

Rewriting Redevelopment: The Anti-Proprietorial Tone in Sydney Place-Writing

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‘The real estate agent was not eager to help’

—Shaun Prescott, *The Town*

The central prompt of this special issue is to consider how literature actively makes place, not to describe how place is immaterially represented in literature. Inverting conventional thinking about literary representation of place in Sydney requires attention to the dominant conditions under which place is made. The city is a settler colonial capitalist imposition on unceded Indigenous Country; the property market is outrageously dominant, both as mediator of place relations and a keystone aspect of a financial system that governs everyone’s life and work; in a time of ecological crisis, the ‘Shadow Places’ (Plumwood) that support Sydney are unevenly strained by this rapid redevelopment; and the monetary value placed on land due to speculative property markets and tax regulations privileges the notion of land and place as financial investment. In addition, government and corporate developers frequently engage artists and writers to contribute to place-making projects. Despite the many potential and radical ways artists might think and make place (especially regarding questions of decolonisation and ecosocial justice), the goal of these projects is typically to increase the desirability and, therefore, monetary value of residential and commercial property, especially in former inner-city industrial areas or brownfields redevelopment.

Given this context, one way that literature literally makes place is by way of the material link between creative labour, the commodification of artists’ lives as ‘lifestyles’ and gentrification. Art’s role in gentrification is very well understood. It is not isolated to Sydney, but is a global, widely documented, strikingly uniform story regardless of geographical difference.¹ The story is this: artists move into undesirable, often toxic, former inner-city industrial zones; they practise their form, build community, increase the desirability of an area and then are moved out by developers who capitalise on their efforts. Awareness of this dynamic is such that many artists self-consciously incorporate a critique of this relationship into their practice.² As such, one way of exploring place-writing in Sydney in relation to the theme of this special issue would be to engage in an ethnography of the contemporary literary scene and explore how it is materially involved in processes of gentrification.

That said, the more difficult and speculative, but, I believe, interesting task is to explore specific ways in which contemporary place writing in Sydney is actively resisting this dominant and powerful proprietorial mode of relating to place. More specifically, it is to ask: How does literature and poetry of Sydney not simply represent place, but resist corporate place-making logics and construct an anti-proprietorial and, potentially, decolonial mode of place relation as well? This essay explores these questions by way of reading Brenda Saunders’s poem ‘Sydney Real Estate: FOR SALE’ (2012), Fiona McGregor’s *Indelible Ink* (2010), Vanessa Berry’s *Mirror Sydney* (2017) and Shaun Prescott’s *The Town* (2017). What I find in these four texts is not a radical alternative world, but a pervasive tone, critical of proprietorial place relations, which opens up ways for making place otherwise.

These texts are all critical of the dominance of proprietorial place relations in Sydney, and I argue that this critique manifests in the tone of the works. Tone is arguably the most immaterial, amorphous and difficult-to-access dimension of a text—a miasma that hangs in the air between text and reader. While Saunders, McGregor, Prescott and Berry all respond directly to the dominant regime of property, I will show that they do so critically, but without articulating a clear alternative vision. Their critique and vision thus manifests in and as tone: curiosity in Berry, disappointment in Prescott, grief and warning in Saunders, melancholy in McGregor. Sianne Ngai describes tone as ‘an artfully created “semblance” of feeling’ that is ‘ideally suited for the analysis of ideology’; tone is ideal because ‘the materially embodied representation of an *imaginary relationship* to a holistic complex of real conditions’ that are markers of ideological analysis, share ‘tone’s virtual, diffused, but also immanent character’ (47). Read from this perspective, the tone of these works functions as an indicator of authors’ embodied, affective responses to the ideological system of proprietorial place relations. Moreover, the repetition of the property market as the key theme in each of the works, and their independent critical success as pieces of contemporary nonfiction, fiction or poetry,³ indexes at least in part, a wider cultural interest in accessing this ‘semblance of feeling’ to think critically, alongside the authors, about the proprietorial mode of place relation.

