

Strange Letters Editorial

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Letter writing has long been a mode of creative potential. Emerging from a traditionally Western writing practice, the epistolary novel, for historian Lynn Hunt, was a literary form through which it was possible ‘to demonstrate that selfhood depended on qualities of “interiority” (having an inner core) ... [and show] that all selves were in some sense alike in their possession of interiority’ (48). Letter writing, as a convention of literature, brings the reader into an inner world; into a relationship with the letter’s author. In some cultures, however, selfhood is not an individualistic quality but rather a collective or communal quality that brings a person into relation with kin, community, and country. In extending this notion of interiority beyond the singular and the human through epistolary address, there is the possibility of recognition—that of more-than-human agency, and with it, affective responses to entangled relationships between author and addressee. It comes as no surprise then to find the roots of nature writing entwined with the epistolary form, such as in the works of foundational British ecologist Gilbert White. His text *The Natural History and Antiquities of Selbourne*, published late in the 18th century, is considered one of the earliest examples of European nature writing and is comprised of a series of letters. These letters, some real, others fictionalised, became an archive of encounter and entanglement with the natural world—an address which reflected keen observation of numerous species, tied with understandings of the detrimental impact of human intervention into natural systems. To read the letter-writing impulse, a sharing of inner worlds, as historically linked to ecology, reveals something about the possibilities of address. However, within this traditional frame of nature writing, the human is positioned as rational translator of the natural world; the actor on an ecological stage, bringing its wonder to life and legibility through print upon the page. This assumed exteriority has become troubled by contemporary ecological thinking, with the ‘boundary-making practices by which the “human” and the “nonhuman” are differentially constituted’ now apprehended as a complex site for excavation (Barad 124). Here it is acknowledged, however, that the unbounded and entangled nature of human-nonhuman communities has long been understood by Indigenous peoples. From this, a troublesome and archaic scholastic legacy ripe for reinterpretation and reconfiguration arises, within which it is still easy to perceive humanity as being the main actors in narratives told about the world. This requires modes of engagement and address which challenge the boundedness of the author and the subject, whilst critiquing settler-colonial presuppositions of address, and understanding them to be mutable within these roles but bounded to that from which they emerge—being inherently earthly.

This special issue arises from a virtual symposium held on 5 February 2021 which sought to challenge the letter writing tradition, interrogating the communicative capacity of the more-than-human. This seemed strangely fitting, occurring as it did in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic when the nonhuman was asking us to listen; a period of life gone strange in which we were forced to adopt new modes of meeting, communicating and being together-apart. As the symposium website describes, we were ‘dislocated from one another by lockdowns, border closures, and the unsustainability, cost, and even danger of travel’. The marked rise in letter writing throughout the COVID-19 lockdowns emerged as a means of countering this dislocation, taking advantage of the epistolary form’s unique qualities as a way of being together-apart (Jenkins). Perhaps this trend was a reflection upon shifting temporalities (compared to other ways of communicating, the slowness of the postal service became less crucial amidst shifts in day-to-day realities), but also perhaps out of a desire to connect. But as we turned our attention to the Earth, the environment, to the more-than-human, we were called to rethink such correspondence. The symposium asked us to imagine how our letters might help us to connect with others through ‘arboreal love letters and existential ruminations’ as were written to the trees of Naarm (Melbourne) (City of Melbourne; Hesterman) or by ‘making-strange ... ideas of ancestry, earth, law, weather and writing itself’ as Alexis Wright implored us to do in her letter ‘Hey, Ancestor!’ in *The Guardian* in 2018, or by paying attention to the way that nonhumans communicate with each other, as Vicki Kirby suggests when describing lightning as ‘a sort of stuttering chatter between the ground and the sky’ (10).¹ For artist and landscape designer Heather Hesterman, technological mediation such as the *Urban Forest Visual Map* can become a conduit for connectivity with plants in a cultivation of what they term ‘chlorophillia,’ an affective attunement to the non-human through memory, care and sentimentality (6-9). So, as a symposium, we embarked together on a journey to strange places, with strange letters for, with and to nonhuman others—one undertaken in recognition of the myriad of harms imparted upon peoples and ecologies by colonial forces, legacies and futures in an Australian context. Letter writing within this special issue can be read as a means of connection beyond the human, bringing together a multitude of subjects and addressees in multiple entanglements, with this issue rendering tangible those communications of desires, impulses, reactions and responses that tie us to our more-than-human kin.

