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5. FICTION AS A FORM OF CHANGE: A PAPER OVERVIEW OF A LITERATURE PANEL DISCUSSION

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Abstract

It is well established that literary work can promote insights that result in future change, whether on a personal or an institutional level. As Umberto Eco (1989) notes, the act of reading does not stop with the artist but continues into the work of communities. The papers delivered in this panel consider the regenerative role of literature within culture, arguing that the special properties of literature can convey an important sense of nature (Bateson 1973, Zapf 2008). These concepts are discussed in relation to writing about Australian flora and fauna. Using an ecocritical focus based on ideas about the relationship between literature and the environment the paper considers Australian works and the way in which literature enlivens this complex intersection between humans, animals and the environment. This engagement is investigated through three modes: the philosophical, the literary, and the practical. The novels discussed include Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*, Richard Flanagan's *Wanting*, and Sonya Hartnett's *Forest*, as well as a range of fictional and non-fictional works that describe the Blue Mountains region in New South Wales. The paper closes with a discussion of the role of story-telling as a way of introducing the public to specific environmental locations and issues.

Keywords: Environment, literature, social change, ecocriticism, storytelling

Introduction

This paper will provide an analytical overview of the three papers presented in a collaborative discussion on literary work as enabler of future insight and change. After all, fiction is not simply an artefact of entertainment or an act of cultural mimesis. Literature can bring about actual changes, philosophically, creatively and practically. The notion of literary works as both presaging and transforming future visions is not limited to utopian genres. This paper concurs with philosopher Umberto Eco's assertion that the act of reading is a productive part of the artistic event; artwork does not stop at the work of the artist but continues into the work of the readers and communities (Eco, 1989). Readers' engagement with literature fulfils a regenerative role within culture; literary language has special properties that can influence the human sense of nature (Bateson 1973, Zapf 2008). This paper uses an ecocritical focus to explore various forms literary potential. Ecocriticism can be defined as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty and Fromm 1996, xviii) and, although, ecocritics may take different approaches in their focus, it is this relationship between literature and environment that remains at the centre. This paper focuses on Australian literature, both the artefact and the presentation and reception of that artefact in community culture. It will suggest three ways in which Australian literary forms may enliven and augment not just our future engagement but the philosophical, aesthetic and epistemological tools we use to establish that engagement. This engagement will be investigated through three modes: the philosophical, the literary, and the practical.

Literature and environmental engagement: Three modes

First, we focus on the philosophical mode through the transformative potential in literary encounters with the non-human animal. Through a philosophical lens, Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* (2006) can be

seen to suggest the import of human uncertainty and open mindedness in encountering animal otherness. The imagined, hopeful and alternative landscape of literature compels movement away from understanding the human/nature relationship as disconnected, adversarial or hierarchal.

Literature can work to destabilise the nature/human divide. Alexis Wright's ground breaking and deservedly lauded novel *Carpentaria* uses imaginative frames to *both* capture the ethos of a time *and* to imagine and shape a new (if uncertain) future and importantly, new (new for Western society in any case) ways for knowing nature. How to encounter the non-human animal in art? Animals in art are often reduced to crude anthropomorphic values, and animal imagery is often used to depict human qualities, often denigrating. But, as John Berger suggests, when we observe and turn our awareness to the non-human animal the animal may return the gaze and we may be aware of more complex connection separation, sameness, difference and otherness (Berger 1980 in Garrard, 2012, 152). The question is, how to ensure such encounters in art, that place of human consciousness change, is not one of violence or silence?

There are countless examples of the non-human animal returning the gaze and of explorations of separateness and sameness in *Carpentaria.* The very opening of the work involves a conflation of Rainbow serpent animal with landscape, seasonal change and Indigenous epistemology of knowing the rivers and seas:

> The ancestral serpent, a creature larger than storm clouds, came down from stars, laden with its own creative enormity. It moved graciously – if you had been watching with eyes of a bird, hovering in the sky far above the ground. Looking down at the serpent's wet body, glistening from the ancient sunlight, long before man was a creature who could contemplate the next moment in time. It came down those billions of years ago, to crawl on its heavy belly, all around the wet clay soils in the gulf of Carpentaria. […] This is where the rainbow serpent continues to live deep down under the ground in a vast network of limestone aquifers. They say its being is porous; it permeates everything (Wright, 2006, 1-2).

