Fox, Ocean, Island:
Drafting – drifting – beyond human (points of) view

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Towards an introduction

What is the relationship between novel writing and point of view? What possibilities does long-form fiction offer for new points of view that veer, steer, away from the human? We ask this, aware of the political, philosophical and aesthetic associations writers and readers tend to assume (in both senses of that word) 'alongside' a human narratorial position (van Dooren and Rose 85). This essay hews close to our collective, respective crafts to consider *how* novels might recentre animal and environmental concerns. Why that matters. We share concrete examples where we have each, separately, sought to make our stories about more than the human. We believe such attempts are essential for artists of the Anthropocene, keen to critique ideas of non/human relations. We, too, ask: 'What is the point of stories in such a moment?' (Bradley, 'Writing'). And we agree: 'If you're a writer, then you have to write about this' (Miller-McDonald). In this essay we writer–researchers interrogate our sole-authored drafts, as distinct from each other in expression as they are similar in intention, to itemise the ways creative practice—our specific creative practices—might counter human-centric perspectives.

We three are embarked upon speculative ventures, proudly self-identifying as 'spec fic' writers (Sparks), albeit of a literary bent. That is where the similarities between our stories end. One of us is writing a time travel tale about a fox; another, a climate fiction awash with oceanic perspectives; the third writes of an island at the end of the world. Reflecting on our revisions, however, reveals fascinating overlaps and insight into the levers creative practitioners might instinctively push and pull in an attempt to answer Donna Haraway's call for 'speculative fabulations.' Paraphrasing Joshua LaBare, Haraway describes novel ways to come at storytelling as 'a mode of attention, a theory of history, and a practice of worlding' (Haraway 213). A mode, and method, which is necessary if we are to write from, and for, a 'more-than-human world' (O'Gorman). This speaks exactly to our practice and our politics. We agree, and turn now to how, exactly, one creates such fantastic speculations. After all, even conservative critic Howard Bloom recognises the novel as having a unique 'strangeness': being 'a mode of originality that either cannot be assimilated, or that so assimilates us that we cannot see it as strange' (Bloom 3). Where, we wonder, have we made our stories strange? When did we succeed in making them so original they may even 'assimilate' the reader, render the returned-to world 'estranged' (Suvin 6)? What

tried-and-tested techniques, as well as more experimental methods, did we—intuitively, iteratively—apply? What follows are idiosyncratic ways we tried to decentre traditional, *person*-ified narrative conventions via various 'textual'—if we can reverse-engineer Gérard Genette's notion of 'paratextual' aspects—*ex*-centric interventions (Genette 2).

These case studies consider craft in context to tease out specific strategies that have enabled us, emerging and established creative practitioners, to develop the ethics and aesthetics of our works-in-progress. These are 'speculative fabulations' via which we practice (noun and verb) 'worlding'—and, hopefully, wilding. We lay out the artistic—personal and political—considerations that have gone into individual conceptions, 'alongside' the geographic and cultural (Australasian, Oceanic) region we write from and back to. We place our work in a so-called Australian context, recentring regionality as a particular perspective in writing. Our messy manuscripts are the (metaphorical) terrain that writer and reader travel together, albeit asynchronously and over an extended time.

Martin Amis describes literary fiction as 'a conversation', even an 'intense argument' (Amis 224). Original and dialogical, then. Speculative and argumentative. We wondered where authors (can) have this 'intense' exchange—with imagined readers, and writerly peers, but also with(in) the worlds we're writing. How and in which ways do we think-with? Here? We asked each other. Hear! We answered, remembering that essays, as well as stories, are powerful tools for 'connectivity thinking' (van Dooren and Rose 85). We co-authored this article in a way we hoped would 'allow for multiple meanings to travel alongside one another' (van Dooren and Rose 85). It has been eye-opening (point-of-view pun intended) to co-write about a fox story, oceanic book, and island tale. To do so without collapsing diversity into one voice is one way—a way, an other way—of unpacking and unpicking, contradicting, the Romantic myth of isolated geniuses.