While all works recognise Indigenous claims to Country, I frame this essay largely in terms of the ‘anti-propiertorial’ because the extent to which they collectively practise decolonial politics is a separate question. Saunders is Indigenous and writes specifically about how contemporary real estate jargon wantonly, if falsely, overwrites Country. Berry’s account of each suburb weaves in a meaningful and material acknowledgement of Country, while tracing how redevelopment is changing the stories of those places. In a post-publication reflection on the book’s seemingly boring focus on real estate, McGregor comments on the mainstream cultural focus on property in Australia. She hypothesises that the settler-colonial project of invading and dispossessing people whose culture is founded on material land relations—which is often thought to have happened in the past—actually remains a fundamental part of the contemporary cultural obsession with ownership; thus she invites us to consider how her novel represents this problematic too.⁴ Prescott notes in the Acknowledgements that his novel is set largely on Wiradjuri land, even though the experience of the characters in the book rarely reflects upon this directly. In other words, these texts represent diverse degrees of engagement with questions of the colonial and decolonial. At the same time, however, all the texts are critical of the dominant mode of proprietorial place relation, even if none of the texts relies solely on Indigenous land claims to carry the critique of the powerful system of settler-colonial land relation wrought by the property market. This is very different to work that represents a strongly decolonial future. In Australia the recent spec-fi writing published in the *Sovereign Apocalypse* zine (Donnelly and Briggs) perhaps best represents a strong decolonial politics in fiction. In the stories the total replacement of the settler regime is imagined and represented. Thus, this essay deals with the implications of the writers’ quests for non-propiertorial ways of understanding and relating to place, and the extent to which this overlaps with decolonial thought and politics is set aside for another paper.

A theoretical framework suited to thinking the potential of literature to materially affect place is performativity. When used to frame close reading, the concept suggests that literature *does* or, at least, can do something in the world. Building on the work of J.L. Austin, whose notion of performative speech acts revolves around formal utterances such as ‘I do’ and ‘I promise,’ queer feminist philosophy and literary scholarship has long understood language and literature as performative for more transgressive reasons. In contrast to bringing into being extant legal apparatuses to reiterate social norms (such as the heterosexual marriage), the notion that

language and literature can be subversively world-making rather than only world-representing or norm-reiterating is central to the work of Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick from the early 1990s. In Butler's case, performativity spans from the written and verbal speech act to an embodied action or performance; any acts that 'resist or oppose' particular 'social forms' have a performative potential to subvert the dominant order and literally produce an alternative reality (Butler 226).⁵ In other words, all writing contains a dramatic quality with the potential to change the trajectory of the world's plot. The materially transformative capacities of language as understood by theorists like Butler and Sedgwick, among *many* others, is in language's potential to thoroughly refigure self and identity. Texts, at the very least, can make new worlds thinkable or possible, if not literally bring into being new subjectivities and worldly relations. In this context, I extend this notion to the capacity for literature to materially refigure place-relations too.

The performative *potential* for place-writing in this regard, which is both simple and radically speculative, informs my response to the theme of this special issue. Given my focus on the immaterial tone in these four texts, the works have evidently not yet materially changed the world! But what these works make thinkable, against the seemingly timeless and totalitarian regime of property, opens up the possibility of building a literal otherwise. Sedgwick's later work on performativity is helpful here. She zooms in on the generative but also provisional and non-teleological capacities of certain speech acts. What she identifies as the specifically "'queer" potential of performativity is related to the tenuousness of its ontological ground' (3). Language, especially in literature, can be queerly performative because it is speculative; it does not determine fixed categories of identity but makes space for desires hitherto unaccommodated to be proposed. I do not bring up queer performativity here in an identitarian sense (this is a line of thought for another time). Instead, the place-writing of Saunders, McGregor, Berry and Prescott is performative in a manner akin to what Sedgwick describes as 'queer' insofar as their written critiques of proprietorial place offers only partial, provisional and tenuous alternative ways of literally making place. Performativity is thus a useful concept to transfer to questions of counter-cultural place-making because it opens up space for the expression of provisional and uncertain desires for different relations with place or land, water, buildings, shelter, Country, history and weather. Moreover if, as Sedgwick says, '[m]any kinds of objects and events *mean*, in many heterogeneous ways and contexts' (6), then here too it is the strange marriage of both the texts and my particular approach to criticism (focusing on the performativity of tone) that makes their logics tend in the direction mapped in the essay; tending towards an alternative mode of non-prorietorial place-making, and away from what Louise Crabtree calls 'The Great Australian Dream of Mortgagee Homeownership' (2013).

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The four texts approach Sydney from different angles and in different forms. Saunders's short poem 'Sydney: Real Estate FOR SALE' and McGregor's long novel *Indelible Ink* focus on particular and culturally similar parts of inner Sydney: wealthy areas around the harbour and beach. Vanessa Berry's creative non-fiction work sprawls with the city into strange abandoned sites or architectural anachronisms, often undergoing redevelopment. *The Town* is a novel ostensibly not about the city at all, but nevertheless ends up in Sydney with two people fleeing the town because it has fallen into a sinkhole; they need to find new place to live and Sydney presents itself as the only viable option.

