

Editor's Note, *AJE* Vol 6

This issue of *AJE* leans left of the 'ecocritical': drunk on its methodologies, it weaves through chemical hauntings; poetry and pulp mills; Plant Studies hybridity; tongues – edible, obscene, abject, hum/animal, architectural, and silenced. This broad reaching edition contains articles for the ecocritic and the cultural ecologist; it has been a long-time coming due to the journal's shift from the National Library of Australia, to its new home, the University of Sydney. Sydney was where *AJE*'s parent affiliation, ASLEC-ANZ, held its 6th biennial conference 'Global Ecologies – Local Impacts', held in conjunction with the Sydney Environment Institute (SEI) in November, and despite the tight turn-around, we're pleased to include three essays from that conference.

One of those essays, 'The Haunting of Agent Orange within the Waters of Rivers and Bodies for Vietnamese Australians', demonstrates Boi Ngo's foray into Experimental History (described by Stephen Muecke as 'a gap between what has made sense in the past, and what no longer makes sense, whether it is past events or new ones demanding to be gathered into the fold of meaning' (*Australian Humanities Review* 1996)). Gathering her material into 'the fold of meaning' Ngo also investigates what Walter Benjamin calls the 'trash of history', those (seemingly) no-account everyday discourses and unspectacular moments. Excepting that for Ngo, a Vietnamese Australian, those discourses include ghosts; and those ghosts haunt the 'unspectacular moments' as, for instance, picnics by the Parramatta River. Ngo's auto-ethnography exposes the benign images that chemical defoliants assume when contaminated with the addition of 2,3,7,8-TCDD dioxin and that haunt Ngo's family in the shape of Agent Orange. Its persistence in fluids pollutes also the literal and cultural meaning of rivers (particularly the Parramatta) for Vietnamese Australians, who find themselves once more confronting wartime experiences reflected in and on the river.

Whereas Ngo's is an emerging voice, finding its levels and timbre, Pete Hay's is pitched deep, at times raspy, with a reassuringly empathic quality. And so it is in 'Poetry as Pedagogy: Issues of Ethics and Praxis in Hay's and Thorne's *Last Days of the Mill*.' The Mill in question is the old Burnie Pulp Mill, Tasmania. And like Ngo, Hay identifies with the bigger picture through personal experience ('I grew up in nearby Wynyard', he tells us). But empirical authority is backed by rigorous argument, questions about representation, language, the conservation of human and ecological values, all embedded within a meditation about being true to the author's arts practice. The essay's originality lies also in its chosen literary form, the deep resources of poetry, here used as 'writing as inquiry' and giving voice to a sense of history and culture framed within the verbal inventiveness of the perceived inarticulate: those Pulp Mill workers of industrial Burnie facing inevitable redundancy in the 1990s. In his justification for positioning himself in a context contrary to his politics (an environmentalist, writing sympathetically about the Mill workers), Hay grapples with Robert Bringhurst's assertion that 'when he sees his people destroying the world' the poet's obligation is to speak truth; 'he cannot lie, as a poet'. That is, how does the environmentalist and poet 'pay homage' to those employed in destructive environmental practices? To Bringhurst (a Canadian poet) Hay's reply is that poetry must 'be inclusive – it must pay respectful homage to those against whom he or she might once have contended'. It's an interesting and timely dilemma, this conflict between the blue and the green, if conflict there is, given that some languages do not distinguish between the two. Hay's analytical approach is both wry and astute and is a valuable contribution to ecocriticism.

