

Editorial Introduction

‘Encountering Australia, Confronting Catastrophe’

To encounter Australia, so our title suggests, is to confront catastrophe, sooner or later. Is this not, after all and immemorably, a land ‘of droughts and flooding rains’, as Dorothea Mackellar famously framed her beloved country? Yet the propensity for extreme weather, often linked to non-annual cycles such as those that meteorologists have dubbed the El Niño Southern Oscillation and the Indian Ocean Dipole, is not in itself a predictor of catastrophic impacts on places of human habitation. As anthropologists of disaster, Susanna Hoffman and Anthony Oliver-Smith (*Angry Earth 1*), succinctly explain, those calamities that are today commonly (and misleadingly) called ‘natural’:

spring from the nexus where environment, society, and technology come together—the point where place, people, and human construction of both the material and nonmaterial meet. It is from the interplay of these three planes that disasters emanate, and in their unfolding, they reimplicate every vector of their causal interface.

It takes two to tango, in other words, namely a potentially hazardous natural phenomenon in association with a more-or-less vulnerable population (human and non-human). Those calamities that Mackellar celebrates as an aspect of the ‘sun-burnt country’, troublesome features of the colonial earth that had helped to forge a settler nation of matey Aussie battlers, were therefore never purely ‘natural.’ As explored by Kate Rigby in *Dancing with Disaster*, such disasters do nonetheless reveal much about how a given society relates to its physical environment: something that is as much a question of culture, values, and beliefs as it is of economics, politics, and technology. As Hofmann and Oliver-Smith observe in their introduction to *Catastrophe and Culture* (10), ‘cultural perceptions of environmental hazards, dramatic events, and mortality tell us much about ideologies of human-earthly and human-supernatural relations’; and those ideologies in turn inform social capacities to prepare for, and recover from, disaster.

The disjunction between Indigenous and settler practices of interpreting and inhabiting the land that the British called Australia provides ample evidence of the socio-cultural dimension of so-called natural disaster. In the wake of the last Glacial Maximum some 12,000 years ago, many parts of the world eased into reasonably regular annual seasonal cycles. In areas favoured also by fertile soils, together with animals suitable for domestication for purposes of food or labour, this facilitated the development of farming, and all that followed from that. In the absence of such key preconditions for the efflorescence of agricultural civilisation, this continent’s resourceful First Nations followed an alternative path of development, becoming adept in reading and negotiating their respective country’s irregular weather-ways in the framework of a mobile and flexible mode of inhabitation well suited to variable local conditions. From their perspective, it was the encounter with ‘Australia’—that is, with the entity that, in

becoming named such, was laid open to European invasion—that has constituted a far greater catastrophe than anything the elements could throw at them. Meanwhile, for the newcomers, it was their own environmental assumptions, place-making practices, and forms of land-use (and, inadvertently, abuse), in their mismatch with the character and climate of the colonial earth, that first rendered those long dry fire-prone periods, punctuated by times of heavy rain, catastrophic in a whole new way.

The expansion of (largely) European settlement in Australia coincided, moreover, with the expansion of fossil-fuelled industrialisation, beginning in Britain in the late eighteenth century then fanning out to continental Europe and across to North America in a tidal wave that has since gone global. As became widely accepted by scientists, and those who paid heed to their diagnosis, only in the latter part of the twentieth century, this process was also quietly engendering the potential for a future global ecocatastrophe—preceded and hence announced by innumerable more localised calamities—as a consequence of anthropogenic climate change. In this context, the recitation *ad nauseam* of Mackellar’s line, especially by those such as Australia’s erstwhile Prime Minister Tony Abbott, who have been keen to deny any link between ever more frequent weather surprises and human-caused global warming (should they even accept such a thing), is also disastrous: for it is precisely by learning to recognise the lineaments of our hand in the making of today’s intensifying droughts, more frequent flooding, super-charged cyclones, cold snaps, heat waves, sea surges, mighty winds and monster hail-storms, along with the inequity that generally typifies their impacts, that we might come to realise more powerfully the dire implications of our fossil-fuelled economy and hence the urgency of transitioning to one more conducive to the flourishing of more-than-human life, not only in Australia, but worldwide.

