

Editorial: Recentring the Region

SWAMPHEN COLLECTIVE

This special issue of *Swamphen* arose from the *Recentring the Region* conference, hosted jointly by the Association for the Study of Literature, Environment and Culture (ASLEC-ANZ) and the Association for the Study of Australian Literature (ASAL) that took place at RMIT in Naarm (Melbourne) on the 4–7 July 2023.

The *Recentring the Region* conference officially opened with a keynote lecture organised by ASAL, our partner in the event. It was their annual named keynote—the Barry Andrews Memorial Address—and this time it was delivered by Yuwaalaraay author and musician, Nardi Simpson. In the talk, Simpson offered up a sustained rethinking of the relationship between oral storytelling and written literature, and challenged the boundaries that define our scholarly regions of study. A dominant colonial tendency remains central to a lot of thinking about and practices around the production, consumption and interpretation of literature today. That is: literature is the written word, literature is books, and reading is eyes on a page covered in words, a mind engaged in processing meaning. In this conception, the surrounding environment is largely irrelevant, or relevant only tangentially; only if our concentration is broken or we decide to take note. This is true even for an ecocritic interested in the environment: the subject of what one is reading about in a book might have little to no direct connection to the land around the act of reading. Simpson challenged this view of literature on a number of fronts and argued that on the large continent now known as Australia, the literary tradition did not begin with colonisation and the arrival of the written word, but rather was established by Indigenous people through a long and diverse tradition of literary practice of spoken literatures; of songlines which are grounded in place. The collective's memory of the live event is supported by fragments of notes in our books and shared discussions about the key ideas we can recall in conversation between ourselves: of the 'incalculable literary creations [that] are held in Country', as Jen Hamilton, one of the collective, has scrawled in their notebook in quotation marks.

To animate the idea of oral cultures as literary ones, Simpson sang for us one of the few surviving Yuwaalaraay melodies from pre-colonial times. The melody wasn't passed down in a conventional sense, but is held in recording in the AIATSIS archive. Simpson learned the melody, held in body, mind and breath, to perform for us. As another note from her talk reminds us: 'from bodies into ears [is] the linguistic/literary scholarship of song'; the performance of a song reactivates and reiterates the dormant sonic text. She reminded us too, as she spoke to and sang with her ancestors, that Indigenous literatures of song emerge and are

experienced with Country. To think about the melody as pre-dating colonial disruption lends a new power and shape to the oral performance as part of a literary tradition; in a similar way, those who read Melissa Lukashenko's novel *Mullumbimby* (2013) might recall how the Country is remembered by birds, who have passed a songline down through their generations, amplifying the work of human kin who are also custodians of the story.

The talk, the song, the generous offering of Indigenous songlines as literature, created a holistic sensory literary environment within the talk. One that not only challenges the dominant view of what literature is and can be in relation to colonial history, but also literature's domain or region, where it is, when it is and what it is we're actually reading when we read. In another talk, Simpson elaborates on this point about reading beyond the page:

We Yuwaalaraay are an aural people and our language has no word for reading. This does not mean we do not do it. We have continually read. And for a period that far pre-dates the invention of a printing press. We read Country, read seasons, read tracks, read winds, we read relationships and middens, we read maps made by stars and trade routes and fires. We read trees (Simpson 14:35-15:12).

The challenge of Simpson's line of thinking is to ask how to carefully listen, acknowledge and respond to this knowledge; as Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars, what can we do with this challenge to the artistic regions of our work? What does this mean for our collective, currently made up of non-Indigenous scholars and artists who mostly think of reading primarily as reading books or other cultural texts with our eyes? Perhaps it begins with a recognition that we are all on stolen Country where language and song shape the transitions from one place to another. Perhaps this question will percolate for a little longer, as we reconsider what it means to read beyond the text. But, more immediately, how does this question carry over to the concerns of *Swampphen* Vol. 11, a partial archive of the conference that was inaugurated by Simpson's ideas?

This special issue brings together nine works, a keynote essay and four book reviews that speak to regions, to the ways they bring together bodies through hydrologies, ecologies and geographies, but can also move them apart; and to the processes of colonisation that have sought to carve up and reshape regions. Growing out of the conference, the issue asks in what ways does art, literature and critique shape environmental thought and action? How might we rethink regions? How does the more-than-human world relate to 'the region'? How do habitats, forests, cities and towns co-become with/as regions? Through considering the

mutability of regions, and the thinking they provoke, how are they continually being constituted by practices that encompass the literary and the artistic in all their forms?

