[Review]Iris Ralph, *Packing Death in Australian Literature: Ecosides and Eco-Sides,* Routledge, 2022, 174pp.

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At first glance, a review of Iris Ralph's *Packing Death in Australian Literature* (2020) does not fit neatly into an issue themed 'Strange/Letters', for, as Ralph's acknowledgements page indicates, this book grew out of the inaugural 2005 conference of ASLEC-ANZ (then known as ASLE-ANZ). However, Ralph's analysis, which 'addresses plants and animals in Australia and its literature' (1), is very much about strangeness if we consider that, until fairly recently, the contemplation of the nonhuman was an unfamiliar approach to Australian literary criticism.

This work is a clever and welcome addition to the growing corpus of Australian ecocriticism. In her introduction, Ralph articulates her critical tools, which include animal studies, ecocriticism, ecofeminism, environmental history, plant studies and posthumanism. She explains the context of her title: 'packing death' is Australian slang for fear or anxiety, and it captures 'states of trepidation in both nonhuman beings and human beings' (1). Additionally, it refers to the frameworks that sideline the significance of the nonhuman and testifies to the ways Australian literature records and represents acts of ecocide. Literature can, Ralph notes, reflect 'the many efforts, often accompanied by mammoth losses and against great odds, to slow and even halt many ecocidal policies and practices' (1).

The introduction comprehensively canvasses ecocriticism in Australia. Fittingly, Ralph begins with C.A. Cranston and Robert Zeller's important collection *The Littoral Zone: Australian Contexts and Their Writers* (2007), the first collection of Australian ecocriticism. She refers to Bill Gammage's *The Biggest Estate on Earth: How Aborigines Made Australia* (2011), Bruce Pascoe's *Dark Emu, Black Seeds: Agriculture or Accident?* (2014), Kate Rigby's *Dancing with Disaster: Environmental Histories, Narratives, and Ethics for Perilous Times* (2015), and Charles Massey's *Call of the Reed Warbler: A New Agriculture – A New Earth* (2017) as works that 'make up the small, but significant, body of criticism that recognizes how and why Australia's oldest people gave country a fair go' (2). She also cites texts by Mark Tredinnick, Tom Bristow, Graham Huggan, Helen Tiffin, John Ryan, Adrian Franklin, Carol Freeman, Elizabeth Leane, Yvette Watt, Deborah Bird Rose, Val Plumwood, Kate Rigby, Ruth Blair, Libby Robin, Freya Matthews, Eric Rolls, Bruce Bennett, Veronica Brady and John Kinsella, providing an invaluable resource for scholars who would like to learn more of Australian ecocriticism and animal studies, or refresh their knowledge. She also elucidates how Cary Wolfe's *What is Posthumanism?* (2009) and Neil Badmington's collection *Posthumanism* (2007) have informed her thinking.

Chapter Two, 'Genocide and Ecocide', dwells upon comparisons between the two nouns in its title. Drawing first upon Nugi Garimara's (Doris Pilkington's) *Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence* (1996), Ralph illustrates how the Stolen Generations 'represent a betrayal in two senses: an ecocide and genocide' (23). The three children in Garimara's work, Molly, her sister Daisy, and their cousin Gracie, were forcibly taken from their parents to the Moore River Native Settlement some 1600 kilometres south-west from their home in Jigalong in Western Australia. The forced removal of children was part of a programme of assimilation and eradication of First Nations peoples aggressively promoted in Western Australia by A.O. Neville, the Chief Protector of Aborigines. The girls escaped and walked through the south-west, then along the rabbit proof fence (erected to stop the invasion of rabbits from the eastern states to Western Australia) and back home. As Ralph observes, *Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence* 'elicits connections between attempts to weed out so-called pure or full-blood Aboriginal Australians and efforts by the Australian wheat and livestock industry to halt the western spread of rabbits in early decades of the twentieth century' (31), first through the rabbit-proof fence, then through the chemical warfare of myxomatosis.