Far from constituting one-off occurrences attributable to the periodically unruly ways of the as yet untamed elements, the localised calamities currently proliferating around Australia, as elsewhere, represent ‘sentinel events of processes that are intensifying on a planetary scale’; as such, the interpretation of messages that they bring is ‘a crucial issue’ (Oliver-Smith 45). And so too is the interpretation of those interpretations a crucial issue for ecocriticism and cultural ecology, and, in particular for this Special Issue. Our title image is a case in point: one that might be seen to exemplify an especially perilous misconception of such events. Here, in a photo advertising a poster-making company, Cyclone Laurence is pictured in a poster depicting the moment when this category 5 super-storm surged into the Pilbara in December 2009. Framed and contained as a sublime spectacle adorning the wall of a chic apartment looking out upon a high-rise cityscape, this sanitised image of awesome elemental power is dissociated from the messy depredation that the cyclone wrought on the ground: upon the vulnerable bodies of animals, for example, including the estimated 1,500 cattle that were killed; the trees that were uprooted; and those who sustained property damage, valued at around \$10 million in total. The pronounced contrast between the swirling lines of the cyclone, the visual trace of winds gusting up to 200 kilometres per hour across a radius of around 100 kilometres, and the clean, straight lines of the built environment, reinforces the common phantasm of nature-culture dualism, conjuring a stark opposition between wild nature over yonder and climate-controlled spaces of ultra-modern human habitation. Effacing

the anthropogenically altered conditions in which Cyclone Laurence gestated (notably, the unusually warm waters of the Indian Ocean, which, like the unprecedented heat-wave that contributed to the ferocity of Victoria's Black Saturday firestorm at the beginning of the same year, bore witness to climate change), this kind of aesthetic and ontological distancing contributes also to the problem of human self-enclosure diagnosed by Val Plumwood in *Environmental Culture* (97-98): a form of socio-ecological false consciousness, to which those who enjoy the benefits of air-conditioning are most likely to fall prey, which is perilous precisely to the extent that it veils the vulnerability even of affluent urbanites, along with their ethical answerability to those, human and otherwise, who all too often pay the price of their pampered lifestyle.

That catastrophe was neither inevitable, nor the whole story, in European encounters with this continent, and its First Nations' encounters with 'Australia' nonetheless also becomes apparent from some of the contributions to this Special Issue. These articles are based on papers presented at one of two consecutive conferences on Australia held in Europe during the northern summer of 2014. The European Association for Studies on Australia (EASA) held a conference at the Monash University Prato Centre, Italy, in September; it explored sites of contact, connection and exchange between Australia and the world, with particular emphasis on Europe, and with the aim of highlighting the importance of cross cultural dialogue. The conference drew on diverse modes and ideas of encountering Australia—imaginatively, theoretically, institutionally, politically, socially, historically, pedagogically and symbolically. Themed sessions included 'Ecocultural Encounters' and 'Ecopoetics' but animated discussion of our natural-cultural environment, whether in terms of climate change, migration and mobility, histories of war and violence, or national and collective memory, was evident across the varied foci. Tellingly, this conference was preceded by a symposium in the same month, hosted by the Australian Studies Centre at the University of Copenhagen, on 'Cultural Response to Environmental Disaster in Australia.'

Drawing on a breadth of subject matter, including bushfire, mining, cyclone and conservation of flora, the symposium presented a range of cultural responses to environmental disaster in Australia, and considered both the ways these responses have shaped our understanding of and attitude toward often cataclysmic events, and the ways by which we might participate in the work toward averting, minimising, controlling or more effectively responding to those events and their impacts. The symposium was significant, and similar to the EASA conference, in that it placed Australia within Europe, bringing European perspectives to bear on the Australian circumstance and providing a European audience with an Australian perspective and knowledge about the impact of the Anthropocene on the Australian continent. The aim of cross-cultural dialogue highlighted by the EASA conference was a valuable outcome of the Copenhagen symposium. Invited speakers included Anne Collett (then Visiting Professor of Australian Studies at the University of Copenhagen Centre), Tom Griffiths (Australian National University and previously adjunct Professor at the Centre), Lars Jensen (University of Roskilde, Denmark), Russell McDougall (University of New England, Australia), Kate Rigby (Monash University, Australia) and Sue Thomas (University of La Trobe, Australia), of whom essays by McDougall and Thomas are published here.