The novel takes as a given that the Dreamtime understanding of the serpent provides complex ecological understanding of the earth and its unpredictability. The rainbow serpent is both creative underground water source and deluge from sky. As Devlin-Glass has observed, Indigenous characters are able to predict the cyclone that ultimately destroys the town by 'recognising bat and bird behaviour as emissaries of a powerfully destructive Rainbow driven cyclone' (Devlin-Glass, 2008, 297). In the quote above the environment is given sentience through an animal embodiment, drawing on traditional Waanyi worldview. This sentient, but not always benign, entity 'permeates everything'. This includes human life, belying modernity's assertion of dominance over and categorisation of nature. Through such narrative construction it is impossible to determine character, action and setting as discrete elements of the text, nor is setting an inferior element to be acted upon, as has been the historical tendency in human perceptions of narrative (Buell, 1995).

The non-human other as a conflation of setting, character and plot in the form of the Rainbow serpent provides both a narrative foundation for the lengthy work and an evocation of Waayni worldview. But this text does not use this worldview as a thematic subject. It is, in fact, a given. The Dreamtime illumination of the earth is juxtaposed with vernacular and quotidian observations of modern existence if the Gulf. More importantly, Dreamtime knowing is implicitly linked to ecological epistemology (Devlin-Glass, 2008, 395). Such Indigenous knowledge is compatible and congruous with western ecology and both come from an entrenched engagement with and observation of the natural world. The unification of 'scientify' (to borrow the text's idiom) knowledge and Indigenous knowledge in the novel fully engages with the modern environment; it is not only an explicating of the past. The epic tale imagines not so much a future, as a future *way* in which we might unite epistemologies to know our present condition.

The novel's representation of feral *and* native animals within the text is a patterning of human connection and humble human confusion in the encounter with the animal. These narrative complexities of the work enable readers an opportunity to see that the literary text can 'save the earth by disclosing the non-equation of the word and thing, poem and place' (Rigby 2004, 437). That is, the art work announces and accepts human incapacity to fully know and represent the non-human realm.

Carpentaria helps to imagine new futures or new epistemologies where we may open ourselves up as respondents and collaborators with nature rather than active controllers of the natural realm, whilst acknowledging the anthropocentric limits of our capacity to *know* nature. These themes are expanded on in the full panel discussion.

Next, this paper takes moves from the philosophical to the literary and examines two Australian authors who shift the boundaries of conventional writing. While setting has always remained the poor sister of the other narrative conventions of character, plot and action, there are authors who are addressing this and opening up the dialogue of possibilities.

One of the advantages of fictional writing is that even though it may have conventional forms and structures, fiction is free from many of the constraints and restraints of everyday language. Because of this flexibility, fictional writing may be a way to challenge our expectations of Earth and provoke new understandings of Nature. The texts chosen for discussion are Sonja Hartnett's *Forest* and Richard Flanagan's *Wanting.* The work of both of these writers goes further than having the landscape as backdrop or animals as merely sidekicks aiding humans and instead is imbued with an overall green consciousness.

This green consciousness takes up the ideas expressed above and develops possibilities that may occur when stories move beyond structures of binaries and, rather than always being subjective, become inter-subjective. These novels, although very different in theme and motive, are both driven by a desire to change and to allow the space for different stories to be heard. Fictional writing may play a vital role in shaping and managing our future and help us in moving forward to new understandings of place and identity. These authors have used a number of literary techniques in their work that may enable these new imaginings spaces to emerge and be heard. Hartnett uses alternative viewpoints and takes the power of language away from humans. Once she does this their authority and decision making is no longer seen as legitimate and dominating and becomes one voice among many. Flanagan uses different literary techniques to push through conventional narrative structures. His work is truly inter-subjective with no one voice, place, history or story taking centre stage.