As published writers we understand creative work is always a collaboration: our writing forever travels 'alongside' others' words—and worlds. Laura Jean McKay's translations of mosquito, whale, dingo and more in *The Animals in that Country* (2020) make for a noisy, more attentive world, until with an antidote—to the novel's 'zoo-flu' that allowed humans to understand all animals' languages—comes a terrible silence, 'the universe gone' (McKay 277). We too write against an 'antidote,' bending our words towards a cosmos and polyvocality, diverging from, verging back towards, fellow writer–researcher–readers. Adopting, adapting, colleagues' collaborative practice-led method—coined as 'crossover' writing by The MECO Network—this paper contributes to creative writing methodology—a process of thinking, reading, writing, reflecting and editing—by documenting how we three sought to exit the centre and arrived at outpost regions: beyond-human narrators; and / *and* narratives (Latour ix). In 'Fox, Ocean, Island' we share knowledge gathered along the way to final (unsigned) fictional forms and—*and*—formal, academic-accredited, non-traditional research outputs.

Voicing *Vulpes vulpes*

In Foxtide*, a novel, a fox is hit by a car and becomes* foxlike*: extraordinary and earth-bound. What follows are Fox's encounters with other beings as Fox experiences the more-than-human world from an altered perspective.*

Vulpes vulpes, the red fox, inhabits every continent but Antarctica. In Australia red foxes devastate ecosystems; it is also true Europeans brought foxes 'to Australia. . . for sporting purposes' (Abbott 463). Much like wolves, their ancestors, foxes 'exist . . . in multiple realities' (Bradley, 'Wolf'): in forests, books, dreams, and in your backyard. Alexis Wright places them alongside other wolf-descendants in *The Swan Book* (2013): 'Its journey took the black swan over the place where hungry *warrki* dingoes*,* foxes and *dara kurrijbi buju* wild dogs had dug out shelters away from the dust' (18). For my research, writing a fox has required my leaning-in to the idea we live in a more-than-human world (O'Gorman). It is a world in which humans don't occupy the central position, a notion held by many philosophies as deeply relevant cultural knowledge, and increasingly acknowledged globally, though traditionally encapsulated in the Anglophone world through children's literature (and thus disposable). Testing this through writing *Foxtide*, I have moved through iterations of fox voicing: from anthropocentric, to alien, to resisting being enamoured with either and rather allowing the research and the imaginative to co-exist. Unsurprisingly this has worked best when Fox, as main character, has driven my novel. I worked through iterations of a 'fox voice' until a satisfactory voice was made; in other words, iterations of Fox's voice were tested until Fox was centred: assimilated and made 'strange' (Bloom 3). Fox is assimilated by being rendered in human language; still strange as Fox is a red fox. Through this process of centring the more-than-human world comes into focus while maintaining ambiguity.

Another of my objectives in attempting to destabilise the hegemony of the human voice in fiction was to foreground the suffering of the beyond-human within the Anthropocene. Living in an altered climate, how might a red fox experience 'solastalgia' (Albrecht)? Who would mourn a red fox, a creature loathed in so many of the places it lives?

As I worked through iterations of fox voice to realise creative and philosophical concerns (hybrid fox, dramatic, fictive, experimental), each iteration remained maddeningly human—and moved away from anthropocentrism, as, indeed, my co-authors' stories are also tales of a voyage out and a return.

Hybrid. Human and fox.

> *The river is ice and halfway home fox is close to a frozen stop; ragged, she reaches the bank, and now on two feet stumbles to the boathouse.*

Hybrid fox, my first attempt at voicing, was tied to the idea that the fox in my novel was a therianthropic character who, to switch between human and fox forms, swam through a river. This idea was influenced by my reading on fox-spirits—mythological beings in Chinese, Japanese, and other Asian traditions—notably in Martin Wallen's *Fox* (2006), and the collected folk stories of *Japanese Tales* (1987). On reflection I was anxious about writing from a fox's point of view; instead, I hid behind the familiarity of therianthropy (werewolves!) and apparent safety of a third-person (distant) point of view. Unsurprisingly the writing was anthropocentric and dull. David Jauss points out in *On Writing Fiction* (2011) that an overlooked question around point of view is narrative distance: not only who is speaking, but at what distance from the reader (36). First person can be distant; third person intimate. How far apart are character and reader? What I needed was fox close-ups, fox-thinking, regardless of who was *speaking*. Quoting Wayne Booth, 'privileged' is the name Jauss gives to a point of view that is both omniscient and intimate (31). I was not ready to write that voice.

Hybrid fox was flat and faraway. Would a more fictive approach get me closer to Fox?

