voice resurfaces nearby and the guitar, horns and drums slowly ebb with the diminishing vocals till the entire composition goes down to a kind of sunsetting silence thickening all around the listener.

What strengthens, as the song wanes, is the notion that ‘Version Dub’ is a sonic island, closely and sensually modeled on an actual island. The tune is realist, therefore. From the reverb we can estimate the scope of the world. From the crackle we get a haptic sense of how that world might grip. From the emerging and submerging insinuations of the different melodies, we sense the dynamics flushing through this domain made of sound. It’s as if we’re left hearing, from the inside, an exquisite abstraction of the geography and fecundity of Tubby’s kingdom. Which is both a fantastic and a real place.

To the extent that the song refers to the drift and decay of radio transmissions emanating from Florida and Cuba, it is a quick lesson in international relations. There’s that word again: relations. It links us back to the haikus with which we commenced this essay. And it helps us bring the essay to a close. The poetry of Seishi and Gray and the music of Tubby all extract intensified reality through the same process: instantaneous, immersed perception gets interwoven with volatile, voluptuous remembrance, altogether releasing that now-familiar flood of associations. Like a condensed guide to a globalising existence, Tubby’s tune offers a sensory commentary on the memory-waste, the associative rumination and the institutional thought-policing that abrade any migrant’s attempt to find a home or a voice in any place, new or old, where one might need to establish an identity founded not on origins but on ingenuity and persistence. Displacement, persistence, ingenuity, changefulness; these real elements have been rendered into art that can orient you. ‘Version Dub’ is a plangent thesis explaining how the modern consciousness is inevitably a variable work in progress, something that has to be asserted and endlessly earned and performed moment by moment in negotiation with prevailing conditions. Not ‘grounded’ in a homeland, the modern consciousness cannot rely on myths that celebrate how people can arise from their original, hosting soil; instead the modern citizen tends to arrive and survive in a place where no birthright is readymade. Hence the defining and completely pertinent sense of erasure and incompleteness in dub, the sense of a musical form in which utterance competes with voicelessness, where agency contends with anonymity. And hence the ‘x-ray’ quality of this music, the way it is built from extracts and underlying hints that grant the listener a clearer apprehension of the tangled contemporary world’ (Veal 196).

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4 Veal acknowledges Luke Erlich and Lee Perry as the sources of the ‘x-ray’ description.
Tubby’s compositions are forensic and Lukácsian therefore, in the way they extract and emphasise the previously covert principles that organise the real place that he represents. Having made this link, we can bring the essay full-circle to its close now by noting how Tubby’s music is useful and inspiring in a way that matches Seishi’s and Gray’s poems: all these artworks are poetically forensic and extractively realist; they inkle out the resonant details and the immaterial relations that really matter, that galvanise a scene and keep the artist and the audience allied to reality. In this tense but thrilling interplay between the urge to select and the urge to combine, the artist can make sure that a provocative, contentious, continuous and pinpoint-efficient realism is always playing out.

In a globalised, saturated world of networked glut, realism like this can be a beacon. In its brevity and speculative association, this extractive but active realism helps us find some way to maintain our allegiance to the world of everyday experience. As another of Gray’s miniature poems says:

The world, it seems, is the maximum
Number of things, or of forces,
That can exist together.
(Gray, ‘Epigrams’)

To know this world properly we need art that lets us comprehend just as many extracted things and forces as can relate well together. Realistically, we need to be in the midst of only what’s essential. No more details than that.

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I turn off the Mitchell Highway outside the New South Wales town of Wellington and drive east into undulating pastoral lands. From here it is about 30 kilometres to the Burrendong Dam, an earth-filled structure across the Macquarie River that was once dubbed ‘The Opera House of the West’. It is difficult to associate this lonely rural valley with a bustling quay and a building that gleams with over a million white and cream tiles. On a treeless rise I can see a brick farmhouse but there is no movement, not even a car parked in its pale gravel driveway. There are no fellow travellers on this narrow road. After winter rain the grass is not high, but it is green, and afternoon sun catches the ridges of low north-south running hills, creating parallel lines of gold and shade across the slopes.

Between 1958 and 1965 a team of up to 1000 workers at a time cut a 1.1 kilometre scar into this alluvial valley floor. With heavy earthmoving equipment they moved 1.3 million cubic metres of rock and dirt to strip the ground to bedrock. The rock buggies’ giant tyres lasted a month before they were worn bare. Workers quarried a further 1.4 million cubic metres of river gravel from an ancient stream bed, and heaped this with more locally excavated material to form a 6.3 million cubic metre pile of rocks, clay and gravel. That is around 50,000 B-Double road trains worth of material, which, parked from end to end, would reach from Sydney to Adelaide. What is the relationship between this dull pile of rocks in the back blocks of New South Wales and the architectural icon of a vibrant harbour city?

Both were nation-building projects conceived in the post war boom. They were under construction at the same time and were plagued by chequered and controversial beginnings. After two decades of slow and interrupted construction, a major design revision, and a rise in costs from an initial estimate of £2 million to final costs heading towards a decimal $40 million, the Burrendong Dam earned the tag ‘The Opera House of the West’. It became a running joke along the river ‘from Bathurst to Brewarrina’, as well as in metropolitan newspapers and state parliament (A. Goodall 2). In 1962 the Minister for Conservation assured New South Wales Parliament that the Burrendong Dam wall would be completed within the next two years, eighteen years after work had begun. In response, the Country Party’s William Chaffey quipped, ‘It’s a pity that the Government did not put the Minister for Conservation in charge of the Opera House’ (New South Wales Vol. 42: 1060).
Leaving the ironic humour behind, it is still a useful pairing. The Opera House was cast as belonging to the world of aesthetics and taste, as an indulgence for those interested in the arts. Conservative political parties labelled it an ‘extravagance’ for Sydneysiders (Bartizan). Publicly funded dams, in contrast, were presented as practical and necessary. Geoffrey Crawford, a Country Party member who joined the Askin ministry, argued it was a ‘tragedy’ that millions were being spent on the Opera House ‘when money is withheld for the building of water conservation schemes’ (New South Wales Vol. 41: 665). We rarely think of dams as part of our cultural heritage, and are more likely to take them for granted as belonging to a separate utilitarian category of ‘resource management’. This perception is founded on a modern dualism that separates culture from nature and it partly explains why we turn to technical and scientific solutions that are part of the problem that we are trying to solve (Weir). Environmental degradation of our hydrological systems, rivers in particular, has not been a result of a lack of knowledge or ignorance, or a failure of science. Scientific knowledge helped engineer large dams within a framework of conservation that pitted production against environment. As historian Tom Griffiths has observed, problems that had been defined as ‘purely scientific or material’ are beginning to be recognised as ‘fundamentally social’ (Griffiths, ‘The Humanities’). We need a method of critique in addition to, or in conversation with scientific inquiry: one that is good at synthesis, and which reaches an audience beyond that of a bureaucrat’s report.

This is what creative non-fiction, and the humanities generally, are good at. I take a creative non-fiction approach in parts of this essay to help argue the case for why narrative is important for environmental understanding. Few people would say the roughly quarried grey rocks that form the Burrendong Dam embody the heights of imagination. Nevertheless, in continuing this tour, acting as both tourist and tour guide, I will explore further the ways in which the dam can be seen, just like the Opera House, as a product of ideological and cultural desires. The story I want to tell is a story of the dam and the river that tries to get beyond so many megalitres; beyond abstract resource management language that makes the rural appear utilitarian rather than cultural and ideological. I argue that cultural desires and values have played a large role in determining how we perceive ‘problems’ and the solutions they require throughout the changing ideological projects of empire, nation and economy. In this narrative tour of the dam site I will try to build a picture of the material consequences of cultural understandings and interactions with place. This work of imagining and analysis is shared, to some extent, between author and reader. I end with reflections on the importance and possibilities of the humanities in environmental research.
I turn off onto the access road to the spillway which is 3 kilometres from the dam wall. From this plateau above the lake there is a good view of the seven radial gates and energy dissipater. The purpose of the spillway is to dampen occasional high inflows from the highlands. It was added to the design after a large flood in 1955. Flooding, drying, and changing course is an integral part of the river’s activity. The Macquarie does not have well-defined channels; Wiradjuri people call it the Wambool, which means meandering or wandering. Before the dam was built, the Macquarie had the highest variability ratio of the major rivers in the Darling system. The range between the river’s highest and lowest flows was from 2 percent to 940 percent of the average annual flow (Murray-Darling Basin Ministerial Council 79). The average for the rest of the world’s rivers, such as the Amazon and Yangtze, is 2 to 3 times (Craik). This exasperated the early surveyors. Oxley lauded the Macquarie when he followed it in winter 1817. In a letter to the Governor he described it as ‘a noble river of the first magnitude’, broader and deeper than the Hawkesbury and Nepean rivers (Oxley). A decade later Hume arrived at the same camp along the river, but in summer; he wrote, ‘the Macquarie River here … can be crossed without wetting your foot, so much, for Mr Oxley’s River of the first Magnitude’ (Hume 11).

People living on the river felt that having to rely on those variable rhythms was uncivilised. When the construction of Burrendong Dam was postponed in 1952, town leaders were incensed. At a public meeting held in Dubbo, an Alderman put his case for why the Macquarie should be regulated. He referred to a drought twelve years earlier when, as he says, ‘The Macquarie River, that fine stream you saw today, was then nothing but a series of dirty stinking water holes that municipalities had to pump from to get their water supplies from day to day’ (‘Urgent Need’ 3). The waterholes played an important role in the biotic life of the river, and as the Alderman’s statement reveals, they were important sources of water that could be relied upon in dry times. He spoke of the river with distaste. It did not flow in ways that conformed to his European sensibilities of what a river should be.

Relationships with environment had long been at the heart of concerns about progress and civilisation in Australia. White people in the antipodes ‘were haunted by the spectre of degeneration’ (Griffiths, ‘Social and Intellectual’ 16). Towards the end of the nineteenth century politicians such as Andrew Garran explained to the colonising population, and to a wider audience in the old world, that Aboriginal people had been ‘kept down’ because of ‘capricious’ climatic conditions (Garran iii). The key to maintaining civilisation was to ‘neutralize the precariousness’ of the Australian environment (Garran iii). Cultivation and its requirement for sedentary land occupation and close settlements was the key to
safeguarding and advancing civilisation. The material entanglements between this discourse and the riverine plains have marked the history of environmental change and social relations along the Macquarie.

It was this ideology that underpinned the dispossession of Wiradjuri and Wailwan people of the Macquarie River. The Macquarie Marshes are an important place for the Wailwan, Wiradjuri, Kamilaroi, and other neighbouring people, and large bora ceremonies were frequently held on the black clay soils. The Wailwan people of the Marshes worked in the pastoral industry and incorporated stock work into their dances (Miller and Donaldson). In 1935 the New South Wales Government forcibly moved the people from the Marshes area to Brewarrina. Heather Goodall provides the context for this in the ‘Dog Act’ chapter of *Invasion to Embassy*. Economic depression, the entry of scientific discourse into bureaucratic management, white demands for land and segregation, and increasing encroachment of agriculture into pastoral lands, contributed to circumstances in which the Aboriginal Protection Board could carry out its aims of concentrating Aboriginal people into camps with prison-like conditions (H. Goodall). Pastoralists and agriculturalists alike benefitted from the dispossession of Aboriginal people. By the time the Burrendong Dam was nearing completion in the 1960s, pastoralists voicing their concerns about the impact the dam would have on their flooded country and grazing operations were dismissed within a similar discourse about civilisation and relationships with land.

The Macquarie Marshes are a verdant network of braided channels and lagoons that spreads across the plains before the Macquarie reaches the Barwon-Darling. Although the vast wetland supports diverse life it has not been suitable as land for agriculture. Any primary production that relied on variable water flows was also regarded as uncivilised in a modern society with an ideological commitment to rationalised industrial agriculture. For half a century pastoralists on the Macquarie Marshes had argued against the construction of the Burrendong Dam because they relied on regular small floods over their properties. The Marshes were once prime grazing land. Famous studs such as Haddon Rig, Raby and Egelabra gained world record prices for their stock. Conversely, irrigation supporters cast the Marshes as wild and ‘unimproved’, and the farming methods there as ‘rough and ready’ and ‘haphazard’ (‘No Surprises’ 3), in contrast to ‘the skilful and experienced large scale irrigators [...] who make scientific use’ of water (‘Is Burrendong’ 1). The pastoral landholders who lived and worked with periodic flooding and drying were as backward and inadequate as the marsh environment.

Local irrigation lobby groups started producing notices in the newspaper that predicted and outlined planned uses for the newly available water. They divided up the potential capacity, not calculating how much water would be in the dam
in different years. They saw a new resource, produced through engineering—
water abstracted from complex river ecosystems. They drew miles of channels
for the phantom megalitres with little thought to the dry and variable past.
They ploughed their machinery through the brown, red and black soil plains,
free from uncertainty. They ploughed their way into the future, the past
trailing away, curling up behind them like wisps of dust. In addition to the
dam’s physical effects on the river, it also legitimises high expectations for water
extraction and associated industries. It produces a perception that production
of a limited range of commodities is the river’s purpose.

The Water Conservation and Irrigation Commission (WCIC) studied river gauge
records and knew that the beneficial flooding that the Macquarie Marshes
received would be reduced with regulation of the river. This was an acceptable
consequence to ensure a more civilised culture of land relations and primary
production. Landholders, ecologists and members of the public with an interest
in the Marshes cautioned that the reed beds would shrink and that there
would be heavy losses to the large bird numbers and breeding grounds that
the Marshes are internationally recognised for. In 1962 *The Sydney Morning
Herald* published a letter that warned ‘these marshes are now threatened with
extinction’, as construction of the dam continued (Cuthbert). The letter outlined
the likely economic, cultural, aesthetic and ecological consequences of river
regulation. Four days later the Secretary for the WCIC responded in *The Sydney
Morning Herald* with assurances, contrary to the Commission’s own reports,
that the dam would be no threat to the Marshes or its wildlife. He stated that
the Commission was investigating the best ways to ‘maintain the marshes at
a desirable level and utilise to the best advantage the water to be allocated to
them annually’ (Quilty). Ten years later the author of the first letter would have
had the opportunity to see what the WCIC meant by ‘desirable level’ and ‘best
advantage’. The WCIC excavated a channel and built embankments to divert
water away from the northern reed beds so that the water could be used for a
planned irrigation scheme past the Marshes. Despite opposition the works were
approved and were justified as a completion of the Burrendong Dam project
(Johnson 71).

The changes in the Marshes, from the introduction of stock to the development
of industrial agriculture, are complex, multiple, and wide-ranging. Since
authorities started regulating the Macquarie, the river has changed the work
it does on the floodplains. It used to spread easily across the plains, depositing
rich nutrients. Now with constant low flows the river erodes channels in the
Marshes so that currently three times as much water is needed to fill the stream
beds over their banks to allow water to spread (NSW Department of Natural
Resources). Richard Kingsford led research that showed the flooded area had
reduced by up to 50% by 1993 and waterbirds were in decline (Kingsford and
Bureaucrats, scientists and landholders knew the dam would damage river health but went ahead anyway. We like to excuse the past by saying people did the best they could with the knowledge they had, and make ourselves more comfortable about what we are doing by saying we know much more, that we are better now. As the activities of the people on the river plains show, it was cultural attitudes, not ignorance, that shaped how problems were constructed and what solutions were demanded and provided by science.

I drive the 3 kilometres back to the dam wall, and pull up on a two lane road on top the wall itself. I am between the old and the new regime. On one side is the rocky basin of the lake, marked with the consecutive rings of varying water levels, on the other side is a small stream dribbling from the base of the wall and running through a green valley. Local papers predicted Burrendong Dam would be ‘an undoubted tourist resort’ (‘Burrendong Now’ 1). In preparation trees were cleared from the foreshores to allow for water sports (‘National Parks’ 2). To control rabbits and prevent erosion around 200 tonnes of carrots laced with 1080 poison were dropped by air over the ‘tourist resort’ (‘Rabbit Poison’ 8).

From this position on top of the wall I can see a swimming area overgrown with yellow grass, and from the end of the old concrete boat ramp a dirt road runs across a desolate basin to the water’s edge. No one is around, so I decide to climb down the rocks of the wall to the outlet works car park and picnic area. I make it to the base of the 76 metre high wall. From here it dominates the gully and denies views to the body of water that it impounds. Before Burrendong Dam was completed the WCIC conducted daily tours of the site and in less than two years 33,500 people had visited it (‘Burrendong Now’ 1). With no views and no opportunities for swimming, fishing or boating, the outlet works picnic area was established to bring visitors to see the dam wall as a monument. It is a place to be awed by the grandeur and promised security of such an engineering feat; it is a place to take comfort in the human power to bring order to nature on a grand scale. As I take a stroll around this playground in the shadow of the wall, it is hard not to see the amenities as decaying remnants of past optimism, a museum of rural decay and stubbornness, of failed big ideas. We have to listen hard for the echo of lost tourists.

These two modernist projects, the Sydney Opera House and Burrendong Dam, show a society at unease with its constructed separation of humans from the rest of nature. The Opera House is an example of organic architecture, a movement that attempted to create buildings that drew form from natural features, and to create buildings in aesthetic harmony with their natural surroundings and environment. They yearned for a return to an idealised nature. The dam, on the other hand, is against nature. It stands out from its surrounds. Its creators
rejected the variable rhythms of the river, and tried to order and control what they saw as an external and unworthy nature. They sought to turn the river into an irrigation channel, a delivery method for units of water.

I leave the picnic area and walk to the edge of the outlet works. The main component of the works is a small cement structure at ground level that looks similar to the discharge pipes of urban storm water drains. These pipes release cold water from the bottom of the dam into the Macquarie River. This is thermal pollution and it is a major cause of degradation of river ecosystems in regulated rivers around the world. Water in dams stratifies into layers that are warm at the top and very cold at the bottom. Water released from the bottom layer is dense, up to 12°C colder than river water in natural summer conditions, and contains little saturated oxygen. This disrupts the breeding patterns of native fish and other aquatic creatures. It destroys life at the very bottom of the food chain. The shock of a sudden temperature drop and low oxygen can be enough to kill native fish outright. In an experiment conducted just below Burrendong, researchers from NSW Fisheries monitored the response of juvenile Silver Perch (Bidyanus bidyanus) to the dam’s cold water. Nineteen out of the 20 Silver Perch in natural water temperatures survived, while only 5 out of the 20 fish survived in the water from the bottom of the dam. They found that the effects of cold water pollution extended 300 kilometres downstream from the Burrendong Dam outlet works (Astles et al.).

The Fisheries report is a striking illustration of how the effects of the dam are total and ongoing. Yet this report has received little public attention. It is not even well known or referenced in government led community plans for the Macquarie River—there is no fishing industry on the Macquarie, so there are no ‘stakeholders’ on this issue. Why hasn’t the knowledge produced in the report generated action? Effects of thermal pollution were known at the time the dam was built, and are well understood now, yet large dams are still being constructed that have not used designs that minimise thermal pollution. Some existing dams in Australia, such as Glenbawn on the Hunter, are slowly being modified to reduce thermal pollution, but it is not a priority, and there is little funding. We seem to be content thoroughly to document the degradation and decline of ecological systems, but put fewer resources into trying to understand our values, perceptions and relationships with nature. We rarely put the same effort into fostering robust and healthy ecological systems and mutually beneficial relationships.

Simply identifying degradation and the way a system functions is not enough. We have to interrogate our values, ask why we act or fail to act, what our priorities are and how we form them. The humanities provide techniques for connecting large and diverse data, for critiquing the production of knowledge, and for focusing on problem-framing rather than problem-solving (Robin and
Connell). One of its most powerful tools for doing this is narrative. Cultural and environmental historian Tom Griffiths argues passionately for the role of story: ‘I would argue that narrative is not just a means, it is a method, and a rigorous and demanding one. The conventional scientific method separates causes from one another, it isolates each one and tests them individually in turn. Narrative, by contrast, carries multiple causes along together, it enacts connectivity. We need both methods’ (Griffiths, ‘The Humanities’). Creative non-fiction makes use of narrative to appeal to the hearts and minds of wider audiences. It engages readers with the ordinary and particular, and provides different perspectives. We need to care for places we do not necessarily have or feel any connection to.

Economist R. Quentin Grafton and environmental historian Libby Robin remind us in the introduction to Understanding the Environment that ‘Ideas about how to act on knowledge must be delivered to audiences beyond any one discipline,’ because environment affects everyone, every species; and that, ‘Accessible, good quality writing is generally far more influential than work published in prestigious journals’ (Grafton, Robin and Wasson 3). They provide the example of Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring, which brought world-wide attention to the effects of pesticides, but Australia has its own long history with writers from science and the humanities who have ventured beyond the language and ideas of their disciplines to write creative and engaging stories about Australia and our place in the environment.

One of the first was Sir Francis Ratcliffe, who in 1938 published Flying Fox and Drifting Sand: The Adventures of a Biologist in Australia, which, as the title suggests, is a travel/adventure story, with a stark warning about the permanent destruction of native vegetation due to overgrazing, and the widespread erosion that followed. George Seddon, Judith Wright, the late Eric Rolls, and Tim Flannery are among a host of authors who have written popular work that has played a significant role in shaping Australian environmental consciousness. In my view creative non-fiction is a form well placed to break down conventions and assumptions, engage diverse audiences, and ultimately, assist us with the broader long-term project of re-embedding human culture within more-than-human nature.

*It is time to bring the tour to an end. At Burrendong the last glow of the sun dwindles in the western horizon. I start my climb back to the car. By the time I reach the top a fog is beginning to form back down in the valley. I turn the engine over and switch on the lights. It is dark at Burrendong and I will leave you with this dark prediction, one that brings the earlier concerns of landholders and townspeople full circle.
If we continue our current environmental practices the Macquarie River will be so degraded by 2020 that the water at major towns such as Dubbo and Narromine will unfit for human consumption 30% of the time (Murray-Darling Basin Commission 31). By 2050 the salt load will be so great that biodiversity will be reduced and the river will support few if any agricultural products (National Land and Water Resources Audit; Murray-Darling Basin Commission). After that, the river’s resilience to modification will have broken. It’ll be a new system, one that does not support anywhere near as much life as before. Once again, we have the knowledge, but will we change our culture to act on it?

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‘Urgent Need for Burrendong Dam Stressed by Western Speakers: “Amenities for Country as Well as City”’ Narromine News and Trangie Advocate, 12 December 1952: 3.

Dorothy Wordsworth presents an ongoing conundrum for literary biography and critical analysis. On the one hand, her relationship with her famous brother William has made her a highly visible figure in literary history. On the other, as an autobiographical writer who wrote very little that is obviously personal, she continues to present intriguing obstacles to interpretation. While her journals have been celebrated for their purported sincerity and simplicity, the extent to which they deliver an accessible authorial ‘self’ is limited by their strangely impersonal quality: instead of a poetics of self, Dorothy’s journals seem to offer a poetics of self-effacement. Similarly, critical analysis of the journals oscillates between reading Dorothy as an active desiring subject on the one hand, and as an object or conduit for desire on the other. In this essay I take as my starting point two crucial insights offered by Frances Wilson’s recent critically acclaimed Ballad of Dorothy Wordsworth (2008): that Dorothy was an active desiring agent and that she was in love with her brother. While these insights are far from novel (rumours to this effect circulated during the siblings’ residence at Dove Cottage), Wilson’s exploration of this material is nevertheless powerfully suggestive; she mines the journals largely in the service of a newly invigorated, yet still empirical, reading of the life. In contrast, this essay takes up one of Wilson’s more provocative but unexplored suggestions—that the journals resemble a love letter—and offers a reading of the journals via Roland Barthes’ rhetorical anatomisation of the desiring subject in A Lover’s Discourse. I read Dorothy Wordsworth’s projection in the journals of a fractured, fretful and quarrelsome self through Barthes’ protracted dilation on desire, in particular through his analysis of the figures of affirmation, alteration and annulment.

A Lover’s Discourse provides a valuable rhetorical framework for understanding Dorothy’s elliptical and often puzzlingly random self-projections because Barthes is predominantly concerned with ‘horizontal’ rather than ‘transcendent’ patterns of representation (7), ones that are best performed through non-syntagmatic, non-narrative styles of expression. Barthes pays meticulous attention to the lover’s ‘bundles of sentences’ (7), privileging the arbitrary and the paratactic over the syntactic in a way that complicates binary oppositions between an
active desiring subject and passive desired object. My aim in this essay is less to
ascertain the ‘facts’ of Dorothy’s relationship with William than it is to explore
that relationship’s rhetoric in Dorothy’s writing and the writing that has been
devoted to her. Following the procedure Barthes elaborates in his biography,
Michelet, my object is not a history of Dorothy’s thought or life, but instead the
search for a ‘thematics’, the laying bare of ‘an organized network of obsessions’
(3). In this sense, what follows is (following Barthes), quite deliberately, ‘no
more than pre-criticism’ (3). At the same time, Barthes’ analysis of the figures of
affirmation, alteration and annulment in A Lover’s Discourse provides a useful
rubric for understanding Dorothy’s desires as such, granting us new access to
the textual intensity, complexity and drama of Dorothy’s desire, irrespective
of the physical ends to which this desire was put. While we cannot know how
Dorothy’s love for William was consummated physically, we can analyse how her
desire was expressed discursively. Focusing on three of Wilson’s most poignant
images of Dorothy—as bird, as lover, and as electrometer—I ask how Wilson’s
negotiation of these familiar metaphors revisits and significantly revises earlier
biographical interpretations. Rather than assessing the empirical accuracy of
any single portrait of Dorothy, I am interested in exploring the critical and
rhetorical frameworks through which her life and work have been, and continue
to be, represented.

Wilson relates that Dorothy Wordsworth lost her mother and her father by the
age of twelve, ‘eloped’ with her brother William at the age of 22, lived a life
of ‘intense, uncharted freedom’ with William at Dove Cottage, collapsed on
the morning of his marriage to her childhood friend Mary Hutchinson, having
spent the previous night with his wedding ring on her finger, and, after helping
to raise their many children, spent the last 25 years of her life prone to bouts
of mental illness that left her unable to speak except in squawks, save for the
uncanny ability to recite her own and her brother’s poetry. Hers is indeed a
singular story. She wrote the Grasmere Journals so that ‘I will not quarrel with
myself, & because I shall give Wm Pleasure by it when he comes home again’
(1). William used this material—sometimes verbatim—in his own poetry, which
subsequently became the cornerstone in the literary mythology of the singular,
autonomous Romantic author. William described Dorothy as his eyes and ears,
Thomas De Quincey (of opium eating fame) described Dorothy as the ‘very
wildest … person I have ever known’, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge described
her as ‘the perfect electrometer’ (Wilson 8, 5).

Wilson writes that, ‘more than any other aspect of her character, it was
Dorothy’s responsiveness that was valued and praised by all who knew her’
(5). As a little girl she apparently burst into tears when she first saw the sea,
revealing, according to Wilson, ‘the sensibility for which she was celebrated by
her family’ (5). It is hard to imagine that this asset was celebrated all the time,
however. I imagine a little of that kind of sensibility might go a long way. And William does, very occasionally, indulge in irritation at Dorothy’s raptures, or what he was once miffed enough to call her ‘nervous blubbing’.1 As an old woman, Wilson recounts, Dorothy wept at the sight of her garden flowers after an illness had kept her indoors: ‘In the readiness and accuracy of her responses, her taste was, Coleridge said, ‘a perfect electrometer—it bends, it protrudes, and draws in, at subtlest beauties and most recondite faults’ (5). An electrometer was a recent invention, consisting of a ‘fragile piece of gold, enclosed in glass, which responded to the most minute fluctuations of electrical charge’, and Wilson suggests that in using it, Coleridge’s metaphor bestowed on Dorothy ‘his highest possible praise’ (5).

The electrometer has been reproduced in almost every discussion of Dorothy’s significance from Coleridge onwards, often verbatim and usually without comment. The very ubiquity of this image, however, warrants further consideration. Ambiguously gendered, the electrometer in Coleridge’s description could be seen as a miniscule phallus, or perhaps an alert clitoris, protruding and retracting in response to every sensory stimulus. Romantic appropriations of eighteenth-century science on both sides of the Atlantic equated understanding with femininity. Margaret Fuller, for instance, refers to the ‘especial genius of woman’ as ‘electrical in movement, intuitive in function, spiritual in tendency’ (Gilmore 473). The electric, Paul Gilmore argues, figured in the work of the Romantic poets either as ‘an intense, nearly physical emotion or an ecstatic, shocking sense of sympathy or transcendence’ (472). For Coleridge, the operations of electricity revealed an ideal, transcendent truth: ‘the idea of two—opposite—forces, tending to rest by equilibrium’ (‘Essays’ 478). Like Wilson, most commentators read Coleridge’s electrometer as unproblematically positive (She was enormously receptive) but Margaret Homans, for one, sees the description as incipiently, if passively, pejorative (She was ‘peculiarly’, perhaps dangerously, ‘obsessively’ receptive [103]). These undercurrents suggest that the electrometer is a useful image for thinking about Dorothy for a number of different reasons. She is an electrometer to her friends and family, and most particularly to William, who used several images and scenes she describes in her journal in some of his most famous poetry. In the early years of their collaboration, Dorothy’s acute apprehension of nature, recorded in her journal entries, was the impetus for many of the poems that found their way into Wordsworth and Coleridge’s Lyrical Ballads. Dorothy also functions as an electrometer for the changing tastes of literary biographers, who register wildly differing readings both about the value of her writing and about the nature of her relationship with her brother, the two of which are usually explored together. And finally,

1 This slur refers to Dorothy’s anxieties for Coleridge. On 10 November, 1801, she writes: ‘I was melancholy & could not talk, but at last I eased my heart by weeping—nervous blubbing says William. It is not so—O how many, many reasons have I to be anxious for him [Coleridge]’ (37).
Dorothy functions as an electrometer for the impulses of literary criticism, offering insights into the fluctuating fads and tremors that inform academic scholarship at different points in time. The journals are electrometer-like in their apparently neutral registering of everyday life—a registration that itself gives life to later (wild, sometimes licentious, sometimes repressive) interpretations. As in Barthes’ *Lover’s Discourse*, Dorothy’s use of fractured, non-syntactic representational regimes arguably provokes more, rather than less, desire to ‘uncover’ the particulars of her story. And, unsurprisingly, scholars with different critical agendas seek very different sorts of Dorothy.

When Frances Wilson’s biography, *The Ballad of Dorothy Wordsworth*, was published to great acclaim in 2008 it introduced, in the words of one reviewer, a ‘new and potent Dorothy for the twenty-first century’ (Bostridge). The novelty that critics saw in Wilson’s approach rests largely on the sensitivity, receptivity and above all potency with which she imbues her principal subject: Wilson presents (ostensibly for the first time) an ardent, even virile, desiring, and desirable Dorothy Wordsworth. Desire is certainly not a new lens through which to look at Dorothy Wordsworth, the familiar scandal of whose life is the spectre of incest that, whether it is explicitly explored or studiously ignored, tends to haunt all discussions of her relationship with her brother William. The promotional materials associated with Wilson’s biography raise this spectre explicitly. The dust jacket of the British hardback edition, for instance, offers the following enticement:

> From the acclaimed writer Frances Wilson, a new biography of Wordsworth’s beloved sister, collaborator and muse … In her journals, Dorothy kept a record of their idyllic years together. The tale that unfolds through her brief, lyrical writings reveals a strange, intangible love between brother and sister, culminating in Dorothy’s dramatic collapse on the very day of William’s wedding. In what sense, if any, was theirs an incestuous affair?

Despite the promise of the book’s promotional materials, however, Wilson’s biography is ultimately surprisingly ambivalent about the exact nature of this relationship. For some reviewers, this is a considerable achievement. Mark Bostridge, writing for *The Independent* (UK) in March 2008, commends Wilson’s dismissal of both the ‘salacious accusations’ of some biographers, and the ‘prurient revulsion’ of others, as ‘equally misleading’. For others, this ambivalence is perceived as evasive. Victoria Glendinning, reviewing for *The Spectator* (UK) in February 2008, finds Wilson’s treatment of sibling incest frankly unconvincing: ‘It seems to me that there is still a small elephant in the room’.
The Ballad of Dorothy Wordsworth deliberately toys with the reader’s desire to uncover the secrets of Dorothy and William’s relationship, to know, definitively, what was going on under the covers, at the breakfast table, on the living room rug at Dove Cottage. ‘We all want stories and details and particulars in our life-stories’, writes Hermoine Lee, celebrated biographer of Virginia Woolf, Willa Cather and Edith Wharton, among others (2). ‘Get as many anecdotes as possible’, writes Elizabeth Gaskell, embarking on her biography of Charlotte Bronte: ‘If you love your reader and want to be read, get anecdotes!’ (Lee 2). In the absence of evidence of a physically incestuous relationship between William and Dorothy (and what would such evidence in fact look like at this stage?), this flirtation with the facts is all we have, possibly all we are likely to have. The ‘small elephant at Dove Cottage’, to borrow Glendinning’s phrase, resembles in this sense one of the ‘contested objects’ of the biographer’s craft. In her 2004 Princeton University lecture, ‘Shelley’s Heart and Pepys’ Lobsters’, Lee reminds us that biographies ‘are full of verifiable facts, but they are also full of things that aren’t there: absences, gaps, missing evidence. … Biographies, like lives, are made up of contested objects—relics, testimonies, versions, correspondences, the unverifiable’ (6). The ‘elephant at Dove Cottage’ presents particular challenges for literary scholarship, challenges that inevitably arise when we attempt to analyze figures whose erotic economies remain opaque to us. As Lee asks, ‘What does biography [and one might usefully add literary scholarship] do with facts that can’t be fixed, the things that go missing, the body parts that have been turned into legends and myths?’ (6).