All four texts share an overarching theme: they all represent proprietorial place relations and financial speculation on land value as a dominant logic in the city. Saunders's poem maps both

the continuity and disjuncture between Country and land as commodity, as writ in real estate advertisements that sell a particular lifestyle while attempting to erase Aboriginal history. McGregor's novel traces the intergenerational transfer of wealth in the north shore suburb of Mosman through the sale of the home—and the life, labour and memories, especially the garden, that are erased in the process. Berry investigates places in Sydney that are odd or abandoned, but these places—relics of previous urban visions and hopes—are frequently already undergoing redevelopment in the text, sometimes fenced off and marked with for sale signs (such as Magic Kingdom), if the text itself does not narrate the transition from one thing to another (such as the Marie Louise Hair Salon on Enmore Road, from quirky hairdresser to stylish restaurant). In *The Town*, the city provides the narrator and Ciara hope for a new life, but when they search for a rental property they find it is impossibly difficult to find even the most basic dwelling. A real estate agent berates them for believing they could find a place to live in the city. Importantly for the argument in this essay, none of the texts directly critiques the proprietorial place-relation. Rather they all contain tonal keys that open up to a critical perspective on this outrageously dominant modality of place-relation.

Many of Berry's chapters narrate places undergoing redevelopment. Drafted as a blog for a PhD project, this is partly a natural effect of her creative process. She revised the blog for the book, *Mirror Sydney*, a few years later, and found that some of the places that were in transition in the initial blog posts had already been overwritten by redevelopment. To manage this material shift in meaning of her place-based subjects, throughout the book Berry repeats a strategy of literally representing redevelopment in process. For example, in Kurnell she finds a new residential subdivision in progress and states: 'the one structure built so far is the frame for a house' (47). She observes that it seems 'as if it could equally be the first to be built or last to remain' (47). Similarly 'the For Lease signs' in a window in Penrith, 'make them remember what used to be there, or imagine what might be there in future' (57). In rewriting redevelopment Berry's view does not simply tend forwards to a clear alternative that neatly matches the vision promised by the redevelopment; rather her observations remain suspended in time, looking simultaneously forward and backward. This strategy of sitting with ambivalence produces a tone of curiosity about what might be if alternative logics or different visions were to be pursued.

Berry's work is primarily descriptive of places in transition or seemingly out-of-place structures, but combined with the perspective she takes on each example, a tone of curiosity emerges. Firstly, what would generally be characterised as 'needing redevelopment' or 'out-of-place' by those who imagine the city as ever-changing and tending towards homogeneity is, in contrast, definitive of Berry's critically curious sense of place. She practises describing the ideas and fantasies that govern what is out-of-place, thereby normalising (in the least pejorative sense of the term possible) their enduring presence in the city. On the back cover endorsement she is rightly celebrated as a neutral observer: 'Berry is the ideal observer because she accords everything she sees the respect of acknowledging the premises on which it was founded' (n.p.). But although Berry is not a polemicist, I contend that her particular perspective begets a material critique of dominant place making practices. In this regard, an important caveat to the cover endorsement is that although Berry appears as a neutral observer, she observes from a very particular perspective. For example, she watches Sydney's famous New Year's fireworks from inside an almost-empty train travelling across the Harbour Bridge at midnight, rather than from a fancy champagne cruise on the harbour (277—79). A critique of redevelopment emerges from this oblique angle, with the train crossing the bridge a fitting synecdoche for the perspective of the entire book. The curiosity that led her inside the train is weird, scary and anticlimactic: 'we are inside the fireworks rather than watching them, and our delight at the

spectacle is intensified by an edge of fear' (278), and soon after they are 'just on a late-night train travelling west' with some 'miserable souls' who got on at Wynyard (279). While Sydney, the city of fireworks, prides itself on a particular uniform image or, indeed, brand identity, Berry's journey on the midnight train over the bridge in that chapter (and across the whole city in the rest of the book) slices through the spectacle. Thus, as a work of creative non-fiction, we read the city through the lens of the 'author's attitude to his [or her] subject matter' (OED), but although the attitude is curious and non-judgemental of the places explored, her perspective is so different to the dominant logics governing place it yields a pathway to critique the governing proprietorial mode of relating to place.