> *Mr Pope's den is surrounded by box and laurel. Fox can tell about the seed of that laurel, and the one before, and continuing on back until Fox is telling about an oracle in Greece with the leaf's salt on her lips. She holds a branch from a tree at the door to her temple. The tree has been there for hundreds of years and remembers when laurel covered the world; then the world became dryer and warmer and in that now the laurel is one of few surviving; and in this now Fox is not able to say if the temple laurel still grows.*

In my next drafting, a fox is the victim of animal experimentation, his dead body dumped in the Thames. He then appears inside Mr Alexander Pope's grotto, an under- and otherworldly place, with an entrance that opens onto the Thames. There this newly ghost fox meets the ghost of Pope. Fictive fox combined the red fox's natural abilities with imaginative leaps: foxes have an incredible sense of smell; my ghost fox could smell back thousands of years. Fictive fox was exciting to write, but I was not yet engaging with how this fox might think or feel.

What I needed was to be more dramatic!

> *The fox falls in the river. Or doesn't fall but jumps. Not a jump but a step; off-bank, off-grass, from edge to air to water . . . The fox notices the river then the fox is part of it. The fox's fur soaks it up and flows out into it, and the fox feels that part of himself become river-like.*

Dramatic fox dabbled with an indirect interior point of view. This attempt to balance third- and first-person narration, to write fox-thoughts, led to a new writerly problem. I was still 'playing fox.' I began to think that the best thing I could do for foxes, if not all beyond-human beings, was put my pen down. What damage would I cause foxes by writing badly about a fox? In 'Against Nature Writing' (2021) Charles Foster worries about whether words illuminate or dull our sense of the world. He is 'appalled by the distance between a petal; and the word "petal."' Foster has his own solutions, one of which is to trust the idea that the world includes words as 'an essential part of its makeup.' In *Summertime*, Danielle Celermajer proposes sharing words as resistance: 'humans,' she says, 'have taken all the best words and guarded them jealously; all the words that signify feeling, wanting, knowing, responding, aspiring' (140). Shared, these words might have a chance at beyond-human associations. I began to see the challenge as one of (affecting) (mis)translation. What I was aiming for was the 'effect of the real,' for language to 'fade into the background' (Barthes 70) —for Fox to be real to the reader, to somehow get close to Fox's point of view and write 'a melodic intertwining of expression, appearance and interpretation' (Lestel 137).

This is an example of how 'thinking-with' has been an essential part of my iterative process, a way authors can have Amis's 'intense' exchange in the world(s) they—we—are writing. Thinking-with these philosophers I gathered knowledge to write between fact and fancy. In her book on narrative shape, *Meander, Sprial, Explode: Design and Pattern in Narrative,* Alison James quotes Ronald Sukenick, saying 'instead of reproducing the form of previous fiction, the form of the novel should seek to approximate the shape of our experience' (15). It is not an accident that the form of this thinking-with has been *foxlike*, has leapt about, been breathless, before settling as I dug deeper into future drafting.

What I needed was to (be) experiment(al).

> *What, apart from a red fox, is red?* Apples can be. *You're thinking of wolves*. I'm thinking of dogs. *I was surprised to learn that a fox is not a member of the cat family*. You're thinking of a minx. *No—and a minx is also a dog.* And all kinds of fruits are apples: potatoes, bananas, melons. *I'd like to move on to something else.* Or go back to foxes? *I wanted all of this to sound terribly beautiful.* Let's talk nose.

To write my experimental fox I worked with poetry, writing lipograms and erasure poetry, playing with language and the page. I gathered fox anecdotes from colleagues, writing in response to these stories, work prompted by reading on anecdote and storying. 'Storying,' says Dominique Lestel, 'an extended method of anecdote, is the etho-ethnography of observation and interaction in a place. Storying attends to the phenomenological co-constitution of place, subjectivity and becoming' (129). Recognising myself as an Anglophone writer–researcher—based in Australasia, Oceania—I learned from this method how to think differently about the stories that happen(ed) alongside each other in

the more-than-human world—and in my novel; to write guided by the idea that 'a story can allow for multiple meanings to travel alongside one another' (van Dooren and Rose 85). An idea that, as set out in our introduction, also directs the view(s) of this polyvocal essay.

