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Landscapes: ‘The Idea of North’

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The call for contributions for *Landscapes* Volume 10, Issue 1, went out towards the latter half of 2019, with the title “Landscapes: ‘The Idea of North’”. A serendipitous, thematic title, this was inspired by Glenn Gould’s mesmeric 1967 documentary of Northern Canada, *The Idea of North*, as well as the 1946 memoir of life in the Nordic countries *In the North*, by Lady Constance Malleson; it was a link to one of the first publications from *Landscapes* Volume 1, Andrew Taylor’s “Wild 1 – The North”, and the field-based study experience of a group of exchange students at the International Centre for Landscape and Language (ECU), heading north from Perth, Western Australia; it was finally a reflection of the Nordic location of the editor of this volume, in Sweden. While the publications of this issue taken as a body of work cannot purport to represent any sustained sense of an engagement with the idea of North, they nevertheless embody the sense of the eclecticism implicit in the original call for contributions.

I wish to thank Glen Phillips for his constant support and inspiration – he is of course the *eldsjäl*, to borrow a Swedish phrase, or ‘driving spirit’ behind *Landscapes* and the International Centre for Landscape and Language. This issue has also received support and encouragement from two former editors, Drew Hubbell and John Ryan; the latter is as a contributor to the current issue. Thanks are also due to Executive Dean Professor Clive Barstow of the School of Arts and Humanities at Edith Cowan University for his continuing support.

It goes without saying that 2020 has been a challenging year. From late 2019 the Coronavirus, originating in Wuhan city, China, has spread across the entire planet, reaching Antarctica by December 2020. The global pandemic has affected all aspects of human society, with travel restrictions, border closures, lockdowns, social distancing, and working remotely, as some of the massive-scale strategies employed by countries all over the world to slow the spread of the virus. At the time of writing, several vaccines have been developed and are currently being approved for use and/or disseminated.

The clear and present danger of the virus has ultimately curtailed human behaviour on a scale that was last experienced during the Second World War. The effect

or effects on the Earth's environment are many and varied, some even fallacious. When a strict quarantine was imposed in the bustling Italian tourist city of Venice, for example, reports that swans and dolphins had returned to the (now cleaner) canals went viral on social media, but were subsequently found to be fake news. NASA researchers, however, have created a Covid-19 dashboard to publish data from their satellite and land-based observations that demonstrate some of the environmental effects of economic and social lockdowns. One dramatic change is found in terms of air quality, specifically within major urban areas, where levels of nitrogen dioxide fell by up to 30% during lockdown in Beijing, in February 2020 ("Air Quality").

In general terms, this may have little bearing on the topics or scope of articles, poems, a short story and book review published in this issue of *Landscapes*. Nonetheless, the environmental impact of changes in human behaviour due to the Coronavirus are highly significant to the environmental humanities: rising infection rates and the resultant deaths caused rapid, unprecedented responses, often lockdowns and social distancing, to 'flatten the curve' (slowing the rate of infection). If anything, perhaps this demonstrates in a more manageable, short-term scale, what is taking place globally and longer-term with regard to climate change, and what should be taking place as a response to this rising, global threat to human life in terms of immediate and unparalleled changes in human attitudes and behaviour vis-à-vis the environment. Indeed the medical and technological breakthroughs in producing a vaccine deserve to be heralded, but the strategies for reducing the number of global deaths due to Covid-19 during 2020 have primarily concerned induced, large-scale social change.

The contributions to this issue then, while not explicit responses to the current pandemic, nevertheless engage in diverse ways with landscape. Thomas Arentzen's lead article analyses the landscape of the Upper Telemark based on a transcribed nineteenth-century oral performance of the Norwegian ballad tradition *Dream Song (Draumkvæde)*. This environment is steeped in folklore and Christian imagery, yet surprisingly this version of the ballad represents a visionary, mythological terrain that is neither epic nor grandiloquent in the mode of the *Divine Comedy*, but unspectacular, ecologically faithful, and ultimately more sobering.

In Cassandra Julie O'Loughlin's "Critically Imagining a Decolonised Vision of Australian Poetry", we find some similar traits: indigenous oral, song and poem

traditions that are forms of kinship with the land; a creative and spiritual identity that resides in and derives from the land. These characteristics, for O’Loughlin, can and should be combined with modern scientific understandings of interconnectedness at the quantum level, Indigenous Australian perceptions of Country, along with a questioning of Western privileging of forms of domination, to present a pathway for a Western decolonised poetry in Australia, which like Arentzen’s article, contributes to a more widespread discourse of renegotiation (and re-reading) in the Western world of artistic, literary, philosophical and spiritual relations to the environment.