Thus we can pursue the implications of this curiosity as future proposals or performative possibilities. Developers and governments (local and state) are currently peddling a spectacularly homogenous future-vision of fancy cafes, green space and luxury apartment life; meanwhile, Berry's investigations systematically reveal the multitude of gaps in this manicured vision. The gaps are not absences, but material traces of other urban visions manifest as literal, material anachronisms in the cityscape. Berry shows that these are ubiquitous across the city. What might be simplistically understood as nostalgia—Berry's attention to a strange clock tower in Oatley, retro arcades in Penrith or the inexplicably amazing Domain Express Walkway—is much more importantly a form of critical attention to the wild temporal diversity of future visions manifest in the city represented by objects themselves. If *Mirror Sydney's* discoveries suggest anything, it implies that total vision for the future peddled by developers will likely only materialise in fragments and parts and will be erased again too. But also, by way of Berry's curiosity, we are left with ways of thinking and imagining how redevelopment could occur in ways that incorporate the past and present, which are not dominated by profit motives, and do not constantly seek to overwrite the old and capitalise on shiny new visions. This tone could be materially performative if we were to take up her generous curiosity about the odd and out-of-place as an ethics of redevelopment or preservation.

Prescott's novel, like Berry's study of Sydney, does not directly name the property relation as dominant object of critique. Nonetheless, the novel's sequence of events and disappointed conclusion—with protagonists adrift on the Sydney property market—produces a tone skeptical of the contemporary mode of proprietorial place relations. While Berry's critiques of redevelopment might be understood as originating in an aesthetic sensibility against homogeneity and bad design, Prescott's emerges directly through his representation of what is colloquially known as the 'crisis of housing affordability.'⁶ In *The Town*, Sydney is rendered disappointing because it is prohibitively expensive and impossible to navigate. Broadly the novel's plot plays like this: the narrator is in a town in central western NSW researching for a novel on disappearing towns; he has difficulty finding information about the town; he meets Ciara, they hang out. Eventually Ciara and the narrator leave the town because it has literally disappeared into a sinkhole and they move to Sydney. Part three is entitled 'The Disappointing City.' Sydney is at once presented as the only viable alternative place to live, but as also inaccessible for people who just want to work at a grocery store, rent a flat and get on with life. The city promises a life and the narrator represents the city's failure to deliver, giving rise to the particularly disappointed tone.

The novel offers a seemingly paradoxical reasoning for the disappointing situation: the financialisation of life in the city has made it an inaccessible place for anyone who is not already living there. The narrator's report on Ciara's findings from a day out capture the novel's attitude in this regard:

She told me that everyone in the city speaks about the city in the same way people in the town spoke about the town. They say the city is not what it used to be. If she asks what it used to be, they simply reply that it used to be more like a city.

It wasn't always like this, the city people told Ciara. The city was once authentically a city. Now it was only where business was conducted. She was doomed for arriving late, she said, laying flat on the dank mattress. She was too late for everything. (221)

The adverb 'authentically' presumably refers to a city of possible dreams and class mobility; where one can get a job, find a house, make a decent living and live comfortably. In *The Town*, Sydney no longer contains any possibility of simple human-scaled hopes and dreams. Now that the city is only a place where business is conducted, if you are not already conducting business, then you are already excluded. In this rendering of Sydney, the city cares naught for anyone's dreams and aspirations unless they already have the means to attain them. The city is also not a viable alternative and hopeful alternative to the town; it is suffering the same fate as small towns.

While potentially controversial given the focus on 'the town,' *The Town* can be read as a novel thoroughly absorbed by the problem of urban proprietorial place-relations in Sydney. This runs counter to the grain of the novel's early critical reception, which focuses on its unique representation of regional Australia. Writing in the *Sydney Review of Books*, Jennifer Mills praises the first two-thirds of the book for their extraordinary weirdness and mystery, for the way in which *The Town* plays with and refuses clichés about regional writing at every turn. In particular, she notes how leaving the town unnamed contributes to this power. But, she argues,

[in] the third and I think least successful part of the book, 'The Disappointing City,' Ciara and the narrator manage to leave, escaping across the mountains to the city. While the town in *The Town* is generic, scrubbed clean of its specificities and thus perfectly suited to allegory, the city is unavoidably recognisable as Sydney. The more connections it is possible to make with real geography, the more *The Town*'s symbolic power deflates.

But the glaring specificity of Sydney in contrast to the town strikes me as the key point, not to mention the idea that Sydney itself is specifically disappointing, rather than a site of particular opportunity or hope.

In an early science studies essay, Isabelle Stengers and Roxanne Lapidus note that disappointment is linked to the French word for deception (81); the etymological relationship between disappointment and deception serves to underline the quality of the disappointment registered by Prescott in the novel. In contrast to almost every advertising image of Sydney—its new property developments, its new malls, new food courts, new toll roads and new suburbs—in *The Town*, Sydney is evoked as a fat pulsating leech on the eastern edge of the continent, sucking the substance from nearby towns and causing them to collapse in on themselves. This is represented literally in the novel through the image of the sinkhole that swallows the town in section two, but metaphorically in the grandiose sprawl of the city in contrast to the smallness of other towns. While Sydney is full of itself, and also the resources and energies of all nearby places, the town is always generic. Strikingly, in the above passage the city is not constructed as the town's opposite, but rather everything in the land seems to be subordinated to the banal and exclusive, financial and, ultimately, proprietorial logic of Sydney.