Ralph then turns her critical lens upon Nicholas Roeg's film *Walkabout* (1971). She examines definitions of the word 'spree', in its earlier context of the exploitation and rape of First Nations women, and later context of mass shootings, particularly in relation to the killing of kangaroos. She cites Ivan Sen's *Mystery Road* (2013) as an example of a film that, through its 'sexualized, quasi-pornographic representation of commercial animal killing and commercial food production evokes the nefarious colonial and postcolonial spree' (35). The chapter does not dwell further on this connection but delves into the history of the killing of kangaroos in Australia, growing awareness of the kangaroo meat industry, and the perception of kangaroos as vermin, despite evidence that the monetary impact of kangaroos on the agricultural industry is relatively low (37). Ralph also delves into interpretations of *Walkabout* as a 'postcolonial ecocritical indictment of the governance of Australia after 1788' (38), as well as Alexis Wright's critique of the two-dimensional representation of the story's Aboriginal boy. The section wanders to the end of the film, with its voice-over of E.O Houseman's poem 'A Shropshire Lad', which 'nostalgically evokes a past Edenic English rural landscape' , one that the poet 'knew had never been' (41). In applying this poem to *Walkabout*, Roeg 'dispels the romanticized contours of Australian pastoral' (41).

Chapter Three, '(Post-)pastoral', further explores the idea of the pastoral through an examination of the domesticated animals in Francesca Rendle-Short's novel *Bite Your Tongue* (2011), Susan Hawthorne's poetry collection *Cow* (2011) and Evie Wyld's novel *All the Birds, Singing* (2013). In her analysis of Rendle-Short's *Bite Your Tongue*, Ralph makes a striking connection between the dish of tongue which the protagonist is served by her mother, a moral crusader in arch-conservative post-World War II Queensland, and the so-called ag-gag laws which 'are intended to silence the "tongues" of animal rights groups who seek to publicly disseminate relatively little-known facts about the meat industry' (47). This signifies the attempt to corral agency through the

restriction of knowledge and education. Ralph then turns to Susan Hawthorne's *Cow*, describing it as 'a disarming and whimsical celebration of feminist and queer identity as well as a text inspired by philology and ancient myth' (49). Ralph outlines the history of cattle production and slaughter in Australia and concedes that while Hawthorne's volume does not celebrate 'the cows who have been a backbone of the Australian economy since 1788', it does make 'a bow, as brief as that may be, to the cows of Australia' (51), through its reference to cows in its debut poems (the opening poem is set in a dairy farm's milking yard). In her analysis of Evie Wyld's eco-Gothic novel *All the Birds, Singing*, Ralph yokes psychic and physical violence against sheep and women, while at the same time acknowledging that the female protagonist, Jake, remains haunted by her own violent actions against a childhood friend. Ralph surmises that 'Jake is a metaphor for, on the one hand, Australians' attempt to run from or ignore the dark side of pastoral' (53) and on the other hand, 'Australians' potential openness to revising pastoral and practicing it more ethically' (53).

While Ralph's observations of these texts are compelling, their framing as evocations of the post-pastoral does not come until midway through the chapter. The definition of Australian pastoral, as developed by nature writer Mark Tredinnick – "'the work of raising sheep and cattle – as opposed to crops – on the land'" (55) may have been situated more usefully in the introduction to aid the reader in understanding the choice of texts. Likewise, Ralph's use of the poet John Kinsella's definition of the post-pastoral — the "'inability to celebrate [pastoral] without negativity'" (57) — might have accompanied earlier mentions of the post-pastoral imagination.

The remainder of this chapter is devoted to pigs. Although they 'do not distinguish Australian pastoral and post-pastoral practices' or the pastoral literary mode, pigs 'are among the world's most intensively farmed animal species' and are 'a staple of the biotechnological and biomedical research industries' (44). Ralph provides a fascinating and unsettling account of livestock genetics companies and practices in relation to Eric Yoshaki Dando's novel *Oink, Oink, Oink* (2008). In this work the boundaries between the protagonist, Squirly, his scientist father and the pigs upon which they experiment become increasingly blurred. The novel is a commentary not only on animal experimentation but also the mass-production of pork. Returning once more to real-world impacts, Ralph indicates that the mass production of pork pollutes waterways in areas where this production is carried out.