And where, for now, have I landed? Each voice iteration had fitting qualities. In fact, each made part of a fox-whole. Sinead Gleeson writes that 'sometimes the world steers you towards the broken apart, the work that refuses to be glued together, that basks in its un-ness' (2020). For my fox voice to take shape it was necessary to work through fragments, to bask in the un-ness, then to glue the most apt of those parts together. Fox's voice is now fictive in terms of this work—being, ultimately, my human idea of a fox's voice and point of view: dramatic but intimate and observational, hybrid but in a different way, in response to the knowledge that in a more-than-human world, stories are inconclusive and asymptotic.

Hybrid, then, in the sense that voices and stories mix and mingle, run 'alongside,' wild, but do not merge. This is how I am now drafting my novel; how we three have written this essay, pack-like. Heading in the same direction but different voices distinct.

A final iteration then. Hybrid and distinctive, attentive to variation, to the tame and un-, and to the vast region of fox:

> *A fox with reddish fur sits on the concrete, his back to the traffic. He is not interested in the hum of tires on bitumen, the police siren and helicopter drone, the people inside the vehicles. Morning songbirds sing at the edges of his attention while he is focused on something in the bushland. Rodent rodent rodent. He springs from the concrete and lands light-footed halfway down the hill. The grass rustles, ants, he paws at them while listening for the rat. It scuttles against a tree trunk, slips beneath the scrub, comes closer. The fox turns his ears, crouches low. A car exits the freeway at speed. The rat runs onto the footpath. The fox leaps.*

Sea-ing perspective

The literary speculative fiction 'Else' pushes our current climate catastrophe to its possible (inevitable?) conclusion and asks: what will be left when our old world is lost? Who, or what, might come into their own? This 'cli fi' tried to make novel connections between neurodiversity and the external environment—specifically, autism and the ocean—in languages that are poetic and playful and, ultimately, hopeful.

James Wood famously says: 'The house of fiction has many windows, but only two or three doors. I can tell a story in the third person'—conventional, traditional—'or in the first person'—anecdotal, immediate—'and perhaps in the second person singular'—radical!—'or in the first person plural'—experimental?—'… And that is it' (Wood 5). Is he right? Is my novel building a place? A space I make for you, Dear Reader, to enter, after? A story centred, centralised, through a unified—and unifying—point of view. As much as I resist

the idea of neatly framed windows with a clear view onto storyscapes, I use this exact metaphor in editing lectures. I tell students to shine language so readers will suspend disbelief and dive through the looking-glass of words. Pull back the curtains, I advise. Polish the glass. I teach point of view as the first thing we recognise, as readers; the first thing we must decide, as a writer. Who will *we* be?

Third person, then.

> *It would go down in history as Australia's most compact tropical cyclone. Gale force winds reached over 200 kilometres an hour, but extended less than fifty ks from the centre of the storm . . . which passed right over the city.* (Michael, 'Four Degrees')

But my own fictional worlds are not built nearly so clearly. The 'house' a work-in-progress might become is only ever glimpsed through gaps in the slats—sensed through cracks in the struts. By me, or sometimes other early readers. Any 'doors' stand, at draft stage, implausibly cross-hatched onto the 'real' story like something at the end of the Narnia series or the beginning of Susan Cooper's *The Dark is Rising* (1973). A Stonehenge-like structure signposting … regions not yet, or not properly, explored. Hinting, simply, where a way—an old way, maybe—is. A path to, or back to, some other where.

First? Person? Perhaps.

> *We were living under the powerlines, at the end of one era and the start of another. At night I listened to them crackle and pop. My brain frazzled and zapped.* (Michael, 'Fragile Y' 313)

If I were to tell you the story about (writing) this story—*Else,* the speculative home I have been building for the past half-dozen years—it would be a study in the failure to find doors. My inability to find the right door. To enter? Or leave. A tale of all the windows I have knocked on. Only now, in the co-writing of this creative practice research, do I appreciate the new knowledge I—*we*—have, 'alongside' each other, fumbled and stumbled towards as we practise (verb) our practice (noun). This essay recentres the region(s) novelists pass through, cross over, work our respective ways around, as we journey from somewhere to some *else* where. Paths that, by the time we come to reflect on them, may already be buried. Built over by our more industry-accepted self-'centric' outputs.