The proprietorial logic of Sydney, as a brand, as a series of land-based commodities and as the centre of the Australian human-labour market, is literally deflating the symbolic power of everything else. This is not to mention the symbolic power of the city to signify human hopes.

The novel is not hopeless; it is disappointed. The tonal distinction between disappointment and hopelessness contains a performative possibility. Hopelessness is despair and futility, but disappointment has an edge of criticality. It can be critical in a moralising sense (like a teacher tut-tutting about a naughty class), but here it is like a small person who is disappointed that their carer didn't look after them better, didn't deliver on a promise to take them out to somewhere special. This massive social infrastructure that should provide for people is failing to due to radical financial self-indulgence ('Tut-tut Sydney,' says the homeless human). Through the particularities of the narrator's disappointment with Sydney the scale of the novel's critique of this supposedly deeply desirable place is exposed; its desirability is now almost exclusively a bleak effect of market forces. The narrator's disappointment in Sydney peaks when he tries and fails to find a place to live. It is in the tone of the narrator's interaction with the real estate agent that we can apprehend this critique most strongly.

I visited a real estate agent in one of the suburbs. I told the man at the counter that I would like to rent a flat, or a house, or anything else inhabitable. The real estate agent was not eager to help. He looked at me with disdain and replied that he had nothing ... He told me I should consider moving to the country and growing food for the people in the city to eat. (219–20)

The town has disappeared into a sinkhole, and the cheapest and most basic dwellings in the city are not an alternative. The city is not the bombed out wasteland of *Mad Max III* either. On the contrary, the narrator's disappointment in the leech-city and the sink-hole small town has clear objects, which are satirised in the novel: it is not a bomb or apocalypse causing the problem, but real estate agents, the ubiquity of business relations and, elsewhere in the novel, the endless network of roads that enable movement but with unclear purposes. The city is not full of monsters that need to be fought or enemies that have to be defeated, but with linked bureaucracies that could presumably be changed but for some reason remain as they are. In hanging his disappointment on the banality of urban injustice and the deception at the heart of all urban advertorials promising a better life, Prescott's tone opens us up to an alternative possible place-relation that could literally be materialised with changes of attitude and ethic, rather than with bloodsports in the thunderdome. Indeed, a desirable 'life beyond thunderdome' in *The Town* is perhaps, quite simply, one where real estate agents assist slightly strange people to look for a house instead of trying to purify their jurisdictions of all weirdness in order to produce high-rental returns in homogeneous places.

Saunders's piece is a short episodic poem and McGregor's is a long work of narrative fiction, but both explore how the commodification of land produces particular experiences of loss. In Saunders's case this loss is identifiable: the poem directly articulates loss as colonisation and the theft of land. For McGregor's protagonist, Marie, the loss is less clear. In selling her house her personal loss has no obvious cause but ricochets strongly between white privilege and gender inequity; it manifests in sadness about her garden, an element of the house tied to place, which cannot be moved in the sale. The different kinds of loss index qualitatively distinct types of anti-propiertorialism. In Saunders's writing of loss of Aboriginal place-uses as a form of partial, misguided re-writing of place, the question of how to decolonise the city is raised. In McGregor, even though her post-publication reflections enunciate an anti-colonial politics, the loss is somewhere deep in the woods of patriarchal and heteronormative settler kinship groups,

class and race privilege, radical solidarity with Indigenous struggles, and is far from making it into the text itself. Regardless of these differences, the sense of loss that Saunders and McGregor generate in their texts contrasts radically with contemporary place-making strategies that celebrate ownership as final, fixed, immovable or even as a type of place-relation thoroughly insulated from the experience of loss. Both writers observe how anything in the city can be reduced to a value-adding element in the service of the proprietorial regime; even complex bodies of water are commodified. ‘Harbour’ is neither Country of Cammeraygal or Gadigal, nor is it tidal estuary or multispecies home, but as McGregor and Saunders observe, it is commodified as ‘harbour view’ (McGregor, 151) or aspect of ‘harbour life’ (Saunders). In exploring loss in this context, these texts call attention to how a harbour, for instance, can be much more than a view or aspect of lifestyle. As such, I will show that, in articulating the proprietorial place relation as an experience of loss rather than possession, we are left with a performative tonal atmosphere through which to imagine place otherwise. With regard to these two texts, we can specifically imagine ways of thinking and making place that are both anti-prorietorial and materially responsive to historical ills.