Strangeness often suggests something that is unfamiliar or difficult to explain. In *Strange Letters* we ask what it means to be strangers, unfamiliar with each other or our ways of being in the world. To reconsider how we might seek communicative exchange with these strangers and how we might re-make letters in strange new ways. In doing so, this issue takes the idea of strangeness to be a generative concept, one allowing for new ways of apprehending and comprehending relationships between knowledge, texts and each other in a more-than-human world. Artist-geographer Candice Boyd suggests that we might view creative inquiry as ‘a critical act of resistance to dominant forms of academic discourse’ which allows for an “‘involved knowing” rather than an objective knowledge’ (211). The

body of work presented in this issue offers ways to know otherwise. According to Tom Griffiths, ‘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’ (20). Embracing strangeness as an impetus leads us to question how we engage in research-creation, offering a means of unmaking and remaking the way in which knowledge is performed by researchers. Further, embracing this strangeness within a narrative scope invites the unexpected and creates space for the influence of organising principles, ethics, temporalities and structures that are found within nonhuman nature. As Alaimo suggests, ‘what was once the ostensibly bounded human subject finds herself in a swirling landscape of uncertainty where practices and actions that were once not even remotely ethical or political matters suddenly become so’ (476). This issue asks how we might cultivate an academic space in which this uncertainty can be acknowledged, unpacked and explored collectively. Within this uncertainty, as Kirby shows, is the potential of communicative exchange with a more-than-human world, of ‘biological grammars’ and ‘the translation capacities of our immune system’ (73), expanding modes of communication beyond the traditional letter and the human voice. The authors of this special issue take up this challenge using a wide variety of approaches, crafting strange letters from mixed media and experimental forms, refiguring the postcard, newsletter, penpal letter and email, and making letters out of memoir, poetry, academic writing and fictocriticism. Many works are addressed to those who will never read them, such as decorator crabs (Tien & Burmann), seabirds (Fagan), lichens (Zettel & Sivanesan), cities (Bayes) and deceased writers (Mickelburgh). In doing so, each of these authors draw on a key aspect of letter writing—the ability to engage empathetically with those distanced from the writer, to speak ‘with’ rather than ‘about’ and as such, to write into strangers’ lives as absent participants. Even in the essays of this special issue, authors engaged in creative methods and approaches—to think with and through nonhuman road trauma (Fetherston), gardens (Mickelburgh), kininfrastructures (Coyne), and in the manner of directly addressing rather than talking about gannets (Fagan).

European interaction with the Australian landscape could be positioned as originating in a disjuncture; an unfamiliarity with an ecology perceived as unruly, or ‘strange scribblings’, that seemed to resist the rigid lines of Western taxonomy and colonial bureaucracy. The oft-quoted identification of this environment as the ‘strange scribblings of Nature learning how to write’, places these localised and othered ecologies within a textual frame, and therefore suggesting they are able to be read, understood and edited at will (Clarke 2). Within this frame, however, there is the possibility of misreading and misunderstanding. The texts within this issue of *Swampben*, through the epistolary form, seek to engage in a correspondence with the more-than-human and ecologies at large, in an attempt to make strange settler-colonial ways of thinking and doing. There are papers that question the cognitive dissonance created when we both love and harm animals (FitzHywel; Fetherstone), papers that ask us to listen deeply to the waters of the city and see them as

kin (Coyne), papers that ask us to reconsider the affective, administrative and material implications of bushfires (Vulcan), papers that refigure epistolary practices through gardening and feminist philosophy (Mickelburg) and papers that investigate the power of sharing photographs as cross-cultural correspondence (Chew).