'Veggie-Might', Ralph's fourth chapter, opens with the dystopian environmental wasteland depicted in *Locust Girl* (2015), a climate fiction novel by Filipina-Australian writer Merlinda Bobis. The landscape in this novel has been razed by fire at the behest of authorities. Ralph segues from this setting into a discussion of pre- and post-1788 parks, as described by Noongar writer Kim Scott in *Benang* (1999) and South Australian poet Miriel Lenore, whose poetry collection *in the garden* (2007) focuses on the Botanical Gardens in Adelaide. Ralph delves into Lenore's representation of the rare Wollemi pine (*Wollemi nobilis*), which as a young plant was

brought to Adelaide's Botanic Gardens and caged for protection. The motif of enclosure – mirrored by the park-like botanical gardens – is contrasted with First Nations peoples' management of the Australian environment through fire, which Ralph recounts through references to *Benang*, Bill Gammage's *The Biggest Estate on Earth*, Kate Rigby's *Dancing with Disaster* and Bruce Pascoe's *Dark Emu*. Ralph also dwells on how the environment in Australia is becoming more and more akin to the dystopian *Locust Girl* through the massive bushfires of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. As an aside, the title of this chapter – 'Veggie-Might' – a pun on the flavoursome Australian staple 'Vegemite' – is another example (alongside 'packing death' and giving country 'a fair go') of Ralph's wordplay throughout her work.

The final chapter, 'Language, Translation, and Communication', contemplates the ethics of speaking for the nonhuman. Ralph draws on the work of scholars such as biosemiotician Wendy Wheeler to challenge the anthropocentrism of translation studies, and notes that 'more often than not, we have mistranslated, deliberately or not, the languages of the natural world to suit our interests instead of attempting to faithfully translate those languages' (99). She refers to Peter Goldsworthy's *Wish* (1995) and Robyn Davidson's *Tracks* as texts that reflect the challenge of translating the natural world, as well as its purposeful silencing. *Wish* charts its protagonist's increasing infatuation with Wish, who is part-human and part-gorilla, as he teaches her to communicate in Auslan (Australian sign language). It is a problematic novel, particularly in its assumption of nondisabled human superiority to animals and disabled people, however it does, as Ralph indicates, speak indirectly to 'efforts to cultivate more respect for an interest in aspects of human language that lie outside of (in biosemiotics terms) articulate language' (102). Ralph then turns to Robyn Davidson's travel memoir *Tracks* (1980), about Davidson's journey with her dog Diggity and camels across 2000 kilometres of desert. She notes how Davidson attends carefully to her nonhuman protagonists, describing them in detail: they are 'hoity-toity, strong willed, unbending, even when struck viciously by the (human) masters, submissive, delicate, dainty, disdainful, clownish, funny, serious, comic, shy, lugubrious, and so forth' (106). The narrative, while it charts Davidson's dependency on camels for 'lugging her and her gear across central Australia' (107), is nonetheless a counterpoint to many depictions of camels that refer to them as vermin to be culled.

In this chapter, Ralph demonstrates an extensive engagement with the field of translation studies, as well as discussions on the importance of listening in ecocritical contexts. She refers to scholarship by Greta Gaard, Deborah Bird Rose, Val Plumwood and Serpil Oppermann regarding the importance of paying attention to, and circumspection about speaking for, the natural world. Ralph's other chapters would have benefitted from this kind of grounding, by way of revealing the soil which sustains her ideas and textual analysis.

In the first half of her conclusion, Ralph continues to dwell upon theory – this time in relation to ecophobia. She applies Timothy Morton's notion of object-oriented ontology, which dispels the

distinction between subject and object, to characters in Patrick White's *Riders in the Chariot* (1961). Mary Hare, one of the novel's four protagonists, 'is not particularly distinguishable from her native surrounds', and 'speaks for the ecological values of decomposition and excrement in contrast with the non-ecological values of permanence and purity' (129). Such decomposition is also represented by her family estate, Xanadu, which gradually crumbles around her, perhaps representing the futility of colonialism and its twin, capitalism, as they eat the resources which house humans.

Packing Death in Australian Literature is inventive and engaging, particularly through Ralph's capacity to make original connections between texts and their depiction of plants and animals. While the internal structure of the chapters sometimes wavers, and the use of theory is imperfectly knitted with textual analysis, the reader remains rewarded by Ralph's unique analysis of Australian stories. A number of the texts that she has selected are not frequently canvassed in discussions of Australian literature, and many of them have been published by small presses. Also of value is the way that Ralph brings in real-world information about deforestation, fire, and the treatment of animals (for example, industrial farming, biogenics and culling). Ralph's astute observations throughout *Packing Death in Australian Literature* highlights the value of attending to plants and animals in Australian texts, particularly given the environmental destruction that has occurred since 1788.