Brenda Saunders’s poem ‘Sydney Real Estate: FOR SALE’ is a deceptively simple. In the first instance, it visually and rhetorically represents the incommensurability of dominant settler notions of places as property or commodity with Aboriginal histories of those same places. But it is the space between the verses that gives rise to a tone of grief and warning:

Bennelong:
Vogue
Penthouse suite
World
address!

corroboree
below

Kirribilli:
High Rise
Harbour life
A Must!

shell middens
testify

Focusing specifically on wealthy inner city harbour and beachside suburbs, from Maroubra in the South to Kirribilli in the North, the poem appears to use contrast—between the vacuous rhetoric real estate agents use to value-add to property, and Aboriginal uses of those same places to create meaning. The decontextualised, agrammatical and banal descriptions of place as commodity in the first instance invite reflection on the notion of desirability and value advocated by real estate advertising. What is ‘a must’ in Kirribilli? Then, because of their textual proximity, the incongruity between the high rise and the midden invites the question: how do the high rises of Kirribilli relate to the shell middens? To what, or for whom do the middens testify? Due to these ambiguities, the neat contrast does not produce neutral descriptions of ‘place then’ and ‘place now,’ rather it produces a tone that clearly identifies and mourns what has been lost in the dispossession.

More than contrast, silence and sequence are also instrumental in producing meaning in the poem. Firstly, structurally the poem inverts historical sequence, with ante-colonial uses of the places now for sale following the advertisement. This enables Saunders to present the past as memories or hauntings, temporal shadows in the present uses of place, rather than as place-relations cordoned off by time. The sequence of the poem's verses and representation of contrasting uses of place combine with the line-break between verses to generate a "semblance" of feeling for Country. The poem's tone, or 'the formal aspect that enables these affective values to become significant ... within (a) holistic matrix of social relations' (Ngai, 43), hovers in this carefully crafted line break. The ideological disjuncture between Aboriginal and settler ways of imagining place, specifically regarding property, is represented as an absence or an atmosphere woven through the poem. In other words, the poem does not only represent disjuncture as the poet's personal loss or as contrasting place-uses, but the space between the verses infers the ethical, historical and ideological problem of proprietorial place-relations specifically because Country is contrasted with snippets of real estate advertorials.

Why is this tonal? Firstly, she does not state these disjunctures explicitly. They are inferred structurally. But it is also tonal because the problem is so large. By focusing on Sydney, not a place with a formal Native Title claim, this problem has radically different implications. That anti-colonial politics persist in central Sydney is easy to forget, with its iconic settler state landmarks, the Opera House and the Harbour Bridge, all within a short bus ride to Bondi Beach. The city's unceded territory is forgotten in almost all redevelopment. How to begin to remake place in this regard? Saunders starts by simply pointing out the Indigenous histories of place, and the shameless lack of material recognition in the present laws of place-relation. In so doing, the entire city is suddenly figured as having a compromised place-relation, contemporary place-making practices that continue to pretend otherwise notwithstanding.

Critically, the loss Saunders articulates is not absolute and the space between the lines stands out not as one of silent submission, but affectively charged resistance; it concludes with a direct warning to the current hegemony: 'Beware / the great shark / Dreaming.' Even though these places are overwritten rhetorically by real estate jargon, the poem suggests that Indigenous histories are nonetheless materially haunting the present and will continue to do so. Despite the wanton erasure of Country in advertising, Saunders also shows that there are traces of Aboriginal uses of these places within the current market; the verses are rhetorically linked. 'Walk to work ... the Gadigal Way': Gadigal, not colonists, created the path between Woolloomooloo and Sydney's Central Business District. Bennelong point was a site for corroboree; traditional owners identified it as a significant place long before settlers built the Opera House and Toaster. These celebrated places were recognised as such prior to white settlement and traces of those uses are still visible today.⁷

Despite the uniformity of certain kinds of uses for places from pre-1788 to present times, the title of the poem positions property as the vector that assures ongoing loss and thwarts the possibility of decolonisation.⁸ It is the commodified place-relation, rigorously critiqued in the poem, that mainstream place-making practices mentioned in the introduction actively seek to construct. In contrast, by mapping the scale of Indigenous losses in the city in relation to property, the poem invites thinking about place against the institutionalised practices of place-making described in the introduction by criticising commodification of place, *tout court*. In terms of the role of reading literature and poetry in relation to place-making then, Saunders's 'Sydney Real Estate: FOR SALE' opens a particular way into thinking critically about proprietorial place relations in relation to Indigenous land claims in the city, one that is so often set aside as a problem for remote areas or lands no one else cares to contest. The performative

aspects of such a proposal have radical implications for making place otherwise and in reparations of historical ills.