The symposium theme encouraged participants to think more creatively about what our research might say and the possibilities for speaking, writing and listening beyond traditional academic frameworks. With the mobilization of the epistolary form came experimentation within the symposium itself—audio, video and visual forms enabled participants to think differently about relationships to the nonhuman and place. We are delighted to include three such pieces within this special issue—a series of postcards by Perdita Phillips and Astrida Neimanis, a durational mixed media ode to the decorator crab by Gianni Tien and Elizabeth Burmann, and a newsletter from future lichenologists by Tessa Zettel and Sumugan Sivanesan. Significantly, however, all contributions to this special issue, whether they follow traditional or experimental modes of writing, draw from entanglements with the more-than-human, bringing these relationships into material form. Here, we point to the significant work of the Bawaka Collective from 2007—an Indigenous and non-Indigenous, more-than-human research collective engaged in writing of, across and with place, on Bawaka Country in North-East Arnhem Land. In recognising Bawaka Country itself as a contributor and collaborator in their ongoing research, the collective displaces restrictive notions of scholarship in favour of Indigenous-led modes of research, practice, scholarship and co-becoming (Fisher). As cultural geographer Lesley Instone writes, in the multi-authored text ‘Writing difference differently’, ‘To move from the stable world of matters of fact to the multiple and contingent lands of situated matters of concern sets a challenge of how to write and communicate differently’ (Fisher et al. 20). All contributors to this special issue, whether directly or indirectly, are seen to take up this challenge of communicating differently, and of embracing strangeness as a generative criterion.

The papers which constitute this special issue take many forms—qualitative assessments, artistic postcards, epistolary literature, newsletters and poetry. There is a communicative conduit running between these works like electricity streaming across a wire, impressions drawn from or imprinted upon landscapes, ecologies and encounters. In moving through the works that comprise this special issue, ‘strange letters’ is revealed as a productive framework through which to think other modes of relation—methodologies for attentiveness and address, frameworks for encounter, and ways of recording and reporting the world.

Taylor Coyne offers an embrace of ‘kininfrastructures,’ recognising that the infrastructures that thread into and amongst undergrounds provide opportunities for more-than-human life to thrive. Just as we should be caring for our more-than-human kin, he argues that we

should be caring for the infrastructures that enable and support their (and our) existences. Coyne calls for us to listen deeply to these watery bodies and in doing so, offers an opportunity to rethink and reconfigure our relationship to city and place. Just as the Situationists called for attention to the beach beneath the street, Coyne calls for readers to shift our attention to those waterways beneath the bitumen (Wark 149-150).

Written against the heat of the bitumen on roads which snake across the country, Rachel Fetherston's essay explores the normalisation of nonhuman death often referred to as 'roadkill', a term that obscures the individual lives lost. In witnessing these deaths, Fetherston enters into a correspondence with the victims to reveal the trauma involved in such acts. Within this essay, attention is given to a seemingly accepted cost of the present, roadkill as a casualty of contemporary life, a toll for passage written in loss. Amidst reflections upon witnessing and mourning those individuals, Fetherston zooms outward and upwards with the exhaust fumes of the vehicles that cause this carnage to recognise the greater accelerating harm of motion, movement and human activity—that of continually increasing CO² levels, and with it, warming temperatures threatening greater loss in the present and the future. In doing so, Fetherston advocates for an ethics of care that is mutable in its application beyond the human, and mutable in its adoption in motion.

Michael Chew refigures the pen-pal letter to investigate youth responses to the environment across cultures. Building on his research project 'Portraits of Change' that was more generally outlined in his paper in Volume 7 of *Swampfen* (under his project title), his essay in Volume 9 titled 'Seeing Within, Without, Across and Between' focuses in on letters exchanged between children in Melbourne and Dhaka to explore the environmental themes discussed and examine how environmental discussions were enriched in the correspondence of photo-stories. His use of photography allowed for a communicative exchange that cut across cultural, linguistic and geographical barriers and resulted in photo-stories and letters that 'invite us to see in different ways' (15), ways that are culturally and politically situated through the bodily entanglements of local children. Chew places these letters within broader discussions of environmental change behaviour and shows how the children's photo-stories capture fears of pollution and environmental damage; care for other animals, plants and waterways; and 'the promise of different ethics of environmental care' (25).

