

## Editorial Note: Ngā Tohu o te Huarere: Conversations Beyond Human Scales

*Swampben* Collective

*Swampben* emerges from the air, lands and seas that form the stories of the First Peoples of Australia and Aotearoa. We attend to these communities' narratives as a first principle. We acknowledge the unceded territories on which we and our contributors have worked to produce this issue of *Swampben*. We pay our respects to those territories' Elders, past and present, with an eye to our namesake, the swampben (kwilom, milu, ping ping, Porphyrio melanotus, pukeko), a bird active in this region's ground, skies and waters.

This issue of *Swampben* is the tenth issue of the ASLEC-ANZ journal and the fourth published under the title of *Swampben*. It follows two guest-edited *Swampben* issues. Particular Planetary Aesthetics (#8) was guest edited by Louise Boscacci and Perdita Phillips. Strange Letters (#9) was edited by Chantelle Bayes, Chantelle Mitchell and Jaxon Waterhouse. The theme of this issue, Ngā Tohu o te Huarere: Conversations Beyond Human Scales, follows the 2021 ASLEC-ANZ conference and is edited by Christine Howe, Alanna Myers, Robyn Maree Pickens and Sue Hall Pyke.

This issue interrogates and challenges mainstream ways of seeing and knowing. It was drafted before the devastatingly overwhelming refusal of Australians to vote for a Voice for this continent's First Peoples. The issue was at final draft before the violent events that have been unfolding in Palestine since October 2023. Acts of oppression and occupation, fitfully obscured by a power elite controlling mainstream discourses, are acts that *Swampben* will not ignore. We take this opportunity then, embroiled in state failure, to contextualise our turn to different scales to see and know the world, in a time of deep social difficulty that has profound environmental implications.

In doing so, we acknowledge that we (the *Swampben* Collective) are Second Peoples occupying the lands of Aotearoa and the continent called 'Australia'—the latter without a treaty that gives self-determination to the First Peoples of these lands. This imbalance enacts the systemic colonialist logic that is hurting this world's creatures, human and more than human, in scales both larger and smaller than humans generally observe. Some of our contributors are First Peoples, some specifically challenge the colonial lens, some tackle anthropocentrism, and all of these wonderful writers try to see differently. To see differently is to know differently, and to know differently allows a space to act differently.

*Swampben* opens with a keynote essay from Ellen van Neerven, who powerfully explores the 'black-green conflict' present in 'nature writing,' the kind of writing that *Swampben* publishes by way of ASLEC-ANZ's charter to support this region's community of critical and creative environmental artists. As such, we fall under the long white history of environmental writing in this part of the world that is largely shaped by the colonialist establishment that van Neerven resists. Their denunciation of the 'strategies of deceit' that mark colonialist inferences about 'nature' extends and expands the ecofeminist derailings of 'nature' that were spearheaded by Val Plumwood and continued by some of the scholars who began ASLEC-ANZ, including Freya Matthews, Kate Rigby and Deborah Bird Rose. Taking van Neerven's thinking to heart, *Swampben* will continue, with determination, to seek to create different, more collectivised ways to understand invader/settler writers' positionality within this paradigm in a just and politicised way. In particular, van Neerven's introduction of the concept of 'nurture writing' is timely and utterly convincing. Their

writing joins that of many First Peoples who are carrying ways of knowing the world through thousands of generations into environmentally oriented writing. The invitation van Neerven extends here is for Second Peoples to understand the possibilities of this ‘nurture writing’ as a gift. Not one to emulate, but one to gratefully accept. The poison at our fingertips need not have further primacy. As van Neerven puts it: ‘It is not just transforming the inedible into the edible, it’s changing the poisonous into the nourishing. The reward overtakes the risk.’ The questions raised by van Neerven, about who is doing the seeing and the knowing of this world beyond the human, in different scales, is an important marker to carry through this issue of *Swampen*.

With the invader/settler construct being proven, again and again, as fundamentally fallible, with crisis seemingly overwhelming attempts at care, Fred Gesha’s mesmerising account of the Hairy Man offers a different world that follows older, stronger rules. His evocation of ‘intangible’ knowledge directly resists the ongoing mainstream quashing of cultural knowledge with ‘disbelief and even disdain.’ Gesha dissolves this wrong-footedness with an eloquence that emphasises the importance of ‘storystings,’ exhorting Second Peoples in Australia to respect this land as an always-will-be visitor, for this is a place governed by ‘powerful living entities with the ability to give life and heal the body, mind, and spirit’.