Anindita Banerjee, Shaun McLeod, Gretel Taylor, and Patrick West article provides an extensive background and methodology to a number of creative-research enterprises that have emerged from Deakin University’s School of Communication and Creative Arts (SCCA) in recent years. Central to this article is the *Dancing Between Two Worlds* project, involving Indian-Australian artists engaged in various creative-exchange activities in Werribee, in the City of Wyndham, Victoria. To approach ‘landscape’ the author’s/project members encouraged dance, primarily, as part of a “multi-sensory immersion” intended to stimulate a sense of “participation in place” for the local Indian community, and to avoid more a more conventional- and distanced- sense of landscape as prospect. Similarly, at the heart of this project, and the article, there is a methodological approach that aims to embrace the creative arts and community engagement while resisting some archetypal, hegemonic features of practice-based research.

In the poetry section of this issue, we have an eponymous connection with ‘North’ and landscape in John Ryan’s ekphrastic piece “Looking for Marianne North”. The speaker accompanies - or perhaps imaginatively aligns a shared experience with - the English, nineteenth-century botanical artist Marianne North, through a series of paintings (and places) from her collection to her “Karri Gums, near the Warren River West Australia” and the “cool”, post-trauma site of “resilience”, the karri tree.

Trauma and associated landscapes is a theme that can also be traced in Eloise Biggs and Jennifer Bond’s formally innovative “Landscapes of connection”: eight prose-like stanzas with interpolated slogans provide a rich variety of geographically and culturally selected landscapes from around the world. These poetic vignettes testify to a fascinating and complex array of landscape relations that evince familial connections,

burial customs, stories, climate issues, land rights, and much more. The poem's final stanza finishes with the legacies of bush-fires, and it is this natural (in this case Australian) phenomenon that is explored in Louise Boscacci's "After Rain". These five stanzas, are lean and charged with pyrogenic imagery and a raw sensitivity to the fire-ravaged bush and all its inhabitants. The poem was inspired by the record heat and related bushfires crisis of Australia, specifically NSW, in early 2020, and is accompanied by a striking image of a *flammagenitus* or fire cloud, which in hindsight feels like a portent of the year to come.

Both Frank Russo's and Lawrence Smith's poems, which complete the section, have specific Australian places in mind, the Swan river-scape in Perth, and Mount Keira on the outskirts of Wollongong – Western Australia and New South Wales respectively. Smith's "Summer on The Swan River, 1953" is ostensibly quaint and nostalgic, yet formally intricate and replete with poetic devices: from the odd, adept metaphor, "the breakwater, wriggling its toes in the water"; to the rich consonance-
assonance generated in the enjambment lines, "[...] stick-men digging bait on the spit, / people, dolphins, shags, fishing."

Russo's "Mount Keira by night" is clearly more contemporary, with a strong sense of urban sprawl and encroachment on indigenous and natural habitats epitomised in the Rusa deer of the Illawarra escarpment. The human-deer encounters at the heart of this poem are quotidian, brief and often fatal: "though last week, one was hauled / fifty metres by a truck's cab— / fur and bones shed". And yet the ending shows another perspective on the deer, the environment and human connection, one that is clearly majestic:

[...] A giant stag peers out
as we steer the bend—
 neck extended, its spiky crown
unfurled like a skeletal fern,
and beyond this, the chain of fog lights
ignite the forest like a lantern-string trail,
a path of luminescent crumbs
to guide us back towards the city.

This issue includes one short story, and it is a piece that subtly deals with, and perhaps even cleverly challenges, the notion of nature as culturally or linguistically constructed. In “Eggs, Hair, Seeds, Milk”, Patrick West’s wonderful “wooden woodland” reminds us of the great artifice we have made of the natural world, as the narrator deceptively draws us into the scene and its rich, clever arboreal imagery. The theatrical scenery foregrounded in the story is somewhat ironically set against the urban background of London during the Victorian-Edwardian eras, but it is the performance of the emotionally-volatile protagonist Elizabeth-as-tree that is brilliantly expressed in this story.

Staying in Britain and with the arboreal theme, Patrick Armstrong’s review of John Lewis-Stempel’s *The Wood: the Life and Times of Cockshutt Wood* (2018) waxes lyrical about the “beautifully written diary of a year in the life” of Herefordshire’s Cockshutt Wood. In a now heavily populated landscape, Lewis-Stempel’s intimate account of a small area of British woodland feels, in terms of landscape connection, restorative, even hopeful; Armstrong concludes: “John Lewis-Stempel provides an elegant example of the essential unity of landscape and the language that describes it. And he does with real panache.”

Works cited

“Air Quality, Chapter 3.1.” *NASA Earthdata COVID-19 Dashboard*, <https://earthdata.nasa.gov/covid19/discoveries/air-quality/cities-experiencing-clearer-air/beijing>