In a manner which attends to the relationships between people and nature as reflected in those early letters of White, Renee Mickelburgh presents a series of letters which blur the boundaries between 'true' archive and fiction—engaging with the archived letters of botanical illustrator Kathleen McArthur and poet Judith Wright. Mobilising the work of Helene Cixous, Mickelburgh puts into practice the notion that 'the book is a letter on the run', extending the letters beyond their initial containment to write herself into the conversation between McArthur and Wright in an effort to understand the connective power of garden writing (Cixous in Mickelburgh 5). In doing so, Mickelburgh writes an

atypical history of McArthur and Wright's environmental activism, imbued with reflections on their feminist writing practices and communicative exchanges arising in combination with their flourishing gardens. Interspersed with these strange letters are letters addressed to Mickelburgh's mentor Professor Elizabeth Mackinlay reflecting on the process.

Melissa Fagan's 'Letter to a seabird' begins with the 'materiality and situatedness of the body,' atop a surfboard, out at sea. This situatedness is employed as an ecopoetic strategy, from which Fagan begins to infill an ecology of relatedness—the located body is a means of 'recogniz[ing] the existence of other organisms, in whose bodies the environmental, cultural and political complexities of the globalized world also become visible' (Marques, 34). With the rhythm of the waves, Fagan moves from the sea to the reef, and to its lively inhabitants—settling the gaze upon the seabird. Drawing from historical and ornithological sources, alongside first-hand observation and personal encounter, Fagan ties memory and archive to the contemporary lives of seabirds. In addressing the seabird, alongside a tender portrait of British academic Bryan Nelson's research, Fagan comes to recognise the impact of colonisation and climate crisis upon local ecologies and networks. These environmental, cultural and political complexities flow through the text like a current, seeds in missives of ecological resistance, in a generous and loving portrait of the seabird.

In Chantelle Bayes' piece 'To the city of murky dreams', the city is both recipient and subject of a multivocal address. This letter is not an urban planning missive, but rather, through the employ of a choral montage, illuminates the city as idealistic fantasy and simultaneously, a localized site of experience. In piecing together a city through overlapping narratives and entanglements, Bayes moves toward a site of multiplicity. In Bayes' city, beneath the gleam and glint of glass and steel towers, are traces of earthly, more-than-human being—dirt, dust, grasses, swans and bats. Intermingled with these imaginaries and more-than-human presences, swell the voices of multiple authors—including writers such as Italo Calvino and Alexis Wright, and theorists such as Donna Haraway and Mary Douglas. In these imagined exchanges, a woven tapestry of relation is revealed, shifting across time, and ostensibly marked by future realities of climate crisis, as much as it is by local and universalised experiences in the present.

Katherine FitzHywel's 'We love, animals / A multispecies address' captures a multitude of actors within a stream-of-consciousness-like text. Seemingly untethered from linear time but firmly grounded in the landscape and culture of so-called Australia, this letter is read through enactments and subsequent critiques of anthropocentric power. FitzHywel's text entangles these networks of interrelationship in performing a critique of national identity, and contradictory affective relationships between 'charismatic' animals, and those destined for slaughter, testing and consumption. In doing so, this 'multispecies love letter' performs a broader critique of Australian colonial identity, contrasting the exploitation of, and identification with, iconic Australian animals (for example, the koala and the kangaroo)

with the harm enacted upon local ecologies as a consequence of capitalist, settler-colonial structures.

Temporality and creative attention inform the poetry of Julie Vulcan, propelled by the experience of climatic shifts resulting in drier, hotter and increasingly catastrophic fire seasons for the east coast of Australia. Vulcan's poetry makes use of the full potential of the page, expanding, stretching and spreading—like the branches of trees, the spread of fire across a landscape, or like the ash and mess left behind. Vulcan redraws the landscape in text. Rejecting the literal coldness of the concrete, Vulcan imbues concrete poetry techniques with the residual heat of the bushfire, encouraging an approach of reading and writing anew. Through this suite of poems, text performs both linguistic and pictorial functions, oscillating between material, affective and administrative perceptions of crisis.