The Grasmere Journals commence on the day that, leaving Dorothy behind, William and his brother John set out from Dove Cottage on a visit to Mary Hutchinson, Dorothy’s childhood friend and William’s future wife. The first entry, on 14 May 1800, is indicative of the kinds of themes and concerns that occupy their author:

Wm & John set off into Yorkshire after dinner at half past 2 o’clock—cold pork in their pockets. I left them at the turning of the Low-wood bay under the trees. My heart was so full that I could hardly speak to W when I gave him a farewell kiss. I sate a long time upon a stone at the margin of the lake, & after a flood of tears my heart was easier. The lake looked to me I knew not why dull and melancholy, the weltering on the shores seemed a heavy sound. … The wood rich in flowers. … Sate down very often though it was cold. I resolved to write a journal of the time till W & J return, & I set about keeping my resolve because I will not quarrel with myself, & because I shall give Wm pleasure by it when he comes home again. (1)

This event is decidedly traumatic: it provides the impetus for the journals, which will effectively become a memorial of the time that Dorothy and
William have spent together at Dove Cottage and which Dorothy wishes could continue uninterrupted. And yet what does the journal entry reveal of the situation? There are certainly a variety of details recorded here, but they are not immediately decipherable as responses to the event. This entry is in fact one of the most personal of the journal, relating an anguish acutely felt and acted out, yet Dorothy does not describe her feelings, nor does she analyze them. We don’t, in fact, know what they are. Wilson wonderfully pinpoints the curious cocooning and consecrating quality of Dorothy’s prose: ‘Her journal made motionless the world in which she lived, defending it from mutability and change. Daily life, in her hands, becomes elegy’ (12). Wilson finds the journals ‘curiously egoless’: writing that ‘when Dorothy refers to herself, it is usually to inscribe her own effacement: my heart was so full that I could hardly speak. At her most emotionally full, she is her least expressive’ (12). Mark Bostridge reiterates this sentiment, writing that the journals ‘possess an overriding simplicity’; the story unfolds, he remarks, ‘with the minimum of authorial intrusion’. Caroline Moore, reviewing Wilson’s biography for the Telegraph (UK) in March 2008, is perplexed by the journals’ ‘peculiar emotional reticences’. Echoing Wilson, she writes: ‘there is no self-exploration—almost no sense of self at all’; the journals represent ‘the absolute reverse’, she concludes, ‘of the egotistical sublime’. Although not novel, the insights that Wilson offers into the subtext of Dorothy’s style are important: Dorothy’s prose, she writes, ‘is defined by modesty and reserve, by the fear of what might happen were she to let herself go’ (9).

One of the paradoxes of Dorothy’s prose style is that while it is conventionally upheld as intensely personal, it actually reveals very little. As Wilson wryly notes, there exists a mockumentary about the Edinburgh Fringe, called Festival, in which an earnest actress performs her one-woman show about Dorothy Wordsworth—to a completely empty theatre. Nothing happens. Dorothy misses William. Dorothy looks at the lake. Dorothy looks at the daffodils. Compared to contemporary examples of creative non-fiction, some of which, contra Dorothy, certainly let themselves go, Dorothy’s journals might fail to deliver a riveting read. If Dorothy had had access to Facebook (and as a keen cultivator of her personal coterie she may have indeed embraced it) her Status Updates would have been singularly un-scintillating:

- Dorothy is waiting.
- Dorothy is looking at the lake.
- Dorothy is cooking a chop.
- Dorothy misses William.
- Dorothy looks at the flowers.
- Dorothy has a headache.

While they are stylistically quite different, structurally, Dorothy’s journal entries are not dissimilar to Facebook Status Updates. In their parataxis, immediacy,
and above all, in their ritualistic repetition, Dorothy's journal entries resemble the formulaic signposts of Status Updates. While Dorothy does not use the third person, she creates an analogous distance from her authorial self. And while Dorothy's limited manuscript circulation seems a world away from contemporary social networking media, the purposes of these very different types of text are in several respects similar: they are read exclusively within a restricted, self-selecting community; they are used by their authors to remind that community of small-scale quotidian events, and they are employed by readers within that community as the inspiration for subsequent textual production. William responds to Dorothy's journal description of a leech gatherer with his eponymous poem. Dorothy recalls her critical response to William's compositions in her journal. The Facebook analogy, while anachronistically perverse, allows us to see Dorothy's journals as more public literary productions than we are used to viewing them. As Meaghan Morris argues in her essay for this volume, Facebook Status Updates simultaneously register the disclosure and secrecy of information within the 'small town' or village-public of a chosen, restricted social network. Morris' comment that Facebook users suffer from 'living passionately in an environment that the owner can alter at will (a condition a bit like being in love and a lot like being a tenant)' is almost uncannily apropos of Dorothy Wordsworth's position at Dove Cottage—as a passionately engaged and valued member of a close literary coterie, but also as a single, unmarried woman in love with (and tenant of) her soon-to-be-married brother.

In a certain critical tradition, one that follows William's early lead, Dorothy's apparent self-effacement is both naturalized and romanticized. In Home at Grasmere, William likens Dorothy's voice to 'a hidden bird that sang' (Wilson 20) and a slew of scholars have subsequently felt authorized to assimilate Dorothy's voice and writing to the natural world she wrote about. It became traditional, as Wilson notes, to describe Dorothy's writing itself as birdlike:

>'The words themselves are as unobtrusive as a sparrow', one critic says of the Grasmere Journals; 'the writing is as natural and unforced as the singing of larks', says another. 'We listen to her', says a third, 'as we might listen to a thrush singing'. (20)

This reverse anthropomorphism, this turning of Dorothy into a bird, re-ascribes Dorothy's authorial agency to the natural world. The results of her writing might be delightful, but they are essentially un-willed. Not incidentally, these readings of Dorothy present the strongest possible contrast to the image William self-consciously constructed, with the aid of his sister, of the poet struggling with the feat of composition. Which is not to say that this picture is entirely self-fabricated: Sara Coleridge remarked ruefully that William Wordsworth was

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2 Wilson also includes the stanza as the epigraph to her biography (1).
forever ‘hurting himself with a sonnet’ (qtd in Jones 235). William Wordsworth’s elaboration of the Poet’s Herculean labour is nevertheless staged alongside, and in contradistinction to, the idea of Dorothy as electrometer—an image which imbues her with a decidedly passive, almost automated, apprehension of incident and energy. Elizabeth Gunn, in A Passion for the Particular, notes that both Wordsworth and Coleridge ‘wanted what she saw because they could not see it, or write of it with her unencumbered pen’ (50). Wilson alerts us to the dreadful irony of the avian analogy in the context of Dorothy’s later life. In the last, unbearably attenuated period of her life, when mental illness kept her confined to her room, the now inarticulate sounds she made were compared to those of ‘a partridge or turkey’ (21). But for Wilson, ‘the bird who most comes to mind’ when she reads Dorothy’s ‘burdened’ journals is the albatross ‘draped around the Ancient Mariner’s neck in Coleridge’s famous “Rime”’. Dorothy Wordsworth emerges from Wilson’s Ballad as an image of ‘the great sea bird shot down in its prime as well as a version of the voyager himself, with the “glittering eye”’ (21). While it would be fanciful to imbue them with proleptic power, the celebrated avian metaphors that were used by her contemporaries and subsequent critics to describe Dorothy have had a powerful and disturbingly embodied afterlife.

If one fairly conventional strand of literary scholarship sees Dorothy rather like nature’s amanuensis, as less of an author in her own right and more like a medium for a higher (and nobler) power (be it Nature or Brother), the early feminist scholarship devoted to Dorothy understandably read this as a travesty. The first wave of feminist critics from the 1970s often saw Dorothy’s own voice as all but obliterated by her brother’s enormous ego. In 1973, for instance, Rachel Mayer Brownstein expressed regret that Dorothy could not claim herself ‘more than half a poet’:

> The world strikes the writer, who cannot manage to think herself a poet and who furthermore is mostly engrossed in waiting up for her beloved, as more poetical than she, and it defeats her. It was not always so. When she was not thinking of the superiority of verse and William, Dorothy Wordsworth could make moonlight and water beautifully her own with a homely remarkable image: ‘The Moon shone like herrings in the water’. (57)

Feminist Wordsworth scholars in the 1980s also struggled with this legacy. Meena Alexander, for instance, returns to Dorothy’s denial of authorship:

> Then there’s the figure of a powerful brother composing in an impossible fluency. What cannot be overcome is repeated. Her uncanny repetition of what is almost his bodily signature forces her to acknowledge her
own secondary nature. Feeling that there was no space left for her to write on, she tries to annul the sexual difference that indelibly marks her. (197)

As Susan Wolfson remarks in her recent reassessment of this critical tradition, the first wave of feminist scholarship on Romantic women poets ‘was attracted to binaries: a “masculine” tradition that was manifold of egotism, sexism, and power politics, defined and exerted against a more diffuse and permeable “feminine” subjectivity, not inclined to self assertion or object appropriation’ (xvi). As Wolfson argues, ‘tuned to broad, categorical descriptions and oppositions’, this tradition sometimes elides ‘not only the instabilities and divisions in male representations, but also the assertive critical force of women’s writing’ (xvii).

Maragret Homans’s influential 1980 analysis offers a more nuanced approach, but nevertheless offers a bleak view of the woman writer’s prospects for poetic identity:

Where the major literary tradition normatively identifies the figure of the poet as masculine, and voice as a masculine property, women writers cannot see themselves as androgynous, or as sexless, but must take part in a self-definition by contraries. (3)

Based on paradigms of feminine psychological development proposed by Nancy Chodorow and Carol Gilligan, Susan M. Levin’s 1987 Dorothy Wordsworth and Romanticism asserts that:

Like many women writers, Dorothy Wordsworth constantly denigrates herself and her talent in a manner that goes far beyond common protestations of modesty. While she does find her own forms in a community of male writing that she proceeds from and revises, the process reflects guilt and torment as she asserts her own passivity in the active world of letters in which she participated. (3)

As Wolfson points out, in these sorts of critiques, ‘theoretical, often value laden principles, practices, and traditions (masculine; feminine) tended to be hailed in advance of, sometimes in circumvention of, the complex particulars of texts, and the agency these complexities might have in writing the historical and political text of the age’ (xvii). In contrast, Wolfson wonders whether ‘textual specifics’ might be used to contest such ‘theoretical generalization?’. ‘What of the potential of literary imaginations’, she asks, ‘to re-imagine, to resist the prevailing paradigms, to open a space in which history is not only disclosed, but made?’ (xvii).

While the aims of each of these critical traditions are certainly different, the end results can sometimes be surprisingly similar: in comparing Dorothy’s writing to
currently prevailing authorial models, Dorothy Wordsworth disappears. In the face of her submission to brother, to nature, or to patriarchy, Dorothy’s agency is rendered negligible. But what would it mean to return Dorothy Wordsworth to this picture—not as the singular, self-evident author promoted by the Romantic revolution she was indelibly a part of, and not as the gynocritical lamb to the sacrificial slaughter, but as something less familiar, and perhaps more interesting; something less than (or different to) autonomous agent and something more than merely victim? By returning to ‘textual specifics’, Wilson initiates this crucial process when she writes of the journals that:

Their style, at times pellucid, at times opaque, lies somewhere between the rapture of a love letter and the portentousness of a thriller; the tight, economical form they adopt is that of the lyric but in the grandness of their emotions they are yearning towards the epic. (4-5, emphasis added)

This is a far cry from the usual position the journals occupy as ‘suggested background reading’ for undergraduate courses on English Romanticism. Wilson’s analysis here is astute, and aims to reposition Dorothy in her early biographer Ernest de Selincourt’s terms as ‘possibly the greatest English prose stylist who never wrote a word for publication’ (5). But it is also possible to push this analysis several steps further by taking, more literally than Wilson perhaps intended, the idea of the journals as love letter.

Wilson’s association of Dorothy’s journals with ‘the rapture of a love letter’ is for me one of her biography’s most important contributions. In his analysis of the strangely de-personalised, non-linear and non-narrative nature of the Lover’s Discourse, Barthes attempts to trace the impulses of a desiring subject, who is identified as the speaking subject of a discourse, with particular speaking positions and rhetorical gestures, but who lacks (or does not need?) a ‘novelistic’ biographical or narrative direction. Of the many rhetorical figures he analyses in A Lover’s Discourse, Barthes’ analysis of the figures of affirmation, alteration and annulment present the most fruitful framework for testing the strength and reach of Wilson’s suggestion—that Dorothy’s diaries evoke the ‘rapture of a love letter’. In tracing the rhetoric of Dorothy’s erotic economy, however, the question of whether or not this relationship was ever consummated becomes, in this reading, beside the point. Rather, the Grasmere Journals can be read as a fragmentary record of what Barthes refers to as ‘an organized network of obsessions’, a collection of perverse, sometimes exultant, often despairing desires. Of the process he terms ‘affirmation’, Barthes writes:

The world subjects every enterprise to an alternative; that of success or failure, of victory or defeat. I protest by another logic: I am simultaneously

3 See Rachel Mayer Brownstein (48) and Jill Ehhnen.
and contradictorily happy and wretched; ‘to succeed’ or ‘to fail’ have for me only contingent, provisional meanings (which doesn’t keep my sufferings and my desires from being violent); what inspires me, secretly and stubbornly, is not a tactic: I accept and I affirm, beyond truth and falsehood, beyond success and failure; I have withdrawn from all finality, I live according to chance (as is evidenced by the fact that the figures of my discourse occur to me like so many dice being cast). (22-23)

Resisting conventional categories of victory and defeat, suffering and desiring violently, but affirming secretly and stubbornly, the disparate, discontinuous fragments of the *Grasmere Journals* form a passionate Lover’s Discourse, cast randomly like so many dice.

The *Grasmere Journals* contain many strange moments of Barthesian affirmation, moments that resist conventional categories of success (reciprocation or consummation) and failure (renunciation or rejection). On 29 April, 1802, Dorothy recounts: ‘William lay, & I lay in the trench under the fence—he with his eyes shut & listening to the waterfalls & the Birds … William heard me breathing & rustling now & then but we both lay still, & unseen by one another—he thought that it would be as sweet thus to lie so in the grave, to hear the *peaceful* sounds of the earth and to know that one’s dear friends were near’ (92). Breathing plays in important part in Dorothy’s desire. On the evening of 23 March, 1802, as they both sit reading before the fire, she writes: ‘The fire flutters & the watch ticks I hear nothing else save the *Breathings* of my Beloved & he now & then pushes his book forward & turns over a leaf’ (82). Another entry, on 17 March, 1802, recounts the ingredients for what must have been, for Dorothy, a halcyon day: ‘I went & sate with W & we walked backwards & forwards in the Orchard till dinner time—he read me his poem. I broiled Beefsteaks. After dinner we made a pillow of my shoulder, I read to him & my Beloved slept’ (79). Earlier still, ‘I petted him on the carpet & began a letter to Sara’ (61). While William might find peace or even rest in such situations, Dorothy is always wide-awake. Barthes adumbrates of the figure of affirmation:

What my love lays bare in me is *energy*. Everything I do has a meaning (hence I can *live*, without whining), but this meaning is an ineffable finality: it is merely the meaning of my strength. ... Flouted in my enterprise (as it happens) I emerge from it neither victor nor vanquished: I am tragic. (Someone tells me this kind of love is not viable. But how can you *evaluate* viability? Why is the viable a Good Thing? Why is it better to *last* than to *burn*?) (23)

If the *Grasmere Journals* provide moments of intense, intangible, affirmation, they are also extremely concerned with negotiating the process Barthes calls ‘alteration’. Written in response to a situation she fears is about to change,
that, in fact, threatens to ‘flout’ Dorothy in ‘her enterprise’, this is perhaps unsurprising. Wilson recounts that it was in the last months before William’s marriage that Dorothy was most alert to the corrosive effects of time; as William’s impending marriage threatened to bring to an end the world they shared, she was positioned uneasily between the realization of paradise and the anticipation of its loss (15). Barthes offers us a poignant insight into the process of alteration:

The lover’s discourse is usually a smooth envelope which encases the Image, a very gentle glove around the loved being. It is a devout, orthodox discourse. When the Image alters, the envelope of devotion rips apart; a shock capsizes my own language. … A blasphemy abruptly rises to the subject’s lips and disrespectfully explodes the lover’s benediction: he is possessed by a demon who speaks through his mouth, out of which emerge, as in fairy tales, no longer flowers, but toads. Horrible ebb of the Image. (The horror of spoiling is even stronger than the anxiety of losing). (28)

Such anxieties give us some insight into Dorothy’s encounter with the absent William’s discarded apple: ‘O the darling! Here is one of his bitten apples. I can hardly find in my heart to throw it into the fire. I must wash myself … ’ (74). It sheds light on the repetitive ritual with the rings that took place the morning of William’s wedding: ‘I gave him the wedding ring—with how deep a blessing! I took it from my forefinger where I had worn it the whole of the night before—he slipped it again onto my finger and blessed me fervently’ (126). And it illuminates Dorothy’s equally emotional recounting of her reaction to that marriage: ‘I could stand it no longer & threw myself on the bed where I lay in stillness, neither hearing nor seeing anything’ (126). The ‘alteration’ of Dorothy’s lover’s discourse is the effect of William’s official choice of Mary. The blasphemy involved is the desecration of Dorothy’s singular relationship with him. The event forces Dorothy to see their relationship in new terms (‘Horrible ebb of the Image’), and ultimately effects her rescinding of the journals (as love letters they have been robbed of preeminence) by his choice of another.

As Wilson’s biography demonstrates, the scandal of an incestuous relationship has a certain perennial appeal. In my high school library the Virginia Andrews novel Flowers in the Attic was kept, bound in its plastic cover, in routinely heavy rotation, matched only in appeal by two other classic female Bildungsromane: Go Ask Alice (1971) and I Never Promised You a Rose Garden (1964). It’s puzzling, and not a little disturbing, to ponder what models of female development were thus so voraciously consumed (and why they were wrapped in plastic!): Why these three novels? Why these three stories? In fact, Dorothy’s story is not so removed from the subject matter of all three. Her life is a veritable Confessions of a (Female) Opium Eater meets Flowers in the Attic meets Mad Woman in the Attic. The subject of Dorothy’s relationship with her brother has proved as
consuming to critics as it did to Dorothy and William themselves. Her love for her brother was, Dorothy wrote, ‘the building up of my being, the light of my path’ (17). William likened himself and Dorothy to two swans—who mate for life—and wrote to her in the most ardent terms:

How much do I wish that each emotion of pleasure and pain that visits your heart should excite a similar pleasure or a similar pain within me, by that sympathy that will almost identify us when we have stolen to our little cottage! (Wilson 47-48)

What is the sympathy that will ‘almost identify’ them? Dorothy’s response to the event which flouted her in her enterprise—William’s marriage to Mary—provides us with several clues: she sleeps with his wedding ring on her finger; she returns the ring to him in the morning with her blessing; he returns it to her finger with his blessing; she is too distraught to attend the ceremony; she falls into a stupor where she can neither hear nor see; when she learns they are returning she flies down the stairs into the arms of her beloved, he helps her across the threshold; they welcome the new bride, Mary, together. Coda: she accompanies them on their honeymoon.

The whole scenario has proved too much for some critics. This was a literary history that itself required ‘alteration,’ in order to contain the implied ‘blasphemy’ of a ‘beloved object’. Wilson relates that in 1889, 34 years after Dorothy’s death, Mrs. Henry Fawcett described her in the worthy sounding, Some Eminent Women of Our Times (1889) as someone who ‘did not know jealousy in love; her love was so perfect that she rejoiced in every addition to her brother’s happiness, and did not, as a meaner woman might have done, wish his heart to be vacant of all affection save what he felt for herself’ (Wilson 10). In their 1985 biography of Dorothy, Robert Gittings and Jo Manton reiterate this myth of Dorothy’s asexuality:

There is no sign that she ever aroused or experienced physical desire, not that she felt this as a loss. … From girlhood she seemed to be a creature apart, one of that distinctive company of nineteenth-century women, clinging like sterile buds to the family stem, tight-furled until November withered them. (Wilson 10)

About such evasions Wilson is beautifully snarky:

Perhaps they are right and Dorothy Wordsworth did go through her entire lifetime responding sensuously to every leaf and stream, falling to pieces with love for her loved ones, living at the mercy of her impulses and emotions, yet never once experienced or aroused physical desire or felt that this was a loss. But what is their evidence for supposing this? (10-11)
Wilson’s biography attempts her own ‘alteration’ of the image of Dorothy Wordsworth. In an article she wrote for the UK Telegraph, ‘A demure virgin? Not the Dorothy I Know’, Wilson explains her own desire to rescue Dorothy from previous misleading representations: ‘Dorothy, whose writing is fired by love and longing, has suffered from “virgin-phobia” more than most. Not only has she been stripped in her posthumous existence of her evident sexuality, but she has also been deprived of the vicissitudes of an emotional and unconscious life’. Wilson challenges this reception of Dorothy partly by describing her ‘hot youth’: perhaps she was in love with Wilberforce, and perhaps Coleridge; perhaps Coleridge was in love with her, and De Quincey seems to have ‘fancied’ her. But the more significant alteration Wilson’s biography enacts is in its representation of the relationship between Dorothy and William. In her Telegraph article Wilson states:

The problem with Dorothy Wordsworth is not that she did not experience jealousy or excite desire, but that we are made so uncomfortable by the idea of her doing so. And this is because the one person who we know excited her jealousy and desire was her brother, which makes Dorothy less a maiden aunt to feel sorry for than a fervent—even feral—figure of whom we should be rather afraid. Even if nothing ever happened between Dorothy and William Wordsworth.

With this final caveat, we are returned to the spectre of the ‘small elephant at Dove Cottage’, the ‘contested object’, the tangible absence that, like Shelley’s Heart and Pepys’ Lobsters, haunts the popular, literary and scholarly response to Dorothy Wordsworth. When it comes down to it, Wilson’s biography is on this point unexpectedly equivocal: ‘to avoid the conclusion that there was a dynamic between them involving love of some sort is like looking through a telescope with a blind eye’. And yet, Wilson affirms, theirs was a spiritual union, based in poetic vocation; the physical side of this union would have held no meaning for them. But still, she affirms, siblings who have lost their parents early in life often ‘experiment’ with each other sexually in their adulthood. While this essay is concerned with the rhetorical resonances rather than the empirical facts of Dorothy’s relationship with William, it is nevertheless clear that Wilson’s equivocations on the subject of sibling incest effect one final ‘alteration’ in the reception of Dorothy Wordsworth: they participate in what Barthes describes as the ‘annulment’ of the lover’s discourse, an annulment Dorothy Wordsworth also tried to effect herself. Barthes writes of annulment:

By a kindly decision of this subject, a colourless object is paced in the center of the stage and there adored, idolized, taken to task, covered with discourse, with prayers (and perhaps, surreptitiously with invectives); as if she were a huge motionless hen huddled amid her feathers, around which circles a slightly mad cock. … It is my desire I desire, and the
The beloved object that emerges from this analysis is not remotely colourless, but she is ‘adored, idolized, taken to task’ and most certainly ‘covered with discourse’. And this is not necessarily an inappropriate or inadequate response: it is a ‘pre-critical’ response (in Barthes’ sense) that usefully resists our literary, historical and scholarly desires for closure and the coherence of a biographical narrative. After all, Dorothy herself made use of the mechanism of annulment in negotiating her renegade desires in the latter part of her life. Eclipsed from her brother’s side (and wherever else she may have been) by William’s marriage, Dorothy set in place a series of substitutions for her beloved object—like William’s unprepossessing and surprisingly blockish son, Will—which repeat the terms of her own lover’s discourse (‘It is my desire I desire, and the loved being is no more than its tool’). Such substitutions, however, did not nearly answer the cause, and for almost a quarter of a century, Dorothy, increasingly addicted to laudanum, was prone to dramatic and prolonged fits of mental illness during which she was confined to the upper regions of the Wordsworth’s laureate residence, Rydal Mount. In a grotesque inversion of her celebrated bird-like status, she became obsessed with the chiming of the cuckoo clock, was liable to emit high pitched screeching, rather like a turkey, and had to be hidden from guests. Enduring the grief of an extended annulment, like Barthes’ lover rendered bizarrely literal, she became ‘a huge motionless hen huddled amid her feathers.’ Mourning, sometimes violently, the ongoing pains of the lover’s alteration, she was ‘possessed by a demon’ who spoke through her mouth, ‘out of which emerge[d], as in fairy tales, no longer flowers, but toads’.

If Frances Wilson’s biography has indeed delivered a ‘new and potent Dorothy for the twenty-first century’—and the international media attention it has generated suggests that it has—it is largely because she has produced a radically desiring and desirable Dorothy Wordsworth. It seems important, then, to bring Wilson’s revisionist, rapturous Dorothy to bear on our readings of her work. Barthes’ anatomy of the lover’s discourse provides one useful way to begin this enterprise. Dorothy emerges from the journals as the speaking subject of the lover’s figures of affirmation, alteration, and annulment. At the same time, literary biography and the academic industry can be seen to have subjected the journals, and Dorothy with them, to various critical processes of affirmation, alteration and annulment. Annulment, as Barthes conceives it, is ‘an explosion of language during which the subject manages to annul the loved object under the volume of love itself’. As the popular, biographical and scholarly responses surveyed here suggest, representations of Dorothy Wordsworth have gone
through several admiring and despairing stages of the lover’s discourse, and will no doubt continue to do so. In this sense, it is Dorothy’s ongoing critical reception, not the overdetermined biographical subject that is endlessly the subject of biographers’ speculation, which provides the ultimate electrometer, capturing the sometimes minute and sometimes violent fluctuations of attraction and repulsion, resistance and intensity that her life and work continue to evoke.

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Works Cited


THE ECOLOGICAL HUMANITIES
Introduction: Writing in the Anthropocene

DEBORAH ROSE

This issue of Ecological Humanities is dedicated to a topic inspired by Val Plumwood: ‘Thinking about writing for the Anthropocene’. In the last article she wrote before her death, Plumwood spoke passionately about the role of writers in our current time of crisis. She called for poets and other writers to join in a rethinking that ‘has the courage to question our most basic cultural narratives’. In particular, she called for writing that is ‘open to experiences of nature as powerful, agentic and creative, making space in our culture for an animating sensibility and vocabulary’. This, she says, is a major task facing the humanities today (‘Nature in the Active Voice’, Australian Humanities Review 46).

The articles in this issue of Ecological Humanities explore the role and dimensions of writing in this time of environmental change. They seek out the kinds of writing capable of shaking up our culture, and awakening us to new and more enlivened understandings of the world, our place in it, and the situated connectivities that bind us into multi-species communities.
Animots and the Alphabête in the Poetry of Francis Ponge

LAUREL PEACOCK

The idea of an animal
patters across the roof
Margaret Atwood, ‘Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer’

Animots
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Animals are a recurring poetic topos; they are anatomized, studied, personified, worshipped, reviled, mystified and addressed by poetry. Because language is one of the many abysses that exist between humans and other animals, they can provoke a crisis of communication, a realization of language’s helplessness to communicate across such an abyss. While humans tend to blame and denigrate other animals for failing to speak to us, Michel de Montaigne remarks in his ‘Apologie de Raimond Sebond’ on the arrogance of blaming all other animals for this language gap, which is equally a human failing; we can no more discern the speech of nonhuman animal than we can control the effects of language (which is a nonhuman agency, after all, that speaks us as we speak it). Communication gaps, furthermore, exist between other animal species—even within this species—and Jacques Derrida emphasizes in L’Animal que donc je suis that the world is rife with such abysses. Rather than dismissing nonhuman others as inferior based on their perceived lack, why cannot we, clever and inventive animals that we are, be more open to the way other animals call us to adapt language? Cannot poets find a way to innovate with language, to change it in such a way that it can begin to offer a space to nonhuman animals, leading to a more hospitable way of understanding them? Any such innovation can only be an essai, doing the work of poesis, and so it is no coincidence that essays and poems, two forms of writing quite accustomed to innovation, seem particularly well-suited to adaptations that can record at least a trace of nonhuman agencies. In this time of environmental crisis, the humanities need to adapt, drawing on strengths in linguistic innovation, while abandoning thoughtless anthropocentrism, in order to begin to fathom what it is we lose when we lose species diversity.

Jacques Derrida coined the term animot (L’Animal 74) to evoke a multiplicity within the singular term ‘the animal’ (a term he considers to be the fundamental violence against animals in our language, that enables real violence). As well as registering a multiplicity within its singularity as a homonym of animaux (animals), the term animot can be thought of as marking an animal invasion of
the word (*mot*), in which animal otherness animates language. An *animot* is an animalistic kind of word, and a linguistic kind of animal, attributing animation, even agency, to language. Thus on the level of the word, and even on the level of the letter, animal otherness can be invited into language. Remember that the first letter of our alphabet comes from a representation of an ox, an iconic transcription of an animal into language (imagine the triangular face and the horns in the letter V, upside down). This letter became *aleph* in the Semitic alphabet, and *bet*, the second letter, comes from an iconic symbol of a home, or shelter.

In this essay I want to explore some ways language can offer hospitality to animals, through the work of observation, emulation, and *poesis*. Drawing on what could be thought of as an animated alphabête, poetry that takes into account the language abyss between humans and other animals can shape itself in emulation of these animals as we perceive them, translating this experience into language. In particular, I wish to explore the experiments with nonhuman agency in/of language by French poet Francis Ponge (1899-1988), who has invented ways of treating the subject of the animal in poetry: he constructs habitats out of poems, in order to allow animals to inhabit language. Marianne Moore’s 1935 characterization of poetry as ‘imaginary gardens with real toads in them’ (‘Poetry’ 267) suggests such a possibility, and a look at some poems by Ponge will reveal another aspect of that line: a wish for poetry that can accommodate the animal’s living alterity, impossibly enough, in language.

Ponge wrote what are called ‘thing poems’, in which an intense meditation on a particular thing brings about a transformation of poetic consciousness, through a contemplation of the thing and its material and linguistic attributes, its silences, and its mode of being. Some of these ‘things’ are animals, and I would argue that Ponge’s animal poems practice a way of thinking about animals that is remarkably sensitive to the problems involved in importing animals (while respecting their alterity) into language. While treating animals as ‘things’ may seem like mere objectification, things (as opposed to objects) are for Ponge phenomenologically complex; things are not objects in that they are much more than their use-value. They are at once more concrete and less readable than objects. In his 1942 collection *Le parti pris des choses* (*Taking the side of things*), Ponge treats things as the subjects (not merely the objects) of his poems. In this and in other collections, the poems treat of a catalogue of garden-variety animate and inanimate ‘things’ that would tend to get overlooked in their ordinariness. While I only consider ‘thing poems’ about animals in this essay, Ponge has a range of poetic work that extends his concurrent playfulness with language and openness to alterity to the study/fabrication of a field/prefix, for
example, in *La fabrique du pré* (*The Making of the Pré*). Ponge’s poetic attention is absorbed entirely in studying things, which are treated neither as symbols nor as allegories for human concerns, but as interesting in their own alien being.

Ponge’s prose poem ‘*Le Lézard*’ (‘The Lizard’) is a good example of his philosophy of animate linguistic difference. The poem begins with a number of metaphors: the titular lizard is a ‘chef-d’œuvre de la bijouterie préhistorique’ (*Selected Poems* 146; a masterpiece of prehistoric jewellery, translations mine) and a ‘petit poignard qui traverse notre esprit se tortillant d’une façon assez baroque, dérisoirement’ (148; little dagger that traverses our spirit wriggling baroquely enough, ridiculously). The lizard’s appearance in the garden represents a traversal not only of the paving stones, but of the spirit or mind. The observer’s consciousness is transformed and traversed by this little lizard making such a sharp and sudden unbidden appearance. The metaphors Ponge reaches for come from the human world of art, referring to works of art and art movements, and he makes no attempt to downplay the artificiality of these metaphors; in this way the anthropocentrism of language is highlighted, tellingly, at a moment when language tries (and fails?) to ‘capture’ a lizard.

As the prose poem continues, it becomes even more self-referential, reflecting on its own process of calling forth the lizard, of providing a suitable habitat. Ponge observes ‘un quelquonque ouvrage de maçonnerie’ (152; an ordinary work of masonry), and asks, ‘À quoi ressemble plus cette surface éclatante de la roche ou du môle de maçonnerie que j’évoquais tout à l’heure, qu’à une page,—par un violent désir d’observation (à y inscrire) éclairée et chauffée à blanc?’ (152; What does the shining surface of rock or of mortar that I was just evoking resemble more than a page,—by a violent desire of observation (to write it), brightened and heated to white?). The poem’s linguistic and material existence, here, is treated as a construction of a page upon which a lizard might appear. The page, like the masonry, becomes an artificially constructed habitat for the lizard. The poet’s ‘violent’ desire to inscribe an observation of a lizard makes him construct the ideal conditions in which a lizard might appear. The page, like the masonry, becomes an artificially constructed habitat for the lizard. The poet’s ‘violent’ desire to inscribe an observation of a lizard makes him construct the ideal conditions in which a lizard might appear, disavowing authorial control, however, of the moment and conditions of such an appearance. When the lizard appears, it is not supposed to be transformed by the poem’s language, but the poem is transformed by its appearance. Rather than representing the lizard’s appearance, words, and then thoughts, act like the lizard to the extent that they become the lizard, take its place:

*Qu’un mot par surcroît s’y pose, ou plusieurs mots. Sur cette page, par cette faille, ne pourra sortir qu’un … (aussitôt gobant tous précédents mots) … un petit train de pensées grises,—lequel circule ventre à terre et rentre volontiers dans les tunnels de l’esprit.* (152)
That a word moreover alights there, or many words. On this page, through this fault, nothing can get out but a ... (immediately gobbling all preceding words)... a little train of grey thoughts,—which circle stomach to earth and return gladly into the tunnels of the spirit.

Thoughts, by the end of this poem, can no longer be represented as the detached, bodiless thoughts of Western rationality, but have been given a color and tone, and have learned to appear in the cracks of a wall/page, to dart around like lizards, and to disappear back into the tunnels of the mind. Thoughts gobble words, using the mouth rather than the eyes to incorporate them, to satisfy an appetite.

One of Derrida’s key discussions of Ponge’s poetry occurs in Signéponge (translated as Signsponge), an unusual work intensely engaged with the question of the signature. The signature is repeatable and quotable, and is subject to the play of language, even as it is meant to fix the singularity of the signatory. Signé Ponge (signed Ponge) can combine to make ‘signe éponge’ (sign sponge), which makes of the sponge (thing or animal?) a sign and a signature. Derrida discusses Ponge’s appropriation of the ‘things’ of his poems to create his own signature; there is a simultaneous expropriation, however, of the ‘thing’ in allowing it to exist as other than language. Ponge’s poetry operates simultaneously both ‘vers le dehors, le retour aux choses mêmes, puis, vers le dedans, le retour au langage, à la question du langage’ (23; toward the outside, the return to things themselves, then, toward the inside, the return to language, to the question of language). Encounters with the otherness of things, Derrida observes, intensify Ponge’s focus on language.