The invited keynote essay of this issue is 'Indigenous Embassy' by Tyson Yunkaporta, Nkwi Flores, and Gabriela Romero. The piece examines what an embassy is from an Indigenous perspective: as a site of 'relational increase' rather than a barrier. In the context of nation-states and colonial infrastructure, an embassy might be thought of as an infrastructure for asserting colonial power alliances and symbolising structures of domination. In contrast, Yunkaporta and his co-authors describe the agenda of the Indigenous Embassy as a work in progress with the sole agenda of 'increasing relatedness' through careful collective processes. In terms of the theme of the conference 'recentring the region', one of the key questions we asked in the pulling together of the program is what do we mean by region? The theme was chosen by our collaborators on the conference from the *Association for the Study of Australian Literature*, Emily Potter and Brigid Magner, who have developed a large body of work on this concept over the last decade (See for example Potter & Magner, 2018). In partnership with ASLEC-ANZ, the conference developed the idea of regions even further. In colonial terms, a region might be clearly delineated on a map and fortified with an embassy. If you apply for a grant as a regional artist or writer, you may have to live in certain postcodes to be eligible. The borders of a state or territory are lines on a map which link up with laws that are only related to place insofar as the boundary determines it. Comparatively, the keynote essay of this issue 'Indigenous Embassy' proposes 'embassy' as a method of careful negotiation, where respect for the specificity of Country and the people is paramount. In this context, principles, laws and regional boundaries cannot simply be asserted as requiring respect; rather, principles emerge through process and facilitation. Here, what is being recentred is the value of process over product, of collective care rather than fortified alliance.

Buddhima Padmasiri, in her essay 'Caring for the Environment: Resistance in the Plantationocene' shows us how women in the Monaragala District in the Uva Province of Sri Lanka are resisting the damaging neoliberal (and colonial) practices of agriculture by using Indigenous ways of gardening. Padmasiri charts the rise of the Plantationocene in the region from colonial development of plantations in the nineteenth century to the mechanisation of sugar cane farming in the 1980s leading to a reliance on factory farming techniques including the heavy use of chemical pesticides, monocultures and sprawling agro-estates. Women work in resistance to this in their small gardens, using organic fertilisers, natural pesticides and awakening the region through Indigenous practices of planting that work with ecologies, people and other animals.

Michael Adams' essay 'Beginner's Mind' transports readers to the New South Wales coast, encouraging reflections on the intersection of cultural and natural histories across marine regions. Drawing on the poetry of Adrienne Rich, Adams explores material experiences of the seascape and the role of such experiences in attuning the human self to more-than-human perspectives. As the title implies, Adams' work evokes the Zen Buddhist notion of the 'beginner's mind' and its many possibilities as a means of engaging deeply with the world through the unmediated animal body.

In a similar vein, Jo Pollitt's critical-creative essay 'Weather Under Pressure' expresses the importance of bodily, artistic attentiveness to weather systems in times of climate crisis. Through a blend of poetry, dancing, visual art and scholarly engagement, Pollitt's essay offers a collective and relational 'kin/aesthetic practice' as an activist means of growing human-environment connection across regions and in localised places. Pollitt proposes a return to 'a methodological dancing body' as a way of confronting the correlation between bodily and weatherly instabilities.

The contested status of regionality is taken up directly by Philip Hayward and Christian Fleury in their essay 'Rainbows Amidst the Rivers: Nested Micro-regionality in North-Eastern New South Wales.' Their case study of the Far North Coast or Northern Rivers area of NSW explores how topography, climate, and culture all factor into senses of regionality that are coherent and shared, though not necessarily coterminous with bureaucratic or cartographic boundaries. Through detailed consideration of the Rainbow Region nested within the FNC/NR area, they show how culture, identity, and community shape the concrete yet always contingent relationships between conceptions of regionality, lived histories, and the physical contours of place.

Similarly, Verity Oswin examines the contested regions created through processes of colonisation in her poem 'tilt country' and accompanying map. These works explore 'place-making, the poetics of empire and the fraught relationship of settler Australians with the land.' In the renaming and zoning of Country, the geography of regions is brought into tension with the colonial project of commodifying land as Oswin shows in her 'Fantastic Map.'

In 'Fox, Ocean, Island: Drafting – drifting – beyond human (points of) view,' three writers reflect critically on their processes of crafting and revising as they developed speculative fictions that attempt to de-centre human perspectives and concerns. In this paper, literature itself is a region that writers traverse as they engage place, text and becomings. Although their creative projects centre very different facets of the more-than-human world, Clare Carlin, Rose Michael, and Hollen Singleton each document the challenges of writing fiction that attempts to

move beyond the human, while also sharing insights gleaned from their experimentations with voice, perspective, and even punctuation. Their critical reflections both speak to the ethics and aesthetics of writing from and about place and also extend the work of their fictions in enacting these re-orientations.