The demolition of the Mill left trace histories in the bodies of the Burnie locals; but memories of the Mill also catalysed aesthetics, creating landscape sculptures that spell 'paper', valuable Burnie arts prizes, and Hay's and Thorne's publication. The next essay, 'The Green Man: The Desire for Deeper Connections with Nature', traces the less transitory history of an architectural aesthetic trope known as the Green Man. Author Prue Gibson points out that there are a few extant examples of this human/plant hybrid in Australia (at the Adelaide Gaol and St Peters Cathedral in Adelaide, South Australia), but there are thousands decorating European churches, lurking on eaves, pillars and cornices, in some cases outnumbering images of Christ (Hicks 15). Today, the Green Man grotesque (an ancient foliate figure) is an invitation for arts experimentation and Critical Plant Studies to come together. Positing that there exists a human desire to merge with nature, Gibson argues that the Green Man can be read 'psychologically as a way to fill this perceived lack or longing in humans'. Gibson plaits together Glenn Albrecht's notion of solastalgia (2003) with Luce Irigaray's notion of 'lack' and Michael Marder's 'plant thinking'. Theoretical underpinning gives way to commentary on arts projects focussed on human/plant hybridity and abjection, with Heather Ackroyd and Dan Harvey (UK); Spela Petric (Slovenia), and the haunting example of hybridity in the work of US artist, Eduardo Kac, who 'introduced' one of his genes into a Petunia, and produced a molecular biology offspring crossed with human wilfulness.

'Solastalgia' and 'lack' are neatly paraphrastic of Jane Gleeson-White's essay 'Country and Climate Change in Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book*'. One of two essays in *AJE* with climate change as a topic, 'Country' (a deeply cultural term in Australian Aboriginal usage) is left to speak through the central character, a broken, betrayed mute named Oblivia. Gleeson-White claims that '[t]his is Wright's most sophisticated narration yet of the entanglement of humans, other-than-humans, land and stories that make up Country'. That narrative sophistication includes assigning to a mute the role of singing up Country that is now 'irrevocably altered by climate change.' Timothy Clark's idea of 'derangements of scale' comes into play, as does Adam Trexler's investigation into the impact that climate change has on the genre of the novel – one being that cli fi allows 'nonhuman things' to shape narrative. Whilst applicable to Country, it is not so with Oblivia; she is however abused and kept for her 'use-value'. Thus, this speechless, sub- and supra-human being articulates 'Country' through an organic, instinctual, connection that precedes the linguistic tongue. As with Trexler's textual focus, Gleeson-White is 'interested not so much in Wright's representation of climate change per se, as in its effects on her representation of Country'. And as she demonstrates, Wright's representation is of 'Country ravaged by climate change [which] acts as a warning and a lament for vanishing and irrevocably altered places'.

For a non-fiction perspective of 'irrevocably altered places' we turn to Cameron Muir's *The Broken Promise of Agricultural Progress* (2014). Reviewer Barbara Holloway notes that Muir's aim was a study that shows 'broken places are still worthy of attention and care' (xviii). The book's subtitle (*An Environmental History*) refers to the areas around the ancient river system of what later became part of the Murray-Darling Basin. Muir, a historian with a long-term relationship to the region, approaches the history of brokenness as both human and natural. From the Europeans to the present, chapters such as 'Hooves', 'Wheat', 'Dust', and 'Cotton' reveal how each spells dispossession of Aboriginal societies. Holloway has high praise for Muir's book 'in its constant demonstrations of interlinking causality between other-than-human and cultural worlds' and as a 'valuable resource for anyone working on neo-colonial, pastoral or post-pastoral research'. Perhaps though, Muir's outlook is not so far from

Alexis Wright's lament for lost places. For, as Holloway notes, although Muir leaves his 'political, ideological or even ethical views unspoken', his rueful conclusion to the story of the Macquarie wetlands—dammed in 1965, despite being declared a National Fauna Reserve in 1944—is that 'Whatever the tone, the ideology or the narrative frame a historian chooses, sometimes things really are just devastated' (155).