Through postcards, Perdita Phillips and Astrida Neimanis engage with entanglements between stygofauna (aquatic animals that live underground), underground water sources and extractive processes. These postcards are palimpsestic; stygofaunian addresses emerging from layered image and text, an approach which befits the medium. The subject of this work, the stygofauna, with their 'skittering limbs,' lend themselves to fragility, particularly in recognition of the scale of the geologic against that of subterranean animals. These scales are reflected through the optical qualities of the postcards with layers of cyan coloured imagery that are hidden under red. Therefore, the stygofauna are encountered as the viewer holds up a red filter to reveal the subterranean worlds. The text from one postcard reads 'time is a place based medium,' which, alongside layering as a method, recalls the accumulative process of stratigraphy (3). This layering is a means of recognising the accretion of time, but further, the application of time as a medium allows the viewer to make and unmake place in material and affective ways.

Continuing with non-traditional modes of engagement is Jianni Tien and Elizabeth Burmann's 'Letter to Decorator Crabs', a hybrid piece shifting beyond the page into durational address through video. This work makes ready use of the visual as an affective mode of encounter, with the letter itself expanding to touch the very borders of the digital page. These pages emerge from a video work, connecting with the ocean in the form of a wave—a digital conduit to the letter in motion, as it unfolds on the screen as a continuing scroll, within which the decorator crab is addressed in the context of multispecies encounter and co-constitutive becoming. Please be advised that this piece contains descriptions of humans confining and eating other animals.

The possibilities of the page are furthered by The T. Rudzinskaitė Memorial Amateur Lichenologists Society headed by Tessa Zettel and Sumugan Sivanesan, with their 'Bulletin, Winter 2089.' An artifact from a speculative future world in which poetry is penned from a community of 'multispecies coconstituants' (1), this newsletter is addressed to society

members—to a future of belonging, of shared interest in the significance of lichenology sustained beyond the present Earth. Here, in 2023, this letter reads like a hopeful missive from the future—a love letter to lichens alongside revelations of astrobiological future truths. Taking the text beyond the page, this bulletin is littered with future artefacts. Zettel and Sivanesan work within what Sivanesan terms ‘anti-disciplinary’ research and arts practices which attend to more-than-human rights and knowledges. Alongside a call for readers to engage in their own lichen-centred incantations are a myriad of videos and audio tracks spreading across the screen, much like lichen as it grows across a surface.

The final piece in the special issue is Jessica White’s review of a significant work of Australian ecocriticism—Iris Ralph’s *Packing Death in Australian Literature: Ecocides and Eco-Sides* (2020). White demonstrates how this book engages with a breadth of ecocritical and narrative literatures from Australia and examines the legacies of settler-colonialism. This book highlights the value of literature studies engaging with strangeness as White argues that ‘until fairly recently, the contemplation of the nonhuman was an unfamiliar approach to Australian literary criticism’ (1). White also attends to the significance of First Nations’ narratives included in the book and reveals the extent to which nonhuman animals and First Nations’ lives and histories have been impacted by the same legacies.

Together the works in this special issue engage with the possibilities of form and attention, presenting manifold encounters with text and turning attention beyond strictly human frames. An oft-repeated refrain over the past few years is that we have found ourselves in strange times (for some these began long before the pandemic)—it seems they are set to become even stranger still, as we face ever-increasing challenges across political, social and ecological spheres. How will we communicate the past in a world that is changing so rapidly? How can we call ahead to the future and provide warnings or assurance? How can colonially inflicted socio-ecological apocalypses of the past and future be resisted, endured, grieved and encountered across First Nations cultures? There is a recognised need for novel forms of address to ourselves, each other, future generations and our broader communities, human and nonhuman alike. It seems doubtful that we can pin down any one mode or medium of communication that will prove effective. We can, however, continue to think and write with strangeness as a generative and generous motivation for encounter, reflection and resistance.

NOTES

¹ These examples were first used in the Call for Papers for the Strange Letters Symposium: Association for the Study of Literature, Environment & Culture (ASLEC-ANZ). “Strange/Letters.” *ASLEC-ANZ*, 22 October 2020, <https://aslecanz.org.au/conferences/strange-letters-2/>

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