It is not as if we—or I, anyway—know what we are building when we begin a novel. Or even how, why, when or where we do so. Celeste Ng speaks to this on *Between the Covers*: how much work we do to set the foundations for a structure that might be a McMansion. Or a glasshouse. This impetus, to perfect, she advises, should be resisted (Naimon). The fiction 'house' we (readers and writers together) 'build' is nothing concrete or solid at all. It

must be as flexible, as fluid, as fickle as … Amis's 'conversation' (224). Sue Woolf captures the essential ambiguity of early draft scenes in *The Mystery of the Cleaning Lady* (2007). Sure, I sit at my desk, here, write something that conjures (to use Stephen King's magical analogy) some kind of 'door,' there, but readers will step through my words into their own imaginary worlds. I, too, come back, repeatedly, to re-hang, re-hinge, recentre optional openings.

Second person! Direct address.

> *I write to you now, on the Ninch, as I would speak—as if ours were a conversation only briefly interrupted by this wide, wild country.* (Michael, 'Dear C—')

To begin where I did—then, *there*—insofar as I had any kind of idea in mind, my third novel was always going to be 'cli fi': a 'hyperterm' coined by journalist, literary critic and climate activist Dan Bloom to describe, and encourage, fiction concerned with the climate catastrophe. This essential aspect—the 'generic' house, if you will—has receded into the background, becoming, as Vivian Gornick would say, the situation rather than the story. Part of the plot, rather than an aspect of the deeper themes: parent–child relations; issues of inheritance; genetic drift.

I still think this initial commitment is key (pun intended) when we come to the question of doors. And what world we might wander—wonder!—into through them. Our respective areas of creative practice and critical research may well be lit spec fic, but I don't like spelling out that it is 'speculative,' because it feels so real to me. For we three, our work connects us and the external environment in language that, according to Woods, might 'not much resemble narration; it may be closer to poetry, or prose-poetry' (Wood 5). Is that so bad?! It seems a fitting way to reflect our changed climate, pay 'attention' to our current crisis, 'practice worlding' the coming catastrophe—in accordance with Haraway's call for 'speculative fabulations.' Along with Kim Stanley Robinson, I am seeking a way of looking at our situation that allows artists to take action. In his words (as said to Joshua Rothman), I strive for 'a feeling of participating in history.' This novel is my answer to Miller-McDonald's demand to 'write about this,' which Bradley has recognised in describing 'my preparedness to use the tools of speculative fiction and genre to push the boundaries of Australian literary fiction into new and fertile territory' (J. Bradley, personal communication, 15 March 2024).

First person, plural: collective.

> *Not that anyone, we know, sees. Her curious mutation, and then migration. Alone of all our kind she sniffs the shallows. Drawn to scent of sand and something: green!* (Michael, 'Genetic Drift' 370)

Timothy Morton speculates the fabulous phrase 'hyperobjects' to describe things 'that exist on almost unthinkable timescales. Like the strange stranger, these materials confound our limited, fixated, self-oriented frameworks' (*Ecological* 19). That sounds like the novel to me. The sole-authored commercially published print novel is often conceived as a fixed object: the book. But the novel is fundamentally a non-singular incomprehensible thing. It is—*they* (fundamentally unit-fluid) are—created over time, in collaboration and conversation with publishers, markets, real and imagined readers; and, with creative-practice peers researching 'alongside.' It is often in speaking with our peers, as Penni Russon says, that 'we test the edges of what we know and don't know about our novels in progress and about the way we work' (Ash and Michael). Drafts become palimpsests carrying the traces of their own making. They offer a way to see ethical and ecological consequences play out over generations, and across continents. Even post publication, novels continue to change over time, between readings and communities, and in the wider assemblages of culture and society. And further, Morton's words made me wonder what hyperobject—which is not a metaphor, idea or social construct; which we cannot see in its totality but only in fragmentary evidence—appears in my work-in-progress. Through closing doors. What Harawayan 'worldings' am I, unconsciously perhaps, building with my creative 'practice' play? Morton writes of our need to awaken 'from the dream that the world is about to end.' According to him (and I don't disagree): 'The end of the world has already occurred' (*Hyperobjects* 7). Pull back the curtains—editor-me invites, instructs, her writerly self—polish that glass.

See.

And there it is: the thing too big to grasp, the iceberg massing beneath the surface—which my words can only ever be the pointy tip of. An ocean. Here I was, researching Settlement, and sediment, down on the Ninch: pouring over early maps; walking the tracks of my beloved back beach; charting where waters could, would, rise. How had I missed the sea herself?