Ponge’s poem ‘Les hirondelles, ou, dans le style des hirondelles (randons)’ (‘Swallows, or, in the style of swallows (escapades)’) is briefly discussed by Derrida in relation to the signature; the swallows in this poem practice their signature on the page of the sky, their repeated flight patterns figured as the practiced swoops and flourishes of a signature, as each swallow ‘inlassablement se précipite—infalliblement elle s’exerce—à la signature, selon son espèce, des cieux’ (176; tirelessly hastening—infallibly she exerts herself—to the signature, according to her kind, of the skies). The poet addresses the swallows in amazement: ‘tu t’écris vite!’ (176; you cry out or write yourself quickly!), highlighting for Derrida the paradox of a signature ‘réfléchi, retourné vers lui-même, sui-référencié’ (Signéponge 133; reflected, returned toward itself, self-referenced). This signature or self-writing of the swallows occurs ‘selon son espèce’ (Ponge, Selected Poems 176; according to kind/species), which indicates that it is an idiomatic writing of the species or kind. Far from communicating meaning clearly to the human poetic observer, the signature leaves no permanent written trace (other than, perhaps, in the memory). The birds’ tailfeathers (plume: feather and pen) are ‘trempée dans l’encre bleu-noire’ (176; dipped in blue-black ink), and the observer
wonders ‘Si trace n’en demeure’ (176; if no trace remains). The birds have signed with disappearing ink, perhaps, or have chosen blue-black ink that disappears against a blue-black sky. But a trace, however unreadable, remains in the poet’s (and the poem’s) memory. Ponge gives a sense in this poem of a language proper to the swallows that is nevertheless inaccessible to us, separated by an abyss which is our failing rather than theirs (especially since we are the ones who try and fail to read their language).

The signature of the swallows can only be read in a ‘poème bizarre’ (176; weird poem), in words made strange by the swallows’ writing. The poetic voice exclaims,

_Ah! Je le sais par coeur, ce poème bizarre! mais ne lui laisserai pas, plus longtemps, le soin de s’exprimer._

_Voici les mots, il faut que je les dise._

_(Vite, avalant ses mots à mesure.)(176)_

_Ah! I know it by heart, this weird poem! but will not leave it, any longer, the care of expressing itself.

Here are the words, I must speak them.

_(Quick, swallowing the words one by one)._

The impermanent writing of the swallows, which the poet knows by heart (by perception, memory, and love), cannot be left to express itself; it fails to cross the language abyss without translation. Perhaps these lines contain the same despair at the opacity of language with which Virginia Woolf once described hearing the birds singing in Greek (see Dalgarno 32): these birds had a language, but one maddeningly inaccessible to Woolf, who did not know Greek, speaking only the non-sense of madness. Ponge recognizes the need, then, for translation. A good translation is called for, one that allows its own language to be altered by traces of the other’s language, allowing the voice of the other animal to voice itself as an irruption in the communicative or meaning-conveying or symbolic function of language, marking the spot of interests that are not our own, and maybe not appropriable. The poet offers words that he must say, because there is no other way to translate the bird writing into human language. The poet moved to translation recognizes an insufficiency and a necessity at the same time. Derrida locates this call or imperative to translation (Ponge’s ‘il faut que’; Selected Poems 176) in the very difficulty of the task, arguing, ‘A work that appears to defy translation is at the same time an appeal for translation; it produces translators, and new protocols of translation; it produces other events that make it possible for a translation that does not exist to be produced’ (Derrida and Ferraris 16).
A difficult text (like the ‘writing’ of the swallows) can call out for its proper translator, and can even generate new methods of translation to deal with the insufficiency of current methods.

Ponge registers not only this imperative to translate the defiantly untranslatable, but also a measure of despair in the failings of translation, despite his best attempts at innovation: ‘Leur notation de l’hymne? (Ce serait trop facile.) / Le texte de leur loi? (Ah! ce serait ma loi!)’ (178; the notation of their hymn? (That would be too easy.) / The text of their law? (Ah! it would be my law!)). But rather than despairing of any possibility of translation, the poet decides that in order to write a poem translating swallow writing, he must proceed like the swallows, quickly, and must swallow the words as he goes along (here something is gained in English translation). The words must be incorporated (avalée), but also made swallow-like (swallowed), made to behave like swallows as they dive to eat insects or letters.

Following the swallows’ flight, the poem engages in an intense ‘swallowing’ of its words, a linguistic transformation that creates words like ‘l’Horizontelle’ (176), ‘defined’ as swallows on the horizon, made up of the words ‘hirondelle’ (swallow) and ‘horizontal’, and then subjected to further transformation away from standard French. In the following passage, swallows inhabit the poem’s language:

_You describe a circumlocution of places to fall_

(_comme cette phrase_).

_Puis,—sans négliger le nid, sous la poutre du toit, où les mots piaillent : la famille famélique des petits mots à grosse tête et bec ouvert, doués d’une passion, d’une exigence exorbitantes,_

_You return to the line, or you must make up the numbers._

(_Posément, à la ligne._) (178)

(like this sentence).

_Then,—without neglecting the nest, under the beam of the roof, where the words chirp: the scrawny family of little words with big head and open beak, endowed with a passion and a demand that are exorbitant,_

(Calmly, start a new line).
Following the movement of the sparrows who land on a (clothes-?) line, a new poetic line (and a new stanza) then begins (in another meaning of the imperative ‘à la ligne’). The poem’s pace and formal decisions follow the swallows’ volition; the sentences, words, and line breaks follow the swallows’ flight patterns and behavior. Birds (words) describe a path without landing, and in nests, words (birds) chirp with open beaks for food. Like languages, meanings proliferate, as they follow (swallow) one another. Canadian poet Don McKay (b. 1942) might describe this ‘swallowing’ of language as an encounter with wilderness in which ‘language is experiencing its speechlessness and the consequent need to stretch itself to be adequate to this form of knowing’ (McKay 30), resulting in a ‘slight deformation of human categories, an extra metaphorical stretch and silliness of language as it moves toward the other’ (McKay 31). The swallows in their inhabitation of language affect, as well, the subjectivity that can encounter them: ‘elles nous jettent en position de spectateurs’ (180; they throw us into the [subject] position of spectators).

In L’animal que donc je suis (The Animal That Therefore I Am), Derrida describes this effect of being thrown into a subject position by the gaze of the nonhuman animal in a vignette of being stared at by his cat. In the extensive philosophical disquisition on the matter of ‘the animal’ that follows this vignette, Derrida develops an ethic of following (suis means both ‘am’ and ‘follow’) that continually finds instances in which ‘the human’ is determined by ‘the animal’, a category upon which its definition relies. The category of the human is constructed in opposition to ‘the animal’, and so it follows that the human follows the animal, literally (as in hunting or tracking), and figuratively (as tropes like ‘the political animal’). Cartesian humanist thought is allowed to self-deconstruct as relying intrinsically, constitutionally, on a category it attempts to displace.

In tracking ‘the animal’ through the thickets of philosophy, Derrida encounters aporias that are of significance both to the follower and the followed. Aporias, literally blocked paths, are what happens when we lose the trail, when we have run out of readable traces. And it is exactly such a blocked path that generates the desire to forge ahead, if not with philosophy, which can get us, perhaps, only so far, then with poesis: ‘aporicity evokes, rather than prohibits, more precisely, promises through its prohibition, an other thinking, an other text, the future of another promise’ (Derrida, Memoires 133).

In ‘Les hirondelles’, Ponge urges us to use our own prized linguistic precision in the service of understanding and hospitality toward other animals: ‘Soyons donc un peu plus humains à leur égard; un peu plus attentifs; consideratifs; sérieux’ (180; Be then a little more human on their behalf, a little more attentive; considerate; serious). We are urged to be, then, not less human, not theatrically animalistic, but more human, and more attentive. As Ponge and Derrida demonstrate, in considering exactly what we think we mean by ‘human’, rather than simply
trying to leave it behind as a problematic category, we find ourselves following the animal, and innovating with language. Language, after all, like the animal, is a non-human agency that operates according to its own laws, and yet it is one of the ways the human constitutes itself; held up as one of the key cases for human exceptionalism, ironically language precedes and operates to some degree separately from human will, much like the animal (that, therefore, I am and it is). When Ponge invites the animot to transform the act of writing along with our sense of who we are, he is both advocating an ethic of humane perceptiveness, and asking us to approach language, carefully, as the strange animal that it is.

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In her essay ‘Nature in the Active Voice’ Val Plumwood makes the call for writers to engage in ‘the struggle to think differently’ (128). Specifically, she calls writers to engage in the task of opening up an experience of nature as powerful and as possessing agency. She argues that such a task should not be understood as a literary self-indulgence, but as ‘a basic survival project’ (128). In this article, I will argue that a critical component of opening up who or what can be understood as possessing agency involves challenging the conception of time as linear, externalised and absolute, particularly in as much as it has guided Western conceptions of process, change and invention.

Initially, I discuss the work of a Carol Greenhouse, who argues that social conceptions of time can be read as theories of agency. That is, she suggests that time concepts express collective understandings of how change happens and how the power to enact change is distributed. I then suggest that this interconnection between time and agency can be seen in Plumwood’s own work. That is, in challenging Western accounts of agency, I argue that she also challenges Western accounts of linear time, which isolate the capacity for agency within the human.

Thus, in seeking to respond to Plumwood’s call to think differently, the question becomes: what kind of writing would enable a fundamental re-thinking of agency without, however, ignoring the way Western notions of agency have been shaped by linear accounts of time? One promising approach is that offered by the work of Jacques Derrida. I first locate the possibility of re-writing time and agency in the experiential aspects of his writing, which I argue interrupt both the reader’s sense of agency and linear models of reading. But further, I seek to connect Derrida’s work directly with Plumwood’s by examining how...
his deconstruction of the Western concept of invention may enable another
count as ‘agency’ within
The

Time as agency

In order to draw out connections between the problem of agency and concepts of time, I am utilising a broad notion of agency that is drawn from the work of anthropologist Carol Greenhouse. Her work is significant in that it enables a critical approach to the way agency is predominantly understood in the West. Specifically, Greenhouse argues that ‘time articulates people’s understandings of agency: literally, what makes things happen and what makes acts relevant in relation to social experience, however conceived’ (1). In doing so, Greenhouse challenges more common understandings that suggest that ‘agency universally involves issues of intention (whether or not the intention originated with the actor) and will’ (80). One of the problems with such assumptions is that they determine ‘in advance that what “matter” about agency are individual effects on society’ (81). This assumption skews understandings of agency by suggesting that Western understandings of it are neutral.

In contrast, Greenhouse contends that agency should be understood as referring to ‘the broad and highly varied meanings people attach to questions of possibility, causation, and relevance around the world’ (183). Or to put it another way, she understands agency as referring to ‘people’s goals, together with their broader sense of what is possible and of what relevance is about, even if their understanding of relevance excludes their own experiences from the story of the world’ (234). So rather than assuming that individual self-directed actions are of most relevance when explaining how significant changes occur, Greenhouse suggests that there are a variety of ways of constructing explanatory causal chains. While in some cases an individual’s actions, regardless of rank, may be thought to be significant, in other cases, only the actions of political or religious leaders are relevant. Alternatively, it may be the behaviour of a group as a whole that shapes what is possible, or agency may be a power reserved only for deities, natural processes, or inaccessible unconscious drives.

Importantly, given the particular focus of this essay, while Greenhouse’s account of agency does focus on human goals, in dissociating agency from intention and will, and by extending the question of relevance beyond the human, her broader account suggests that agency need not necessarily be restricted to humanity. Crucially, her work suggests that the individualistic and humanist notion of agency that dominates the Western tradition is not simply what agency is. Rather, she argues that this account of agency is shaped by the socially produced articulations of time that underlie it.
Greenhouse’s broader account of agency suggests that when a culture is guided by a different temporal schema, agency can be understood quite differently. To briefly provide some examples, I will outline her account of the connections between time and human agency in the classic Western anthropological typology of time as ‘timeless’, ‘cyclical’ or ‘linear’. In discussing these traditional taxonomies, even while challenging them, Greenhouse initially argues that ‘agency can be seen to have many sources and many different concentrations in the human world, from highly concentrated to highly diffuse’ (93). Indeed she argues that what best distinguishes between systems of time is not their differing understandings of how time ‘flows,’ but rather how change is thought to occur, that is, how the power of agency is distributed among possible human or non-human actors. For example, she suggests that ‘timeless’ or ‘shapeless’ times ‘formulate agency as having been generated in a single burst apart from the social sphere of experience’ (86). While this ‘single burst’ of agency may intervene in day-to-day life, it is not distributed to all social actors at all moments. Cyclical times distribute ‘agency in one or more finite clusters that include the lived in world’ (86). For example, in the cyclical notion ‘to everything there is a season,’ the ability to act in certain ways is understood to be clustered within a specific part of time, or ‘season’. One cannot act in any way that one would like at any time, rather only specific actions are thought to be viable at any specific moment. Finally, Greenhouse argues that ‘linear’ time ostensibly ‘distributes agency most widely, dispersing its “original” creation (by God, or a big bang, or another potentiating force) to each individual’ (86).

In discussing this temporal typology, Greenhouse notes that these accounts of time and agency are not mutually exclusive; rather there are always multiple ways of living time within any particular society. However, where one specific idealisation of time becomes hegemonic, this notion will also guide the hegemonic notion of agency. As such, Greenhouse’s work raises the interesting question of whether Western accounts of agency focus on the ability of a self-conscious individual to achieve a previously articulated goal, not because this simply is agency, but because the notion of time as linear guides this understanding of how change happens. Specifically, her work suggests that the West’s dominant account of agency is shaped by linear time’s basis in the modification of present moments, where an idealisation of ‘presence’ underlies the idealisation of the

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2 Greenhouse criticises the strong tendency to understand time through the use of geometric metaphors within the West, arguing that such metaphors are inadequate and limiting. For example, she points out that ‘when cultural constructions of time rest on underlying notions of cyclicity, a cycle might be a pendulum, a static circle, a dynamic cycle, a spiral’ (85). To claim that such notions are all ‘circular’ obscures the significant differences between each account. Further she argues that societies are referred to as ‘timeless’ not because there are in fact no concepts of time but ‘because their representations of time do not appear geometric to a Western eye’ (85). One example of work that explores alternative non-geometrical dynamics of time is that of Deborah Bird Rose (see, for example, ‘To Dance’ and Dingo Makes, especially 203-217).
individual and its capacity for rational decision making. Importantly, her account enables one to begin to consider how attempts to reshape the concept of agency may be unknowingly restricted by underlying social concepts of time.

The importance of this last point can first be seen in the case of Western encounters with so-called ‘timeless’ societies. As anthropologist Alfred Gell has claimed, to categorise a community as without time is to suggest that its members ‘do not believe that the world changes much or in very important ways, by contrast to [those with linear time scales] who are perhaps inclined to believe that the world changes constantly and in ways that matter a great deal’ (36). Further, he explains that ‘what seems to be meant by calling time “motionless” … is the imperviousness of some process or institutional form to systemic change’ (26). However, what Greenhouse’s work suggests is that such societies are neither devoid of time, nor are they devoid of accounts of agency. Rather, their accounts of time and agency are not easily recognisable from within the framework of linear time. Thus it is from the particular perspective of Western societies that the classification ‘timeless’ is pronounced. To classify something as ‘timeless’ does not, therefore, mean that it escapes time altogether but, rather that, to those doing the classifying, a particular process or culture does not appear to change in significant or relevant ways. In this way, as I have explored more thoroughly elsewhere, notions of time can be used in a variety of ways to dismiss or misread different cultures (Bastian).\(^3\) However what is important in this context is how Western assumptions about time have fostered notions of nature as timeless, and as without agency.

**Nature’s agency**

According to Bill McKibben, one of the reasons why the West has failed to respond adequately to the threat of climate change has been because of a confusion about time. That is:

> though we know that our culture has placed our own lives on a demonic fast-forward, we imagine that the earth must work on some other timescale. The long slow accretion of epochs—the Jurassic, the Cretaceous, the Pleistocene—lulls us into imagining that the physical world offers us an essentially stable background against which we can run our race (7).\(^4\)

In treating nature as a stable background, we are, in a sense, claiming that the changes that do occur within nature are neither significant nor relevant. But further, when one understands time as *agency*, seeing nature as without

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3 See also Johannes Fabian’s seminal *Time and the Other.*

4 Thanks to Beth Seaton for bringing this quote to my attention.
Inventing Nature: Re-writing Time and Agency in a More-than-Human World

significant changes, without time, is to also see it as without agency. However, recognising nature’s agency cannot amount to an attempt to incorporate nature within the smooth even flow of absolute time as it was conceived by Newton. This is because within linear time, what counts are individual wills, and, when combined with teleological or progressivist tendencies, rationally guided logical change. Indeed I would argue that reinterpreting the creative changes, possibilities and causalities that do occur within nature as agency is impossible if one attempts to integrate nature into the schema provided by linear time. Instead, it would appear that Plumwood’s own work indicates that a shift in how agency is understood must be accompanied by a shift away from linear temporal models.

In the essay ‘Nature as Agency,’ Plumwood calls for a non-reductive understanding of nature as ‘an active collaborative presence capable of agency and other mind-like qualities’ (16). Such a task is doubly important as it links up with feminist and social justice concerns. As Plumwood explains, ‘it has been possible to discount the agency of subordinated groups of humans by counting them or their agency as nature only because nature’s agency is itself normally denied and backgrounded in Western culture’ (‘Nature as Agency’ 20). Thus, as a critical concept within a variety of schemas of dominance she argues that ‘the reconception of nature in agentic terms as a co-actor and co-participant in the world and its recognition in distributive terms is perhaps the most important aspect of moving to an alternative ethical framework’ (‘Nature as Agency’ 16).

In analysing the conceptual structures that support Western conceptions of agency, Plumwood focuses particularly on the technique of hyper-separation, whereby the contributions of both subordinated humans and nature are backgrounded, or taken for granted. She argues that ‘the One or Man of Property is able to assume the contribution of nature in the form of a continuing support base for production, accumulation and renewal, but to deny it in failing to recognise, and allow for, nature’s reproduction and continuation’ (‘Nature as Agency’ 9). Indeed she claims that it is dominant conceptions of agency that provide ‘the conceptual means by which this simultaneous reliance and disavowal is accomplished’ (‘Nature as Agency’ 14). One of the key characteristics of this notion of agency that she highlights draws on the Cartesian split between a mechanistic nature and a mind that possesses free will. That is, ‘anthropocentric culture often endorses a view of the human as outside of and apart from a plastic, passive and “dead” nature which lacks agency and meaning’ (‘Nature as Agency’ 12). The capacity for creating change is isolated from whatever is perceived as natural. Instead, as she argues in ‘Nature in the Active Voice’, the instigator of change is understood as ‘a separate mechanism or intelligence driving the materially-reduced organism from outside, and it is to this external
driver that true agency is attributed’ (119). The task of re-imagining agency lies, therefore, in challenging both the externalisation of the rational human subject from nature, and the mechanisation of all that remains.

Interestingly, what is common to both the idealisation of rationality and the mechanistic reduction of nature is an idealisation of logically ordered linear processes, epitomised by the utilisation of clock metaphors in the work of Descartes, Leibniz and Spinoza. Despite their important differences, each philosopher utilised images of the clock to emphasise the underlying order of the mind and, alternatively, of the physical world. In part, this is perhaps due to the premier place the clock has in encouraging an understanding of time as an external constant that, firstly, is unmoved by human emotions, desires or fears, thus providing an idealised model for the rational mind as likewise unmoved. Secondly, in illustrating the supposedly steady even flow of ‘absolute time,’ as Newton called it, the clock also suggests that underneath the seeming chaos of multiply interacting social, biological and ecological processes there lies a logical linear time-line that charts a single all-encompassing movement from the past to the future. Nature thus becomes the expression of underlying logical physical laws that promise one day to be uncovered, enabling all natural systems to be predicted and managed. This account of time, which is often presented as a simple unit of measurement, and thus as asocial and free from the operations of power, is thus arguably an important foundation for the account of agency that itself supports the hyper-separation of nature and culture.

Indeed, in articulating an alternative understanding of agency, Plumwood’s work appears to move away from the kinds of linear processes discussed above. What seems to be key is her effort to disconnect the concept of agency from a linear model within which the only significant and relevant changes are those that are planned and carried out by a rational subject in a logical and predictable manner. For example, one of the reasons why she critiques the model of ‘production’ as unsuitable for explaining humanity’s relation to nature is because it would ‘continue to suggest human control ... and seem especially inappropriate for those many cases where the outcome is neither planned nor anticipated by those responsible for it’ (‘Nature as Agency’ 24). In her account then, unexpected and surprising changes should be recognised as having relevance and significance. Even further, Plumwood explores the possibility that evolution be understood as a form of agency. For instance, she asks ‘why can’t we see evolution, for example, as a form of testing and learning, like trial and error, a form of wisdom?’ (‘Nature in the Active’ 125). This further suggests that Plumwood explicitly seeks to understand changes that are not driven by a single rational mind as significant and creative.

In contrast to the hegemonic Western conception of agency, Plumwood suggests that recognising nature as a sphere of agency may instead draw upon
‘more pluralistic and context-sensitive concepts of influence, interaction and mutuality’ (‘Nature as Agency’ 23). Such an emphasis would indicate a shift away from understanding processes of change as being ultimately reducible to the single line of linear time. In ‘Nature in the Active Voice’ she suggests further shifts in how agency is understood. Specifically she muses over the possibility of seeing accident as ‘creative non-human agency,’ ‘sound as voice,’ and ‘adaptation as intelligence’ (‘Nature in the Active’ 125). In this way, she teases open the taken-for-granted connection between agency and rational deliberative forethought. It is this issue that I will take up specifically in my discussion of Derrida’s account of invention. For the moment, however, I would like to suggest that it is precisely in opening up the possibility that agency need not be about the deliberate implementation of a series of pre-thought-out steps aiming towards a clarified goal, that Plumwood not only reworks the concept of agency, but also reshapes Western modes of conceptualising the flow of time.

Re-writing time

In ‘Nature in the Active Voice’, Plumwood emphasises the importance of challenging the West’s ‘most basic cultural narratives’ (113). She calls for writers to open consumerist culture to self-criticism and to make it think more closely about its underlying assumptions. While other articles in this issue explore the possibilities of types of writing that could more properly be called literary, I would like to offer a reading of Derrida’s writing as that which could help to address the questions of agency and of time. First, I will suggest that the experiential aspects of his writing enable a re-evaluation of the limits of the self-directed individual prized by traditional Western accounts of agency. Secondly, I explore how questions of change, possibility and causation (which are also questions of time) are reworked within an enigmatic framework that intertwines the capacity to bring about change with a necessary passivity in relation to significant change. Such questions arise throughout Derrida’s work, particularly in those areas that most directly address key issues within environmental philosophy, such as the limit between human and non-human animals (see, for example, ‘The Animal’). My particular interest, however, is in developing Plumwood’s suggestion that evolution be understood as a manifestation of nature’s agency. I will suggest that Derrida’s reworking of the Western concept of invention, which has itself marked the limit between the human and non-human, provides new avenues into the question of agency that are not pre-determined by the imperatives of linear time.

To begin, one of the first ways we might see Derrida’s writing as shifting Western understandings of agency and of time arises from the difficult and obscure nature of his work. That is, while its difficulties have been generally criticised for being elitist, exclusionary, or obscurantist, I would suggest that, within the context
of human exploitation of nature, the experience of encountering a new (con) text that is impossible to master with a single glance (or single reading) offers something very important. This is particularly the case in an age where brevity and clarity are often uncritically valued. As Plumwood herself notes, ‘public discussion in our society is dominated by the tyranny of narrow focus’ (‘Nature in the Active’ 113). The complexities of Derrida’s texts refuse this narrow focus or search for easy answers. As such, they offer the very practical lessons of patience, of developing complex stories, of the impossibility of mastery, and of the need to change oneself in order to ethically encounter the strange and the new. Above all, in countering the desire for immediate clarity, Derrida’s work thwarts the desire for the world to be presented to the self in terms that are already familiar.

The experience of reading such texts has the capacity to shift experiences of time in a number of ways. Firstly, texts characterised by clarity do not take up one’s time. They can be read and understood quickly. They present themselves. Secondly, even when one is referring to a longer text, where a certain amount of time must, of course, be taken, this time is not marked by confusion, by missteps or breaks. Rather one can chart one’s progress in a fairly simple fashion. Chapter or page numbers regularly mark, not just the amount read, but the steady amount of increasing knowledge one has gained. Complex texts, on the other hand, demand one’s time. One must learn to work at a slower pace in order to appreciate them. In this way they have the capacity to challenge the consumerist desire for immediate wish-fulfilment and also offer a counterpoint to the breakneck speed that has come to characterise the capitalist world.

Further, the different rhythm required to read Derrida’s work, is not just slower, but could also be thought of as non-linear. One does not move smoothly from beginning to end. Instead of building a cumulative understanding as one progresses, Derrida’s work requires one to wait patiently, collecting up one’s experiences and only later gaining a better idea of how they might fit together. One could perhaps draw parallels with the Permaculture practice of observing one’s environment for at least a year, learning the specificities of one’s place before intervening. This attitude assumes that neither a text nor an environment is available immediately to an actor but must be experienced through time, in their different seasons, throughout their (and one’s own) changes. It also assumes that one is encountering complex systems that need complex experiences and built up shared histories before one can hope to act productively within/or in relation to them.

Like the natural environment too, one must not treat the text as a timeless unchanging thing awaiting the action of the human. Indeed I am constantly amazed by the way in which Derrida’s texts shift and change between readings. The supposedly passive, unchanging text, the work that is thought to help one
escape death by maintaining a faithful unchanging record of one’s thoughts, becomes mobile and creative. Not on its own, but within the mutuality, interactivity and influence that enframe another understanding of agency. This ability to change over time, to have something new to offer to the future is a deliberate feature of Derrida’s work. In the interview, ‘Negotiations’, he claimed that he sought to ‘enable a phrase to have an immediate effect and also a reserve, to say other things to others, later on’ (28). He thus sought to enable multiple rhythms within his work, operating at different speeds, in recognition of responsibilities owed not only to those in the ‘present’ but those who have already died and those who are not yet born (see Spectres of Marx). There is therefore a certain unpredictability within his texts that does not allow one to understand them as impervious to change, to understand them as ‘timeless’. This is a sense of extended time that is sorely needed in an era where present and future lives are sacrificed for short-term gains.

As mentioned above, key for Plumwood is questioning the dogma of human supremacy, connected with ‘the need to see ourselves as more limited beings’ (‘Nature in the Active’ 117). In challenging linear patterns of reading, Derrida’s work has the capacity to provide a much needed experience of limitation. In doing so, it also provides another experience of agency (understood in the broad sense outlined above). That is, in reading his writing one experiences oneself as limited since one cannot grasp as much as one would like: the text exceeds the reader. The reader finds themselves in an environment that does not bend obligingly to their will. One cannot have what one wants in the moment one wants it. Further one does not achieve one’s goals in a steady, accumulative way. Instead, flashes of understanding come by chance, or by accident; more a fortuitous gift than the guaranteed outcome of continuous application. This is quite different from what is usually understood as agency. Indeed the active work of reading is not experienced as mastery, but rather as an active passivity. One must strive for understanding, but one’s goals are not achieved solely through one’s own initiative. Indeed the very notion of achievement is transformed. One’s active waiting finds satisfaction, not in something predictable, but in the surprising and the unexpected. Simple solutions, simple summaries do not suffice, indeed one cannot be satisfied with them. Instead, these texts issue a call to understand in a more complex and shifting way. Through them one can learn the value of an impatient waiting that heightens one’s awareness, but also reserves the desire to intervene too quickly.

5 I would not claim this is appropriate for everyone in all contexts.
6 But it also exceeds the writer. As such it would be interesting to consider how Derrida’s work might fit with Kate Rigby’s claim, in ‘Writing After Nature’, that nature writing should be seen as ‘embodying a literary practice of response: as such, we can truly say that writing comes second, following on from the other’s call, while becoming in turn the locus of a new call, to and upon the reader’ (np).
Re-inventing invention

I would now like to turn to the question of what Derrida’s writing may offer to the problem of recognising nature’s agency, over and above the experience of reading. To recall, Plumwood argues for the need to develop accounts of agency that do not rest in the individual hyper-separate rational actor, but that instead draw upon concepts of interaction and mutuality, and importantly, the possibility of seeing what has been dismissed as merely accidental, ‘as creative non-human agency’, of seeing ‘adaptation as intelligence’ (‘Nature in the Active’125). Under her account, those changes and expressions of creativity that are of key relevance are not those that can be traced back to a single, rational human actor. Rather possibility and causation, to echo Greenhouse’s definition of agency, are thought in terms of the creative and active capacities of nature. As I noted above, the question of possibility can be taken up in a wide variety of ways within Derrida’s work. In order to explore one approach in sufficient depth I have chosen to focus particularly on his exploration of the concept of invention. Since within this work, Derrida develops an account of transformation that does not arise through the active power of the rational individual, but rather depends upon the accidental and the surprising.

In his essay ‘Psyche: Inventions of the Other’, Derrida makes a claim that at first glance appears to be extremely unpromising. That is, he claims that ‘invention always belongs to man as the inventing subject’ (43). Indeed he claims that despite important variations within the concept, the connection between man and invention is ‘a defining feature of very great stability’ within the Western philosophical tradition (43). As he notes, within this tradition, ‘man himself, and the human world, is defined by the human subject’s aptitude for invention’ (44). In particular, this account of invention is strongly linked to the understandings of agency connected with the rational subject and to linear temporal schemas. For example, one of the ways serendipity is distinguished from invention is the extent to which inventions arise, not merely by chance, but can be understood as part of the logical progression of a certain body of knowledge. So while serendipity denotes a discovery made merely by chance and without reason, Derrida points out that since the Enlightenment there has been a much higher status granted to rationally guided inventive processes. He locates such views in the work of Leibniz and Kant, for example. As a result, insofar as invention has been understood to be in opposition to the serendipitous, that is, characterised by deliberation, agency and foresight, inventions have come to represent another step in the unfolding of rational progress. This links invention tightly both to ideals of linear progress and to its character as a peculiarly human capacity. Attempting to develop an account of nature’s agency from within the
framework of the Western concept of invention may, therefore, run into similar
problems as those discussed above in relation to rethinking nature’s agency from
within the framework of linear time.

However, despite its unpromising heritage, Derrida nevertheless argues that the
humanistic account of invention, which isolates this capacity within the domain
of rational human acts, is not the only understanding of invention within the
Western tradition. Rather, he exploits an apparent paradox within the tradition
in order to open up the concept of invention beyond its role as guardian at the
threshold between human and non-human. This paradox lies in the invention’s
dual character as firstly that which is repeatable, and thus able to become
familiar or conventional. That is, an invention must introduce a technique or
mechanism (understood in a broad sense) that can be shared and utilised by a
wider community. But secondly, the invention must be that which breaks with
all conventions, in that it must be new and surprising. That is, the invention
must exceed the rational, logical, predictable unfolding of possibility, which has
also been called ‘progress’.

One way this paradox can be seen to be operating within the modern experience
of invention is that while we may appear to be living in the golden age of
invention, where an increasing amount of novelty is encountered on a daily
basis, Derrida points out that many continue to dream of a reinvention of
invention itself (‘Psyche’ 46). He argues that this desire arises because:

what is called a patentable ‘invention’ is now programmed, that is,
subjected to powerful movements of authoritarian prescription and
anticipation of the widest variety. And that is as true in the domains of
art or the fine arts as in the techno-scientific domain (‘Psyche’ 46).

So despite the ever increasing availability of new electronic gadgets, new forms
of entertainment and of communication, invention is, for the most part, not
experienced as revolutionary or surprising. Rather than being experienced as
the product of the rare combination of genius and luck, invention has become
all too predictable. For Derrida then, ‘our current tiredness results from the
invention of the same and from the possible, from the invention that is always
possible’ (60). The ‘possible’ invention is one that can be planned for and
anticipated. The future that it heralds does not differ significantly from the past,
instead the invention is able, fairly unproblematically, to take its place within a
logical progressive schema.

Nevertheless, Derrida argues that this ‘invention of the same’ does not fully
accord with the concept of invention, as it has been thought in the Western
tradition. Since if invention were only an invention of the same, then ‘invention
could be in conformity with its concept, with the dominant feature of the word
and concept “invention”, only insofar as, paradoxically, invention invents nothing’ (‘Psyche’ 60). He admits that it is a necessary characteristic of invention that it conform to certain conventions. For example, a new object or method must be recognised by others as significant and useful if it is to be granted the status of invention. In this sense the invention cannot be singular or idiosyncratic but must be able to be utilised more generally. The invention must therefore offer a new capacity or ability that is repeatable by others. However, it remains the case that a true invention is expected to be disruptive and unpredictable. Indeed, the attempt to render invention neat and predictable does not actually fit with the perceived notion of what an invention is. Derrida writes instead that ‘an invention always presupposes some illegality, the breaking of an implicit contract; it inserts a disorder into the peaceful ordering of things, it disregards the proprieties’ (25). Far from appearing as always straightforwardly realisable, he argues that ‘an invention has to declare itself to be the invention of that which did not appear to be possible’ (60). That is, ‘the only possible invention would be the invention of the impossible’ (60).

By claiming that a true invention is ‘impossible’, Derrida is not claiming that they never occur. Rather, he claims that the impossible invention cannot be comprehended from the perspective of a calculable temporality. In its imperative to be disruptive and seemingly ‘impossible,’ the invention must break with an experience of time as comfortable and predictable. Indeed, he argues that ‘there will be invention only on condition that the invention transgress, in order to be inventive, the status and the programs with which it was supposed to comply’ (‘Psyche’ 41). An invention should not, therefore, be a simple fulfilment of what is already thought to be possible. Instead, the invention is what does not appear to take place in the normal order of things. So rather than representing a point along an infinite line of progress, Derrida suggests that the ‘impossible’ invention is better understood as ‘an inaugural event’ (28). In order to draw out what he might mean here, I will present a brief overview of how the concept of ‘the event’ has been approached within the phenomenological tradition, drawn from Françoise Dastur’s essay ‘Phenomenology of the Event: Waiting and Surprise’.