The remainder of the *Swampen* contributions are by non-Indigenous writers. While we will continue to do our best to amplify First Nation voices as our first priority, there is much decolonising work to be done by Second Peoples on these lands and we will continue to be part of assisting this shared task, until directed otherwise.

Louisa King and Therese Keogh tell of the violence staining the history of nation state building in a collaborative epistolary story that crosses between Lachlan Swamp, on Gadigal/Dharawal Country, and Kooragang Island, on Awabakal and Worimi Country. The question of poison, raised by van Neerven, is clearly at work here. King and Keogh critique colonialist representations of swamps as ‘the wasted, the toxic and the untamed’ by rendering these sites anew as offering a ‘marshy resistance’ to the ‘environmental disaster’ taking place in these regions.

Luna Mroziak Gawler engages with the conference theme of scaling up and down by writing virus as collaborator. This examination of ‘vital agencies of virus worlds’ hones in on COVID-19, following a speculative experiment, Emissary 2920, set up in the early days of the Narm/Melbourne lockdown. Gawler shows how such viral loads might well resist the ‘toxicocene’ understood here as a ‘shared condition of contamination’ created by colonialism, under the auspices of capitalism and Cartesianism. This essay’s call for care practices unbound by species or scale is true to the conference’s starting point that the leaky body we call human is always and already more than human. Poisons affect all bodies, not just those on the list for eradication.

Our Deborah Bird Rose essay joins Rose’s project of ethical intent and writerly care, by exploring the ready pitfalls of ‘nature writing’. Sadie Hale’s depiction of an unsuccessful attempt to view the Basking shark in Scotland demonstrates that more than ‘attentiveness, immersion, and sustained participation’ are required if the motivation to know differently is to be realised. Hale questions her (non)encounter and discovers the challenges in writing of nature when expectations or hopes are laid bare, rather than realised.

In our review section we feature a new offering to *Swampen*, our first reading group review. This is provided by Rachel Fetherston and Jessica Wilson, two scholars in the

environmental humanities who co-convene the ASLEC-ANZ Postgraduate and ECR Reading Group. Responding to work from Marcia Langton and Malcom Ferdinand, Fetherston and Wilson rightly ask if a ‘meaningful settler connection’ with ‘colonised spaces’ can happen without resolution of First Peoples sovereignty. They question where they are placed, reflect on the ways readings can shape new actions, and demonstrate how reading together can assist the creation of innovative scholarly thought.

This issue’s theme of stretching beyond Western centralisations of the human continues with Carol Freeman’s review of Teya Brooks Pribac’s *Enter the Animal* and Deborah Wardle’s review of Hayley Singer’s *Abandon Every Hope*. In her overview of Brooks Pribac’s gathering of anthropology, psychology, ethology, ethics and sociology, to examine attachment, loss and grief, Freeman joins Brooks Pribac in finding the most telling human discernments occur through caring relations with other species. Uncaring relations are the central tenet of Singer’s *Abandon Every Hope*, and Wardle’s reading of this work offers a responsive lament that befits a work that engages the reader’s body viscerally to show the harms that come with the animal-industrial complex, where the consumption of the flesh of other animals precludes any other relationship. Together, these books compel the reader to confront head-on their relations with non-human animals.

The *Swamphen* Collective would like to take this opportunity to formally thank our previous *Swamphen* Collective members, Kate Middleton, Robyn Maree Pickens and Hayley Singer. Hayley and Kate were unable to continue their involvement in the collective after *Grounding Story* (#7), but their guiding influence is present in our approach. Robyn was a vital contributor in our editorial responses to the contributions in this issue, and was steadfast in the work needed to guide our two guest-edited issues to publication.

Our next issue, which follows our 2023 conference, *Recentring the Region*, will be curated by an extended *Swamphen* Collective. Currently members are Chantelle Bayes, Adam Grener, Jennifer Hamilton, Christine Howe, Alanna Myers and Sue Hall Pyke. Chantelle Bayes is now the contact person for the journal. As always, the *Swamphen* Collective is deeply grateful for the ready guidance of the ASLEC-ANZ executive committee whose support continues to be outstanding.

Alanna, Chrissy, Robyn and Sue  
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