Third person, unrestricted. Omniscient. Omnipresent.

> *Leisl wakes. Finds herself standing in the garden in the dead of night—an undead night! She finds herself: standing. Night, but. It is: insanely noisy. There seem, bizarrely, more animals awake now than in the short daylight hours. Is it? Bizarre?* (Michael, 'The Knot')

The harder I tried, the more I pulled on these last 'plural' doors—which Wood warns will 'not much resemble narration'—the more 'situation,' the further away from the page-turning pull of story my writing became. The farthest from commercial fiction. All my

crafty attempts to give agency to something, some one other—by applying second-person, using first-person plural—only made my human hand more obvious. Like the narrator in the example above, author-me pulled back: to a restricted—but not that restrictive!—point of view. The default mode for so much literary fiction of the last century—only now superseded by the fantastic, relentless, logic-defying first-person present-tense (have I made my own perspective clear?!). I land back where I began. Before I had begun, actually, with seasonal notes towards a novel. Setting, become story.

Regardless of my inefficient means, my circuitous method(s), I am *in* … though I'm not sure it's a house. More a hide, perhaps, or blind: a camouflaged shelter from which I can watch the wild life. Observing our most abundant seabird species. Noting hooded plovers flocking in the brief respite between breeding seasons. Migrating birds returning from the south to replace those leaving. Life, finding a way, after my characters are long gone.

I became de-centralised, re-centralised, through a series of poorly made, unstable (let that Narnia reference ring for all you fellow kings and queens!) doors that went nowhere. Slammed shut behind me. The affordances and limitations of Wood's distinct points of view are not ultimately the objective our paper, but it does help to understand why I—or we—might reach towards them. Why you might. Because of what it's assumed they convey: an authentic 'other' perspective. Or create: intimacy and empathy with that. By reflecting on my iterative and abandoned drafts I can see how a narratorial perspective, once associated with an omnipotent God, might be just as close, if not closer, to Nature—though no more natural than any other fabled speculation.

Punctuating Island

Writing a novel explicitly set in so-called Australia, not abstracting the where, leaves you—me, us—in a contested land: a place occupied in the most material ways and post-colonising in how it is thought and imagined. Doing this, not for the first time but for the first time with the commitment of novel-writing, drew me towards the inclusion of an (other) region that is differently riddled with the imaginations of the settler: Lord Howe Island.

Lord Howe Island is a small tropical island of New South Wales, flung out about halfway between Newcastle and Auckland. Visiting the island is difficult, regulated and expensive. One of the first firsthand accounts I ever read of the island was this extract from Arthur Phillip's account: 'Innumerable quantities of exceeding fine turtle frequent this place in the summer . . . There was not the least difficulty in taking them.' European arrival at the island began with some dozens of turtles: hunted, eaten in a soup and brought back to Sydney. 'There was not the least difficulty in taking them.' This observation would come up repeatedly in the literature. How easy it was to eat any animal living on the island, often attributed to the animals being absolutely unfamiliar with predator humans; the word 'paradise,' too, recurs in the literature. There is an insistence that those Europeans of the

Supply must be the first to see and touch Lord Howe Island, possess it with the senses—even on an evolutionary time scale. It's thrown about that these animals have evolved to be conveniently and edibly docile (Anderson 98; Cheesman 50; Nicholls 16–17).

Writing about this place makes me another representer in a line of representers. Already, it was carrying a lot of water as a place; I mean that it was suspended in a web of emotive and sometimes flimsy ideas. It was a colonial fantasy. It is a colonial fantasy. I had caught something of the place that I would call haunting, as in Avery Gordon's framing. She writes:

> [Haunting] is an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely . . . we're notified that what's been suppressed or concealed is very much alive and present, messing or interfering precisely with those always incomplete forms of containment and repression ceaselessly directed towards us. (2)

The possession of the island—its useability and its condition and its objectified value—relies on the past, or rather, a particular representation of its past. It trades on its own curated history. Representations and representers of the island have invested in a discursive presentation of Lord Howe Island as a place of possessive purity and natural preservation for human—and white—recreation. The past is not admitted to be a zone of ambiguity; the island's trajectory towards a conserved future as a place of enjoyment for the wealthy is secure. This is how to get haunted.