For Dastur, ‘the event in the strong sense of the word is ... always a surprise, something which takes possession of us in an unforeseen manner, without warning, and which brings us towards an unanticipated future’ (182). The event then, in Derrida’s sense, is not one of the simple daily occurrences that make up the cycle of our lives. Rather, the event refers to those happenings that dislodge the anticipations and expectations that we have in regard to the future. Thus to be an event, an invention must disrupt the tendrils of anticipation that presume to know in advance what the invention would be. Reinventing invention thus requires developing a different relation to the future. Moreover, the disruptive effects of the event are not limited to social projections of the future, but extend
into a society’s shared heritages and traditions. As Heidegger has suggested, the possibilities we see in the future are projected from one’s ‘having-been’ (18, 20). The impossible invention, however, exists as ‘the event of a novelty that must surprise, because at the moment when it comes about, there could be no statute, no status, ready and waiting to reduce it to the same’ (‘Psyche’ 43). In this case, no having-been is available to enfold the invention within shared pre-understandings. So while an invention that could be anticipated would be one that conformed to a society’s shared history, the invention, as event, would happen beyond this prior experience. It would be surprising rather than reassuring, and thus not immediately graspable in relation to its usefulness or within common sense. It is for this reason that Dastur contends that the event ‘does not happen in a world—it is, on the contrary, as if a new world opens up through its happening’ (182).

In breaking with the world, the impossible invention is also that which offers the possibility of breaking with Western conceptions of linear time. This is, in part, because the transformation that produces an impossible invention is just as much a transformation of linear time. As Derrida argues in *Spectres of Marx*, the event cannot be thought ‘as long as one relies on a general temporality or an historical temporality made up of the successive linking of presents identical to themselves and contemporary with themselves’ (70). Instead, as Dastur suggests, the event ‘introduces a split between past and future and so allows the appearance of different parts of time as dis-located’ (182). She thus argues that the event is

irremediably excessive in comparison to the usual representation of time as flow. It appears as something that dislocates time and gives a new form to it, something that puts the flow of time out of joint and changes its direction (182).

Or as Derrida writes in *Spectres of Marx*, ‘what is coming, in which the untimely appears, is happening to time but it does not happen in time’ (77). ‘Time’ should here be specifically understood as linear time. That is, as that which is calculable and predictable, where the future is felt to be something that can be planned and meaningfully anticipated. Thus above and beyond its disruption of social expectations and preconceptions, Derrida suggests that the invention, as event, disrupts linear time itself.

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7 Werner Hamacher suggests that this distinction between the future as possible and impossible can be understood as two ‘times’ ‘a time that renders possible and one that renders impossible this very rendering’ (174). However, one problem, which I only have the space to gesture towards here, is that both Derrida and Hamacher describe the time that is not predictable as ‘not time’ or ‘atemporal’. While I cannot go into this problem in more detail, it is important to remember that an unpredictable future is only ‘not time’ from the perspective of a hegemonic Western understanding of time. That is, it is important not to mistake a re-temporalisation as an absence of time, in part, because it assumes that Western conceptions of time are simply
How, then, might the impossible invention transform understandings of agency, as a result of its disruption of dominant conceptions of linear time? To re-iterate, the impossible invention, which accords with the Western concept of invention despite its paradoxical character, cannot take place within a temporal scheme where the past provides a supportive interpretive structure or where the future can be anticipated. Crucially, this means that neither the agent's previous knowledge, nor their capacity to deduce logical consequences is useful here. Instead, what one finds in regard to the impossible invention—the invention as event—is that it is not something that can be actively and consciously invented by a subject according to a preconceived plan and with predictable effects. Instead, Derrida argues that to consciously invent would only be to invent on the basis of the possible, of the familiar. In contrast, the event is always something that happens to a subject, something which happens upon them and catches them unaware. As Dastur explains ‘one does not decide freely to change one’s world, or to become converted. We can speak of the event neither in the active nor in the passive voice’ (186). Consequently, the self-directed subject with its clear anticipations of the future is ill-equipped to deal with the disorientation of the invention as event. This suggests that the invention-as-event is not an account of invention as a fully conscious activity of the self.

This does not mean, however, that one is absolutely passive in regard to the event. Interestingly, Dastur suggests that the event ‘can change us and even “happen” to us only if we are in the right disposition’ (186). The more embedded one is in traditions or habits, the less one is able to positively experience and welcome the difference such inventions herald. A more promising disposition may lie in welcoming the disorientation of the event as an opportunity to be extended and transformed by the unexpected character of this experience. Thus, in as much as this disposition can be cultivated, there may be room for activity and agency. Even so, the possibility of breaking with sedimented habit is not primarily in the hands of the subject, but depends upon the unexpected dislocations brought about through one’s interactions with others. This is perhaps one reason why Derrida terms this type of invention ‘the invention of the other,’ in opposition to the ‘invention of the same’ (‘Psyche’ 55). So rather than the agent of invention being understood as outside of, or external to the world, under this account, the agent is passive insofar as they are dependent upon a surprising and accidental creativity to intervene within their world and transform it. This suggests that the ‘agency’ inherent within the act of invention is a strange intertwining of activity and passivity.

the time. Thus, the untimely should not to be understood as not time simply because it is not calculable and predictable. The question of to what extent Derrida's work might fall into the trap of universalising a particular cultural account of time must remain an open one for the time being.
Importantly, Derrida’s deconstruction of the concept of invention does not destroy the term altogether. But neither is this notion of invention ‘new’. Rather, it is an understanding faithful to the concept’s histories and traditions, which nevertheless opens it up and enables it to mean something else, and something more. This is important because as Plumwood argues ‘we can’t just strike out with a brand new story with brand new characters, or no story at all, and hope to make sense of where we are’ (‘Nature as Agency’ 27). Instead Derrida’s work on invention suggests a way of challenging our most basic assumptions through a closer analysis of the paradoxes already inherent within them. In particular, the paradox of agency, as it plays out within the concept of invention, is that the creative act is never solely within the capacity of the rational agency. Instead it is always an interaction, a mutuality and the instigator is never the individual rational self, but is rather the intervention of an other.

Consequently, what Derrida’s work on invention suggests, is that while invention (as the invention of same) remains tied to an anthropocentric idealisation of the rational subject, invention also calls, from within its heritage and tradition, to be re-invented (as the invention of the other). In his essay, Derrida focuses on a poem by Francis Ponge, *Fable*, in order to articulate what this invention of the other might look like. Crucially, as was discussed above, while the invention must partake in an event-like structure, its character as a new, repeatable, shared capacity, means that the invention cannot only consist in the event. Rather the invention must combine a disruptive temporality and a more stabilised and predictable experience of time. That is, while the event happens only once, unique and singular and the institutionalised possibility is endlessly repeatable, the invention must be both. As Derrida writes, inventions ‘imply both a first time and every time, the inaugural event and iterability’ (51). However, as he has argued elsewhere, there is no absolute distinction between iterability and the possibility of the new. Within each iteration there is the chance that the repetition will not go as expected. Thus he explores how the repetition of Ponge’s poem within a variety of contexts has the potential to open up new interpretations or experiences of the poem.

What I find most interesting, however, to return to the question of nature’s agency, is how Derrida’s account of invention might enable one to locate an ‘invention of the other’ within the processes of evolution. Far from being rejected as merely accidental, chaotic, or random (see Plumwood, ‘Nature in the Active’ 125), evolution could represent just that kind of invention that has the event-like power of transforming the world. In particular since, unlike the pure event, the accidents of evolution do not arise as a singularity that cannot be repeated. Rather, it is precisely the repetition necessary to reproduction that opens all living organisms to the ever-present possibility that they may reproduce in ways both unintended and unexpected. Indeed it is the very
possibility that the extraordinary may arise from within the ordinary, not in opposition to it, that is one of the key elements of the (im)possibility of the invention of the other. Further, while being passive in regard to these changes, it is the species that are most able to welcome them, that are the most adaptable and resilient, that will be most able to thrive. Importantly, seeing evolution as invention enables the recognition of these changes as creative, rather than being produced like ‘clockwork’. The changes that occur within nature become relevant and significant, thus affirming that nature does indeed have time (even while this may not be linear time). But more importantly, what this suggests is that we might understand the intertwining of activity and passivity, which characterises the processes of evolution, as a form of agency.

The key aim of this article has been to argue that challenging Western conceptions of time as linear is a key component of reworking Western conceptions of agency. I have suggested that Western understandings of linear time should not be used unreflectively as a guide for exploring conceptions of agency if one hopes to re-write nature as a powerful creative actor. Indeed, I have discussed how linear time’s connection to notions of rational progress helps to exclude nature, and those humans associated with nature, both from the capacity to have time and the ability to exercise agency. Rather than seeking to include nature within the concept of linear time, I have argued that both time and agency have to be rethought. Through an analysis of Derrida’s work, I have suggested that a non-linear time, marked by a certain disjointedness, may be a more appropriate candidate. Particularly since within this account, change and creativity are not linked primarily to forethought and logical calculation, but rather to the surprising and the accidental. In this way, the changes that are deemed relevant, the changes that are deemed ‘causes’, are not those initiated by a rational actor, but rather are those that happen to the subject, those that throw the subject into a new world. It is under this account that, within the shifting changes, adaptations and creativities that happen to all life in the process of evolution (nature’s ‘form of wisdom’ as Plumwood describes it), one may indeed be able to discern an inventing nature.

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Works Cited


‘Plants That Perform For You’? From Floral Aesthetics to *Floraesthesia* in the Southwest of Western Australia

JOHN C. RYAN

Writings on landscape tend to express engrained human attitudes towards plants. The theme ‘thinking about writing for the anthropocene’ suggests that, for us to explore new models of writing landscape that give agency to plants, we need first to explore the philosophical underpinnings of our varied relationships to flora. This need is especially evident in the branch of ecological philosophy known as ‘landscape’ or ‘environmental aesthetics’. The flowering plant has been represented textually and visually with vocabularies inherited from the appreciation of artistic objects. In the Southwest of Australia, plants have been objectified, dismissed or aestheticised in representation, depending on their adherence to traditional ideas of beauty. A more enlivened writing about plants emerges from new conceptualisations of the human perception of flora. The act of writing itself becomes a form of enquiry into the human-plant relationship.

In Kojonup, a small Western Australian town and regional hub for the wool industry, on an early winter afternoon, I decided to seek contact with a local expert to learn about native plants. The staff at the tourism office brusquely told me ‘The show hasn’t started. The wildflowers aren’t out yet, you won’t see anything’. Nevertheless, venturing into the small bush reserves around town, my guide and I uncovered a world of sensory and cultural richness. Selecting nuts from the base of a quandong (*Santalum acuminatum*), we cracked open the convoluted outer shells to expose the crisp, white inner flesh tasting of macadamia. We then scrambled across the highway to a marri (*Corymbia calophylla*) to taste the medicinal kino, or gum resin, oozing from the bark. Back around town, we spotted a plant with distinct cylindrical fruits. My guide coyly told me that varieties of this plant with white flowers are known locally as a remedy more effective than Viagra! As the sun began to set, we discussed a species of gum, which can be used to assuage the sting of an ant bite, as we crushed the fragrant leaves in our hands and rubbed it all along our forearms. Whilst there were few flowers in Kojonup that day, there were instead a myriad of textures, tastes, smells and sounds emanating from the plant life. In fact, the show had never stopped.
What does it mean to say that ‘a plant performs for you’, a catchphrase used by at least one Australian nursery to market its native seedlings? This paper poses an interdisciplinary response at the margin between philosophical aesthetics, landscape poetics and botanical science. Along the way, the difficulty of representing living beings, through the vocabularies of the visual and performing arts, becomes apparent. A performative model of aesthetics constructs hierarchic relationships between the plant and the human. It enframes the plant within a picture postcard, puppeteers the plant to perform for an audience, or evaluates the plant for its formal beauty as an object in the landscape. The concept of ‘plants performing’ suggests a dynamic of spectatorship between plants and people. In other words, the catchphrase originates in the relation between the artistic botanical object and the rational human subject.

The southwest corner of Western Australia (the ‘Southwest’) provides a poignant study in the human perception of plants as performers. The monochrome of the Southwest landscape in the intense heat of mid-summer follows a brilliant emergence of variegated blossoms in the spring. This succession of ecology and aesthetics has given rise to wildflower tourism, a seasonal industry based on the timely performances of the flowering parts of plants. Flowers, often frozen in space and time as photographic snap-shots, compel the ritualistic aestheticisation of indigenous flora by human visitors each year. The landscape after flowering, however, has been characterised as valueless, monotonous, empty, ugly, poised for conversion by agriculture, or in need of resuscitation through the artist’s touch. In other terms, the landscape post-flowering has been perceived as both unaesthetic (confounding aesthetic tastes) and anaesthetised (lacking a whole sensorium beyond mere visual qualities of form and colour).

Through historic visual and textual sources as well as references to contemporary wildflower tourism, this essay first defines the botanical aesthetics of the Southwest region. It traces in these sources a trajectory of subjectivism that judges and represents plant species as ‘horticultural objects’ (Lindley xxvii). Plants are, however, temporal ecological phenomena linked to both the human subject and the environment. Considering this gap in representation, the essay suggests a more experiential and multi-sensory aesthetics of open sense immanence, or aesthesis, rather than an aesthetics of privileged perception in which living beings are regarded as performing objects. Simply put, this essay offers the possibility of an aesthesis of human experience and perception of plants.

The flower dominates our aesthetic sensibilities and holds firmly in the popular human imagining of nature. However, natural cycles of growth, such as flowering and decay, such as the dehiscence of fruits, are integrated aspects of

 cited sources and references

1 Redlands Nursery: http://www.redlandsnursery.com.au
plant ecologies. In the context of ecological cyclicalty, the explosion of colour and form during wildflower season is always connected to the less colourful landscape in its post-flowering character. An aethesis of flora, in contrast to an aesthetics of flora, considers the sensuous life patterns of plants in relation to their ecologies and to the human subject. A floraesthesia involves seasonal, multi-sensory and poietic perception and representation of plants. It ultimately points to a possibility of deeper engagement with the more-than-human. After the bloom, we find other sights, sensations, smells, tastes and sounds related to our experience of plants. As interpreted by Heidegger in Poetry, Language, Thought, ‘making is, in Greek, poiesis’ (214). Plants, as multi-sensory ecological beings, are in-the-making rather than merely in-bloom. Fruits dehisce, seeds disperse, leaves rattle, bark sheds, sap sticks. The poietic focus of this perceptual model reflects the ecologic and aesthetic patterns of living flora. The essay concludes in hope that dialogic engagement with plants will lead to a renewed conceptualisation of the human relationship with flora. Such engagement positions the human subject as a participant in a shared performance, based in the rhythm of ecology.

**Visual inversions and the perceiving subject in floral aesthetics**

Australian plants tend to defy visual preferences inherited from European landscape tastes, and representations by many colonial artists and writers express the curious and frustrating inversion of nature (Elliott; Arthur). The flora challenges modernist visualism and, given the sexualised origins of universal taxonomic nomenclature, it perverts botany insofar as it corrupts botanical conventions (Schiebinger). In the words of early writers and artists, Australia as the Antipodes, as the land of contrariety, harboured an inverted, ungenial and uncooperative nature where thin-leaved evergreen eucalypts afforded paltry summer shade in a climate of intense solar exposure (Elliott). The appearance of the vegetation to settlers had much to do with characterisations of the environment as a whole. In the 1876 ‘Preface’ to Adam Lindsay Gordon’s poetry collection Sea Spray and Smoke Drift, author and literary critic Marcus Clarke encapsulates the character of the Australian landscape as ‘weird melancholy’ where ‘from the melancholy gums strips of white bark hang’ (45). In short, the unfamiliar terrain and its flora lacked familiar markers of beauty.

George Seddon in the ‘Foreword’ to Sense of Place offers an autobiographical snippet of his arrival in the Southwest and expresses some initial aversion towards its plant life: ‘The country was all wrong. … The jarrah was a grotesque parody of a tree, gaunt, misshapen, usually with a few dead limbs, fire-blackened trunk, and barely enough leaves to shade a small ant’ (xiii-xiv; emphasis added). Contrast this to almost 25 years later when Seddon arrives upon a lucid, visual
language of revelation and a flowering of ecology into the senses: ‘Melaleuca huegelii’ flowers … with a profusion of creamy spikes. Acacia rostellifera is common, wind-sheared into a dense mound, which protects the soil and moulds the landscape. Cockies Tongue (Templetonia retusa) puts out its brick-red pea flowers in spring’ (Landprints 173). The making of home within the new place for Seddon had much to do with reappraising the disappointing and contradictory appearances of the indigenous flora.

Floral aesthetics is concerned with the perception through the human senses of the intrinsic beauty of plants as artistic objects. To consider an object ‘aesthetic’ is, most commonly, to deem it optically beautiful by virtue of its features of grace, harmony, symmetry, smoothness or colour. An aesthetic object invigorates a feeling of attraction or pleasure, whereas an unaesthetic object reviles or stimulates no response in the viewer. Although Alexander Baumgarten’s eighteenth-century neologism takes as its root the ancient Greek term ‘aesthesis’, aesthetics in modernist terms has come to denote ‘a sensible image of perfection’ rather than generalized sensory perception (Caygill). Through an emphasis on the power of sight, modernist aesthetics has been a ‘triumph of a pure visuality, concerned solely with formal optical questions’ (Jay 160). Aesthesis, as the exploration of ‘perceptual complexity’ through sense immanence, has been eroded as the originary meaning of aesthetics by the power given to the ‘aesthetic subject’ in determining states of artistic beauty (Singer 14-5). Stolnitz remarks that ‘any object at all can be apprehended aesthetically, i.e. no object is inherently unaesthetic’ and that the percipient needs only to adopt an ‘aesthetic attitude’ (83). Nevertheless, in opening the domain of aesthetic appreciation to higher inclusivity, Stolnitz reaffirms the binary opposition inherent in the positioning of an aesthetic subject to a perceptual object.

Various philosophers have discussed the privileging of sight and the distancing function of visual perception in replicating the dualisms of object and subject, consciousness and matter, normally thought to have originated in the seventeenth-century philosophy of Descartes.2 Visuality, or ‘the distinct historical manifestations of visual experience in all its possible modes’ has given rise to ocularcentrism, or the dominance of vision and the attendant marginalisation of the other senses (Jay 9). Visualism goes back to the classical Greek partiality for sight over the other senses and has a close functional association to language (9). An imagistic culture can visualise the world in the mind’s eye only insofar as it can construct the image in words.

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2 For a classic study of the distancing function of sight, see Hans Jonas’ essay ‘The Nobility of Sight: A Study in the Phenomenology of the Senses’ in Jonas 135-56.
Beauty consisting of the mutable features of living creatures is ephemeral and unstable, unlike a work of art or performance. This is particularly true when we consider, as Western Australian artist Gregory Pryor describes, ‘the loaded aesthetic appeal of the flower’ (Pryor). The aesthetic appeal of the flower engages the most traditionally beautiful (graceful, symmetrical or colourful) phase of the plant’s lifecycle, but lasts for a relatively brief time and is only one feature of an integrated ecology. Unlike most sculptures or paintings, plants engage multi-sensory experience through the faculties of touch, taste, smell and sound in addition to sight. Nevertheless, it is unusual to refer to non-visual senses as ‘aesthetic’ although pleasurable experience surely stems from senses other than the visual. As Aristotle in The Nicomachean Ethics remarks, ‘That pleasure is produced in respect to each sense is plain; for we speak of sights and sounds [alike] as pleasant’ (256). The visualism of aesthetics and the exclusion of diverse sensate experience is a performative model of spectatorship, in which the object dazzles or pleases the subject’s tastes. An aesthetics of flora, as outlined here, sees the closing in of the senses upon the observer in service to a rational subject of artistic appreciation.

Plants and performance: the wildflower spectacle

The Southwest of Western Australia is one of the most floristically diverse places in the world. In the late nineteenth century, botanist Baron von Mueller identified the Southwest region as a ‘botanical province’ owing to the distinctiveness of the flora (Beard 107). The floristic province, including the metropolitan area of Perth, stretches from Shark Bay to Israelite Bay east of Esperance and has long been isolated from the rest of southern Australia by the aridity and the limestone soils of the Nullarbor plains (Seddon, Sense of Place; Hopper, Kangaroo Paws). It presently is the only ‘biodiversity hotspot’ in Australia with 80% of its plant species occurring nowhere else on Earth outside of cultivation (Conservation International). Incredibly varied and venerable botanical communities have evolved here through a rare combination of stable climate and geographic isolation. There are 8,000 total classified species of plants in the Southwest, one-third of which have been scientifically identified only in the past three decades (Hopper, ‘What Lessons’).

The sheer species diversity and unusual adaptative ecologies of the flora have given rise to a richness and variety of floral colour and form. Neville Marchant, former director of the Western Australian Herbarium, remarks on the connection between species numbers and diversity of perceptual morphologies:

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3 That is, a performance is judged according to certain fairly stable standards of beauty, grace or harmony; thus, we have poor or excellent plays or concerts. Performances in themselves are typically set, staged, rehearsed, and standardized in order to become works of art.
Apart from high species numbers, this diversity is also expressed in the myriad of plant forms that abound in the south western flora; a huge array of plant form, branching patterns, stem shapes, leaf types and flower shapes go hand in hand with species diversity. (19)

The Southwest’s internationally renowned wildflower season satiates a visual hunger for intriguing flower shapes and arrangements and variegated colouration. From June through September each year, wildflower species ‘explode across the state’ of Western Australia, and wildflower viewers, hungry for sensuous stimuli, are beseeched to ‘forget drab days and bleak landscapes’ and ‘add colour to [their] winter blues’ (Tourism Australia). The booming colour and forms of the spring blossom season are represented in a language of portraiture, and the painterly act animates and infuses a drear, slumbering landscape with artistic elements: ‘the state’s south-west springs to life with grand, Picasso-style strokes’ (‘Western Australia’s Wildflowers’). The spectacle of flowering casts the plant in the role of the performer, and the tourist becomes the audience, as ‘wildflowers continue to dance south along the coast’ (‘Western Australia’s Wildflowers’).

Through these images, the resplendent succession of flowering in Southwest Australia transcends the state’s coastlines and is effused throughout the world. As they attract bees and other pollinators, the blossoms similarly garner the attention of an international contingency of wildflower tourists. Kings Park and Botanical Garden in Perth reported over half a million visitors to its Wildflower Festival held throughout the month of September (‘Kings Park’). Additionally, approximately one in five Perth residents had visited botanic areas between 2001 and 2003 to behold the diverse aesthetics of Western Australia’s flora, as indicated by a study of public perceptions of the region’s wildflower tourism industry (Western Australian Tourism Commission 3). In the same study, the sole suggestion for increasing the ‘motivational appeal’ of the annual WA Wildflower Holiday Guide is to ‘focus more on larger photos of expansive, scenic and experiential wildflower imagery rather than micro photos of individual flowers’ (5). The intention of the visual imagery of the publication could be described as sensory enticement. Wildflower imagery, to borrow Mules’ term, is ‘the mediation of presence through images’ (‘Contact Aesthetics’ 2). The spectator is lured to a scene and the visual experience of wildflowers through an aesthetic appreciation of performative flowering. The spectacle of fantastic form and compelling colour is both an optical and evanescent one in which the landscape, or seen, is often in the role of setting.

A recent quick survey of postcards at Kings Park in Perth identified only two images that did not in some way depict the flowering parts of the plants. The most interesting and suggestive exception, of Acacia sp., shows two curvaceous tawny seed pods split open and exposing a black array of seeds. The caption on
the postcard notes the ‘diversity of form and unique colour’ of the indigenous flora (‘Acacia sp.’). Through an ahistoric kind of visual aesthetics, the image conceals the rich history of wattles as a staple food for Noongar people who baked the ground powder of the seeds into cakes (Daw, Walley and Keighery 30-1). On a different postcard, the Mangles Kangaroo Paw, the emblematic state flower of Western Australia, is cut off from the rest of the plant and washed in the pure azure blue of the sky (‘Kings Park and Botanic’). The Western Australian photographer whose work appears on the Acacia sp. postcard, Jen Grey Wilson, attributes visual appearance (colour, flamboyant display, exquisite visual detail, grace and harmony) to the evolutionary strategy of the flora:

They are the oldest plants on earth, and when you get close and you find the most exquisite detail [sic]. They had to attract the pollinators because there were so few, they had great competition and they had to get more attractive colour-wise and more flamboyant in displaying themselves. (Wilson)

The profusion of flowering images on postcards could be considered an outgrowth of visualism or an outcome of an ocularcentric culture, but regardless of its derivation, it entails the aestheticisation of the native flora.

The aesthetic of portraiture and the ‘horticultural object’

In Western Australia, since the formation of the Swan River Colony in 1829, there has been a notable tendency in its literature to represent plants as purely visual constituents in a beautiful scene. This aesthetic of portraiture is the frozen moment, the synchronic visual glimpse of the plant largely excised of its ecology. Visual representation serves the imagistic compulsions of tourism, botanic desideratum, or pastoral utilitarianism. The emphasis on plants as optical objects has resulted in a surface-oriented aesthetics in which the flora is bound as if within the frame of a painting. Jay (517) describes this as an aesthetic discourse of framing and cites Heidegger’s critique of the Gestell (the enframing) in which landscapes become scenes, or seen, to be beheld from an appreciative and disengaged distance. The flowering period of native flora is the enframed bloom, or the visual spectacle bound by the postcard.

The diaspora of visualism and ocularcentrism is also noted in the literature designed to entice settlers to the antipodal Swan River colony. The Colony of Western Australia published in 1839 to attract ‘emigrants’, ‘capitalists’ and ‘the younger branches of the higher classes’ to the fledgling colony similarly evidences a visually-oriented aesthetic vocabulary with the speaker situated at a perceptual distance: ‘The earth is enamelled with flowers; at some seasons the
meadows have been compared, when at a distance, to *surfaces of golden chintz* (Ogle 260; emphasis added). Fred Davis, cited in Thomas Groser’s 1927 *The Lure of the Golden West*, reproduces visual values with ‘pictorial statements’ (Ivins 3; qtd in Jay 69) depicting a drive alongside the edge of the Blackwood River as ‘what is indeed a charming picture. How a landscape painter would revel in these lovely spots!’ (qtd in Groser 245). A concatenation of reasoning begins with an aesthetic judgement and terminates in the broad-scale conversion of the wild to the pastoral. The drive is interspersed with cleared areas and ‘beautiful as [the forest] undoubtedly is in its natural state, yet, from a utilitarian point of view, it will be more beautiful still when all under cultivation’ (Davis qtd in Groser 245). This is the problematic contradiction of sense knowledge gained exclusively through the eyes bringing to rise, as an imperative, the conversion of an idle-looking scene into productive, techno-industrialised land. This is one of the primary ethical concerns that makes this research critical. Aesthetic values, based in artistic form and colour, often conflict with values of conservation and ecosystem integrity. Landscapes that look idle, unproductive or repulsive, such as wetlands, are often biologically critical to a host of organisms, including human beings (Giblett, *Postmodern Wetlands*). A counter-aesthetic, or conservation aesthetic of plants, would restore the full gamut of senses to the appreciation of plants.

John Lindley, a British horticulturalist and editor of the journal *Edward’s Botanical Register* (1815-1847), published the first significant European account of the flora of the Southwest province in 1840, *A Sketch of the Vegetation of Swan River Colony*, within which 283 new species of plants were identified scientifically. The publication aimed to distribute information on the potential to cultivate certain aesthetically worthy Southwest plants in European gardens, with only minor reference to potential climatic or habitat differences between the hemispheres that would affect cultivation:

> The frequent arrival of seeds from this Colony, the excellent state in which they are received, and the facility with which further supplies can be procured, appear to render some Botanical account of this remarkable country a desirable appendage to a work which, like the Botanical Register, forms an original record of new plants introduced, or worthy of introduction, to our Gardens. (Lindley i)

Lindley’s textual accompaniment to the hand-coloured lithographs considers the beauty, prettiness, strikingness, colour and brilliance of different species in determining their suitability for European horticultural preferences. Some are ‘species of no beauty’ (i.e. referencing the *Stackhousias* on p. xxxviii). He engages clearly what I refer to as ‘aesthetic language’ whose referents are ‘horticultural objects’ (Lindley lviii). Lindley’s *Sketch* is unusual for its mixture of aesthetic language and standardized botanical nomenclature, but
it’s important to recognise that his purpose was to disseminate information on the horticultural viability of the plants. He describes the tribe Chamaelauceae within the Myrtle family as ‘bushes with small heath-like leaves, and white, yellow, or purple flowers, of great brilliancy’ forming ‘a most striking object in the vegetation’ (v). Lindley dismisses the horticultural and appreciative potential of other plants. Speaking of the Goodeniaceae family, aside for the royal blue *Lechenaultia* and the indigo *Dampiera* spp., ‘all the other species, and there are many, are by no means beautiful objects’ (emphasis added) (Lindley xxvii). The confoundingness of some of the region’s species is suggested in his description of *Daviesias quadrilatera*, whose leaves ‘look more like objects prepared to puzzle a geometrician than any thing already known in the vegetable kingdom’ (Lindley xiv).

The nine hand-coloured lithographs done by an unnamed botanical artist exemplify some of the objectification of plants hinted at in Lindley’s textual descriptions. Botanical illustration, allied to scientific taxonomy as both a record of and an instrument for probing into the gross morphology of flora, also captures aesthetic features and is an artistic form in itself (Hewson). This fusion of graphic art and botanical science for the purposes of plant species identification tends to function along ocularcentric lines requiring the distancing of the human from the ‘horticultural object’, although the work itself was made possible, presumably, through intense and careful visual scrutiny and actual dissection of plant specimens. A plate of *Laxmannia grandiflora* and Pipe Lily (*Johnsonia pubescens*) exhibits cross-sections of plant organs almost as numbered footnotes at the bottom of the plate. Single idealised species against a white backdrop with reproductive parts flayed open form a kind of botanic portrait, extruding the plant from its seasonality and the wholeness of its floral community. The exposed and dissected specimens of botanical illustration parallel anatomical illustration, such as the écorché renderings of the human body by Vesalius and da Vinci.4

The frontispiece of Rica Erickson’s 1968 *Plants of Prey in Australia* depicts the Western Australian Pitcher Plant (*Cephalotus follicularis*) and the Rainbow Plant (*Byblis gigantea*), the latter identified by Lindley in his 1840 *Sketch*. The flower head of the Pitcher Plant hangs suspended in the ethereal blank whiteness of the plate and the intentionally enlarged, out-of-proportion organs of flowers, stamens, styles and ovary dominate the composition of plants swollen by a kind of *flora-titis*. The aestheticisation of the plant is the sole emphasis on form and colour and the distortion of the plant’s reproductive structures for purposes of enhancing identification. Linnaean taxonomy, allied to botanical illustration

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4 Écorché, literally meaning ‘flayed’ in French, refers to a 19th century school of anatomical illustration that favoured depicting the muscles and bones of the body without the skin. See Saunders and O’Malley.
though taken as scientific objectivism, is based upon the sensorially limited and culturally selected visual differentiation according to sexual anatomies (Schiebinger).

Botanical illustration exemplifies the concept of the ‘synoptic tableau’. Regarding the relationship between scientific classification and representation, Latour writes ‘once classified, specimens from different locations and times become contemporaries of one another on the flat table, all visible under the same unifying gaze’ (Latour 38). The synoptic tableau of the botanical plate engrains the anatomical plant. Through illustration, comparisons between plants are made feasible that, in the field, are impossible. Scientific knowledge, therefore, relies on the movement of signifiers, such as species names and technical images of plants, or ‘circulating references’ (Latour 38). Illustrations are part of scientific networks of knowledge based in standardisation and universalisation. In Latour’s view, the relationship between representation and the plant is dialectic. The locality, particularity and materiality of a plant in its environment are reduced to the compatibility, standardisation and circulation of scientific knowledge. The process is, however, reversible and invariably reduction leads to an amplification of knowledge. Botanical schemata, for instance, can be used to identify a plant in the field and to begin to understand its attributes.

Outside of the circulating references of scientific discourse, however, aesthetic images risk becoming conflated with actual plants. Hence, form and colour, rather than the sensory manifold of the plant, fall under the gaze of knowledge. In contrast to works of traditional botanical illustration, the installation art of South-west Australian visual artist Gregory Pryor responds to the ‘loaded aesthetic appeal of the flower’ through a direct evocation of the ecological precariousness of many indigenous plants. Pryor cites the aesthetic magnetism of the floral form as the primary challenge to a contemporary visual artist’s treatment of flora (Pryor). His 2005 exhibition *Black Solander* is a physically immersive memoriam involving 10,500 Western Australian plant species, each painted in black ink on a square of black sugar paper to create a mausoleum effect within the gallery space. Shadowy profile portraits stand in for idealised renderings of flowers to elicit the imminence and urgency of native species extinction. Pryor’s method, which required frequent visits to the Western Australian Herbarium to depict pressed specimens, comments on the traditions of John Lindley and early regional botanical illustrators, artists and collectors for whom balanced (or imbalanced, in the case of the enlarged plant organs of Erickson’s plants) proportions and flower colour reigned.

Pryor furthermore interrupts and extends the scientific lineage starting with state botanist Charles Gardner whose specimens in the 1920s formed the initial collection of the Western Australian Herbarium. The artist’s inversion of the conventional aesthetic of flora is made obvious through the shutting out of
the sun, an ever-present intensity to which Southwest plants have adapted so well and on which the entirety of life rests. The visitor experiencing the exhibition enters into the body of the immediacy, recreated as a mausoleum within the darkened gallery enclosure. An engaged relationship between the plant image and the visitor creates an empathic feeling for the threatened flora. The exclusion of light and colour especially create a sombre visceral response. Yet remaining impending, but hidden still, is a feeling for—a waiting for—the sensory pleasure that is yet to come, the diverse pleasures of form, colour, harmony, balance, sound and touch that too are threatened. Pryor effectively deconstructs the disengaged viewership model of floral aesthetics that places the distanced subject at a comfortable and appreciative remove from the ‘horticultural object’. His work represents a transition from floral aesthetics as suggested by Lindley, Seddon, Wilson and the wildflower tourism industry and into the milieu of a floral *aesthesis*.

**Towards *floraesthesis*: Practical *aesthesis* and the open-whole**

The tradition of floral aesthetics that Pryor upturns is a determinate discourse of visual beauty rather than an openness of sensory contact with plants, or *floraesthesis*. Pryor’s exhibition moves beyond the mediation of plant presence through images and towards sensory engagement through a representation of flora that invigorates the body. Sense, of this kind, as immanence, is sense embedded in the field of contact, representational or actual, rather than sense collapsed upon the inward-turning rational subject. An *aesthesis* of flora is multi-sensory immanence leading to an outward-extending field of sense contact with the plant phenomenon into an open and ‘meaningful perceptual whole’ (Jonas 153). The field of contact at the liminal edge between bodies, botanical and human, obviates the subject-to-object directionality residual, and arguably unavoidable, in the traditional notion of aesthetics.