One of the growing areas of interest in eco-criticism is the way literature can be used to change perception and move through past limitations that have aided in the continued barriers that are placed between humans, animals, and the environment. Helen Tiffin, one of leaders in this field says, "what is probably most needed is not the capacity to think beyond the human, but the courage to imagine new ways in which human and non-human societies, understood as being ecologically connected, can be creatively transformed" (Tiffin, 2010, 215). Lawrence Buell finds that there may be a way to move forward and transform our understandings but it requires a shift in the way we actually read a text. This may sound a simple task; to read differently. However, as Buell makes clear, our reading strategies are based on long standing literary conventions. Buell says there must be an "upending (of) a traditional quasi-Aristotelian fourfold framework for reading literature (plot, characterisation, theme and setting)" and there is a need to refocus our frameworks of reading around setting, the element most often neglected in Western criticism (qtd in Payne, 206). Writers have often neglected place. They may give brief descriptive passages but only as a way to get into the more important story about the human characters or if setting is described it is used as the backdrop for the human action to occur. Setting may also be used in a thematic sense but once again it is used to explain character development or motivation. The emphasis of the story remains; character, plot, theme and setting is added to accommodate and accentuate these dominant three. This is not to suggest that writers and readers are doing this in a deliberate sense, but more that, many writers and readers have not yet incorporated a green consciousness into their meaning making processes—the idea that the environment can be part of our imaginings. Our imagination needs to undertake a process of regeneration. However, how this regeneration is to occur is not immediately identifiable.

This panel looks at how regeneration may be possible, not just in a philosophical sense, or an imaginative sense but also in a practical sense—to be applied and lived within the everyday world. In so doing, this panel paper ends with a discussion of the intersection of the imagination and the natural world in the context of designed exhibition spaces, whether they are called heritage centres, museums,

cultural centres or art galleries. Given the growing emphasis on such centres as a way of introducing the human to the non-human environment, storytelling fulfils an important part of the process of public consumption because the displays inevitably refer to the stories from a region, whether literary or vernacular, and to relationships with landscape and animals expressed in those stories. Yet often fictional (and non-fiction) writing is subsumed in newly designed centres in favour of stunning visual representations, recorded oral histories, or geo-cultural data. The visual and oral accounts are undeniably important but history tells us that it is often the imaginative stories that have worked powerfully over centuries to create links between human and non-human worlds.

With a re-orientation towards the literary it is possible to use digital technology to foreground narrative as part of the engagement, education and nostalgia that form the basis of today's experience economy that features in exhibition design (in which the 'experience' is the focus of much social, economic, and cultural activity).

The Blue Mountains Cultural Centre, which opened in Katoomba in November 2012, offers an interesting case study of the new ways in which the public experience local and regional narratives. This discussion considers both fictional and non-fiction representations of this environment, selected on the basis of writing that has been acknowledged in the World Heritage Exhibition which is an important part of the new Cultural Centre. The Exhibition, called 'Into the Blue' is a drawcard. Billed as a'high-tech interactive exhibition that explores the natural as well as social landscape of this unique area' audiences are invited to 'navigate their way through these stories through an immersive exhibition experience, introducing them to the richness and wonders of the Blue Mountains World Heritage area.'

The juxtaposition of human-landscape tensions is evident in the work of the list of writers featured in the Heritage Exhibition. Diarist Elizabeth Hawkins' 1822 work drew attention to the terrors of the land and the difficulty of the mountain crossing; Charles Darwin's 1836 appreciation of the wilderness beauty was overtaken by his aversion to the colonial society of New South Wales; and Eleanor Dark's book *No Barrier* (1953) followed the colonial road building effort of 1813 which ignored Indigenous occupation and knowledge of the region. In 1931 the renowned conservationist Myles Dunphy had acknowledged a general attitude of hostility towards nature. "In destroying bushland we destroyed part of ourselves", he stated (26). And yet he envisioned a limited and specialised use of the forests by bushwalkers. His writing pointed to the romantic associations of writers and landscapes: he said that much of the government map-making of the period "killed much of the romance of penetrating rough scenic country hitherto unmapped" (84).