Paradise past

Creative practice research enables a kind of digging into and turning over of historical materials. By moving the pieces of my reading–research (as opposed to writing–research) into new contexts, by appropriating and collaging texts, I could hear their resonances with the contemporary understanding of a place. While made up of many sources and approached from multiple directions, the modern writings about the island have drifted towards a point of hyperbolic repetition, almost, about the nature of the place: a concordance reached over the last century of its representation. From the collection, my own curation, reading and rewriting, I track the fantasy and put together a history of thinking about a place/fantasising about a place.

This, too, is a resonance we three are highlighting and explicating here: our mutual hybridising pivot in perspective while creating distinctly different novels. It is implemented early; it propels our method. This perspective-shifting move is integral and integrated, even while 'inefficient' and 'circuitous' (to appropriate from the above case study).

Representing Lord Howe Island in fiction puts my work into a collection of writings about this unique, exclusive/excluding place. Language protects and encircles Lord Howe Island, from the adventure stories of the island as a frontier to the laws that have been written into it, from its high-end tourist entrapments to the Eurocentric logics underpinning the state's environmental efforts. The uniqueness of its laws and its state-arranged conservation programs are often justified as preservation. Rarely expressed, this always means preservation of the island as it appeared to the first Europeans to take possession of it (Tiffin 64). The language mantling the island reflects colonial desires for a true terra nullius (Watson 254, 257), paradise island, that is wholly property, in mint condition—defined as the moment of the arrival of the white gaze.

This purity language, imbued with settler certainty, was used to promote a broad extermination effort. Launching in 2019, there was a large-scale poisoning of the rats—and certain owls, a part of the project often omitted or given a hasty mention, the owls—with a powerful anticoagulant poison called brodifacoum. To write about the extermination efforts, I created a kind of patter of sources. The more conventional literary chapters of the novel are interrupted by passages of appropriated Lord Howe Island texts. While retaining and expressing a viewpoint of my own, I'm attempting to puncture my own representation, create gaps in the shell of the novel. The interruptions come from many sources—historical, scientific, fictional, government reports and newspapers. Collaging as a form creates a representation that resists wholeness, 'complete and perfect knowing' (Hejinian 53). It suggests uncertainty: the unknowability of the possessed region.

Punctuation

When collaging from other texts, every time I noted a death or an implied death, I left a slash, what is called a solidus, virgule, oblique or separatrix. This piece of punctuation (in French, the little rod) signifies conjunction. This can be a literal co-ordinating conjunction —it can mean 'or,' and sometimes with a bit of slippage it means 'and'—as well as disjunction, a separation. It's a line break and an indication of exclusion, yes/no. As a practice, using it in my own way, an easily skimmed creative reflex, it ended up revealing euphemisms and signalling the undercurrents in the often highly positive material:

> efforts to control/the rat population
> (Tiffin 59)

> There is the p[ ]tential for a number of owls to succumb/the shooting component/
> (Walsh et al.)

> Other threats to the site's values include climate change—future oceanic warming/

(IUCN)

by that means I was able to take/nearly the whole of them
(Gilbert qtd. in Hutton 12)

I'm interested in and engaged in highlighting the evasions to be found in the archive of material around the island.

Aside from quotation (which is itself curation and omission), I made one other intervention in the quoted material. The example below draws from, first, a distinctly imperial novelisation of the island, Evelyn Cheesman's *Landfall the Unknown* (1950), and, secondly, the legislation undergirding state management of the island. Every time I noticed a possessive concept expressed obliquely or overtly, and the related word contained an 'o,' I replaced the letter with brackets, [ ], an erased space, a nullius inserted.

—by working, then by and by they shall be given plots of ground to [ ]wn.
(Cheesman 104)

All the land on the Island belongs to the Cr[ ]wn
(Parliamentary Counsel)

I am drawing on concepts and theorists that are central to my writing of place; Irene Watson's 'Buried Alive' indicts 'the *terra nullius* of sovereignty . . . their myth of emptiness justifying the lie that a space existed/exists for their invasion' (257). But there is some randomness to my practice; even here, I wonder if 'belongs' might not better take the brackets than 'Crown.' This conscious textual habit—repurposing punctuation—is something that is wholly creative and not rational or consistent. As a writing practice, I can analogise these punctuation interventions to tarot reading's value for one who does not believe in magic or clairvoyance. A device like this, something with a set of rules that contain an element of the arbitrary, the not-entirely-controlled, can prompt a shift in interpretation. This creative experiment, repetitive and reflective intervention in the material, enables close observation of the language that legally, ecologically and imaginatively structures the island. Hence:

There is the p[ ]tential for a number of owls to succumb/
(Walsh et al.)