What is *aesthesis* and how does it relate to the idea of ‘the open’? *Aesthesis* has thus far been defined as the ancient root of the term ‘aesthetics’. However, whereas *aesthesis* signifies generalised, open sensory apprehension, ‘aesthetics’ implies closed categories of taste based on predetermined features, such as balance and symmetry. Accordingly, something can be unaesthetic, or even ugly, if it fails to meet established, visual criteria of beauty. Moreover, something can be objectified as an object of aesthetic appreciation. If *aesthesis* is liminally open-sense, aesthetics is categorically closed-sense. Whereas *aesthesis* holds the possibility of wholeness, aesthetic judgement has resulted, especially in the representation of Australian flora, in fragmented and, at times, destructive conceptualisations of the landscape. It is therefore necessary to discuss *aesthesis*...
in terms of the open-whole and to consider that objectification, of floral species as ‘horticultural objects’, is a state of closedness to the unbounded experience of plants.

*Aesthesis*, as defined by Mules, is immanent sense, or ‘the gathering of the senses in contact with the absolute as an open-whole (i.e. the immanence of sense to itself within an open field)’ (‘Contact Aesthetics’ 3). Sense, in Mules’ terms, is the field of contact or the edge of intersection between bodies; sense is location, it is where engagement between beings occurs. Moreover, sense is unified experience in a field of contact, or the open-whole, gathered through the sensate faculties of seeing, hearing, tasting, touching and feeling. Multifarious sense experience of fruits dehiscing, seeds dispersing, leaves rattling, bark shedding and sap sticking coheres as an open-whole, as sense itself. Simply put, the world makes sense through a sensory experience of plants. Additionally, *aesthesis* is bodily contact or ‘the openness of the body to the outside, the gesture that makes contact with the world’ (Mules, ‘Contact Aesthetics’ 6). Sense experience reaches a resolution, unfragmented by prejudgements or epistemological contradictions, and embedded, paradoxically so, within an irresolute experience of gesture. Sense emerges from the senses as a bodily *aesthesis* signifying open-wholeness (Mules, ‘Open Country’).

The kind of knowledge of plants suggested by Mules is based in the multitude of senses. Sense perception is the foundation for knowledge culminating in wisdom. Aristotle in the *Metaphysics* defines *aesthesis* as generalised sensory apprehension belonging intrinsically to living beings (McNeill 24). In human beings, however, the senses constitute the foundation for the final state of knowledge: *sophia* or wisdom (McNeill 26). As Aristotle states, on the limitations of sense perception, ‘Wisdom, again, is not to be identified with sense-perception which, though it is our primary source of knowledge of particulars, can never tell us why anything is so (e.g. why fire is hot) but only that it is so’ (*Metaphysics* 52). The raw senses alone do not lead to *sophia*. For Aristotle, *aesthesis* is an attribute of all living beings, but it is vision which distinguishes human perceptivity and wisdom, because ‘sight is the principal source of knowledge and reveals many differences between one object and another’ (*Metaphysics* 51). Aristotle’s account of *aesthesis* privileges the optical acuity of human perception in differentiating objects. Vision, hence, proceeds to create discrete objects out of a network of ecological relationships in a landscape.

According to William McNeill’s interpretation of *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle characterises ‘practical *aesthesis*’ as beyond mere sense perception; the object is apprehended as a whole (in all of its particularities) and vision reaches a kind of culmination (39). This kind of apprehension of the whole occurs through a state of openness to perceptual experience, rather than through the predeterminations inhering within aesthetics. Certain forms of botanical illustration and Lindley’s
‘horticultural object’ are both examples of closed aesthetic models, made to fit, in these instances, within the objectifications of science and horticulture. It is, however, unclear if visual perception for Aristotle is a kind of metonymy for sense perception as a whole. The other senses are described as base faculties, especially insofar as they are shared amongst different creatures, and vision alone valorises human perception. ‘Seeing’ in an open-whole sense encompasses sight, along with the other sense faculties in general, as well as an ultimate state of perception: knowing, wisdom or sophia.

Heidegger interprets practical aesthesis as the perception of sensory particulars. He translates the Greek boule as ‘open resolve’ or ‘resolute openness’ with openness being a kind of disclosedness of the sense world or exposure of the individual to perception (McNeill 41). Hence, for Heidegger, aesthesis is ‘circumspective seeing’ that is inclusive and open and is not speculative or just ‘mere looking’ or visual apprehension (39). In short, the object is ‘seen’ within its situation as a whole (its environment, ecology, seasonal or climatic situation) and within its unique particularity (as a species and particular individual living being). The situation as a whole (the plant within its ecological circumstances) constitutes the field of practical aesthesis rather than the sense-object itself alone extruded from its whole. Perception as practical aesthesis is the making sense of a phenomenon and, in this regard, perception approaches a culmination or eschaton.

Aesthesis, or open-whole sense perception, as described here is the foundation of experience (empeiria) and wisdom (sophia). Heidegger in Poetry, Language, Thought describes the Open ‘as the pure forces serried, boundlessly flowing into one another and thus acting toward one another. The widest orbit is the wholeness of the whole draft of attraction’ (124). Furthermore, ‘objectification … blocks us off against the Open’ (120). Sense perception is whole, poietic and unfolding, as well as indeterminate, ‘open, at stake, yet to be decided’ and hence dynamic (McNeill 36). ‘Seeing’ then also involves the situation of the human subject such that, in our perceptions, we are ‘present to ourselves immediately, without any contemplative distance or objectification’ (McNeill 36). The particular situation of the sense phenomenon within its milieu is so unique that it can only be apprehended by this kind of practical aesthesis (McNeill 43).

An aesthesis of flora, thereby, differs from an aesthetics of flora. An aesthetics of flora privileges the appreciative powers of the human subject to isolate sensual features within the plate of botanical illustration, the bounds of the camera shot, or the cursory gaze of the eye over a carpet of wildflowers. Floraesthesia is more of a counter-aesthetic of plants. Giblett describes a multi-sensory counter-aesthetic of conservation that engages the body: ‘Rather than appealing to aesthetics and so predominantly to the sense of sight, a conservation counter-aesthetic would appeal to all the senses’ (Living with the Earth 57). Floraesthesia
is sense experience of plants in relation to the open-whole: the environment, the habitat, the ecosystem and the planetary biome. However, in the early Aristotelian view of *aesthesis*, we find traces of visual hegemony. A restoration of all the senses in a counter-aesthetic of plants towards a ‘meaningful perceptual whole’ would need to draw from bodily engagement and gesture in the open-whole, as suggested by Heidegger and furthered by Mules.

**Reciprocal engagements: ‘botanic field aesthetics’**

*Floraesthesis*, as it has been defined here, is a liminal state of sense openness and indeterminacy outside the constructions of aesthetic criteria. In order to ground a philosophical model of the human relationship to plants, I now outline a qualitative methodology of *floraesthesis* that I have been developing. ‘Botanic field aesthetics’ works from living plants in their biodiverse native habitats, rather than from dried herbaria specimens, cultivated plants in public or private gardens, or popular horticultural images. The methodology explores three connected approaches. The first, poetic enquiry, extends to the study of flora recent scholarship on the value and efficacy of the process of poetic creation in the social sciences. The second, ethnography with botanists and wildflower enthusiasts, explores local botanical knowledge and the language used to communicate sense-based knowledge of native plants. Lastly, embodiment practice theorises the act of walking as a performative gesture, in Mules’ sense, for situating the human into an embodied engagement with flora. The resultant sensory openness lends itself to reciprocal, even dialogic, performances with plants.

For research started in June 2008 and continuing until June 2011, I have been surveying remnant sites of high botanical diversity in the Southwest. Instead of scientifically-based vegetation surveying techniques, the project employs a mixed field methodology drawing from philosophy, cultural studies and creative writing. The purpose of this methodology is to substantiate the role of interdisciplinary, non-scientific enquiry in the study of flora. ‘Botanic field aesthetics’ experiments with the implementation of *floraesthesis* at regional sites of intact native species richness. In April 2009, I chose to study two sites of contrasting floral composition, aesthetic character, topography and frequency of human usage: Anstey-Keane Damplands in the southern metropolitan Perth area near Armadale and the Stirling Range National Park, one hour’s drive north of Albany, WA (Figure 1). These two sites differ in how the public perceives their respective aesthetic values. Anstey-Keane has been called ‘a seemingly unremarkable parcel of land in Forrestdale’ with an abundance of flora species that require a delicacy and attentiveness of perception to appreciate (Giblett and James). Unlike the flat, ‘unremarkable’ coastal plain habitat of Anstey-Keane,
the Stirling Range and its endemic floral species, however, have always had a prominent physical and metaphoric position in the European imagining of the Southwest.

Figure 1: Between 2008 and 2011, I will survey four sites of significant botanical diversity in the Southwest of Western Australia. Anstey-Keane Damplands, south of Perth, and the Stirling Range National Park north of Albany are two sites of contrasting character. (Map adapted from ‘Figure 1: Western Australian Biogeographic Regions and Botanical Provinces’ (after Thackway and Cresswell, 1995) in Paczkowska & Chapman, inside cover).

Situated between the Wheatbelt of inner Western Australia and the coast, the Stirling Range National Park harbours the only major mountain range in the region. As John Septimus Roe, an early European venturer to the region, exclaimed in 1835, ‘The Stirling Range burst on our view in great magnificence as we rounded the crest. … The whole extent of the conical summits were spread before us’ (qtd in Thomson et al). The Range consists of about 1,500 plant species, or about one-third of the flora in the Southwest province, including 87 endemic species throughout five main botanical communities (Keighery and Beard). A recent walk up Bluff Knoll reminded me that poetry is the act of presencing to sense experience of the immediate environment. The process of poetic creation, as aesthetic awareness, asks for close attention to the momentary subtleties of perception. As an ongoing record of experience, poetry quite effectively traces
the sensory nuances of plants and the environment, and our own situation within
the overall ecological dynamics of revealing (e.g. flowering, booming, titillating)
and concealing (dehiscing, going drab, busting). Heidegger comments on the
obverse nature of the relationship between concealing and revealing: ‘But in
presence there is concealed the bringing on of unconcealedness which lets the
present beings occur as such’ (Poetry 123). Successional engagements, rather
than single instance perception, make possible a sense of habitats as they change
through the seasons.

Anstey-Keane Damplands is one of the most floristically diverse areas in the
metropolitan Perth region. Keighery (cited in Payne) suggests that the number of
indigenous plant species could be as high as 381, including rare and endangered
orchids (Payne). Anstey-Keane Damplands is, however, under threat from
road development, off-road vehicle damage and other pressures of suburban
expansion. Aesthetic discourse is involved in the protection of the damplands.
Local policy makers consider the predominant look of the damplands mundane,
although it goes through a succession of flowering throughout the year with
the most intense blossoming in September.5 On an April 2009 field visit to
Anstey-Keane, I was surprised to find several plants in brilliant flower and other
interesting textures and smells, including the roughened charcoal exterior of
the balga tree. As a non-expert in the plants of Southwest Australia, and hence
being someone with little foreknowledge of the flora, I realised the importance of
intersensory mixing, where one sense is referenced to another. Vision is typically
cross-referenced with the other senses, but it can also be compartmentalised
(Gibson). In making my way on foot through Anstey-Keane, I required touch to
ascertain if the spikes of a certain plant were stiff and thorny or more bristle-
like and soft, and if passage around the plant would prove uncomfortable or
relatively painless.

‘Botanic field aesthetics’, as delimited here, involves recurring visits to sites
based on the indigenous Noongar calendar to record successional changes in
both the aesthetic (the synchronic visual appearance) and the aesthesis (the
diachronic intersensory mix) of the native flora. According to Colleen Hayward,
a senior member of the Noongar nation, the traditional Aboriginal calendar of
the Southwest recognises six seasons through changes in the flowering, fruiting,
seeding and other aspects of the life cycles of native plants. The six seasons,
each with distinguishable climatic and botanical variables, are demarcated by
ecology rather than the preset numerical standards of the European calendar. The
approximate, yet always fluid, correspondences are Djeran (April-May), Makuru
(June-July), Djilba (August-September), Kambarang (October-November), Birok
(December-January), Bunuru (February-March) (‘Aboriginal Life’). For instance,
during Kambarang the Wonil, or Peppermint Tree (Agonis flexuosa), would have

a high concentration of aromatic oils that would waft in the hot air, imparting a distinct olfactory experience to the season. Additionally, the Mudja, or Christmas Tree (*Nuytsia floribunda*) flowers during Birok, signalling the time for migration of the Noongar people to the coast. During Djilba, the Bohn, or Bloodroots (*Haemordorum spicatum*) have been harvested for their peppery roots, which are used as a food seasoning. Hence, the Noongar calendar encodes a history of regional knowledge of local plants that, unlike the contemporary wildflower tourism phenomenon, draws from a manifold of sensory experiences linked to cultural practices. It proves a useful model for a regionally focused research project into diachronic perception of plants and their ecologies.

How do plants perform over the seasons, how do these performances change based on topographic, environmental or perceptual factors, and how does an aesthetics of performance become an *aesthesis* of dialogic engagement? More importantly, what mode of representation best fits these goals? I suggest the role of poetics in responding to this query and in engaging a practical *aesthesis* of plants. *Poiesis* is making or becoming; poetry is a method of becoming; and plants are always already in the process of becoming. The term *poetry* is derived from the Greek *poiein* ‘to make’ (Leggo 166). Poetry is what Heidegger, time and time again, refers to in *On the Way to Language* as ‘an experience with language’ (59). Poetic process, as a form of enquiry into flora, is the undergoing of an experience with plants and language. In considering this conjunction, it is interesting to note Heidegger’s choice of botanical metaphor to qualify language as ‘the flower of the mouth. In language the earth blossoms toward the bloom of sky’ (*On the Way* 99). Heidegger even goes so far as to claim that ‘all reflective thinking is poetic’ (136) and that language, in the final analysis, is the essential holding vessel for open-wholeness: ‘language is the house of Being’ (63). The process of concealment (dehiscence, the bust after wildflower season) and unconcealment (flowering, the boom of floral forms) is evoked and etched in the poietic nuances of language. According to Leggo, a prominent voice for poetry as a qualitative methodology of research, ‘poetry is a way of knowing, being, and becoming in the world’ (168). Poetry, therefore, is an aesthetic modality, but not in the manner of painting or photography in which images can be perceived as frozen, single instances. In poetry, the perception of pleasing sensory features mingles with the human subject’s position in the environment. Poetry turns to narrative. ‘Knowing, being, and becoming’ through poetry are parts of an integrated process of ecological awareness beginning in the plant world.

A ‘botanic field aesthetics’ further involves ethnographic interviews with Noongar, eclectic, amateur and scientific botanists, as well as wildflower enthusiasts. The insider approach to ethnography shifts the emphasis towards expressive speech and gesture as well as multi-sensory narratives of experience towards a kind of ethnographic phenomenology. Johannes Fabian argues that the
truth of vision in Western cultures has predominated over sound, touch, smell and taste in ethnographic narratives: ‘the taxonomic imagination in the West is strongly visualist in nature, constituting cultures as if they were theatres of memory, or spatialized arrays’ (Clifford 12). Interviews reveal the possibility of a *floraesthesis* by giving primary data on the categories of aesthetics commonly reiterated by those deeply familiar with the flora. Ethnography, as multi-sensory and open-ended, discloses tendencies towards composing the flora as if in a painting, as well as the relationship between the senses and body experience in constituting knowledge of plants. Local knowledge of this kind might reveal the usage of pre-Linnaean taxonomies, or non-hegemonic but structured systems of knowing the natural world. Most importantly, ethnographies expose the significance of local expert knowledge of plants. Some experts will be more rooted in botanical science, but more typically, the research expects to identify the usage of diverse sources of information such as taxonomic keys, Aboriginal stories of plants, artistic images and bush tucker anecdotes.

Places of high botanical diversity are usually national or regional parks requiring travel by foot. Walking from plant to plant creates continuity and situates the researcher within a sense of the whole place or ecosystem through the body. Movement by foot also invokes the tradition of the plant collector, such as Georgiana Molloy whose ‘collecting walks’ in Augusta and Vasse in the Southwest helped her to learn the native flora, connect with knowledgeable Noongar botanists, and overcome isolation in the nineteenth-century settler frontier (Harper 8). Walking, then, is an embodied experience of plants that puts us in touch with the landscape and disrupts the hierarchies inherent to the faculty of vision. Solnit cogently explains that ‘an apotheosis of speed makes those bodies seem anachronistic or feeble. In this context, walking is a subversive detour, the scenic route through a half-abandoned landscape of ideas and experiences’ (12). Walking is the practice of being embodied and orienting human action in the world through the senses; the act of walking demands that the body is present and taken into the account. In ascending to the montane reaches of the Stirling Range’s higher peaks, Bluff Knoll and Toolbrunup Peak, during *Djeran*, I experienced an elevated heart rate, sweating, invigorated breathing, occasional cramping in the diaphragm and the cooling effect of the wind. At Anstey-Keane Damplands, I experienced different corporeal sensations unrelated to elevation gain and montane exposure. I became wearied by long undulations of sand and pestering flies along with a surprising humidity for what started off as a cool and overcast day. Hence, an aesthetic of flora that is solely about the pleasing visual or other single sensory features of the plant alone excludes the varied natural and cultural relations of the plant as well as the body of the human.
Botanic field aesthetics’ brings alternate, non-scientific knowledge to our engagement with plants and their ecologies. The methodology, by going beyond the ‘loaded aesthetic appeal of the flower’, to borrow again Pryor’s apt phrase, situates our aesthetic engagement with flora in a multi-sensory, diachronic, embodied and locally-focused appreciation of the plant world. Poetry, walking and ethnographies used in combination reveal the possibility of deep, sensorily-rich relationships to plants that go beyond the visually-privileged, closed categorical system of floral aesthetics. Through such a practice, within the philosophical model of *floraesthesia*, new understandings, based outside of hierarchical subject-to-object dynamics, may emerge. Yet, the ideas are not entirely new. John Clare, the nineteenth-century English writer who preferred non-Linnaean classificatory systems, employed something which may be called an early ‘botanic field aesthetics’. His poetry draws from his conversations with locals and his routine of walking as a means for understanding the flora of the pastoral countryside (Mahood 112). He is also known for having referred to taxonomic classification as ‘Linnaeus’s dark system’ (qtd in Mahood 3). Without coincidence, the methodology described herein occurs entirely under the light of the Southwest sun. As a ‘field practice’ it seeks the interdependencies between plants, people, the sense faculties, knowledge systems and the language of representation.

**Conclusion: towards diversified appreciations of indigenous plants**

The idea of a plant, or any living being, performing for you originates in the subject-to-object binary inherent to floral aesthetics, as I have outlined it, as a visual mode of appreciating plants for their suitability as aesthetic objects. The flora is expected to put on a show, to erupt in colour and form, and to flower in a brilliant array. This is a performative and horticultural expectation with the audience poised for entertainment. A performing plant is an aesthetically pleasing, even compelling, one, if it is a good actor, or a good work of art. An aesthesis of plants, or *floraesthesia*, however, is open sense appreciation that perceives the interdependencies between the bloom and the bust. Flowering, as the most visually captivating phase of the plant’s seasonal cycle, is no more compelling than seed dispersion, or other less visual but more tactile features.

An aesthesis of plants requires seasonal, successional, embodied and narrative awareness of sense experience, whereby the performance is more of a dialectic exchange with living beings. It is a state of multi-sensory intermixture between the human and the plant in which the ‘rational subject’ and the ‘perceptual object’ find contact in a liminal field of unresolved openness. Plants are always in the process of eliding synchronic forms of representation, but *poietic* representation entails sense immanence as what is to come. Instead of a focus on
single species flowering, such as that represented by botanical illustration, an *aesthesis* might consider the succession of flowering between different species over various temporal and spatial dimensions.

To understand how an *aesthesis* of plants might lead to diversified economies and appreciations of indigenous plants and a brighter outlook for botanical conservation, consider micro-enterprises based around the non-visual experience of native flora. Mt. Romance, near Albany, Western Australia, is a small-scale industry that sustainably harvests native Australian sandalwood (*Santalum spicatum*) for processing into essential oil. For every sandalwood tree harvested, the company plants twelve seedlings to ensure the survival of the slow-growing hemiparasitic trees. Although the focus of the enterprise is on the single sense faculty of smell, the educational experience at the centre brings the visitor into the domain of *aesthesis*. Visitors are invited to touch living sandalwood trees and to get as close as possible to hearing, seeing, smelling and even tasting the living tree, considering that the factory itself is outside the natural distribution range of sandalwood.

We might also consider regional micro-enterprises incorporating the taste of indigenous flora into food products and educational tourism centred on multi-sensory experiences of indigenous flora with long histories of usage—sensuous and palpable histories that too risk being lost before being fully appreciated. Diversified forms of appreciation, such as wildflower tourism in tandem with bush tucker education and essential oil enterprises, are in urgent need. Marchant writes, ‘A sombre thought is that the diversity of WA plants will decline significantly before its forms and survival strategies are fully appreciated in Western Australia’ (20). Part of species diversity is sensate diversity, which too risks decline: smells and tastes that no longer exist, and foods and fibres whose histories are no longer connected to our postmodern means of sustenance.

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One day in 1975, Henry Cultee, Chehalis elder from Grays Harbor, Washington, told me he wanted to show me something. He beckoned me aboard the boat he kept moored by his fishing shack at Samamanauwish on the Humptulips River. Samamanauwish was also Henry Cultee’s traditional name, inherited along with his luck in fishing from his grandfather’s brother. It meant ‘between two channels’. In explaining the name he shared with the land, Cultee said, ‘I’m living right here’, as he pointed out the channels of the Humptulips that ran on either side of his cabin.

Eighty-five year old Cultee stood erect as he poled the river to guide us over the riffles for which his people named this river Hum-m-m-m-p-tulips, the name humming along with water running so fast it cleaned itself out in three days after a rain. As Grays Harbor opened before us, modern frame houses and mill stacks dissolved from view. We entered a world composed of water and sky. The wind danced paths of light on the water. This was the wind that lives here, the one that Henry Cultee’s mother told him to run against with his arms outstretched, measuring its gaping mouth, so it would be ashamed of itself and calm down. As we moved on into ancient memory, that lone sentinel of a rock hanging over the harbour shrugged off the name of James Rock (for the pioneer) and relived its history as Sme’um—the place where Wildcat stole fire, singeing his tail with the mark he still wears as a result. The urbanized jumble along the Aberdeen River evaporated on the milky mist behind us, giving way to its more lively self: the Wishkah River (‘stink water’) where Thunderbird dropped a rotting whale carcass. Across the harbour from us was no longer the Cosmopolis named by pioneers, but Khaisáləmish, named after the character of the sandbar where the mythic figure Xwane Xwane kept himself from being swept out to sea in the story that related the origin of the Chehalis way of life.

Power lived in this place. It was here that Henry Cultee’s mother’s father obtained his Indian doctor power that was as famous as it was dangerous. After he found that power, his grandfather took the name of the place where it lived: Khaisáləmish. Whites gave him a white name, but he never dropped his Indian one. Thus he was known as Khaisáləmish Pete—or as pioneers anglicized it, Cosmopolis Pete.
Cultee and I slid smoothly down the harbour channel until we came to a dense array of shell mounds exposed by the action of the water on the shore. Cultee laughed as he pointed out these signs of the generations of sweet feasting of his people here. This was what he wanted to show me: how the land kept the story of the lives of his people here.

The land trades stories with us this way. If we know its stories, it keeps our own. The stories Henry Cultee told expressed an ancient reciprocity between humans and the ‘the eyes of the world’. In his tradition, it was how the eyes of the land’s multiple lives witness our behaviour that determines the length of our own lives among them. Cultee was one of the generous elders from the indigenous Pacific Northwest who showed me something of what we lose with the stories of a living land—and what we might gain by re-storying our world. That is the topic of this paper.

Val Plumwood (‘Struggle’; ‘Concept’) discusses how the traditions of indigenous Australians might serve as a model for honouring earth others in environmental philosophy. Among such peoples there are ‘animated, agentic, and intentional views’ of nature—and valuable critical perspectives on our own cultures and their worldviews (‘Nature’ 12). This essay discusses traditions of the indigenous peoples of Washington, Oregon, and California in that light. I have titled this essay ‘re-storying’ and ‘re-viving’ the language of life, since in our tenure of life on earth, humans have been more prone to subjectify the natural world than to objectify it in the habit of modern industrialism. In his meticulous survey of global cultures, nineteenth-century anthropologist Edward Tylor wrote that the life of indigenous peoples was ‘inextricably bound in with the ... mental state where man recognizes in every detail of the world the operation of personal life and will’ (285). Carolyn Merchant traced the historical shift from the idea of a living earth to inert matter with the coming of the Renaissance and industrialization in Western Europe—and the spread of European colonialism and capitalism in the Americas (Death of Nature; Ecological Revolutions; Radical Ecology). Joanna Hubbs reconstructed the vision that persists in pockets of peasant peoples in Eastern Europe, who see their relationship with the earth as with a living mother, whose double womb gives them out at birth and takes them back at death. Thus they wake each morning to kiss the ground that bore them.

In his critical survey of the idea of animism, Graham Harvey focuses on the ‘concern with the ‘proper treatment of peoples, not all of whom are human’(xi)—a concern central to indigenous North America. Irving Hallowell’s portrayal of the personalized world so persistent among the Ojibwa that ‘any concept of impersonal natural forces is totally foreign’ (59), is coincident with the worldview of ancient Californians, among whom ‘nothing was inanimate. Animals, plants, rocks, trees, trails, mountains, springs, manufactured objects
and natural objects—indeed, all things—were *people*, fully alive and intelligent, with complex and interconnected histories’ (78). The traditions discussed in this paper likewise link the recognition of agency in earth others with moral obligations toward them—in marked contrast to the objectification of others in modern capitalism Plumwood details.

The habitats of the diverse cultures I will be discussing ranged from rainforest on the ocean coasts and along Puget Sound, the Olympic Peninsula and northern California; to oak savannah in the inland valleys like the vast Willamette Valley, to more arid lands in Central and Eastern Washington and Oregon on the Middle and Upper Columbia River plateaus. These peoples moved into and out of one another’s territories to share fishing stations, hunting territories, and gathering and root digging grounds, coming together in trading centres and in mountain berry-collecting camps. At such gatherings, they shared stories and songs and renewed old acquaintances—and many met their future mates. All these people had strong and specific links to place. Eugene Hunn observes that non-Indians who call themselves native after a single generation can scarcely imagine what it is like to live on a land where one hundred generations of their ancestors are buried (Hunn and Selam). Sometimes these peoples transferred their affinity for place to the federal reservations on which they were relocated, but sometimes the land of their ancestors called them back after generations. Takelma elder Agnes Baker Pilgrim returned to live in southwestern Oregon nearly two hundred miles from the Siletz Reservation on which she is federally enrolled—and to which her ancestors were forcibly removed one hundred and fifty years ago. There she has reinstated the annual salmon ceremony on the spot where her ancestors practiced it for perhaps thousands of years. Esther Stutzman, also enrolled at Siletz, now lives in her ancestral Kalapuya territory on the Charlie Applegate claim—at the place where her great great grandfather first invited the Applegates to take up residence alongside them. Though he was enrolled on the Quinault Reservation in spite of his ancestors’ refusal to sign a treaty removing them to this place away from their homeland, Henry Cultee did not live there. Instead he returned in season to the place on the Humptulips River whose name he shared with the inheritance of his people—where he was ‘rooted to this ground’ beside the river into which he dived as a child to share the river’s own long life.

The link between human longevity and rootedness in a community of earth others parallels the idea of ‘fitting into country’ in the indigenous Australian traditions recounted by Deborah Rose. This view, as Rose points out, is in vivid contrast to the competitive notion of ‘survival of the fittest’ in industrial society. The latter is exemplified in the narrative of Manifest Destiny with which Cultee’s ancestors were all too familiar—and which expressed the ‘national conviction’ that ’Indians were a race doomed to ... extinction and replacement by the
civilization of the whites’ (Slotkin 418). Notably, the idea that the conquest and replacement of indigenous peoples by whites was a matter of natural law served to alleviate the emigrant sense of responsibility for their actions toward these peoples. Cultee’s tradition had a very different perception of natural fitness—grounded in 10,000 years of sustainable living here. In their view, those judged most fit before the eyes of earth others were those who ‘helped one another’. Thus Cultee’s people held care for their land and for one another as a primary ethical tenet. Just as he explained the care that must be taken in utilizing the land’s resources, he explained that whatever came from the land was to be shared with others. It was bad manners to imply one had control over food by even a asking a visitor, ‘Are you hungry?’ One just brought out the food. Other ethics included the care for children on the part of all adults and conscious avoidance of actions that might cause dissention. Cultee told moving stories that illustrated his mother’s modeling this ethic in the most difficult of situations.

Chehalis stories also illustrated how those who use their power to overcome others could look forward to having the earth ‘shrink their life’. In this context, the emigrant view of progress by conquest was not only delusional but self-defeating. In the 1940’s Upper Chehalis elder Silas Heck (a distant cousin of Cultee’s) related an ironic portrayal of Washington Territorial Governor Isaac Stevens, in which the latter told the Indians that whites were so crowded in the East that they would soon be eating one another—and so the Indians should give them their land to prevent this. Heck opined that the Indians felt sorry whites were resorting to cannibalism, but he did not entertain the idea of giving up his land as a result (Smith). There is pointed irony here: the society that sees evolutionary fitness in Manifest Destiny’s version of ‘might makes right’ sets itself up for dissension within and without. ‘Eating one another’ is also an apt metaphor for a people so grasping it seemed they might eat up the whole land. Henry Cultee told me his version of the traditional story in which Bluejay visits the Land of the Dead. In it, Bluejay finds the white man in central residence among the dead, surrounded by numerous Indian tribes and other species he has put there—still declaring ‘eat it all up!’

It certainly seemed that emigrants wanted to catch all the fish—or kill them trying. Cultee was horrified at the waste he witnessed when an early salmon cannery dammed up the river to create a salmon trap, causing so many salmon to back up against the dam that the cannery could not handle them, so that they had to hire several scows to tow the rotting fish out to sea to dump them. Charles Wilkinson reports a similar incident on Puget Sound (Crossing). Though they themselves had the technology to ‘catch them all’, the Indians chose instead to moderate themselves out of respect for the salmon they considered ‘kindred spirits capable of engaging in interpersonal relationships’. When whites arrived, these people were harvesting seven times the contemporary
catch in a sustainable fashion. In his study of salmon runs on the Columbia River beginning in pre-human times, Jim Lichatowich attributes the abundance of Indian fisheries to their partnership ethic, which allowed the Indians and the fish to co-evolve over thousands of years (32-41).

The Sahaptin peoples on the Mid-Columbia applied this partnership ethic to the whole of the natural community in which they were situated: they firmly believed that ‘People, animals, plants and other forces of nature … share … intelligence and will, and thus have moral rights and obligations as PERSONS [emphasis in original]’. In Sahaptin Waq’ádyšwit, meaning life, infuses everything with the “soul” possessed by people as well as animals, plants, and forces of nature, and because all that is waq’ádyšwit is imbued with ‘intelligence, will, and consciousness’, this forms the moral basis of the reciprocal partnerships between humans and their land. From the ‘laws of creation’, the Sahaptins learned reciprocity, cooperation, sharing, and thanksgiving (Hunn and French 388; Hunn and Selam).

Life had a comparable moral force among those who lived on southern Puget Sound: ‘[W]e believe that all things have life in this world. We honour all things. The dirt, rocks, fresh water, salt water, and all things that have breath are sacred’ (Hilbert, Miller and Zahir, iii). At a Muckleshoot cultural committee meeting I sat in on, those present listed the tragic litany of sacred sites ravaged by development. As things appeared very bleak, an elder interjected with quiet resolve: ‘I guess we just have to go on the side of life’. Likewise Billy Frank, Jr. from the neighboring Nisqually affirmed his faith in the life created by nature when queried about hope in the face of current environmental crises. As long as nature does not give up on the life she has put here, neither should we give up on our work to restore, care for and protect it (Wilkinson, Lessons).

In Frank’s words:

I don’t believe in magic. I believe in the sun and the stars, the water, the tides, the floods, the owls, the hawks flying, the river running, the wind talking. They’re measurements. They tell us how healthy things are. How healthy we are. Because we and they are the same. (Wilkinson, Lessons 101)

Wilkinson observes that Frank’s philosophy deserves the same intellectual attention we might give to Locke or Rousseau. But its inevitable conclusion, that we ‘think of ourselves not as giants but as equals with the runs and herds and packs and groves whose existence is so fragile because of us … is not only sophisticated’ but ‘demanding’. Holding this view with Frank’s level of personal commitment would impel us to change radically our society to accommodate
earth others. As Frank puts it, ‘We talk about state sovereignty and tribal sovereignty, but those ant communities under the big fir tree are sovereign too. We’ve got to find a way to protect their sovereignty’. On the Nisqually River one day, Frank and Wilkinson were encircled by a vast number of harbour seals. Whereas non-indigenous fishermen seek legal permission to shoot the seals because they compete for salmon, Frank’s response was very different: ‘The seals are part of this. We’ve got to be sure to put some salmon aside for them’ (Wilkinson, Lessons 91-104).

This is in profound contrast with the worldview that objectifies earth others, seeing them only in terms of how they affect humans. In the Willamette Valley near Eugene pioneers declared all-out war on the local rattlesnakes, whom one witness claims they killed by the hundreds. This horrified the local Indians, who stated that the snakes clearly ‘saluted’ humans with their rattles. It was only those rare snakes who failed to communicate with humans by attacking silently that they in good conscience could themselves attack. That is, they would only hurt a snake that violated this perceived contract between species (Barton).

As agents, earth others participate in contracts with humans on their own terms as well as ours. A Palouse story from the mid-Columbia Plateau honours rattlesnakes as linked to the well being of the salmon on which these people depend. Like other stories from this area, this one ‘demonstrated that humans do not have dominion over plants and animals but that they are on equal or lower plane than other life’. Contemporary elder Andrew George tells of the time when humans took too many salmon, and the Salmon People met in council to determine a remedy. They decided to approach Rattlesnake to borrow some of his power. After that, when humans took too much, a salmon bit humans and infected them, using the power the ancestral salmon got from Snake. This story serves as a reminder to humans to adhere to the natural law of balance in taking salmon (Trafzer 22).