By also highlighting the way the property ownership produces loss, Fiona McGregor's *Indelible Ink* casts the commodification of place as problematic for different reasons. The novel is about a divorced woman in her sixties and her three adult children from the privileged Sydney suburb of Mosman. While the main narrative is about Marie's relationship with her children, intergenerationalism and inheritance, it is also about the Sydney property market. The main event organising the novel is the sale of Marie's house, which she is forced into after her divorce settlements left her without any 'liquid assets' but a multi-million dollar property on Sydney Harbour. Marie is a melancholic figure in the Freudian sense ('Mourning and Melancholia'). She is unable to fully identify the loss she is experiencing in the sale of the home and is melancholic largely because she believes she needs the money that is tied up in the commodified home-place (and so do her children, who encourage the sale as a matter of fundamental necessity); this ultimately blinds her to the fact that there are other ways of relating to place and to people. There are other ways to make kin. Thus she experiences the sale as an unknowable loss. During her working years, Marie did not engage in paid employment, but rather raised the three children. Her husband worked and controlled the finances. In their divorce she assumed no authority to determine the distribution of wealth and so in the 'settlement' she received the house. While a harbourside home is extremely valuable, without any money to spend on other necessities, it only becomes useful as such when sold. McGregor is cognisant of the colonial dimensions of place as an asset as well, and she reflects on this in an interview about her process (see endnote 4), but the colonial critique is focalised through Marie's melancholy, climaxing in the family drama that coalesces around the sale of the home.

As well as the overarching structure of the novel replicating the difficulties of the intergenerational transfer of wealth, McGregor uses the motif of Marie's private garden to highlight the fraught material and temporal logics of property. Marie has cultivated a garden that marks her history at this home. In the garden, Marie seeks to transcend the dominant proprietorial relation with place: trees planted after the birth of each of her three children literally ground those events in the place and materially and symbolically root them there even as the children move away. Moreover, due to the garden, she is attuned to the seasons and the drought in ways that seem strange to her friends, and she is frustrated to the point of cynicism about the ways in which she cannot respond to the world in the way she can to her garden. While preparing the home for sale on the market Marie watches the home next door bulldozed and rebuilt by new owners, erasing the personal histories of those who lived there before. She recognises that the same thing is going to happen to her garden. Stubbornly refusing to surrender the personal history she cultivated in the garden, Marie begins to tattoo it on her body.

The tone is central to the novel's critique of place relations. Marie's loss is opaque to her but is much clearer to the reader. The narrative is focalised through Marie and her three children, but is told in a modified third person narrative voice (occasionally veering into free indirect discourse). None of the characters is especially likable, and the reader generally knows slightly more about what is going on than the characters that focalise different sections of the novel. As a study in character, the novel has been heavily critiqued; but as a study in place-making or environmental writing, the novel has been revered as a masterpiece.⁹ Regarding Marie's melancholy, then, the multi-focal structure of the novel produces a unique perspective on the quality of her loss. In other words, although the character is melancholic, we do not thoroughly identify with her perspective. Marie's life is so caught up in proprietorial place-relations that she does not know how to manage the loss. What becomes thinkable for a reader after

apprehending this dynamic in the novel is, therefore, a question: what would it actually take for someone of old colonial money to recognise their life is tenuously founded on the fiction—both limited and limiting—of a proprietorial place-relation? What would it mean for someone like Marie to realise that alternative kinds of place-relations are indeed possible, and not just in the confines of her exclusive harbourside garden? This transforms into a performative possibility of actually observing and unpacking all the intergenerational, affective, interpersonal and fiscal ties that literally keep the colonial land-relation in place, thus opening up the possibility that things could be otherwise.

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The four texts analysed here represent tensions in the proprietorial regime that governs place in Sydney. The anachronistic landmarks of Berry, the impossibility of finding a rental in Prescott, and the historical, intergenerational and affective landscapes mapped by Saunders and McGregor invite imaginings about the potential for non-prorietorial relationship with place. At the same time these four texts all recognise the problem that the property regime poses for the materialisation of that relation. The tones of these works—curiosity about what is possible, and a sense of disappointment and loss at what presently *is*—imply radically different relationships with place which are both desirable and imaginable beyond those constructed through official place-making projects in Sydney, aimed at value-adding to place-as-commodity.

