

‘On Species’

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This special issue of JASAL, ‘On Species’, comes out of a one-day symposium held at the Australian Centre at the University of Melbourne in December 2013. The symposium focused on new approaches in the Australian humanities to questions of species and ecology, and looked at the ways in which encounters with species play themselves out in the creative arts—fiction, poetry, visual art, theatre, and so on—and in historical and cultural practice. It was especially interested in the way the lives and deaths—and afterlives—of species in Australia and the region are represented and understood.

The articles in this special issue cover a range of Australian media and engage with various kinds of practices and disciplines in the Arts and Humanities. Some turn to colonial history. Suzanne Fraser looks at some etched glass panels of a stag at Werribee Park Mansion in Victoria, created locally in the mid-1870s, to tease out the way they evoke a displaced sense of ‘Highlandness’ in the colonies. Ken Gelder looks at Edwin J. Brady’s delightful ‘The Friar Bird’s Sermon: An Australian Fable’ (1897) in the framework of colonial native species classification and description. He then situates this story alongside a later and very different work by Brady, *Australia Unlimited* (1918), reading both texts as ‘fantasy projections of colonial life as it might have been or might yet become.’ Peter Minard is a historian: he examines the role of the Acclimatisation Society of Victoria, established in 1861, and looks in particular at the introduction of the American rainbow trout into local rivers and its effect on native river blackfish. Rachael Weaver’s article focuses on two late colonial writers, Louis Becke and E. J. Banfield, in order to explore the figure of the beachcomber. For Weaver, Becke’s beachcomber stories produce the island as a fantasy space where—among other things—actual encounters with local native species can be chronicled: but always in the context of Pacific adventurism. Banfield, on the other hand, transforms the island adventurer into an ‘ecological recluse’ who develops a compelling kind of ‘spiritual’ kinship with local species and habitats.

Turning to contemporary representations of species and the field of ecology, Philip Morrissey writes on Aboriginal ecological philosopher Bill Neidjie. Neidjie’s narratives interweave the natural world with sacred and cultural practice, reflections on social issues and Aboriginal history. In his reading of *Story About Feeling* published in 1989, Morrissey draws attention to the refinement and sensitivity of Neidjie’s language and the connections he makes amongst all orders of being. Lara Stevens considers how art and science shape broader perceptions of species normativity. She examines Sydney-based, Colombian-born visual and performance artist Maria Fernanda Cardoso, whose exhibition ‘It’s not size that matters, it is shape’ includes resin sculptures of the male copulatory organs of the harvestman, an insect related to mites and spiders. For Stevens, the exhibition playfully challenges normative understandings of biology, ontology and gender and offers an alternative to the hetero-normative dualisms of male-female courtship, reproduction and sexual difference. Denise Varney considers how a theatre of species focuses on the dramatic relationship between humans and animals while sounding the alarm about current endangered species. She analyses the performance *They Saw a Thylacine* by writer-performers Justine Campbell and Sarah Hamilton, which tells of the final tragic days of indigenous thylacine. Varney argues that the artists take a social and historical stand on human induced species extinction by placing it squarely in the era of human dominance over nature.

Our thanks go to Tony Simoes da Silva and Brigitta Olubas for encouraging the publication of this special issue of JASAL; and thanks, too, to all the external referees who reviewed these articles. We hope readers will enjoy these interventions into current thinking in the Australian humanities about species.