Among Esther Stutzman’s Kalapuyan ancestors who lived in the Willamette Valley, hunting was an activity with considerable spiritual import. A hunter would participate in a special ceremony for five days before and five days after going on a hunt, singing a song to the deer to honour it and declare his intentions—and it seems, to warn the deer so that he might choose whether to be caught. The hunter sang, ‘Run! A man is coming to get you, but if you let us get you, we will treat you right’. If a deer was caught, the people must never ‘waste a thing’ in using this gift—lest the disrespected deer people never return to Kalapuya territory. The Kalapuya specifically maintained deer habitat to invite the herds to stay near local villages. They never took the biggest and best from herds as do modern ‘trophy’ hunters. Early emigrants on the Santiam witnessed a traditional circle hunt in which the Kalapuya surrounded a herd
of deer and then picked out the finest animals to release before they took their own kill (Boag). Stutzman described the special joy in seeing the tail of a deer as it leapt away—for by tradition it would carry away all one’s negative feeling with it.

The idea of human dominion over hunted animals was so foreign to the Plateau Salish that their language lacked a way to say ‘my elk’—since the use of the possessive contradicted the idea that the animal had its own spirit and thus could not be possessed by humans. The idea of ownership of an animal was first introduced to local peoples by nineteenth century Europeans who branded their cattle. Only in that context did the Salish language adopt an expression for ‘my cow’.

‘The earth is alive’, Stutzman said in one of her visits to my college classes, ‘It has a heart’. Thus treating it with respect can ‘bring about balance’. She elaborated, ‘Always thank the earth. Thank everything, living and non-living, and sometimes pay the earth … If you take food or basket materials, say thank you. If you swim in the river, say thank you. Respect everything, living and non-living’. She joked that she even tells the weeds she pulls from her garden, ‘You are going to a better place’. The attitude of respect and thanksgiving—and the actions of reciprocity that flow from it, make you a ‘better-spirited person. You feel better about yourself inside, and when you feel better about yourself, you treat others in a better way’.

We can understand the import of becoming a ‘better-spirited’ person by contrasting it with the psychic dislocation from land and people critiqued among the emigrants whom Stutzman’s ancestors nicknamed the ‘moving people’, since ‘they would only stay a little, move on, stay a little, move on’. Unlike those who were situated in a community of earth others, those so psychically dislocated would treat no one well. Among the Chehalis this malaise came with a failure to listen to others as one scurried frenetically around (Adamson). Among the Pit River people, such ‘wanderers’ who ran all over the landscape, ‘broke things’ and it was best to keep away from those in such a state. Okanagan (Upper Columbia/Canadian) Jeanette Armstrong articulates the moral consequences of the lack of belonging that such persons exhibited: ‘Okanagans say that ‘heart’ is where community and land … become part of us because they are as essential to our survival as is our own skin’. By contrast, ‘people without hearts’ exhibit ‘collective disharmony and alienation from land’. They are blind to the destructive effects of their actions both on themselves and on others (Callahan 35). To belong to the ground of community and place, by contrast, is to become that ‘better-spirited’ person who understands how to treat others.

Balance is another key concept brought up in Stutzman’s words: humans must take from the land to sustain our lives. But if we take too much—or take without
making a repayment, we harm all life. Daily we make such decisions as does Stutzman when she pulls her weeds—or as did the Kalapuya in both taking deer and letting them go. Stutzman’s words indicate the resonance of people and land that should guide such decisions in an agentic world—in which the earth has a heart like our own, and thus should be treated with reciprocity and respect. As Billy Frank stated in asserting we should measure our health by the health of earth others: ‘We and they are the same’. The depth of resonance with earth others in the co-immersion in a community of life with them is expressed by the words of Elsie Pitt (mid-Columbia River): ‘Someday the land will be our eyes and skin again’ (Stowell 104).

Charles Wilkinson used to think that changes in law would address our current environmental crises, but after working with Billy Frank, he thinks we need a change in worldview that prompts us to engage with the natural world with the kind of emotional depth elicited by Indian ceremonies. Such ceremonies affirm covenants between humans and earth others as they relive ancient stories. When ‘Grandma Aggie’ Baker Pilgrim officiates at the ceremony to honour the first salmon in the Taklema (southwestern Oregon) territory of her ancestors, she tells the story of the struggle of the salmon women making their way upriver against seemingly insurmountable obstacles for the sake of their children. Sharing this story both creates an emotional resonance between humans and salmon—and models the courage and persistence with which we might struggle for the future of the children of both species. Plumwood observes that the hierarchy that places some humans over others and all humans over other natural life is based on ‘hyper-separation’ between the elements of ranked dualisms such as civilized/savage, mind/body, and human/nature (Plumwood, Feminism). Such stories as Pilgrim’s obliterate all such separation.

In the early 1900’s linguist Jaime de Angulo recorded his frustration in trying to get a term for ‘animals’ as opposed to humans in the Pit River language. His consultant, ‘Wild Bill’, insisted there was no such term in the Pit River language, since there was no such distinction between humans and other natural beings in Pit River culture. When pressed, the only equivalent Wild Bill could give for ‘animal’ was a term that meant ‘world-all-over-living’—a category which included what the white men called animals, what they called humans, and even what they saw as objects. In Wild Bill’s words, ‘Everything is living, even the rocks, even that bench you are sitting on. Somebody made that bench for a purpose, didn’t he? Well, then it’s alive, isn’t it? Everything is alive’ (Callahan 240; emphasis in original).

Wild Bill’s attribution of life to the bench made ‘for a purpose’ recognizes that it is animated by our labor and intent—as well as by our use. This view of the bench as ‘living’ also brings to our attention its source in the living world, as illustrated by a view of the Karok neighbours of the Pit River peoples:
When a Karok woman went out to collect pine roots, hazel stems and bear-lily roots for her baskets, she moved in an animate and indeed passionate world. She gathered her basket materials from people. ... By plucking roots and stems she was not harming these people but rather honoring them, transforming them into beautiful baskets that would be displayed during ceremonies ... her relationship with the pine tree, hazel bush, and bear-lily was one of partnership ... after all, she and pine tree were both women, and could thereby understand and help each other very well. (Margolin 79)

In this context, to recognize the 'life' of the bench reminds us what the dualism of modern capitalism encourages us to forget: that the goods we consume inevitability depend on natural life. Wild Bill goes on to make an ironic observation on the psychic toll of such forgetting. Since 'objects' can only be rendered in the Pit River language as 'dead people', Wild Bill opined, 'White people think everything is dead... They don't believe anything is alive'. And as a result of living in a deadened world, whites 'are dead themselves'. Notably, these 'objects' are not dead things—since there is no equivalent for 'thing' in the Pit River language. They are formerly living people, whom objectification has in effect murdered (Callahan 240-241).

The habit of treating natural lives as 'objects' readily extends itself to other humans. A Chehalis story features Raven as a 'boss' who commands a 'fish trap' fashioned of human beings, who shiver as they stand immobilized in the river. But Raven-boss pays no attention to the fact that they might have feelings—or voices with which to express them—he does not hear their cries in his single-minded focus on getting his use out of them. In this story, the exploitation is foiled when the traditional Chehalis culture hero happens on the scene and ordains that this is not the way things will be in the future, since 'These people are human beings' (Boas 15-16).

Specifically countering any objectifying stance, a Chehalis grandmother1 told me that ‘everything important told around here is always told person to person’. Another grandmother, present in 1926 when Thelma Adamson collected Chehalis traditions from her father, had waited for decades to see the book that Adamson would produce. She was delighted when I gave her copies of stories from Adamson's *Folktales of the Coast Salish* told by elders she had known. But when she read these, she was disappointed. Traditional storytellers

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1 A Chehalis grandmother whom I visited many times one day urged me to publish her words. She also asked that I not use her name. This is related partly to traditional humility in this community, but also to an unfortunate history of the selection of 'white favorites' that caused community dissension. I have given anonymity to all the Upper Chehalis grandmothers with whom I worked in order to protect this woman's anonymity in her small community.
brought stories to life by inhabiting them, using voice and mime—and their own personalities. One of her favourite things about such stories was how ‘each one gets it a little different’.

By contrast, ignoring the voices of others is an essential aspect of objectifying them. In a culture sustained by dialogue, there are a multiplicity of voices as opposed to the monological story (Plumwood, ‘Concept’; ‘Nature’) or ‘monotheism of memory’ (Hillman, ‘Myths of the Family’) which modern industrial society tells and hears. Adhering to the perspective in which differences between multiple voices are blurred or unimportant, pioneers and territorial officials designated certain indigenous individuals as representatives of their peoples—subsuming voices of whole communities to white-designated ‘chiefs’ (e.g. Carey; Stern; Youst). Chehalis elders protested this remembered injustice as they stressed that ‘no one speaks for anyone else’.

There is a decided contrast between delight in the diversity of tellings—and the assertion that there is only one right—or representative—version of things. The former opens itself to dialogue, as this elder illustrated in her own interaction with me. If I asked a question indicating I misunderstood something about Chehalis traditions, the elder above did not contradict me. Instead, she might say, ‘I never heard of that happening around here’. Thus she left room for the possibility that my words might be true in another context—or even true ‘around here’ in a way that escaped her knowledge. This consideration for the voices of others—even the voice of a young woman who knew so comparatively little about her culture—is a striking counter to what Hillman terms the ‘monotheism of memory’. Dialogue implies incompletion in its openness to the other—in the readiness for something more to happen. This Chehalis grandmother used her quick wit to poke fun at the contrasting attempt to have the last word. After watching a Chehalis elder relate his life story on a film, she quipped: ‘He did a real nice job. Only thing is, he didn’t give us the ending’. The end of the story, of course, can only be his death. This grandmother’s wit had something else to teach about the difference between allocating meaning to the world and pinning it down. In an inappropriately academic frame of mind, I once asked her whether the ‘Night People’ she had spoken of were confined to particular territories. Her response: ‘I think the Night People travel in Ford cars. They like women with hair the colour of yours, especially when the sun shines on it as it’s going down!’

In contrast with traditions sustained on dialogue among multiple voices—the ‘mono-logic’ of modern industrial societies gives us the end of the story before it is begun. In what Plumwood terms the ‘logic of colonialism’, each word or term assumes a static place within the category the speaker ascribes to it. Take this syllogism:
John is a man
All men walk on two legs
John walks on two legs.

This version of things has its end in its beginning—for what one can logically conclude rests on the identities of ‘John’ and ‘man’ remaining as they initially are. If that changes—if John is wounded in war and walks on only one leg, for instance—the logic of the syllogism is subverted. One cannot delight in getting things ‘just a little different’ here. If one opens the definition of ‘man’ to question, for instance, as does John Stoltenberg in his *Refusing to be a Man*, where he argues that there are as many definitions of sexual identity as there are individuals, the logic of the syllogism crumbles. Indeed, if anything here moves across categorical boundaries, redefines itself—or simply surprises us—it disrupts the logic of the system. This logic, in short, rests on the assumption of changelessness. And since life is characterized by change, we are back in the land of Wild Bill’s ‘dead people’.

Here we have emptied John of ground—made him an exemplary case of Plumwood’s hyper-separation. We have disengaged him from the vitality of words—as well as from his own flesh. In the impulse to make him exist consistently in all times and places, we have made him exist nowhere in actual time and place. We have, in short, created for him the mental disease of dislocation indigenous peoples see as signed by irresponsibility, the tendency to ‘break things’ and the inability to hear the voices of others. It is a reason for lament, as James Hillman notes, that the scientific worldview following the Enlightenment ‘would reduce language by stripping away all ambiguities, emotional undertones, and historical associations to make each word mean one thing and one thing only’ (*Hillman, The Myth of Analysis* 210). In reducing anything to such a symbol, one short-circuits engagement with it—or on its behalf. One cannot seek justice for this symbol—or levy any moral claim in its favour. We may only seek justice for those with whom we share joy, wonder, sadness or laughter—those with whom we share a story.

In contrast with the logic that lifts both thinkers and their thoughts from the world, the metaphor of stories sets them back into it. Metaphor literally means ‘to carry across’; it builds bridges to move us across the divide between one kind of life and another. And so in the story told by Pilgrim, salmon and humans and the rivers they swim in are joined in an interwoven drama. Notably metaphor allows flexibility as mono-logic does not. If I say John runs like a deer, I have not exhausted or confined his identity. He may still walk or fly or swim—or run—like innumerable others. There is no principle of contradiction here. Thus the grandmother who made the ironic quip about the Night People driving Ford Trucks could in another context honour them as the spirit-*people* they were,
who empathized with human emotion in a way that made them at once scary (they could predict a death) and bearers of gifts (for those who understood they were truly people and spoke of them with commensurate respect).

Metaphor releases both the thinker and the thought to this vitality of context, expanding identities and meanings as it links us to other lives. Thus it sets us on the earth that has a heart like our own, where the deer carries our feelings and the salmon teaches us to struggle for the future of the children of her species and ours. Like all these earth others, Wildcat has a life of his own, but we may bring him across to us on the bridge of story that weaves his physical distinction (a black striped tail), his wily personality, a technological gift (fire)—with a place on the land. Such stories do not constrain earth others by categorizing them; in fact, they do precisely the opposite by recognizing that in their personhood is a ‘sovereignty’ that ‘deserves to be seen’ (Wilkinson, Lessons 91). With such stories humans take their place amidst the sovereignty of salmon and seals, rivers and deer and wind.

If we owe indigenous philosophies, as Wilkinson noted, comparable attention to that which we devote to modern environmental philosophers, we also owe them more. Importantly, we owe them solidarity in their struggle for survival in the face of societies like our own. Indeed our conversation with them only has authenticity in both our personal presence—and the critical perspective we gain in viewing our culture and history through their eyes (Diamond; Plumwood, ‘Nature’). Such self-reflection is often asked of us as scholars and writers among indigenous peoples—though it is too often absent—as with those who missed the satire of Coast Salish stories in Washington State because they failed to locate themselves in those stories (Holden). Similarly an anthropologist missed the bald humour of the Ojibwa who made up traditions for him to collect while they waited for him, as an Ojibwa woman told me, to be ‘honest with himself’ by bringing himself into his fieldwork.

It is time for us to be honest with ourselves. Surely we have seen the world held in a stranglehold of objectification long enough. It is time to invite back historical and spatial context, ambiguity, and emotion—to invite back life itself into our writing. I began with a query about what we might lose if we lose the stories of a living land. We only need look around us to see the answer—our whole precious living world is at stake in the choices we have before us.

In this essay, I have also tried to show something of what we might gain as we reclaim what Linda Hogan calls the ‘songs of agreement and safekeeping’ that depict the covenant humans once made and might make again with life—in all the connotations of sacredness and responsibility of this utterance among the Northwest’s traditional peoples. The eyes of the living world are watching us.
now more than ever, urging us to reclaim stories that ‘tell us not only how to keep the world alive’ but ‘how to put ourselves back together again’ (Hogan et al. 14).

To gain this gift, we must counter the stance of objectification with our own subjectivity—and counter the perennial disengagement of our time with our own engagement. Val Plumwood does this as she begins her Environmental Culture with her story of coming upon a dying penguin on the beach, carrying it back to her house, and trying helplessly to revive it. The penguin, as both we and Plumwood learn, is one of a community starving en masse as a result of careless human action. The image of Plumwood with that penguin in her arms resonates with us as we move through her philosophical book about our choices in relating to earth others. In Living Downstream, Sandra Steingraber combines her biological research findings with the wrenching personal experience of growing up in a family situated in the midst of a cancer cluster. Her writing de-objectifies epidemiology as well as medical research and treatment—as in her response to finding a cancer cell sample from a woman’s breast identified by a lab tag as MCF-7. She refuses the anonymity of this situation by tracing the name of the donor and relating her personal story.

For both Plumwood and Steingraber, their personal presence is a critical accomplishment that dissolves the distance between the human and the natural—along with the privilege of the writer over her subject matter. Their openness to the agency of the other is apparent as they act in response to the need posed by earth others who are suffering at human hands—as in the case of the dying penguin in Plumwood’s arms or the 10,000 victims of cancer she researches that Steingraber reminds us each reflect a human life. Perhaps all engagement begins in this way—with our standing in solidarity with earth others, as in the experience shared with the chimpanzee at Stanford University related by Fran Peavey in Intimate Nature. Watching a breeding encounter between an aggressive male chimpanzee and a beleaguered female, Peavey was feeling sympathy for her when the chimp suddenly yanked her chain out of the hands of the rough male caged with her and walked over to Peavey to take her hand. The chimp then proceeded to lead Peavey to the two other women in the watching crowd, joining hands with one of these so that together they formed a small ‘support’ circle, as Peavey puts it. She effectively ends her telling of this incident here—for then it is up to the reader to respond to this moment of solidarity that ‘reached out across all those years of evolution’ (Peavey).

There is no objective response to such a story. We can only respond by engaging it with our own presence and self-reflection. This is the way out of the language littered with Wild Bill’s ‘dead people’. In the face of such oppressive language, stories and their metaphors can carry us across to something else. Such stories are healing in direct proportion to the ways in which they enliven and link our
world—in direct opposition to the way in which objectification divides it and
dislocates us from our belonging to this world. The metaphors we need for this
are those like the shaman’s comb used to comb Sedna’s hair in the profound
Inuit story. In that story, a father maims his daughter, trying to bend her to his
will, and though he would as soon have her drown as follow her own course in
life, she falls to the bottom of the sea to find her real place—where she becomes
the catalyst of the natural fertility that sustains her people. But she will only
release that fertility in the form of fish and seals if her descendents comb her
hair for her, since she is fingerless as a result of her father’s abuse.

We, too, need to tell stories in which we find a way to heal the spirit of our
histories, stories that tell us how to dive to the bottom of things, to swim into
maimed places to untangle the knots between humans and nature, humans and
one another. We need to tell stories that imagine how, once we have gone to
those depths, we might swim up again to breathe the air we are made for and to
lend ourselves to caring for this world that sustains us.

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‘Why do you strip me from myself?’ Marsyas the satyr cries out as he is flayed by Apollo. In the midst of his agony, against all odds, Marsyas retains his eloquence. As nature writers search for new narratives to express our embeddedness in the more-than-human world, this Greek myth with its allusions to corporeality, psychic development and the connections between writing, the skin and the land speaks to us of passionate resistance to the triumph of humanity over animality. The consistent reappearance of the story of Marsyas during the Renaissance, its representation by Baroque artists and its recent revival in Anish Kapoor’s giant sculpture Marsyas in the Tate Modern attest to its undiminished relevance.

Historically, in Renaissance art, the depiction of Marsyas was heavily influenced by allegorical readings which go back to Plato. They acknowledged Dante’s invocation to Apollo at the start of the Paradiso, as well as the Florentine Neo-Platonists and their heirs. Marsyas’ fate within this genre tells of the necessary diminishment of the body as a pre-condition for the release of man’s true, inner, spiritual nature; of the victory of divine harmony over earthly passion, or light and reason over primitive darkness realised through the ‘barbaric’ pipes contending with the ‘divine’ lyre.

Today, Marsyas’ loss of his skin is most commonly read as a psychological metaphor for early issues in infancy where the inside and outside of psychic space lacks delineation, and boundaries of self and other need to be established. In this sense it speaks of the split between writing, the body and the land. As a musical contest it is concerned with the production of sound, including speech, and aesthetic judgement. The rich texture of possible meanings offers a point of departure to consider engagement with the ecological humanities.

For nature writers, Marsyas’ predicament especially resonates with the conflicts inherent in the hybrid structure of nature writing as a first-person account exposing an inward, psychological exploration in conjunction with an investigation of the physical world that aims to eschew an ontology of dominance. Nature writers, including scholars working in the ecological humanities and animal geographers who work poetically, seek to represent the more-than-human world not as a nut to be cracked, an object to be mined for meaning and left vulnerable to exploitation and maltreatment but to evoke this world through a narrative that touches, that calls us to dwell within a nature
full of mysterious forces. A narrative that is open to healing the other within us and the other that is nature. The cruelty of Apollo’s knife is balanced in these narratives by the possibility of the healing touch of the physician and the ‘talking cure’ of psychoanalysis.

Metaphorically, the nature writer’s heart-felt response to Ovid’s rendering of Marsyas’ fate might be embodied in a writerly ‘light touch’ which caresses the imagination and fleshes the word. Within this economy skin becomes the sign of our transformability, an organ breathing in and out (back and forth, between) that opens the imagination, imbises language and makes the tentative marks of a shared vulnerability. As Steven Connor remarks, it signifies ‘our ability to become other, as well as our identity, our ability to persist and survive in that becoming other’ (32).

The transformations undergone by nature writing since its modern manifestations as a celebration of wilderness set apart from the forces of industrialisation to its present day emphasis on interrogations of the place of the human within the natural order and the need to redress the ‘failure of the rationalised world to acknowledge and to adapt … to the … ecological support base it draws on in the long-denied counter-sphere of “nature”’ (Plumwood 4) implicitly look back to Ovid’s understanding of language in his portrayal of such figures as Marsyas in his Metamorphoses. Lynn Enterline summarises this understanding as a ‘desire to “reactivate” the body’s material relation to the world in a way that does not separate words from matter, ideas from the flesh’ (248). Ovid is fascinated by moments in which the body changes form despite its owner’s desire or will. Equally, he is fascinated by the power of words to ‘move’ us on two levels. First there is the artist’s ‘touch’ signifying power over the world and secondly, there is the power of words that are directed inward, ‘penetrating’ and affecting us. Together these form a reciprocal link between mind and world that Ovid understands through the classical rhetorical formulation of images not as mere representations of the world but as a force that can alter it. Aesthetics and ethics can be understood as meeting at this point in nature writing where the desire to be emplaced in the wonders of a more-than-human agency and complexity is not a didactic reflection of environmental circumstances but a palpable force expressed through images and figures that are derived from our fleshly, tactile origins in infancy. This configuration conforms to classical rhetoric’s aim to both please and to move.

Don Scheese historicises this movement when he comments on the profound change brought about in nature writing by the publication of Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring in 1962 (31-32). It inaugurated the literature of environmental apocalypse in which the surface of the earth, its ‘ecstatic skin’ was seen as poisoned and scarred by human actions. It changed the way in which we saw our planet. Later our perception of the earth was again irrevocably altered by
the photographs taken by the Apollo astronauts. A shimmering, fragile world was revealed to us, one that promoted a global effort to reduce destruction, deforestation and pollution. Today nature writers are confronted by the escalating threat of global warming and catastrophic rates of extinction. In the search for narratives with which to respond to this devastation, the myth of Marsyas offers ways to explore new versions of being-in-the-world that refigure the dualistic regime of internal and external, rational and emotional, self and world.

In this reworking, skin figures as an image of abundant connections, of folding and unfolding. Rather than seeing skin as possessing an inside and an opposing outside, it is imagined as complex and manifold, stretched out or involuted, pleated or rucked so the outside is folded over to become an inside. In looking at the possibilities inherent in this reworking I focus on three moments in the history of Marsyas’ representation. First in Ovid’s account of the ‘division’ and ‘re-membering’ of Marsyas in his *Metamorphoses*, I argue that marked skin signifies memory, a refusal to forget. The marks and incisions in skin are a model for markings on paper that re-activate our memory of material origins in the maternal body of the earth and the necessity of recognising and accepting our ecological origins.

The second moment is an interpretation of Titian’s painting *The Flaying of Marsyas* in which I postulate a movement beyond the thematics of the knife’s cut on the individual to a fleshy, corporeal, cultural life that is not necessarily contingent upon ordeal and trauma. Such a move requires a recognition of the necessity of empathy with our more-than-human others. Finally, Anish Kapoor’s sculpture *Marsyas* is examined as a ‘breathing’ space that generates a sonorous perception surrounding us and inspiring the imagination. Overall, the relevance of these three ‘texts’ for nature writers is couched within a psychoanalytic understanding of a psychic container that is brought into being by skin and sound.

This psychoanalytic understanding is one in which skin literally shapes our world and gives a sense of our shape in it. During birth, mammals experience a uterine massage that stimulates the commencement of breathing. This interaction prepares the skin in its pre-birth stages to an awakening as a being with a surface. Throughout the twentieth century, an understanding of the skin as giving rise to the ego was developed, beginning with Freud’s assertion in ‘The Ego and the Id’ that ‘the ego is first and foremost a bodily ego; it is not merely a surface entity but is itself the projection of the surface’. In the English translation he added a footnote that ‘the ego is ultimately derived from bodily sensations, chiefly those springing from the surface of the body. The ego is thus
a mental projection of the surface of the body’ (26). This understanding of the constitution of the ego in which the outside is an inside culminated in Didier Anzieu’s concept of the skin ego.

Before Anzieu’s publication of *The Skin Ego*, Esther Bick was the first to undertake an in-depth study of the psychological function of the skin. She speculated that the skin functions as a container from the very earliest stages of infancy, creating a passive experience of being held together. The containing function of the skin, however, has its counterpart in catastrophic anxieties about disintegration. She writes that, ‘in its most primitive form the parts of the personality are felt to have no binding force among themselves and must therefore be held together in a way that is experienced by them passively, by the skin functioning as a boundary’ (55-6). Only when the infant feels it has a skin that holds its body together can a concept of space within the self arise. This space within ‘contains’ the imagination which is experienced paradoxically as without bounds—and therefore subject to hubris—and yet given form by the skin—making it subject to corporeality. Anzieu’s theory of the skin ego situates the skin as a dynamic psychic and physical interface between the subject and the world. He proposes that ‘the ego is the projection on the psyche of the surface of the body’ so that a skin ego is ‘a mental image of which the ego of the child makes use during the early phases of its development to represent itself as an ego containing psychical contents on the basis of the experience on the surface of the body’ (1985: 40). Anzieu here emphasises the positive role of the skin in providing ego consistency rather than being assaulted.

Skin functions not only to differentiate but, as in Luce Irigaray’s figure of two hands held together palm to palm, evokes the undifferentiated maternal contact of the womb, where sensory experience is that of being ‘palpated without seeing’ (154). It is this undifferentiated maternal substratum which lies at the heart of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and which he sees as the origin of the world and of language. For Ovid, a maternal nature possesses the power of the artist’s touch over the bodies she creates but the ‘birth’ of language as a force in the world also violates the maternal body. Marina Warner notes that:

> Marsyas’ music sang the praises of the Mother … and so there may be buried beneath the Ovidian story a much earlier account of the Olympian victory over older powers, with Apollo not only asserting Apollonian control over the demi-beast’s Dionysian pleasure, but also quelling any nostalgia for the ancient Magna Mater. This relates to flayed bodies: Marsyas in his torment is butchered, reduced to meat on a hook, to the non-individualised raw flesh of form-before-form. (126)

Our primary source for the myth is Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, completed in the year 8BPE during the reign of the Emperor Augustus. The short, savage section
on Marsyas is inserted in the midst of a series of divine revenge killings. The entire story is not related in this section but dispersed throughout the text. The tale begins earlier when Minerva, having seen a reflection of herself playing the pipes in a river, was so dismayed by the sight of her puffed out cheeks and reddened face she threw the pipes away. Marsyas found the pipes and became so proficient at playing them he challenged Apollo to a contest. In order to win, Apollo turned his lyre upside down and demanded Marsyas do the same with the pipes. Unable to compete under these circumstances, Marsyas’ punishment was to be flayed alive.

Ovid presents the scene as a spectacle of dismemberment rather like those watched by audiences in the Roman arena. As part-goat part-human with furry thighs and cloven hooves, the satyr is associated with uncivilised, instinctual behaviour and appetite. He is linked to Dionysus and distinguished from the human order so a punishment in which he is reduced to meat is seen as fitting. Apollo’s position of power permits him to act with gratuitous cruelty within the law but for Marsyas, the victim, time is running backwards: he turns back into undifferentiated matter as the integument that delineates his selfhood is stripped from him.

Ovid presents the first transformation of the satyr into raw meat as punishment for his ‘boundless’ imagination and consequent challenge of the gods. Marsyas’ crisis has come about because he is an animal body that has produced meaningful human sound. Fittingly his ‘inside’ is exposed as mere meat. His cry epitomises the resistance of the flesh to being cast aside by a ‘disembodied’ discourse that seeks to transcend it. Paula James writes that:

> the stripping of the satyr’s skin from the surface of his limbs leaves his palpitating insides on view. Within this one wound, which becomes his essence, organs and nerves go on throbbing and beating ... so that the language of the passage describing what remains of Marsyas seems to be mimicking the very lyre that has defeated him ... Marsyas becomes, for one brief moment, a living lyre. (96)

He also becomes, in effect ‘singing meat’ and through the combination of lyre and singing meat he retains his dual constitution of human and animal. Despite being strung up by his fetlocks and rendered motionless he is still able to move his audience by his music.

This gruesome transformation appears to be balanced by a reprieve in which Marsyas undergoes a natural metamorphosis into a river fed by the tears of his mourners. He is ‘re-membered’ in this reading through the mourning of the textual audience whose tears are absorbed by the earth and transformed into a river named Marsyas, the ‘clearest of Phrygian streams’. This transformation
both gestures back to the stream in which Minerva saw her distorted image and forwards to one where the body itself, its tears, are the agent of language. Language emerges in association with grief, pain and loss, although the goddess Minerva’s perception of her loss of beauty in her reflection in the stream is a parody of Marsyas’ catastrophic loss.

Despite his unequivocal defeat Marsyas does, therefore, acquire a potent identity as the river which carries his name. The weeping of the pastoral world turns into the lyricism of the water that is Marsyas transformed. Elena Theodorakopoulos suggests that the onlookers ‘to some degree repair the damage done to Marsyas by Apollo’s violence’ (156). However, she also notes that Ovid changed the traditional story in which the blood of Marsyas became the river which bore his name and concludes:

Marsyas torn from himself sheds blood which disappears, and leaves behind no better part, no opus, nothing to preserve him at least symbolically besides the grief of those who witness or hear of his demise; his name is attached to the traces of others’ mourning instead of his own suffering. (156-7)

The voice of Ovid’s unnamed narrator also opposes the re-membering of the satyr. He seeks to have his death remembered solely as an illustration of the power of the gods. The story, therefore, presents its readers with two ways of remembering, those of pastoral lament and cautionary tale.

How might nature writers respond to Ovid’s representation of the Marsyas myth with its warning of overreaching and song that ‘re-members’ through the ‘veins’ of the land, a song that springs from the earth, singing of pain and loss? Marsyas’ suffering has undergone a double transformation to be finally filtered through the grief of others who are left to tell his story by replicating the cuts to his body with the markings of words.

Steven Connor writes that:

most cultures seem to have a myth of the primal marking of the skin; whether it is the story of the inauguration of rivalry and blood-guilt ... or the distribution of the animals of creation into different habitats and functions as indicated by the markings on their skins ... All these are imagined in terms of the marking of a previously immaculate surface ... The marking of the skin is the arrival of accident and contingency. Whatever it may be, the first, arbitrary, unnecessary event is a marring, a maculation. Behind every myth of the coming to writing lies a myth of the marking of bodies or faces previously dreamed perfect, by the traces of injury and death, by the lines of age. (73)
These markings are interpreted by psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche (1976) as language’s shaping force on the bodies in which we live. For Laplanche the maternal body is deeply involved in the setting up of language as a sign system. This does not, however, constitute a search for origins or an account of biological destiny. Rather, it is a retrospective focus on the distortions brought about by a patriarchal symbolic system. As Lynn Enterline points out ‘Laplanche argues that the “marks of maternal care” on the infant’s as yet nonsignifying, unmarked body are the beginnings of the sign system that will give that body its cultural significance and value. But he is careful to point out that these words can be called “maternal” only in the sense that they become so as a result of cultural practice’ (250). In other words, he is not endorsing the constructs that conflate female, the animal and the emotional together as inferior to the male, human, and rational but placing these understandings within a cultural and historical construction.

A similar understanding of a trope of mother-as-matter is posited by David Abram in *The Spell of the Sensuous* where he argues that writing has gradually become divorced from its natural referents, the human body and the land, as a result of the dominance of western rationality. Rather than remembering its origin in the marring of the skin, language has become incorporated into the master narrative of western civilisation that has abandoned its roots in the living body of the earth. What has been lost is the sense that a material, organic body is at the source of the production of both speech and writing and that all bodies, not simply human bodies, are capable of what might be called ‘speech’. The non-human, the Marsyas-like of the world, have been relegated to silence and regarded as incapable of speech. Instead, Abram seeks to resurrect the voice of Marsyas by suggesting that what ‘lurks behind all the texts that we read is not a human subject but another animal, another shape of awareness (ultimately the otherness of animal nature itself)’ (282).

Abram uses the term ‘storied’ knowledge to refer to a way of understanding that differs from our current abstracted way of knowing, an understanding that reflects the complex ways in which we relate to the living sensuous world around us.

Drawing on Merleau-Ponty’s theories of perception as participatory and of human language as rooted in sensorial experience, Abram goes on to show how the western linguistic model encourages ‘a massive distrust of sensorial experience while valorizing an abstract realm of ideas hidden behind or beyond the sensory appearances’ (72). To think of human language in this way, argues Abram, is to justify seeing humans as significantly different from other beings and consequently to justify ‘the increasing manipulation and exploitation of
nonhuman nature by, and for, (civilized) humankind’ (77). Abram proposes an alternative to seeing language as a mere code or signifying system which accords with Ovid’s claims for rhetoric.

Ovid’s account of the myth of Marsyas suggests to the nature writer the need to reconsider what it means to be subject to language and the body without splitting the two asunder. It suggests that the overarching challenge to the ‘gods’ can be reinterpreted as the necessary challenge to an overly dominant rationality and an attempt to reinstate language as a force for change in the world and not merely a representation of it. It states that the gratuitous violence of the knife should not be confused with the incisiveness necessary for understanding but that this must be balanced by an affective dwelling in the world. Modifying the legacy of Apollo necessitates a revaluation of the dominant traits of our culture and the embrace of our animal selves. Ovid’s story of Marsyas recalls us to an understanding of materiality that cannot be sundered from the earth. He shows us that the earth is saturated by the blood and tears of our bodies and the bodies of others that are re-membered through the voice of narrative.

Titian’s painting, The Flaying of Marsyas, recapitulates the graphic cruelty of Ovid’s story while centring on allegorical significances in Christian-platonic terms. It celebrates humanist ideologies in which Marsyas symbolises the triumph of divine art over human art and the ‘redemption of the sufferer’ through ecstatic agonies. This may account for the eerie lack of agony on Marsyas’ face although it is equally possible that Titian is affirming Ovid’s vision of continuous organic transformation in which nothing truly dies but is reborn in a different form.