Back in the day, before ASLEC-ANZ, when ecocritics and cultural ecologists gathered at ASLE-US conferences, literary critics were rubbing shoulders with natural scientists, be they volcanologists, or canopy experts; it became uncomfortably clear early on that not all ecocritics were science literate; that, if the Two Cultures were to clasp hands across the disciplinary divide, then textual criticism must push for ecoliteracy, or what oft-quoted Laurence Buell calls a text's 'dual accountability to matter and to discursive mentation' (*The Environmental Imagination* 1995; 92). In his case studies, Tom Doig explores what happens when the ecological context is viewed as so appalling that literary discourse and scientific language fail, giving way to a single profanity to describe the environmentally profane. In 'Global Warming is a Headf**k', Doig introduces five middle-class white Melburnians, all trying to come to terms with 'the Super Wicked Problem of Climate Change'. His essay introduces a genre (journalism) often alienated from scholarly journals, although scholars have been known to turn to journalism in their own research. As with Ngo's Experimental History approach, and Hay's employment of Poetry as Pedagogy, Doig's methodology (long-form cultural journalism, and oral history) 'prioritise[s] the quotidian experiences of ordinary people'. The ordinary people in Doig's population sample fall into the category of 'the Alarmed', a category devised by The George Mason U. Centre for Climate Change Communication. Other attitudinal categories towards global warming [but not discussed in Doig's paper] read like a Disney cast: the Dismissive; Disengaged; Cautious; Doubtful; and Concerned. Doig follows Maarit Jaakkola's approach to 'the journalistically sound production of literary journalism or nonfiction', while pairing Jaakkola's scholarship with the *Urban Dictionary* to explain the title glyphs – 'headf**k is the 'feeling you get when an idea or concept is beyond your understanding'. As one reads Doig's case studies, it's possible to see a connection with Muecke's description of Experimental History as 'a gap between what has made sense in the past, and what no longer makes sense'.

While the figures are in regarding the impact of cattle on the environment, the impact of climate change on cattle is less likely to cause concern to most consumers until they are hit by economic losses resulting from heat stress (on cattle and their feed), reduced milk production and reproduction. Either way, the anthropogenic component – in climate change and in industrial farming – makes cattle mute 'stockholders' in the debate. Iris Ralph's essay 'Australian tongue and Ag-gag laws' investigates the literary work primarily of Susan Hawthorne's *Cow* (2011) and Francesca Rendle-Short's *Bite Your Tongue* (2011) within expressions of silencing. Silencing can take the political form of a Queensland Moral Right book-burning spree versus freedom of speech; and it can take the form of the literal (if one-sided) communion in the eating of cow's tongue, a communion between the predatory, carnivorous, languaged creature, and the cud-chewing ungulate raised only for its use-value. No essay about cows is complete without a reference to Les Murray, and Ralph includes 'The Cows on Killing Day', to demonstrate the poet's attempt to register the farmed-flesh interior language of distress. Ralph's essay draws also on Tim Winton's *Shallows* for its narrative about the successful end to whale hunting, thus drawing attention to the disconnect between concern for whale slaughter and the 'continued slaughter of cows, and other species that taste good to the human palate'. The increasing exposure to the living and dying conditions of farmed-flesh brought about by Animal Advocates and others (Ralph includes a selection of seminal books on the topic by

academics), has created a backlash from industrial farming producers. As a result, advocates prepared to challenge 'industrial farming practices on moral as well as environmental grounds that include claims for the right of 'speech' of nonhuman animals', are facing political attempts to silence them. In her reading of three core texts, Ralph's essay hopes to contribute to the 'pressing questions' about the ethics of behaviour, by commenting on attempts by the meat industry to introduce these agricultural gag laws (so-called Ag-gag) into Australia.

What Would Animals Say if we Asked the Right Questions? is a fortuitously titled segue from the preceding essay. Reviewer Helen Tiffin warms to author Vinciane Despret's 'empiricist challenge to accepted scientific beliefs' in the field of ethology. This is no obscurantist out to silence the 'subtractive empiricists'. As Bruno Latour writes in his Foreword, Despret is an 'additive empiricist', one who is 'prepared to weigh evidence across a number of fields'. Tiffin demonstrates the breadth of knowledge garnered to address the book's title question, and which challenges gatekeepers who 'rigorously patrol disciplinary boundaries and outlaw apparent protocol violations'. As with Ngo and Hay, Tiffin introduces a personal anecdote, telling of her time as a student taking 'Animal Behaviour' in the Psychology Department. Behaviourism, anxious to appear a 'real' science, she tells us, 'had to strictly rule out contributions from "amateurs" who, in their intimacy with animals, might be inclined to commit the cardinal sin of anthropomorphism'. And here we have the crux of the debate; Tiffin credits Despret's contribution to ethology as an important one, organised around an abecedary that investigates animal self-consciousness, the 'ontological divide of "killability"', and an appeal to science to 'take Humanities seriously'. In other words, to problematise and to challenge what Despret damningly refers to as Animal Behaviourists' 'systematic and blind exercise of irresponsibility'.