For me this is one of the more oblique usages of the [ ] that stood out to me on redrafting the novel. I had to think to remember what made me pick out this letter. The potential: this is the opportunity afforded to a possessor—here, the state. The island is owned and its owls and rats and any susceptible thing are therefore available to be poisoned, or whatever,

by their putative owner, the Crown. Punctuatively, I'm indicating that inherent potential, that intervention and artificially cleared space.

Now that the manuscript exists, I am the editor. I'm drawn, sometimes, to cut all the enjambed lines, the punctuated, scavenged and scarified extracts: the difficulties. The other voices, reverberating around and *cluttering mine*. This is despite what I have detailed above—the thoughtful perpetuation and revision and play with other texts. This instinct towards cleanliness persists, despite my own political interest in stranger writing, in pushing the limit of good writing, in promoting maybe 'bad' writing. There are many hardened (big L) Literary conventions to be jostled; there is soft editorial power to be resisted. I have been delighted to see/sea Rose and Clare's experiments here and elsewhere, in punctuation and form, micro and macro. For now, we three think of our forays in processual, mobile terms; that this is a tide; what has been disgorged onto dry land may be dragged back, leaving remnants and maybe-fabulous wreckage behind.

Away from a conclusion

Thus ends our whistlestop tour of three not-yet-accepted texts. Our unpublished manuscripts evade familiar, settled/Settler centredness in distinctly different and yet recognisably similar ways. We present them, collected, as connected case studies documenting novel-writing practices researching—reaching—towards beyond-human perspectives. We seek to approximate the shape of our experience of, and by, thinking-together. Place and the natural world (inclusive of human animals but not restrictively so) are at the core of our practice. Our practices. This is our commonality. *This*, community. It is an aim, an ambition, not a fait accompli.

We re-draft and drift, off course, backtrack over ways taken and/or roads not. Intervening in our own texts repetitively, recursively, testing terrain for viability and viewpoint. Looking for new ways—slantwise, fabulous!—to go on. Towards the regions and outer rims. Going over and over text to allow connections and resonances to accumulate. Accepting that old associations persist, but may be cycled through towards true novel-ty.

The novel persists as a human project, tied to human failings, pulled towards self-centred concerns. Fail better! It is also a popular, prestigious, potentially commercial creative practice output. We believe one of the reasons for its longevity is precisely because the form is so mutable, so adaptable. As capacious as Ursula K Le Guin's 'carrier bag' (86), as imaginative and speculative as us humans, but also as fantastic as all the inhabitants of our world—and that, *this*, world herself. The novel expands to meet other places, include other texts, imagine other species. Enable other selves. The novel urges us to look again at where we write from, who we write for, against, and alongside. We ask, again, in this climate-precarious time, 'what is the point . . .?' (Bradley, 'Writing'), and find we are haunted by the sufferings of the human and more-than-human. Hayley Singer writes that 'hauntings

come… when the over-and-done-with rustle like grass in a breeze' (Singer 60). We are compelled in our novels to respond, differently, to those ever-louder sounds.

More and others are gathered in our speculative and fabulous practices. These drafts go too far, show us overreaching—overturning current crafts. Placed side-by-side, presented together, we see—*see!*—how our very inconsistency is constant. We have embarked upon journeys without maps, made vain attempts to scale mountains, without much hope of success. And yet here we are. Starting. Starting again.

Finally, bags full, we contract back. Return to the fire with ingredients for a story. Ready to share what we have gathered, which includes the account of our trip—to the limits of the known world. Perhaps even over its edge. As Margaret Atwood writes in *On Writers and Writing*—originally, more originally called *Negotiating with the Dead* (as Jauss's guide was first published with the much more apt title *Alone with Everything that can Happen)*—'the act of writing charts the process of thought, it's a process that leaves a trail, like a series of fossilized footprints' (142). Look, we say, sharing work begun in the dark, exposing the plodding ways we took, things we bumped into and up against as instinct, intuition, iteration gave way to considered reflection and, finally, academic articulation. To end up, here, again, on the page—albeit a new, co-written one—saying all this to you, too.

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