In Masks of Difference David Richards describes the orderly composition of the painting in which arms bent in right-angled shapes repeat themselves across the canvas. Only Marsyas’ ‘goat’s legs and human torso break the orderliness of these lines’ (11). The picture’s composition, he continues,

divides in two antagonistic directions: out beyond the canvas to an ethereal and unrepresentable vision located somewhere above the middle top of the picture, and diametrically below that point to the middle bottom where a pool of blood is forming. Between these points hangs the body of Marsyas and this place smells of blood even at the moment of exaltation. (11-12)

Like Ovid, Titian presents the audience with contradictory messages. Although the painting evokes the inverted crucifixion of St Peter, Marsyas’ death does not speak solely of resurrection but plunges downwards into the darkness of blood on the forest floor. The painting’s allegory shows that the refined Apollonian world deals with its wild savage other by wielding a knife. Richards writes that:
the painting radiates from the knife at the centre. The god seems to cut
the human half of the satyr from his animal half as his “art” cuts the
human from animal nature and the civil from the sylvan. The knife will
not be denied its clarifying role as that which separates and divides,
one and for all the Apollonian from its other. It is the instrument with
which Apollo makes his triumphant acts of designation. … The knife is
the divine caesura, the image of an absolute separation, it makes all the
difference. (18)

Apollo appears to be triumphant, wielding the knife that divides and structures
the world into the civilised and its others. But the contemplative presence of
Midas, generally taken to represent Titian himself, is not involved in the action.
He seems lost in thought, reflecting on the spectacle of Marsyas’ debasement
and questioning Apollo’s triumph. Our attention is drawn to Midas by the
gleam on his attire and his separation indicates that what we are looking at is a
representation of his meditation projected onto the ‘skin’ of the canvas.

The knife, Midas insists, does not necessarily perform an act of redemption. It
also performs torture and execution. It is the rational mind’s need to know taken
to the point of madness. Apollo seeks in the body of Marsyas for an answer to
the question of how it is that a mortal creature can rival him as a music-maker.
The irony is that being omnipotent and immortal he is unable to understand
that the power of Marsyas’ art is rooted in his vulnerability, a vulnerability
Apollo despises. Unable to feel sympathy or empathy, ignorant of loss, death
and ordinary human/animal emotions Apollo is cut off from the world of
human creativity that is dependent on suffering and destructiveness even as it
endeavours to make reparation for it. Apollo is only capable of annihilating the
animal other in the belief that he can in the process find the other’s talents and
use them for himself. Although he believes his action is directed by the power
of reason, it is a savage act that actually brings him closer to the ‘animal’ other
both within and without that he seeks to dominate.

Structurally the painting has an outer containing membrane of colour that
follows the rose-coloured curve of the king’s cloak to the belly of the dog, across
Midas’ feet to be picked up in the pool of blood and the figure of the musician.
It appears on the lines of his bow, on the pan-pipes hanging in the tree, across
the top of the canvas and down to the shoulder of the Pan figure and back to
the colour of Midas’ cloak. Apollo has his back to this warm skin that contains
the world of the picture. He repudiates it as he looks in towards death. Midas/
Titian, on the other hand, is wrapped in the warmth of this rosy-glow; his body
emerges from it without losing contact with it. By remaining ‘in touch’ Midas
is able to contemplate and render manageable the dangerous and threatening
emotions within the self, to remain alive and hopeful and to contain all that
seeks to be omnipotent by tolerating limits and loving steadfastly. As an artist,
Midas/Titian speaks of the ruthlessness inherent in the pursuit of art, of all that is terrible within us yet is part of the ordinary human process of transforming thought and feeling into art.

Titian creates a canvas replete with the tactile beauty of fur, foliage, clouds and sparkling water as if underscoring the notion that aesthetic pleasure and cruelty are inseparable from the body. He seems to be commenting on the impossibility of the artist bringing the body of his work to fruition without mutilating it. He asks the questions, can psychic interiority, language, aesthetics and ethics be attained without paying the penalty enacted by the knife? Is human subjectivity possible without that cut separating it from the non-human? Is there no alternative to Walter Benjamin's assertion that ‘there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism’? (258).

Midas’ reverie invites the nature writer to contemplate these questions and to consider not simply the centrality of the knife but the desire behind the cutting. Should the knife be repudiated or accepted and balanced by other modes of being? It is the motivation behind the use of the knife that is crucial. Apollo is intent on dehumanising and debasing Marsyas. While Foucault would read therapeutic uses of the knife as a masquerade in which punishment consists, not of flaying, but being forced into a discursive discipline, psychoanalysis insists the self can only be discovered in communication. The price paid for becoming human is to accept the mind being laid open not to the knife but to language.

The ‘knife’ of language possesses a subtlety that enables it to discriminate between layers, to behave in ways that repudiate grasping, prodding or slashing and opt instead to caress. In the caress, there is an approach or address to another skin that is recognised as possessing sensation and that does not hold self and world apart but allows them to mingle and become manifold.

Layers of matter are not separated out by the caress into binary contrasts but experienced as a continuum ranging from dense to delicate where the exploration of folds and pleats reveals dark, dense material to be contiguous with light delicate material. There is a kind of equilibrium, a ‘delicate balance’, or equipoise, in such a caress which is not characterised by passivity on the one side and activity on the other. Instead it is creative, mutual, reciprocated, and actively constituted by both parties.

The caress is not that which delivers up the other as object or animal. The caress is a way of bringing into being that which is touched. It is not the opposite of the knife’s incision, however. Knife and caress are complementary; they stand together in opposition to the violence of no contact or withholding. Lack of any touch is the touch that kills without touching. It is touch that refuses contact.
The very lack of any imprint, mark or trace constitutes a profound and deadly violence. It speaks of the silent cover-up that repudiates all music, all narrative voice.

In his sculpture, Anish Kapoor endeavours to trace a direction that opposes the cover-up by creating doorways that open up new spaces. In ‘Untitled’ (1992) he created a giant monolith of granite with a doorway signifying natural forces in conjunction with human activities and history. By placing your head inside the lintel, Norman Bryson states, you become ‘a being that has never altogether broken its connection to the mineral life of the earth from whose elements your own organic body ultimately derives’ (104-125). Homi Bhabha describes the convex curves or concave funnels of the 1997 ‘Untitled’ as creating ‘a sudden disappearance of surface in a deep, dark hole [that] literally cuts the ground from under our feet’ (Bhabha 24, qtd in Forster 122). At other times his sculptures disrupt the relation of surface to body and undercut:

the difference between what we explore only with our eyes and what we can grasp only through the physical sense of touch, that is, the hypothesis that sculpture belongs entirely to the viewer. With utmost precision, the continuously curving surfaces of the sculptures transform the traditional relationship of surface and body into a continuum.

(Bryson 122)

Skin focuses Anish Kapoor’s imagination in such a way that he has said, ‘there’s a kind of implied unreality about skin that I think is wonderful’ (qtd in Warner 129). He has ‘forever wanted to turn the red of earth and body into sky’ (Warner 131). The ‘skin’ of his Marsyas shimmers with an evanescence reminiscent of the photographs of the earth taken by the Apollo astronauts. It appears to tremble from imaginary breezes moving over its surfaces, to rise and fall with the breath of life from within.

Kapoor is not expressing a desire to turn away from corporeality but to turn away from the broken and horrifying body of chaos, to envision an order where destruction is transformed into creative plenitude. As with Ovid and Titian, this plenitude is associated with maternal materiality and the enfleshment and emergence of bodies. Marina Warner writes of the Marsyas sculpture that:

through the vast and passionate web of crimson skin, the skied body of Marsyas reveals to the viewer the invisible fabric of the world, the very impress of the impalpable forces that shape phenomena, that vibrate and pulse in the air, fold and stratify mountains, stellate snowflakes and cause waves to break in scalloped rills. (132)

There is a vast echoing spaciousness to this work that replaces the terrible, howling void, the winds of interstellar space. The viewer is drawn into a visceral
close-up of the body through throat-like openings and whorled labyrinths like
giant ears. These open into vast, internal spaces in which it seems natural to
imagine the intimate sounds of amplified breathing. The skin envelope becomes
a comforting ‘sound envelope’.

Anzieu has argued that it is a ‘sound envelope’ that constitutes the bodily ego’s
relation to space in terms of breath. Breathing, he claims, is one of the primary
ways by which the nascent self acquires interiority. ‘The auditory sensations’,
he states:

produced when sounds are made are associated with the respiratory
sensations which give the self a sense of being, a volume which empties
and refills itself and prepares the self for its structuring in relation to
the third dimension of space (orientation and distance) and to temporal
dimensions. (157)

The Marsyas sculpture conjures up a sense of the body as an acoustic container
that empties and refills with the voice-producing lungs constantly resonating
with potential sound. It presents a shimmering sound bath that eludes all
possible cover-ups because sound reaches us from everywhere; it surrounds
and passes through us. Sound encompasses the earth with the music of life and
hope. A music structured by the gut-strings of the lyre and produced by flesh.

It holds out to nature writers a promise of writing that is flesh and that refuses
to objectify what it expresses. It seeks to remain passionately in touch with the
more-than-human and to create markings reminiscent of the play of light on
rippling water, the texture of a tree trunk, a palimpsest of growing layers. Of
sap, like breath, rising and falling, releasing songs of place, echoed in the musical
timbre of voice laid down on paper, literally shapely words, lines curving like a
cupped hand around space that appears empty yet reveals something, touched
and held in the cradle of the musical mother.

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Writing in the Anthropocene: 
Idle Chatter or Ecoprophetic Witness?  
KATE RIGBY

A book must be the ax for the frozen sea within us.
Franz Kafka

We must regenerate ourselves if we are to regenerate the earth. ... Our feelings and emotions must be engaged, and engaged on a large scale.
Judith Wright

Two words haunt any ecologically attuned consideration of the historical hour in which our increasingly globalised world currently finds itself: one, which heads this special issue of the Ecological Humanities, is ‘anthropocene’; the other, lurking as a grim potential, or even an unfolding reality, within the notion of the anthropocene is ‘ecocide’. The former term implicates us all in a call to responsibility: the future of Earth, understood as a diverse collectivity of more-than-human life and the conditions in which such life either thrives or fails, we are told, now lies in our human, all-too-human hands. Awesome, and certainly burdensome, though the responsibility connoted by this word may be, the latter term is more troubling, implicating us, and some considerably more than others, as perpetrators of a crime against our Earth others that is at once historically unprecedented and morally unforgivable, and by which we too are now imperiled. Thinking these two terms in conjunction, we are confronted by the question of whether the anthropocene will be the era in which the ecocidal violence that modern industrial civilization has thus far unleashed upon the Earth will culminate in the utter destruction of humanity’s planetary birthplace, the oikos that remains still our only home and the home of the myriad other beings who are our kin; or whether we will manage to pull back from the brink, vouchsafing our Earth others the possibility not merely of a continued existence after their own kind, but perhaps even of a renewed and greater flourishing, as those of our kind, who had come to consider themselves apart from and above the rest, learn to live in a more just and compassionate pattern of relationship with the more-than-human lives in whose midst, and through whose grace, we ourselves exist.

In this article, I want to make a case for the value of writing in the anthropocene in the mode of prophetic witness. Such writing would seek to disclose the catastrophic consequences of continuing on our current ecocidal path and
awaken us to the possibility of another way of thinking and being: one that holds the promise of reconciling urban industrial society with the Earth. The model of prophetic witness that I call upon here is biblical, but I am going to bring it to bear in an ecocritical rereading of a work of modern secular literature: Judith Wright’s ‘Dust’, a poem penned during the Second World War that has acquired a whole new salience in the era of anthropogenic climate change. Before I get there, though, I want to dwell for a moment on the difficulties of this undertaking, and especially the risk that, in the face of the unspeakable horror of an unfolding ecocide, all our fine words might amount to little more than ‘idle chatter’.

It is Theodor Adorno who alerts us to this possibility in writing on the crisis of art in the wake of the Shoah. Let me cite the whole passage from ‘Cultural Criticism and Society’ from which the well-known (and generally misrepresented dictum) on ‘poetry after Auschwitz’ is taken:

> The more total society becomes, the greater the reification of the mind and the more paradoxical its attempt to escape reification on its own. Even the most extreme consciousness of doom threatens to degenerate into idle chatter. Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today. (Prisms 34)

Read in its wider argumentative context, Adorno is not announcing the end of poetry per se here. Rather, he is insisting that if it is not to ‘degenerate into idle chatter,’ literature, along with other forms of art, needs to acknowledge its own failure, both to prevent the unspeakable horror of the Nazi extermination camps and adequately to respond to it in an aesthetic medium. As Elaine Martin has recently argued, Adorno calls for a form of art, which bears witness to its predestined failure, artworks which present the fact that the ‘unrepresentable’ exists. Adorno’s dialectic emphasizes the indispensability of that which it simultaneously deems impossible, it demands the pursuit of that which it deems futile. (11)

If, in George Steiner’s words, the Shoah confronted humanists with the devastating realisation that ‘a man can read Goethe or Rilke in the evening [...] and go to his day’s work at Auschwitz in the morning’ (ix) so too, ecocritics

1 Many thanks to the two anonymous reviewers of this article, whose thoughtful comments and suggestions have been invaluable in helping me to clarify my argument at various points. Needless to say, the remaining infelicities are entirely my own. I am also grateful to the Australian Research Council for providing funding for the research project ‘Imagining the Great South Land’ from which, in part, this article arises.
must acknowledge that a woman might well read Wordsworth or Thoreau in the evening (well, in the unlikely event that she has any time for reading at all), and go to her day’s work for Exxon-Mobil in the morning—and, for that matter, I would not be at all surprised to encounter a Japanese whaling executive with a taste for Basho. And yet, for all that, this of all times is no time to withhold our poetic words from the more-than-human world. We might have grown wary of that hoary old metaphysical abstraction, ‘nature,’ an invention of settler civilisations unknown to hunter-gatherer societies, which, as Plumwood suggested some years ago, we would be able to dispense with altogether in a fully ecological culture (Plumwood, ‘Nature as Agency’): but the plight of Earth’s waters, forests, soils and atmosphere, and of those myriad creatures, human and otherwise, whose life depends upon them, obliges us to utterance, even though we know that our words, no matter how artfully wrought, are bound to be insufficient either to prevent or to bespeak the unprecedented horror of the ecocide of which we ourselves are both victims and perpetrators.

Now, this is tricky territory, so let me attempt to clarify what I am saying here. I certainly do not want to equate the Nazi genocide of the Second World War with the largely unintentional ecocide that looms before us today. Leaving aside for the moment localised exterminations of competitor species, such as the wolf in much of Europe and North America, the mass extinction event in which we now find ourselves appears to constitute something more like collateral damage, an accidental by-product of the industrialisation of the Earth, now almost exclusively under the aegis of an aggressively globalising, if currently rather crest-fallen, capitalism. Yet the relative unconcern—the refusal to witness—with which the fate of non-human others is generally regarded, notwithstanding the efforts of individuals and minority groups, whether that fate is traced in the extinction of whole species or in the day-to-day suffering and death of animals in the meat trade, in laboratories, in recreational hunting, or simply on our blood-spattered roads, holds a clue as to the structural connection—but not, I repeat, equivalence—between genocide and ecocide.

This clue pertains to what poststructuralists term the logic of the Same, or, in Plumwood’s terms, the ‘logic of colonisation’ (Feminism) or of ‘centrism’ (Environmental Culture), which, in instituting a rigid divide between subject and object, self and other, denies ethical considerability to anyone, or any thing, that is excluded from the company of the sovereign self. Relegated to the realm of mere materiality as opposed to privileged sphere of mind, spirit or reason, animals have long been in the front-line of the domination of nature. Indeed,

2 In Problems of Moral Philosophy, Adorno says of Schopenhauer’s critique of Kantian Idealism that he ‘probably suspected that the establishment of total rationality as the supreme object principle of mankind might well spell the continuation of that blind domination of nature whose most obvious and tangible expression was to be found in the exploitation and maltreatment of animals’ (215).
within idealist thought, as Adorno once observed, ‘animals play virtually the same role that the Jews played for the fascist system’ (Beethoven 123). In that sense one might well say that, ‘Auschwitz begins whenever someone looks at a slaughterhouse and thinks: they’re only animals’.3

It is, of course, as a response to Auschwitz, and the annihilatory logic that helped to make it possible, that the thinking of alterity acquires its ethico-political urgency in the contemporary thought of Emmanuel Levinas, among others. Yet in restricting ethical response and responsibility to the human other, in whose face and speech alone we are called to account, Levinas’s ultimately ‘anthropologocentric’ project, as Silvia Benso terms it, perpetuates aspects of the negative structure that it seeks to overcome (Benso 136). The lesson of Auschwitz runs deeper, and demands more of us, than most major continental philosophers (with the exception Derrida4 and, before him, Adorno) have yet realized. Bringing down the divide that allows certain human groups to be categorised as available for use, abuse and potential annihilation is not enough. The hyperseparation that segregates the human other from other others, as ecophilosophers have long argued,5 must also be called into question. Now that we are being forced to recognise the ecidical, as well as genocidal, implications of the logic of the Same, we are called to extend our thinking of alterity in the direction of an ecological ethics, in which we are accountable to more than only human others. This constitutes one of the central challenges of the anthropocene, not only for philosophy, but also for literature and other forms of art.

Before I turn to a further consideration of this challenge with respect to writing specifically, it is necessary to register another apparent difference between the genocidal violence connoted metonymically by the name of Auschwitz, and the ecocidal violence of the present: namely, the fact that the latter is as yet incomplete, remaining in potentia, as a possible future horizon, rather than a catastrophe that had already come to pass. So, whereas Adorno was concerned with the plight of poetry ‘after Auschwitz’, our concern is with how to write in the midst of an unfolding disaster, the catastrophic culmination could perhaps yet be forestalled. This is not to say, however, that genocide is a thing of the past: far from it. Moreover, genocide and ecocide are not infrequently entangled, not only in theory, as suggested above, but also in historical practice, above all in

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3 Translation of ‘Auschwitz beginnt da, wo jemand auf Schlachthof steht und denkt: Es sind ja nur Tiere’, attributed to Adorno in Blanke (48), but as I have not been able to track down the source of this quote (widely cited in animal liberation literature), it could be apocryphal. On the ethics of animals in Adorno, see Savage; Gerhardt.

4 See especially The Animal That Therefore I Am.

5 Among the first to do so, at opposite ends of the world, were the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess (1973) and the Australian philosophers, Val and Richard Routley (1973 and 1979), later Val Plumwood and Richard Sylvan. Perhaps the most fully elaborated ecophilosophical critique of anthropologocentrism (or the ‘logic of colonisation’) is to be found in Plumwood, Environmental Culture.
the context of colonisation. As Deborah Rose puts it, settler societies ‘are built on a dual war: a war against Nature and a war against the natives’ (Reports 34). In Australia, the devastating legacy of this dual war includes:

the loss of around 90 per cent of the original Aboriginal population, the loss of all but a small number of Aboriginal languages, and the loss of earlier cultural coherence of the continent through Aboriginal networks of cultural exchange. It includes the loss of large numbers of plant and animal species, including the highest rate of mammalian extinctions in the contemporary world [...] the regular loss of topsoil [...] large amounts of agricultural land [...] to salinity [and] of pastoral land [...] to erosion and scalding. (Rose, Reports 35-6)

In view of the geographical and social stratification of the impacts of climate change, whereby many of the most vulnerable communities and peoples, such as those of Bangladesh and several Pacific Island nations, are among those least responsible for the carbon emissions currently warming our planet, we might well need to reckon with new kinds of entanglement between ecocide and genocide.

In my earlier work on literature and ecology, I have argued for a form of ‘negative ecopoetics’ which sings the praises of the living Earth in an aesthetic frame that acknowledges the impossibility of capturing its phenomenality in writing, or even of responding entirely adequately to its call (‘Earth’; ‘Writing’). Such writing, in Mary Oliver’s words, ‘would put all its money on the power of suggestion’ (53), enticing us to lay aside our reading and seek out the kinds of embodied experience of the living Earth that might strengthen us in our desire to defend our Earth others, human and otherwise, against the forces of injustice and destruction—a desire whose fulfilment nonetheless necessarily returns us once more to the world of words (which, in truth, we have never truly or wholly left behind). Here, I want to turn my attention towards another mode of ecopoetic negativity; one that is concerned less with praise than critique, leaning more towards lamentation than celebration. Here, I take my cue, not from Mary Oliver, but from Franz Kafka, who once declared in a letter to his friend Oskar Pollak:

I think we ought to read only books that bite and sting us. If the book we are reading doesn’t shake us awake like a blow to the skull, why bother reading it in the first place? So it can make us happy? Good God, we’d be just as happy if we had no books at all [...] A book must be the ax for the frozen sea within us. (36)

Kafka’s drastic, not to say violent imagery, recalls the voice of the Hebrew prophets, whose language of lamentation and forewarning was pitched at
breaking through the psychic numbness engendered by what biblical scholar Walter Brueggeman (2001) terms ‘royal consciousness’: a way of thinking and being that renders us insouciant towards suffering, heedless of injustice, content with affluence, and dangerously unaware of our own imperilment. Writing in the anthropocene, it is precisely such biting, stinging words of prophetic imagination that might just be able to prevent our concern about ecocide from degenerating into ‘idle chatter’.

According to the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber (in whose journal Der Jude, incidentally, Kafka’s devastating critique of human racism, ‘A Report to an Academy’, was first published in October 1917), the ancient Hebrew prophetic tradition, which was carried forward into the Christian Gospels in the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, differs from both Jewish and Christian apocalyptic writing of the late Hellenic period in the position that it assumes towards ‘the historical hour’. While apocalyptic shares with prophetic the revelation that humans, for all their self-proclaimed apartness, belong ultimately to a more-than-human community of fate, it tends to constitute history as pre-determined in its outcome, leaving human agents little option other than to prepare themselves for the millennial end that heralds a glorious new beginning. By contrast, the prophetic voice insists on the ever-present possibility of a change in direction in the present, in the absence of which there is absolutely no promise of redemption. As Terry Eagleton puts it, ‘[t]he role of the prophet is not to predict the future, but to remind the people that if they carry on as they are doing, the future will be exceedingly bleak’ (175).

The central trope of prophetic writing, in Buber’s analysis, is that of turning and returning, on the part of both the people and their God, whose relationship is conceived as dialogical. The prophetic voice, moreover, while understood as uttering the speech of heaven, does not speak from a place of purity: the prophet is both implicated in and wounded by the wrongdoing that is shown to be driving his or her world headlong into catastrophe. ‘There is in the prophetic voice,’ writes Deborah Rose, citing Susan Handelman, ‘an ‘ethical self-exposure’ in which subjectivity lays bare its vulnerability, and opens itself consciously to others’ (‘On history’, 165). Prophetic speech is inspired by the imaginative capacity to see through and beyond those conventional attitudes, assumptions and patterns of behaviour that engender or support oppression and wrongdoing; and it is propelled by the hunger for justice, underpinned by compassion, that cannot tolerate complacency in the face of another’s suffering. Breaching the fortress of royal consciousness, the mindset of mastery and privilege that renders us insouciant to the suffering of others and unmindful of our own vulnerability, the prophet speaks with the voice of grief; but also,
implicitly or explicitly, of hope. Prophetic speech incites lamentation in order to engender transformation, at the same time that it warns of what will ensue if the people fail to heed the call.

In a recent presentation at the Two Fires Festival of Arts and Activism in Braidwood (March 2009), I discussed a poem by Judith Wright, in whose honour this festival was founded, as an exemplary work of ‘ecoprophetic’ witness, and I would like to conclude this article by returning to that discussion of Wright’s biting and stinging lyric, ‘Dust’ (Collected Poems, 23-4):6

This sick dust, spiraling with the wind,  
is harsh as grief’s taste in our mouths  
and has eclipsed the small sun.  
The remnant earth turns evil,  
the steel-shocked earth has turned against the plough  
and runs with wind all day, and all night  
sighs in our sleep against the windowpane.

Wind was kinder once, carrying cloud  
like a waterbag on his shoulder; sun was kinder,  
hardening the good wheat brown as a strong man.  
Earth was kinder, suffering fire and plough,  
breeding the unaccustomed harvest.  
Leaning in our doorway together  
watching the birdcloud shadows,  
the fleetwing windshadows travel our clean wheat  
we thought ourselves rich already.  
We counted the beautiful money  
and gave it in our hearts to the child asleep,  
who must never break his body  
against the plough and the stubborn rock and tree.

But the wind rises; but the earth rises,  
running like an evil river; but the sun grows small,  
and when we turn to each other, our eyes are dust  
and our words dust.  
Dust has overtaken our dreams that were  
wider and richer than wheat under the sun,  
and war’s eroding gale scatters our sons  
with a million other grains of dust.

6 A number of ecocritical discussions of Wright’s work have appeared over the past decade, including ‘An Ecological Vision: Judith Wright’ in Bennett; Zeller; Kohn; Brady, Kutchins, Rees and Sharp in a special section of LocalGlobal (Volume 3, 2007) on the legacy of Judith Wright; and Gifford. I had also discussed this poem from another perspective at an earlier Two Fires Festival, and I am very grateful to my interlocutors on that occasion, especially Terry Gifford and Stuart Cooke, for their comments on the earlier version.
O sighing at the blistered door, darkening the evening star,
the dust accuses. Our dream was the wrong dream,
our strength was the wrong strength.
Weary as we are, we must make a new choice,
a choice more difficult than resignation,
more urgent than our desire of rest at the end of the day.
We must prepare the land for a difficult sowing,
a long and hazardous growth of a strange bread,
that our son's sons may harvest and be fed.7

Although Wright did not consider herself to be a Christian, or any other kind of theist for that matter, her poetry is profoundly indebted to biblical imagery (just as her politics clearly owed much to the core biblical values of justice and compassion). In the case of ‘Dust,’ a poem that she penned in the war-torn, drought-ridden summer of 1942-3 (Brady, South 91), it is possible to discern an echo of one particular prophetic motif, namely that of the drying up or mourning of the land (the Hebrew verb used in these biblical passages can mean both desiccation and grief). In the Hebrew Bible, the dialogical relationship between people and God is nearly always triangulated by the figure of the land or earth (erets), and in the Book of Jeremiah, it is the grieving earth itself that is said to bear the brunt, and thereby also mark the measure, of human wrong-doing. In the drying up of the land and in the dying of their fellow creatures, on the land and sometimes also in the sea,8 the people stand accused of breaking their covenant with God: ‘because of this,’ we read in Jeremiah 4:28, ‘the earth will mourn/dry up, and the heavens above become dark’ (translated Val Billingham’). Admittedly, in such biblical texts it is generally unclear as to whether the land has itself been wronged, or whether its drought-ridden state has been wrought by YHWH purely in order to punish the people who depend upon its bounty. In at least one passage in Jeremiah, however, it appears that the desolation of the land is indeed a direct result of a human wrongdoing, in the guise, moreover, of a failure to cherish it: in the King James translation of

7 I am grateful to Wright’s publisher, HarperCollins, for allowing me to quote this poem in full in this article.
8 E.g. Hosea 4:3 reads ‘Therefore shall the land mourn, and every one that dwelleth therein shall languish, with the beasts of the field, and with the fowls of heaven; yea, the fishes of the sea shall also be taken away’ (Holy Bible, King James Version); or, in the New Revised Standard Version of The Green Bible (the publication of which is in itself a sign of hope, insofar as the ‘greening’ of Christianity, along with many other faiths, both new and old, could play a part in pulling the global community back from the brink): ‘Therefore the land mourns, and all who live in it languish; together with the wild animals and the birds of the air, even the fish of the sea are perishing’.
9 I am grateful to Val Billingham, a graduate student at the Melbourne College of Divinity, for alerting me to the significance of this figure in Jeremiah, and for pointing out that the Hebrew word commonly translated as ‘mourns’ can also mean ‘dry up’. I am even more indebted to my own DMin student at the Melbourne College of Divinity, Janet Morgan, for introducing me to the work of Brueggeman and for conceptualizing the ecoprophetic voice. Jan’s thesis is entitled ‘Earth’s Cry’. For a more historical discussion of the Hebrew prophets, see Heschel.
Jeremiah 12:11, YHWH says of the land through the voice of the prophet: ‘They have made it desolate, and being desolate it mourneth unto me; the whole land is made desolate, because no man layeth it to heart’.10

The prophetic voice is called forth by the cry of the oppressed, and in Jeremiah, it is the earth itself that calls out, communicating its distress in desiccation. And so it is too in Wright’s ecoprophetic poem, ‘Dust’. The cry, which the prophet apprehends and mediates, is an indication that something is drastically wrong. The speaker of Wright’s poem, who hears the earth sighing all night ‘against the windowpane,’ if only in sleep, and so perhaps unconsciously, initially locates the source of the wrong in the land itself: ‘The remnant earth turns evil,’ laments the dismayed farming woman whose address we hear in this poem. In the very next line, however, we are given a hint that the land might actually be the victim rather than the agent of this wrong, for the earth that ‘has turned against the plough’ is said to have been ‘steel-shocked’. Later in the poem, as the speaker moves towards a revised assessment of what is amiss, a metaphoric association is drawn between the loss of topsoil from the ploughed land in the drought and the deaths of men on the battlefields of the war; men, who are identified emotively from the maternal perspective of the speaker as ‘sons’: ‘and war’s eroding gale scatters our sons/with a million other grains of dust’. In light of this linkage, we might hear in ‘steel-shocked’ an echo of the World War One expression ‘shell-shocked,’ and in this echo, a suggestion that the agricultural landscape is itself a battle-field of sorts.11

This is not how the speaker initially speaks of the land, though, in recalling happier times: ‘Wind was kinder once, carrying cloud/like a waterbag on his shoulder; sun was kinder,/hardening the good wheat brown as a strong man’. Yet once again in the following lines there are hints that this ‘kindness,’ that is to say, the amenability of the land to the production of wheat, was not so much gifted as extorted: ‘Earth was kinder, suffering fire and plough,/breeding the unaccustomed harvest’ (my italics). Here, the connotations of ‘steel-shocked’ are reinforced, and we are reminded that the earth that was now ‘running with the wind’ had once been accustomed to a very different kind of treatment: indeed, as Wright would later come to recognize, a kinder treatment, namely from those Indigenous landholders from whom the speaker’s people (who were also, of course, the poet’s12) had stolen it.

10 Biblical scholars will hasten to point out that this is not necessarily a particularly accurate translation: the currently most authoritative version, reads ‘They have made it a desolation; desolate, it mourns to me. The whole land is made desolate,/but no one lays it to heart’ (The Green Bible). It is the King James Version of the Bible that is of most interest to literary scholars, however, both as a canonical text in its own right and as an influential intertext for the work of English-speaking artists and writers.
11 For a recent discussion of this common motif in Australian settler culture, see Robin 2009.
12 See especially Wright, Cry of the Dead and Born of Conquerors.
If, at first, the speaker mistakenly perceives the wrong that she intuits as arising from, rather being suffered by, the land, it is because she is still blinkered by dominant ways of thinking, and in particular by that thinking which legitimates human domination of the earth (along with settler domination of colonized peoples and an array of other social hierarchies). Wright’s later acquaintance, the feminist ecophilosopher Val Plumwood, referred to this dualistic and hierarchical way of thinking as the ‘standpoint of mastery’. In ‘Dust’, such a standpoint is implicit in the speaker’s recollection of her former aspirations with respect to the land: ‘Leaning in our doorway together/watching the birdcloud shadows,/the fleetwing windshadows travel our clean wheat/we thought ourselves rich already’. Claimed as private property, the colonized earth is valued primarily as a source of economic wealth and a vehicle of upward social mobility, by means of which the speaker and her husband had hoped to free their son from rural labour, which is now construed explicitly as entailing considerable struggle with a recalcitrant land: ‘We counted the beautiful money/and gave it in our hearts to the child asleep,/who must never break his body/against the plough and the stubborn rock and tree’. While the speaker claims our sympathy here for the hardship that she and her people have suffered in pursuit of a dream that is now being dashed both by the war that is claiming their sons’ lives and by the drought that is ruining their harvest, it is made clear that their calculation of future happiness is founded on the standpoint of mastery, resting as it does upon the assumption that they would ultimately claim victory in their battle with the land (the unspoken battle for the land evidently being assumed to have been won already).

In reducing Earth to the status of a mere resource under human sway we become insouciant to other-than-human suffering. Just as royal consciousness silences the cry of oppressed peoples, the standpoint of human mastery silences Earth’s cry. What this poem traces is the moment when such silencing mechanisms begin to break down: ‘But the wind rises; but the earth rises,/running like an evil river; but the sun grows small,/and when we turn to each other, our eyes are dust/and our words dust’. In the opening stanza, the dust was described as ‘harsh as grief’s taste in our mouth,’ a simile that creates an association between the harshness of the desiccated land and the harshness of the grief felt by the speaker for her own loss, while implying that the association is that of cause and effect: the speaker grieves because the remnant earth, as she puts it, has ‘turned evil’. Here, once again, evil is seen to be manifest in the land, as the dust runs ‘like an evil river’ in place of the waterways that have run dry. Now, though, the earlier simile has been displaced by a more intimate metaphoric association between the human subject and the dessicated soil; one that intimates a dawning realization that it is not only the land that is eroding, but the perspective from which her people had hitherto viewed and spoken of it: ‘our eyes are dust/and our words dust’. As the standpoint of mastery begins to crumble, it becomes
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apparent that in its drying out, the land too is calling out in grief, and the
speaker is forced to recognize her own culpability in the wrong to which the
dust bears witness: 'O sighing at the blistered door, darkening the evening star,/the dust accuses'.

Grieving now not for herself alone, but with and for the wider Earth community,
human and otherwise, that she and her kind have wronged, the speaker is
finally forced to admit that, 'Our dream was the wrong dream,/our strength was
the wrong strength'. This recognition has come too late to avert disaster. Yet,
in keeping with the biblical tradition upon which Wright draws at the same
time that she departs from it, there remains the possibility of going forward
otherwise, incorporating a new covenant, if not with God, then with Earth
itself.