The sciences of course, are driven by differences within their own ranks: for instance, Despret distances herself from the 'Harry Harlows' of the discipline, along with their social isolation experiments; and none of Doig's 'the Alarmed' sit in the climate change deniers camp. In the nineteenth century, the geological rift was played out between the Neptunists and the Plutonists. Showing that there is room in the sciences for both humanities *and* amateurs, Robert M. Thorson's *Walden's Shore: Henry David Thoreau and Nineteenth-Century Science* (2014) imaginatively reconstructs 'Thoreau as a self-taught geologist' familiar with the Neptunism debate and, as an odd job bod for Ralph Waldo Emerson, discovering Plutonism through Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1830-1833). Thorson's reading of Mount Katahdin and its link to 'Thoreau's vision that it may have once "rained rocks"' exemplifies what Reviewer Yeojin Kim sees as a conjoining of 'the field of science and literary criticism'. Thoreau's encounter with glacial theory, for example, extends the geological and geographical texture of Thoreau's *Walden*, for Walden Pond was a paleo-valley, its topography 'a collapsed glacial delta'. Kim is positive about Thorson's contribution to ecocriticism, echoing an entreaty common in this *AJE* issue, which is to push 'the limits of literary criticism by broadening its horizon with solid scientific research combined with [the] most creative and vivid literary imagination'.

In the first Interview that *AJE* has ever published, Scott Slovic mentions the importance of Thoreau's personal journals to his own work, especially Thoreau's focus 'on paying attention to the natural world' but also 'on how his own mind responded to the world'. Interviewers Sayyed Ali Mirenyat and Elaheh Soofastaei are from the Universiti Putra Malaysia; they take Slovic through a variety of topics, such as his biography, a (necessarily) brief history and aims of ecocriticism, the psychology of nature writing, ecofeminism, helpful resources concerning Gothic ecocritical themes and cli fi, a personal list of ecocritical 'bests', including 'A Fable for Tomorrow' (from Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962)) as 'the single most powerful piece of

ecological fiction in the USA’, the population debate in ecocriticism, whether humans *are* alienated from ‘nature’, pastoral writing in classic literary texts, science and technology’s potential conflict with ‘nature’ in ecocriticism, the role of ecology and nature in utopian texts, environmental apocalypticism in literature, postcolonialism and ecocriticism, ecocriticism in fiction and nonfiction, ecocinema, the future of ecocriticism, and the teaching of environmental literature and ecocriticism. As you can see, Slovic was extraordinarily generous with his time, and his answers provide an excellent and useful overview of the topics in play at the moment. *AJE* is fortunate to have ‘scored’ such a comprehensive interview.

Finally, as the founding editor of *AJE* I am hanging up my fonts for this particular project; and as *AJE*’s Journal Manager, I am handing in the templates. *AJE* has come a long way since its inception in 2010 at the ASLEC-ANZ ‘Sounding the Earth’ conference dinner, in Launceston, Tasmania. The two other editors who helped *AJE* to become a reality were Barbara Holloway and Lorraine Shannon. Together we launched *AJE* in 2011, quietly and without fuss. Barbara Holloway continues to make significant contributions to *AJE*, which will serve the academic community under the leadership of a new team who will make themselves known in *AJE* 7. My thanks also to Alanna Myers, a new member of the *AJE* team, for her part in bringing this issue to ASLEC-ANZ members.

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