For settlers in Australia, it is assumed that one wants to own a home, and corporate place-making practices capitalise on that uncritical and widespread want. Conventional place-making practices trade on the desire for home ownership, cultivated in Australia over generations of settler colonial policy (Crabtree). A reappraisal of this normative settler colonial desire, which occurs across all four texts, at least begins to make thinkable or sensible an otherwise. What is the subsequent potential for these preliminary expressions to translate into a material ethics for place-making? Close reading is a practice so unbelievably minor in scale—an atom to the universe of everything else—that it is hard to ‘keep a straight face’ and argue that close reading alone or performed to a room with between three and fifteen people (the classroom or the conference), or the small audience of this essay, can make anything material at all. But it is also redundant to be only cynical about the small-scale potential for real world transformation here. As I noted at the beginning of the paper, even the best art is easily enrolled in the service of value-adding for corporate profit. So, why not try to find pathways for resistance, and if we must instrumentalise art, do so in a way that works against the forces of capitalist enterprise? In reading these four different visions for the potential decommodification of place, this paper has sought to develop a strategy for doing just that.

NOTES

¹ For a good and brief overview of the literature, see the introduction to Andres and Golubchikov ‘Limits to Artist-Led Regeneration.’ Given the widespread uptake of Richard Florida’s notion in *The Rise of the Creative Class* that the creative class can help to build prosperity in cities, art is often involved in conventional place-making projects. This process was propelled in Australia, in particular, by public figures like Marcus Westbury, author of *Creating Cities* (2015), and curator and now councilor for the City of Sydney, Jess Scully, whose role across both her curatorial and political careers is described on her website as cultivation of relations between creative and business enterprise in relation to urban development. Florida has since distanced himself from his famous argument. See Sam Wetherell, ‘Richard Florida is Sorry’ in <https://jacobinmag.com/2017/08/new-urban-crisis-review-richard-florida> for a critical appraisal of the situation.

² Most recently the performance by Sydney-based artists Maria White and Emma McManus ‘Never Trust a Creative City’ (in Festival of Live Art, ArtsHouse Melbourne, March 2018). See also the work of Squat Space collective (<https://squat.space>) and, for a specific meditation on a range of critical creative responses to the redevelopment of Redfern, see the exhibition catalogue *There Goes the Neighbourhood: Redfern and the Politics of Urban Space* edited by Keg de Souza and Zanny Begg.

³ McGregor won the Age book of the year award; Saunders won the Indigenous Poetry Prize at the 2014 Melbourne Writers’ Festival; and while too recent for awards at time of writing, both Prescott and Berry have received widespread critical acclaim for their work.

⁴ In ‘The Story of My Book: Fiona McGregor on *Indelible Ink*’ she says: ‘Sydney went through significant changes while I was writing the book: more tunnels and freeways were laid, creating a more stressful mood and pace, segregating the city and pushing up prices. The police force obtained even greater powers and exercised them. Real estate skyrocketed. The latter is a national phenomenon but particularly acute in Sydney, and has meant huge losses to the artistic and left wing community: every year more are forced out. Real estate became one of the main sources of drama in the book, if not the main one. I can’t deny my political feelings about this: I know of no other nation so focused on home ownership—economically, politically and emotionally. At the same time we have the world’s most ancient civilisation here—a culture whose very basis is its spiritual relationship to the land - which is still being denied its land rights and struggling to survive. I don’t think this is coincidental.’ <https://www.readings.com.au/news/the-story-of-my-book-fiona-mcgregor-on-indelible-ink>

⁵ Butler actually credits Sedgwick as influential to her rethinking these questions in the wake of criticisms of *Gender Trouble*. See Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (281, footnote 3).

⁶ The more mainstream dimension of this topic is the subject of another of my essays, ‘Labour against wilderness and the trouble with property beyond *The Secret River*,’ which critically explores what is colloquially known as ‘Australia’s obsession with property’ and the related but non-identical ecological and colonial problems with the commodification of land. This essay is focalised through the narrative and mainstream controversy surrounding the publication of Grenville’s novel.

⁷ On a walkshop around Redfern organised by Bianca Hester and Saskia Beudel from the ‘Space, Place, Country’ research group at Sydney College of the Arts, Cathy Craigie reminded participants that Botany Road, one of the main artery roads connecting the inner city with the airport, was an important Aboriginal trade route.

⁸ I use decolonisation here instead of reconciliation. For a short critical analysis of how reconciliation rhetoric does not sufficiently materially transform settler/Indigenous relations see Tom Clark, ‘Paul Keating’s Redfern Park Speech and Its Rhetorical Legacy.’ Decolonisation has replaced the framework of reconciliation because it theorises and calls for a deep structural transformation in Indigenous/settler relations.

⁹ For critical readings on account of character see Brendan Cowell and Marieke Hardy on ‘First Tuesday Bookclub’ (2010); for celebratory readings on account of place or environment see Williamson (2010) and Whish-Wilson (2010).

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