In the final lines of the poem, addressed to a community yet to come, ‘land’
bears a double burden of meaning: that which must be prepared ‘for a difficult
sowing’ is not only the land that demands to be farmed otherwise, farmed that
is, with a view to making a living with rather than from it; it is also the self
that requires to be thought otherwise, such that (recalling the Parable of the
Sower from Matthew 13: 24-30), ‘sowing’ might be read as the imparting of a
truth that not all, perhaps, will be ready, willing or able to receive. Similarly,
the recollection of the Eucharistic feast carried by ‘bread’ suggests that what is
at issue here is the soul no less than the soil: the anticipated ‘bread’ might then
be understood not only as a source of nourishment, but as a sacrament of sorts,
seeded by the poetic word in its radical critique of royal consciousness. The
possibility of reconciliation that is proffered at the end of this ecoprophetic verse
is nonetheless not conventionally Christian, the qualifier ‘strange’ prefiguring
the necessary emergence of ‘new relationships and forms of thought not yet
realized,’ as Wright later put it in her essay ‘The Writer and the Crisis’ (1952).13
In this way, ‘Dust’ calls upon its readers to have the courage to surrender familiar
patterns of thinking and being in favour of cultivating a different sense of self,
incorporating a more life-sustaining way of being-in-relationship, not so much
with a God beyond, but with one another and with the land: only thus might
the flourishing of future generations be assured.14

Although it was written over half a century ago, I believe that this poem speaks
powerfully to our present historical moment of eco-climatic imperilment. Today,
Wars that will increasingly be fought over Earth’s dwindling ‘resources’ threaten

13 Here, Wright uses the metaphor of ‘bread’ with specific reference to language, understood as ‘the vast
symbol of man’s relationship to the universe […] It is at once the bread he lives by, and the seed wheat from
which will come the bread of future generations, for in it lie potential new relationships and forms of thought
not yet realized’ (Because 175).
14 For a socio-economic perspective on what such a transformation might look like, see e.g. Gerda Roelvink
to proliferate, ‘scattering our sons with a million other grains of dust’. Today, too, ‘the dust accuses,’ not only on the drying agricultural land of southeastern Australia, but on a planetary scale: the dust accuses, for instance, when it blows from the parched plains of sub-Saharan Africa, where the monsoon has failed yet again on account of the polluted atmosphere of Europe, and, crossing the Atlantic, enters the lungs of children in the Caribbean, who sicken with asthma, for which only the wealthy can afford medicine (Schmidt). Now, moreover, it is also the wind that accuses, and never more so than when the cyclonic storms and rising seas cooked up by we who feed on fossil fuels bear down upon the poor of far lower carbon-emitting climes.

We need the help of scientists, both natural and social, to disclose such ills, and the engagement of activists, politicians and policy makers to redress them. But if we remain walled in behind the battlements of royal consciousness, we shall be ill-prepared to make not only the effort, but, let’s face it, the sacrifice, that would be necessary to right such wrongs and forestall major planetary catastrophe. As Wright observed in a prescient lecture to the National Parks Association in Canberra in 1968, ‘we must regenerate ourselves if we are to regenerate the earth,’ and for that to occur, ‘[o]ur feelings and emotions must be engaged, and engaged on a large scale’ (*Because* 206). To break through the silence imposed by the standpoint of mastery we need to attend to the poetic voice of ecoprophets such as Judith Wright. She might have had poor hearing: but to a greater extent than any other major Australian writer of her generation, Wright had an ear for the cry of the oppressed, human and otherwise. Responding to that cry in poems such as ‘Dust,’ she calls her readers to mourn with and for the land and its diverse denizens. Such grief alone has the capacity to bring down the walls of human self-enclosure that render us insouciant towards other-than-human suffering, and, in so doing, open the flood-gates of justice and compassion. For, as Glenda Cloughley writes in ‘The Gifts of the Furies’, a contemporary choral work of ecoprophetic witness that premiered in Canberra on 29 March 2009, ‘lament is the start of renewal’.

The challenge for writing in the anthropocene, in the shadow of ecocide, then, is to find new ways of raising our voices from the level of ‘idle chatter’ to that of biting and stinging ecoprophetic witness. For unless we can hear Earth’s cry and respond with the kind of grief that energizes just and compassionate action, in recognition of our own complicity in a wrong that now imperils us all, there will be in the future no land, anywhere, in which ‘our son’s sons may harvest and be fed’.

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15 This talk was subsequently published by the Australian Conservation Foundation under the title ‘Conservation as an Emerging Concept’. I am grateful to Don Henry, current Executive Director of the ACE, who cited this essay in his talk at the 2009 Two Fires Festival.

16 A recording of the premiere performances of ‘The Gifts of the Furies’ has since been released on DVD and is available for purchase from the Chorus of Women via their website: http://www.chorusofwomen.org/
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REVIEWS
‘The Legend’ Fifty Years on…

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Reviewed by Nathan Hollier

In 2008 Russel Ward’s The Australian Legend turned fifty. At the University of New England, where Ward worked for many years, an Australian Historical Association conference in September 2007 included a major focus on Ward and his work. All but two of the full-length articles published here, the editors tell us, are based on papers presented at that conference.

Clearly, Ward’s text has been enormously popular—especially for a work of history—and influential intellectually as well, even if, in more recent years, as a point of departure rather than a still accepted authority. But does this work still have anything vital to say? ‘We offer this volume’, state Bongiorno and Roberts, ‘as a reassessment of Russel Ward’s The Australian Legend [and] a provocation to the closer study of Australian historiography and intellectual history’. But more reasons for reading and thinking about Ward and his work emerge.

Russel’s son Charlie, Robin Gollan, David Kent, Jeremy Beckett, John Ryan and Alan Grocott draw on their personal recollections of Ward to evoke the generosity, passion, energy, humour and commitment to justice that they found characteristic of him. ‘Dad’, Charlie tells us, ‘saw Australia as the greatest, youngest, most precious and precarious stage on which decency and compassion might assert themselves, and all the twists and turns of our political and social history as tracks made on the long road to the full blossoming of a self-aware and self-authored nationhood’ (3). Kent observes: ‘The Australian Legend was “history from below” before anyone made the term or the approach fashionable’ (9).

Angela Woollacott sets out to ‘discuss two specific issues: one concerns Ward’s time of writing, and the other is that of locating Ward as the founder of what we might call the “Armidale school” of Australian historiography’. She argues ‘Perhaps the gender dynamics of the 1950s need to be added to those of the
1890s to explain the singular tenacity of mateship within Australian national mythology’, and traces Ward’s influence on historians Miriam Dixson, John Ferry and Alan Atkinson (28–29).

Roberts places Ward’s work on convicts in its historical context, noting ‘what distinguishes Ward from other writers up to that point is that he turned away from the customary discussion of convict character and morality … in order to understand how they reacted to the Australian environment and how that reaction shaped an outlook that permeated Australian social traditions and, much later, its literary traditions’ (54–55).

John Merritt recounts using Ward’s ‘legendary’ Australian as a yardstick by which to measure the culture of shearers and other members of the AWU, and later that of high-country graziers, the last of Paterson’s ‘men from Snowy River’. In each case, he found significant divergence from, but also overlap with, the legendary archetype Ward set out. He finds this conclusion ‘reassuring’: ‘I have always thought that Ward was onto something’ and, ‘so far as I am concerned, there has never been anything wrong with Ward’s assumption’ that ‘a fair percentage of white Australians … did want to signify to themselves, and to those among them who wished to create an antipodean Britannia, that life in Australia was going to be different’. Merritt argues, in addition: ‘I do not think there is much wrong with (Ward’s) account of how the sectional self-image subsequently won a wider currency in Australian society’ (69–70).

Lisa Featherstone ‘explores the conjunctions between bush mythologies and masculinity in late-nineteenth-century Australia, through a focus on sexuality’. Drawing on medical literature, in particular, she suggests that Australian masculinity in the period Ward wrote about ‘was not necessarily dominated by bush ideals’ (90).

Alan Atkinson concludes that Ward ‘still has a great deal to teach’, though, it seems, indirectly: ‘For all its dated idealism … the late nineteenth-century as it appeared to Ward, and also to [Vance] Palmer, still has its uses as a pivotal moment for the broad integrity of the Australian story’ (94).

Anne Coote, examining ‘the growth of national consciousness in NSW’ (106), criticises aspects of Ward’s historical account of cultural development in the colonial period and argues, interestingly, for the existence of distinctive, state-based nationalisms. Relatedly, though less rigorously, Lyndon Megarrity explores ‘the notion … which Ward briefly mentioned but did not investigate … that Queensland was the most “Australian” colony’ (123).

Ben Maddison, like Woollacott, sets out to consider the influence on Ward’s work of this historian’s own culture and society. He suggests that ‘the contemporary assimilationist context exerted a more powerful structural influence on Ward’s
argument than is usually acknowledged’ (141), but, less usefully, searches mainly for this influence in Nino Culotta’s *They’re a Weird Mob*, rather than in Ward’s work.

Joy Damousi, in perhaps the most insightful and creative essay of the collection, notes that ‘the use of speech and language as the basis for historical argument was uncharacteristic for historians (in 1958), and some fifty years later it remains an under-explored aspect of historical research’ (155). Consciously building on Ward’s thesis she argues ‘that there was a gradual evolution of Australian language—much like that of the English language as a whole. And, like its English counterparts throughout the world, Australian English did not evolve uniformly, but changed and metamorphosed to reflect the various layers of society, the roles of men and women, and the demarcation of races (169–170)’.

Drew Cottle provides the most detailed account of the biographical, social and institutional bases of Ward’s thought and politics and tries also to explain the ‘extraordinary impact and enduring significance’ of *The Australian Legend*, through reference to it as ‘an attempt to capture a version of the Australian national character for the Left … at a time of anti-communist hysteria’ (184–185). He also suggests, however, for me a little confusingly, that this was not a populist project.

Carl Bridge’s piece on ‘Anglo-Australian Attitudes’, perhaps written for an English audience, is part memoir, part biography, part performance (‘Let us raise an imaginary glass of red to that wild colonial boy, our old mate Russel Ward—gentleman, scholar, atheist, communist—and above all, wise old bastard’ (200)), and part argument: ‘Ward’s *Australian Legend* was quintessentially an expression and product of profound Anglo-Australian attitudes’ (199). Bridge suggests, seemingly contradictorily, that while the ‘historical moment’ of these attitudes ‘has now passed … the legendary Australian (Ward) described is still indelibly at the core of our cultural DNA’ (199).

Bongiorno addresses the famous attack on Ward and his work by Humphrey McQueen, and Ward’s, and others’, responses, in a piece which draws on very interesting original research but ultimately side-steps the question of whether or not this attack was justified: ‘the growing rancour between McQueen and Ward was more about how to behave as a left-wing historian than the content of either *The Australian Legend* or *A New Britannia*’ (216). In similarly diplomatic vein, Bongiorno suggests that *The Australian Legend* should be recognised as an important work because so many subsequent scholars have felt the need to attack it.

The last word is given to McQueen, though if the editors and conference organisers were hoping for further insight into, or reflection on, his argument
with Ward, they would have been disappointed. Instead, McQueen considers building and construction workers, mainly in the nineteenth century, as Wardian ‘improvising nomads’. In a characteristically wide-ranging piece utilising obscure historical records and explicitly Marxist political economy, McQueen advances the formulation that ‘The crux of the Legend is not a divide between the city and the bush, but rather their interactions within the conflicts between wage-labour and capital’ (250).

‘Culture’, as Raymond Williams explained in his classic accounts of this idea, can refer to the ideals of a people or to the actual lived experience of them. In practice, the connections and distinctions between these ideals and activities can be difficult to determine. Ward, it seems to me, valuably identifies the ideals of a people: broadly, the common or working-class Australians of his time. As Richard White wrote in 1981, this was ‘the last great re-statement of the character of the Australian type’ (154). Ward’s explanation of the actual social and historical bases of these ideals, on the other hand, as numerous historians have noted, was, at best, limited. In particular, he failed to acknowledge the extent to which the ideals of the typical bushmen were shaped by people other than the bushmen themselves—people in the city, for instance—and by conscious and unconscious silences (about racial violence, especially) and exclusions (most obviously of women, non-whites, and homosexuals).

Arguably, however, Ward’s text remains important, and not just as a work of 1950s cultural studies, because the Australian cultural ideals he identified were in the past and remain now real potential bases for individual and social behaviour. As right-wing populists like John Howard and Les Murray have recognised, the ‘legendary’ cultural ideals and codes tend to connect with the self-understanding of many Australians and especially the predominantly white working class or ‘mainstream’.

It is instructive to remember here that Ward wrote during a time of vehement anti-communism and that, unlike many radical intellectuals of his own generation and of McQueen’s ‘new’ left, he never thought a revolution in Australia was likely. In that sense he may have been more realistic than some of his critics.

To an extent the question of whether or not there is anything of value in Ward’s text is the question of whether there is and has been anything of value in ‘mainstream’, white Australian working-class culture. And reconciling ‘old’ and ‘new’ left approaches to this question is a vital task (as Cottle notes, Ward’s detractors ‘have come from both right and left, although the former predominated before 1970, the latter afterwards’ (182)). After all, the vilification of progressive politics as ‘elitist’, so characteristic of the Howard era and the two decades of right-wing cultural politics that preceded it, was partially enabled by this distance between left and liberal academia and the cultural ‘mainstream’.
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Work Cited

Orientalism and its Stereotypes

Chinese in Australian Literature, 1888-1988
By Ouyang Yu
Cambria Press, 558pp, US$139.95, 2008
ISBN: 978-1-60497-516-1

Reviewed by Deborah Madsen

Ouyang Yu is best known for his poetry, fiction, translations, and editorship of the Chinese-language literary journal Otherland which he co-founded in 1994. This book is a revised version of Ouyang’s doctoral thesis which he completed at La Trobe University in the early 1990s. He mentions in the Introduction that he submitted a proposal for the book to Cambridge University Press in 1995. This history is important because the book does show its age: when Ouyang seeks to establish a parallel between his effort to study representations of Chinese immigrants in white Australian fiction and similar Chinese-American studies, the books he cites date from the middle part of the twentieth century, bibliographical references throughout the book are similarly dated, and following the conclusion is a brief discussion, entitled ‘Author’s Comment,’ in which Ouyang fills in the gap between 1994 when he completed the research for the book and its publication date of 2008. Unfortunately, this kind of postscript is just not the same as updating the scholarship and theoretical contexts of the entire project.

It is in Ouyang’s methodology, particularly its lack of substantive theoretical engagement with his subject, that the real weakness of the book lies. He explains that he brings to the project his experience and intellectual background as a person of Chinese descent who was educated in the PRC until coming to Australia as a doctoral student in 1991. He claims: ‘With my experience in and knowledge of Chinese culture, my voice will certainly contribute to the understanding of the Chinese. Where Australian works of fiction directly involve China and Chinese experiences, I can read them from within the culture they claim to represent, testing them against my own experience’ (5). But the culture represented is not Chinese—they are Australian representations of Australian racial attitudes that constitute Ouyang’s subject. This is a fundamental confusion and one that leads to the expectation that perhaps this study will do little more than expose and deplore anti-Chinese sentiments and policies that are no secret in Australian (literary) history. And when Ouyang confesses that he received no theoretical
training in China and had to adopt ‘Western theories, such as Edward Said’s *Orientalism*’ (6) during his doctoral studies in Australia, then concerns about the rigour of his study are hardly put to rest. The resolution of the methodological problem of cultural relativism is achieved in a disturbing way when Ouyang dismisses as ‘nonsensical’ these concerns with the observation: ‘Now that I am a naturalised Australian, writing creatively as a novelist and poet within the literature, I certainly am in an advantageous position to offer Australians my perspectives by interlacing the work with my own writings as a challenge to *their* reading’ (6, original emphasis). This positioning as an ‘insider outsider’ does not persuade, especially when the claim to ‘insider’ status is based on a certificate of naturalisation alone. Cultural differences cannot be dismissed so lightly; cultural relativism as a methodology for literary study needs careful and nuanced representation.

The book begins in 1888, the year of the Second Intercolonial Conference which determined upon a policy to exclude Chinese immigrants from Australia and ends in the year of the bicentenary. After the historical and theoretical opening section, the second part discusses representations of Chinese in the work of *Bulletin* writers, other Anglo-Australians, and concludes with a discussion of representations characterised by what Ouyang calls ‘positive Orientalism’. This ‘positive Orientalism’, in the discussion of Henry Lawson and Charles Cooper’s work, provides an exception to the Orientalist representations of the post-Federation period, the heyday of the White Australia Policy, which is the topic of the third part of the book. The fourth part takes us from 1949 (marking the Communist victory in the PRC but the post-World War II period in Australia) to the bicentenary of 1988 with an emphasis upon political and multicultural literary trends. Unfortunately, Ouyang’s study stops just at the beginning of the burgeoning of Chinese Australian writing in particular and Asian Australian literature in general that characterises the contemporary Australian literary scene. Thus, the book is an historical artefact in several senses.

Having said that, the opening chapter provides a very useful abbreviated historical account of Chinese migration to Australia, documented with numbers of migrants in specific historical periods and the legislative response of the colonies. This history is divided into the periods that Ouyang uses to structure his book, 1888-1901, 1902-1949, 1950-1988, so the historical overview helps to clarify the contexts in which literary texts were produced. When we turn to the second, theoretical, overview then some of the methodological issues mentioned above become urgent. Ouyang’s account of Edward Said’s work does not take into consideration the substantial scholarship that has been published in response to *Orientalism* and other works. Indeed, Ouyang reduces the idea of Orientalism to ‘negative’ (the Chinese as ‘inferior and backward’) and ‘positive’ (where the Chinese are depicted as ‘superior and civilized’ [38]).
These categories are then related to historical change in ways that are simplistic, such as the claim that, in figures such as Ah Soon and Cheon the Cook, Henry Lawson and Mrs Aeneas Gunn ‘stressed these qualities [of servility and loyalty to their masters] because the time had moved from a period of fierce exclusion to a less severe period of assimilation’ (41). The ‘because’ in this claim asserts a logical, causal connection between literary figures and public sentiments that needs to be argued and rationalized with a theory of how literary meanings relate to meanings circulating in public discourse. The naïve reflection model that Ouyang assumes but does not argue undermines the value of the literary patterns he reveals.

These stereotypes, which defy historical change by persisting in Australian representations of Chinese characters over the course of a century, require analysis and explication. But when Ouyang turns to the issue of racism, it is as what he calls ‘a valid theoretical approach’ (43). It is difficult to imagine how racism can be a theoretical approach to literature until Ouyang invokes the context of nationalism. Racism as a key discursive component of Australian nationalism has been discussed by Ien Ang with great perspicacity; the relations between racism and territoriality have been illuminated by the work of Ghassan Hage: neither is mentioned in this book although Orientalism and the historical experiences of Asian Australians are central to their work. Instead, the reflection model dominates and produces false problems like the following: ‘One question that raises itself is whether any racism remains after the dismantling of the White Australia policy in the late 1960s and the establishment of Sino-Australian diplomatic relations in the 1970s’ (46). That legislative and foreign policy change should necessarily produce a change in the public sphere that would, in turn, be expressed in literary forms, is a question that only arises out of a naive parallelism between literary and governmental discourses. Generalisations are allowed to stand unquestioned—for example, ‘Nationalism finds in the Chinese a convenient scapegoat and a necessary antithesis. Thus most Australians, in their social attitudes, banished the Chinese to the position of Other, and an undesirable Other at that’ (62)—while the scholarship on anti-Chinese racism in the US, which Ouyang himself invokes, has shown some of the ways in which government manipulated public sentiment and public discourse to produce support for anti-Chinese policies. Whether such practices also took place in the Australian context is not raised by Ouyang.

If literature is a distinctive way of communicating through a particular use of language (something that a poet and novelist like Ouyang should appreciate), then these discursive and linguistic differences need to be addressed. Ouyang has provided a service by making available in one place an archive of literary titles that engage with the issues of Chinese immigration and Australian racial diversity. With some pauses to discuss writers like Xavier Herbert, Henry
Lawson, George Johnson and David Martin, Christopher Koch and Brian Castro, Ouyang surveys an extraordinary field. He compensates for the lack of close analysis of most of his primary texts by exhaustively bringing to light the vast literature about Chinese Australians of the century 1888 to 1988. As an archive that can be mined by future scholars, this book deserves a place in most reference libraries.

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The Work of Memory and Forgetting

*Forgetting Aborigines*
By Chris Healy
UNSW Press, 250pp, $39.95, 2008

Reviewed by Christine McPaul

In *Forgetting Aborigines* Chris Healy’s project is centred not on ‘memory as a thing’ but on ‘remembering as a process’ (8). This conceptual manoeuvre enables Healy to examine the dynamic interplay of remembering and forgetting in such diverse areas of Australian life as ‘personal testimony and witnessing, writing and film, photography and television, painting and museum exhibitions, teaching and celebration, mourning and commemoration’ (8). Healy argues that it has been all too easy for modern non-Indigenous Australians to forget Aborigines, and to forget the fact of their forgetting (203).

From his vantage point as a non-Indigenous Australian, Healy wonders how it has been possible for this to occur. Reflecting on his own actions connected with remembering and forgetting, Healy frames his consideration in part around Marcia Langton’s observation that there is a ‘disparity between the actual life circumstances of indigenous people and the ‘cultural and textual construction of things “Aboriginal”’ (5). In considering these disparities, Healy locates what he describes as the ‘tides of remembering and forgetting’ with reference to the cycles of politics in Australia (203).

Healy offers five essays in which he explores how the concept of Aboriginality has been constructed throughout the twentieth century. In the first of these, he demonstrates how changing notions of Aboriginality have proved unsettling for non-Indigenous Australians by outlining the responses to a 1940s board game called *Corroboree*. He describes how some of his friends are offended by the game’s simplistic depictions of Indigenous people with spears or boomerangs, while others are concerned that the images, and their apparent commodification, may be disrespectful to Indigenous people. Many ‘look away’ literally and, importantly for Healy, symbolically. He argues that to conceal the images of the *Corroboree* board game ‘is also to hide from the past in the present. It is to make Aborigines disappear. It is to forget’ (4). His analysis here points to the dynamism contained in the process of remembering and forgetting as well as to the tension that exists between the two. It also suggests the iterative nature of
the process he is examining, and its inherent instability, reinforcing his point that there is value in understanding the discourses at play rather than the memory itself.

His contemplation of the 1960s television series *Alcheringa* draws attention to the ‘restaging of an imagined precolonial Aboriginal world’ that he argues produced ‘strange patterns of amnesia in the contact zones between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians’ (37). Healy suggests that while *Alcheringa* portrayed fixed and primitive constructions of indigeneity that attempted to forget the existence of Indigenous Australians in contemporary society (46), it relied on performances from Indigenous actors. For Healy this kind of internal contradiction or conundrum is at the heart of the process of remembering and forgetting. The cultural and textual constructions work to elide the lived circumstances of Indigenous Australians because within the non-Indigenous population, the will to remember is in tension with the capacity to forget (18). Healy’s interest in the discursive positioning of *Alcheringa* highlights the role this televised series played in forgetting that Indigenous Australians continue to be part of modern Australian society.

In his exploration of the relationship between Indigenous Australians and the production of Indigenous art and other intellectual property, Healy suggests that throughout the mid twentieth century the predominance of assimilationist political policies enabled the cultural heritage and history of Indigenous people to be forgotten systematically. According to Henry Reynolds, assimilationist policies were designed both to ensure that ‘full-blood’ Indigenous people were segregated from the wider population, and to encourage ‘half-castes’ to ‘raise their status’ so that they would be absorbed into the white population (Reynolds 207). Healy’s contention is that these racialised policies of assimilation were being played out in the cultural as well as the political and social spheres. He argues that incorporating Indigenous art into non-Indigenous cultural spaces, and constructing a non-Indigenous frame through which this art is presented, necessarily involves a repeated forgetting of earlier Indigenous achievement and cultural history. His argument traverses the impact of Geoffrey Bardon on the inception of the Papunya Tula art movement in the 1970s (69-78), American dancer Beth Dean’s production of the ballet *Corroboree* in 1954 (87-89), and the popular fascination with so-called ‘Abo art’ that involved kitsch representations of Indigenous Australians (80).

Healy turns attention in *Forgetting Aborigines* to the ‘institutional practices of memory’ (113) with particular reference to the period following the 1988 Bicentenary celebrations which he describes as relying on ‘an irredeemably white and narrowly national history’ (130). Healy argues that the official discourse connected with the Bicentenary attempted to silence the displaced or suppressed cultural identities and rituals of Indigenous people (127). He
explores several other case studies in the late twentieth century, including the discourses connected with the Mabo and Wik judgments as well as the Bringing Them Home Report, noting that this report was important in validating Indigenous memory and history. Healy is concerned about how ‘the rhetorical erasure of Aborigines has flourished at the same time as it has been flatly contradicted by the persistence of indigenous being’ (10) and calls for acknowledgement of ‘history in the present’ (117). An example of this process in action was Prime Minister John Howard’s address at Corroboree 2000 about the Stolen Generations, when he asked that the audience not ‘forget or ignore or fail to express sorrow or regret for the pain of the past’ (Howard). Despite this plea, his use of ‘we’, ‘us’, ‘them’ and ‘their’ throughout his speech worked to exclude Indigenous Australians from the notions of citizenship and nationhood he espoused, something in contrast to Prime Minister Rudd’s direct and specific language during the Apology to the Stolen Generations in 2008 (Watson). This contributed directly to a discourse that demonstrated the moment of forgetting Indigenous Australians even as it purported to be part of an occasion about remembering. Mick Dodson drew attention to this particular form of forgetting when he compared his life and family with a similar chronology for Howard, highlighting that the people Howard was forgetting were the same people he remembered specifically and clearly (Dodson). This example of history in the present demonstrates the dynamic tension of remembering and forgetting, as well as the capacity for the lived experiences of Indigenous Australians to disrupt the forgetfulness of non-Indigenous Australians that Healy identifies.

In his earlier work, From the Ruins of Colonialism: History as Social Memory (1997), Healy addressed himself in part to the role of museums in social memory, something he again analyses in Forgetting Aborigines. His discussion of breastplates shows how the double narratives connected with them enable a reading ‘across the grain’ (139) to interrogate the processes connected with collection and curatorial practices. Healy explores the emerging relationships between Indigenous people and two museums, the Melbourne Museum and the National Museum of Australia, to suggest that collections of Indigenous artefacts are no longer simply ‘a mirror to colonialism’. Instead he argues that they are engaged in a more ‘dynamic process of remembering’ (160). This reinforces one of his central concerns, namely that remembering is never complete, but is ‘a shifting, heterogeneous, partial and repetitive assemblage of acts, utterances and artefacts’ (9).

For Healy Aboriginal cultural tourism is the result of a complex set of factors including the international leisure market, regional economies, government funding, global television, travel writing and the actions of Indigenous Australians. Healy suggests that the Lurujarri Trail, established near Broome in Western Australia by local Indigenous people such as Paddy Roe, is an
example of ‘aesthetic tourism’ which is ‘profoundly forgetful’ of ‘the colonising that produced the space and the postcolonial relationships that enable its existence’ (186). As an exercise in cultural consumption, Healy’s participation in the Lurujarri Trail produced some unexpected moments that disrupted this aesthetic by bringing the past and present into an ironic conjunction. One activity provided on the Trail was boomerang making. Although Healy found a suitable elbow of wood, he prevaricated in making a boomerang. When Roe came over to him, Healy indicated he would get started on the task of chipping away at the wood, as the other participants were doing. Contrary to Healy’s expectations, Roe suggested that a better option would be to slice the elbow of wood into four planks with a chainsaw, thus enabling four boomerangs to be made. Healy observed that while he had been ‘casting Paddy as someone who could commune with the spirit of the boomerang wood … he was replying with rational and mechanised efficiency’ (189). Healy’s example, and his reflection on his personal cultural aesthetic in which Roe had been constructed romantically within a paradigm of ‘authentic’ indigeneity, shows how pervasive the process of forgetting Aborigines can be.

Healy’s work points to the importance of asserting a distinctive Australian perspective on memory and cultural studies. In Forgetting Aborigines he offers a mode of understanding the Australian cultural ‘contact zones’ (37) in which the moments of forgetting and remembering occur, and this focus on the relationship between artefacts, actions and social practice provides a valuable insight into twentieth century Australia. Healy observes that in the early years of the twenty-first century ‘there was a lot of forgetting around’ (21). Forgetting Aborigines provides a way to remember this forgetting.

Christine McPaul has recently completed her PhD at the Australian National University. Her current research projects centre on the cultural history of non-Indigenous responses to corroboree. Christine has published previously on Australian Women’s Self Representation, and on the performativity of Helen Demidenko-Darville.

Works cited


Religious Conversion and the Historical Moment

The Lamb Enters the Dreaming: Nathanael Pepper and the Ruptured World
By Robert Kenny
Scribe Publications Melbourne, 384 pp, $39.95, 2007

Reviewed by Chris Healy

The Lamb Enters the Dreaming opens and closes in cemeteries. The first is the burial place of Philip Pepper, a Wotjobaluk man. His grave lies amid the ruins of the Ebenezer Mission 400 kilometres northwest of Melbourne. In 1858, it was to this place that young German missionaries had come to bring the Word and Light of God to Indigenous people. The other cemetery is at Ramahyuck, east of Melbourne on the Gippsland Lakes. Ramahyuck is where Nathanael Pepper, Philip’s brother, died and was buried in 1877, aged thirty-six.

Nathanael was a celebrated convert in Christianity at Ebenezer in 1860. For Kenny, this conversion offers an opportunity to consider closely the rupturing of the Wotjobaluk world and the role of (various kinds of) Christianity in the colonisation of Victoria. But Nathanael’s becoming Christian as Christianity was becoming Wotjobaluk is only one stopover in Kenny’s ambitious itinerary. Greg Dening was right to call it a brilliant ride and to note that it was a distinctively La Trobe project. This is a book that should be handed to any publisher who thinks that a good monograph cannot be fashioned from a PhD. It is an important book for anyone interested in the consequences of colonialism and indigeneity for twenty-first century Australia. But it’s also been around for a while.

Many AHR readers will already know this book because it has been the recipient of numerous awards. According to Kenny’s staff profile at La Trobe University, it’s been the ‘winner of both the 2008 Australian Historical Association’s W. K. Hancock Prize and the 2008 Victorian Premier’s Award for First Book of History. It was also Short-listed in the Adelaide Festival Award for Literature (non-fiction) and Commended in the Victorian Community History Awards’. The website doesn’t note that it was also the joint winner, along with Tom Griffiths’ Slicing the Silence, of the 2008 Prime Minister’s Prize for Australian History.
Thus, this review is belated. So rather than pretend that it has not been adequately ‘reviewed’ more than once, and trudge in familiar footsteps, from here on in I depart from some of the usual conventions of reviewing.

I like histories that work through moments of intensity. I like it when a writer can persuade me that her work derives its force from a moment when seemingly unrelated ley lines converged. The Lamb Enters the Dreaming is such a book and the conversion of Nathanael Pepper is its moment. Again and again Kenny returns to 1860 when, in Pepper’s words, he ‘went down the river and thought how He prayed in the garden til His sweat came out as blood, and—and that for me’ (196).

The rupturing of which Kenny writes was as recent to Pepper as Paul Keating being Treasurer and the Bhopal disaster, the introduction of the one-dollar coin and the Milperra massacre are to us. Yet the consequences of such colonial ‘events’ for the Indigenous population, even at the most basic level, has been catastrophic; peoples who were reckoned in the tens of thousands were counted by hundreds. Kenny considers this through the epidemiology of disease and settler violence, through Wotjobaluk accommodation and perception, through the ‘opportunism and greed’ of some settlers (239) and the despairing faith of others (35).

Kenny’s linking of religion and the legacy of colonial violence and dispossession is stunningly successful. For example, he makes complex sense of why the Moravian missionaries thought it so important that Pepper built a hut when he arrived at the mission; it was ‘a sign that the curse of Ham had been lifted’ (82). In the wonderful chapter ‘The Centaur’s Entrance’ Kenny imagines the deep impact on the Wotjobaluk of the sheep and cattle that came onto their lands. The colonists themselves emerge, in Kenny’s telling, as more complex figures than the caricatures which historiography has so often bequeathed.

But what, might we ask, is in the value of the story of Pepper’s conversion for a contemporary historian such as Kenny? Although this question could be answered in a number of ways, it seems to me that there are two strong possibilities. Firstly, Nathanael’s conversion gives Kenny the opportunity to write a different kind of history. The Lamb Enters the Dreaming begins with an epigraph from Richard Rorty that calls for the writing of history to be concerned with ‘an endless network of changing relationships, without any great climatic ruptures or peripeties’ (from the Greek peripeteia meaning ‘A sudden change of fortune or reverse of circumstances’). As already stated, when he goes about this kind of historiographic practice, Kenny is thoughtful and compelling, challenging and creative. But there is another mode in which Kenny engages with these questions and that’s as a grumpy and sometimes dismissive critic.
Scattered throughout the book and collected in the chapter ‘A Scar in the Air’ are various dismissive asides and disparaging condemnations of modernism, theory, relativism, postmodernism, Derrida and the notion of culture. It’s certainly the case that, in some of these instances, Kenny is gesturing towards important questions. For example, the equation of disenchantment, post-religiosity and modernism is certainly ham-fisted Hegalianism. However, in contrast to his very careful and thorough approach to writing history and teasing out nineteenth-century religious or scientific history, Kenny’s orientation to theoretical critique lacks both care and generosity. He conjures enemies where he might find friends. His mode doesn’t allow him to see that, as a matter of intellectual history, some of the theorists he ridicules have in fact produced the ground from which he writes. To take only one example, he finds James Clifford (like Clifford Geertz) sorely lacking in his conceptualisation of culture. Clifford’s point is that culture, despite being ‘a deeply compromised term’, is one which he ‘cannot yet do without’. For Kenny this is a self-referential conceit. Yet ‘cultural history’ is a term quoted in the epigraph to the book and Clifford’s work, particularly in essays such as ‘Fort Ross Meditation’, often explores precisely the issues with which Kenny is concerned, and in the same spirit.

Secondly, Pepper’s conversion also enables Kenny to ask Nathanael’s question from Scripture: ‘Can any good come out of Nazareth?’ Sometimes Kenny answers the question in terms of what it meant for Pepper himself, as a personal experience, and his answer is unequivocal: ‘out of Nazareth, came the balm of sense to the suffering, and with it the possibility of survival and prosperity for the future’ (335). That such possibilities were never realised was, for Kenny, not a consequence of missionisation or Christianity (nor indeed any other meta-narratives) but of the particular and shifting forces that constituted settler-colonisation in Victoria. At other times, however, the conversion becomes a metaphor for how the Wotjobaluk negotiated colonisation. It provided, ‘for him [Pepper] and his people, a sense of salvation and a cognition of the world, but also an understanding that settlement was the only future. … The Lamb was now in the Dreaming’ (337). While Kenny’s intention may not be to offer a straightforward ethical lesson to his readers, surely these questions remain unsettling? If, metaphorically, conversion and settlement were ‘the only future’ in 1860, then isn’t it important that 150 years later it seems radically inadequate to describe indigenous Australians as converted and settled? Otherwise, we might be condemned always to begin and end in cemeteries.

Chris Healy teaches cultural studies at the University of Melbourne. His most recent book is Forgetting Aborigines (UNSW Press 2008).