Our collection begins with two articles that address colonial practices of botanical naming—one biographical, the other literary critical—which pertain to ways of knowing and networks of relationship that cannot be reduced to, although they remain entangled with, imperialistic agendas. While Jessica White shows how Georgiana Molloy's contribution to the research of the London-based amateur botanist Captain James Mangles brought her into cross-cultural dialogue with local Noongar people in south-western Australia, Jessica Maufort reads Murray Bail's novel *Eucalyptus* as not only reflecting on colonial naming-practices, but also embodying a decolonising ecopoetics that restores agency to the trees thus named, unsettling the anthropocentrism of the colonial culture.

The second of the next pair of articles, both focused on the colonial framing of tropical cyclones, is also concerned in part with naming: Cyclone Mahina being the first such super-storm to be given a personal, rather than a place name, and one which Russell McDougall shows to have been marked by racial and gender assumptions. So too, as he explains, is the forgetting of the calamity wrought by this category 5 cyclone, which surpassed the far more famous Tracy both in size and in human fatalities, connected with race relations in this country: most of those who died as 'Mahina' ploughed into the pearling fleet in Bathurst Bay in 1899 were either Indigenous or foreign. While the instruments that enabled the more accurate measurement of storms and hence classification of cyclones, a term first coined in 1848, had only come into use from the mid nineteenth century, a wide range of written documents is helping 'paleotempestologists' to reconstruct the prior history of their occurrence and impact. In her 'critical tempestology', Sue Thomas investigates newspaper reports, poems, letters, excerpts of travel narratives, and overseas commentary on 'current affairs' of state to examine how 'hurricanes' (the general term in use before 1848) entered and shaped the Australian colonial literary and discursive imaginary, and the role of such hurricane narratives in projecting a sense of place and right of territorial occupation.

With Arnaud Barras's article on two recent novels by Alexis Wright, we are confronted with both an alternative way of reading and negotiating cyclones and with an exploration of Indigenous and, in the case of *The Swan Book* (2013) especially, inter-cultural pathways of recovery from the double catastrophe of colonisation and capitalist neo-imperialism; pathways that must now be traversed, however, amidst the wreckage already beginning to be wrought by anthropogenic global warming. Such concerns also lie at the heart of our concluding 'niche' contribution. Here, Bronwyn Lay uses the medium of the fictional letter home from an Australian expat to meditate on contradictory European constructions of Australia, and to consider the possibility that the intellectual cross-fertilisation of the ecological humanities movement in Australia, in conjunction with, and informed by, Indigenous philosophy and jurisprudence, with the emerging new materialisms in Europe might afford hopeful alternatives to the naturalisation of hyper capitalism and its exploitative agendas: 'As the oldest but most ecologically fragile natureculture community, Australia doesn't have to be a dumping ground for European fears and desires, but seen from a deeper perspective, is a site of political opportunities: an exchange of intercontinental wilful remembering.'

In addition to the articles arising from the conference and symposium, this issue includes two book reviews that resonate with many of the topics addressed here, while expanding the geographical and temporal bounds of our considerations. David Young's review of R. M. McDowall's *Ikawai* takes us across the wash to consider traditional Māori understandings and interactions with freshwater fishes against the background of the calamitous socio-ecological impacts of European colonisation in New Zealand; while James Burgmann's review of Gerry Canavan's and Kim Stanley Robinson's anthology of essays on the burgeoning field of ecologically oriented science fiction, and especially 'cli fi', endorses the uses of narrative in imagining alternative futures as a spur to acting otherwise in the present.

If to encounter Australia is to confront catastrophe, then the hope that inspires this issue of *AJE* (one that has been modestly buoyed-up by the outcome of COP21, for all its shortcomings) is that the work of critical and creative reflection on actual or potential disasters might help us to avert, or at least ameliorate, the threatened slide into worsening crisis and calamity, and to enhance the chance of those positive transformations that would allow for renewed more-than-human flourishing on this continent of (more-than-meteorological) extremes.

In addition to (modest) hope, we also have (profuse) thanks, to those people and institutions who assisted with the organisation of the conference and symposium; to our contributors and their anonymous reviewers; to the Freiburg Institute of Advanced Studies, where Kate worked on this issue as a Marie Curie EU-Co-fund Research Fellow; and, last but no means least, to CA. Cranston for her invaluable contribution as General Editor of *AJE*.

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