Writer Martin Thomas is not represented in the Exhibition, but his reading of culture, myth and landscape in *The Artificial Horizon: Imagining the Blue Mountains* (2004) offers an interesting perspective on such tensions. Thomas says the sense of a 'vertiginous terrain' remains domain in popular imagery, 'highlighting the aura of sadness, danger and imminent death' (26) as expressed by Delia Falconer in her Katoomba-based novel *The Service of Clouds* (1997). He says the Jamison Valley is itself an amphitheatre, a place of performance in which the "experiences and anxieties of a community, and especially the tensions concerning its relationship to country, could be enacted, remembered, inscribed" (164).

Poet and essayist Mark Tredinnick, who is acknowledged in the Exhibition centre, is well known for his 2009 work *Blue Plateau: a landscape memoir* in which he expresses similar concerns about public consumption of the Blue Mountains environment. This work is a creative response to the generations of black and white inhabitants in the mountains and is organized along geographic and climatic principles: valley, river, catchment, escarpment, pasture, fire, home. His epilogue resonates with the theme park sentiment of earlier authors:

> It was not landscape itself that I fell out with, not those two valleys, and my home ridge and Henryk's ridge and the river, which is the author of us all; no, but the towns and suburbs, which sit upon that parlous ridge with so little grace, aghast at what surrounds them. Les said in his old age that Katoomba had become nothing but a tourist attraction. And I think he's close to right. The place is a tawdry theme

> park, perched in an astonishing terrain. Some find beauty in the dissonance, but it palled on me (231).

These ideas are interesting in relation to the responses of visitors to that Centre. To date, visitor feedback has argued for a greater acknowledgement of the authors in the region, including filmed interviews and more access to their works and their writing on the landscape. A general query is over the 'lack of chairs' in the Exhibition space, as visitors obviously want to have the time to sit and view the interactive exhibits and take in further fictional and non-fiction material as well as visual experiences.

This type of response is typical of a growing reader/audience demand for greater engagement with exhibited material and in part reflects the expectations of today's digitally proficient cultural tourist—a term that covers a visitor from another country or another suburb. Many visitors seem ready to take up the idea of co-creation, a concept proposed by Boswijk, Thijssen and Peelen (2007) to describe a way of integrating social or cultural experiences with a user's personal values, aspirations and demands. Our research shows that there are ways to use digital formats to engage visitors and allow them to feed back their experiences to the interactive site.

Digital representations of Indigenous culture and history have been very successful in the past decade and the inclusion of references to Indigenous fiction, such as *Carpentaria*, in this mode would offer new avenues for co-creation and the growth of valuable archives. If the natural amphitheatre of the Jamison Valley, as described by Thomas, does move indoors, one could argue that the shift may only generate a complementary version of the imaginary experience that writers have long celebrated in their written work. But the fictional world can be brought to a wider readership through the interactive engagement in public spaces. The expansion of new modes of digital delivery can be a part of the provocation of new understandings of Nature that we find in the writing of Flanagan or Hartnett.

Conclusions

Literature raises questions and leaves us in a space of productive movement towards a future, positioning us on the brink of change not mired in fixed outcomes and the past. This paper provides a critical overview of a more lengthy panel discussion where eco-critical approaches are applied to literature and humans engagement with literature as a mean of social change. In terms of our future engagement with the environment, the theoretical vantage point of ecocriticism identifies fictionalised redress to the non-human as backdrop setting, antagonist to human action or divided from human life; positions which have been dominant Western literary traditions (Plumwood 2009, Buell 1995 and 2006, Glotfelty and Fromm 1996, Kerridge and Semmels 1998). In this paper we have looked at how shifts can occur in our epistemological framings of knowledge, as well as our modes of creative writing and finally how to implement these changes into a lived experience. Our thoughts, our writings and our travels are all closely interwoven and impact upon one another. Writing is not static. It is an organic and changing process that reveals and opens up alternatives and possibilities.

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