Similarly, Caitlin Macdonald examines the relationship between text, region, and the more-than-human through literary critique in the essay 'Ink, Vomit, Blood, and Water: The Ripple Effects of Care, Carelessness, and Violence in *The Octopus and P*'. Set on the isthmus of the Tasman Peninsula, the paper considers how larger forces of patriarchal, environmental and colonial violence are reflected in the novel. Macdonald examines how the ripple effects of care and carelessness extend across the social and ecological regions of Tasmania, 'a space marked by settler-colonial violence and ecological fragility.'

We also have two companion pieces that explore ocean being in a performance piece called 'Multibeing Drag Rift' by Sue Reid and Astida Neimanis and a creative paper called 'Multibeing Ocean' from Sue Reid. In these two complementary works, the ocean becomes a region of poetic critique where taxonomies dissolve and singular characters give way to multibeing subjects. In 'Multibeing Drag Rift', we are invited into a playful and queer feminist provocation of what it means to exist within a multibeing wrack zone, exploring how extending drag beyond the human can move us into new regions of thought and action. In 'Multibeing Ocean', Reid takes us through a series of preambles that poetically rift off International reports, and further examine the exploitation of multibeing worlds in extractivist practices like deep sea mining.

Lastly, this edition includes reviews of four recent books that each connect to the theme of regions in different ways.

Groundwater, the subject of Deborah Wardle's *Subterranean Imaginaries and Groundwater Narratives*, is fundamental in shaping the distinct regions that are recognisable above ground, while itself remaining largely unseen. This tension between groundwater's simultaneous importance and invisibility is highlighted in Taylor Coyne's review of Wardle's book, which finds it to be a 'rich and thought-provoking exploration of groundwater's place in human and ecological systems.'

Ellen van Neerven's *Personal Score* (which includes *Swampben* vol. 10's invited essay) asks what it means to play sport on First Nations land, offering an exploration of sport's fraught relationship with race, gender and sexuality that is grounded in the unique histories of the land on which it is played. Asha Steer's review of *Personal Score*, enriched by related experiences and

research, aptly responds to van Neerven's essay collection. With reference to the play 37, Steer finds, with van Neerven, that the decision of First Nation communities to play ball need not be complicit with the follies of Western competitiveness.

Jennifer Mae Hamilton's review of Bonny Cassidy's *Monument* is also written with a sense of shared positionality. Hamilton responds to Cassidy's memoir of a white settler family, and the sensitivities in monument making and unmaking, with no small measure of discomfort, thinking through the entrapment of 'shameless denial' and the fraught relations created by white women writing towards allyship while still armed with inherited economic privilege.

Finally, looking beyond our Oceanic region, Shannon Woodcock reviews Irus Braverman's *Settling Nature: The Conservation Regime in Palestine-Israel*. As Woodcock summarises, Braverman's book 'documents the central role of nature conservation creation and administration in the expansion of the Israeli settler-colonial state between 1948 and 2022.' In reflecting on the role of the creation of national parks and nature reserves in dispossessing Palestinian communities, Woodcock draws parallels to similar strategies historically aimed at keeping Indigenous peoples out in Australia. The book also prompts Woodcock to consider alternatives to reproducing the human-animal dichotomy when writing about colonial violence, finding an example in their learnings from GunaiKurnai Country and Community.

As we put the finishing touches on our special issue, multiple regional wars threaten to merge and multiply, destroying land, waters, people and non-human life. All the while environmental records have continued to fall. Though the frontlines of the war distant from our own region, we are connected to it: on our screens, in our economies, through our political systems, in our humanity and by the damage caused to the planet we all share. In the weeks before our launch the Madleen, a small boat carrying twelve unarmed activists, attempted to break the blockade and deliver aid to citizens of Gaza. It was intercepted illegally in international waters by the Israeli Defence Forces. All aid was confiscated, the activists kidnapped, detained and then deported. Aboard the boat was environmental activist Greta Thunberg, who was widely criticised by mainstream media for an apparent turn away from her environmental issues towards human politics and anti-war activism. Her response was clear: to do nothing is not an option when we're witnessing a live-streamed genocide. But Thunberg is also clear on the connections between struggles: 'The climate justice movement must be a decolonial, anti-capitalist, antifascist movement that fights against genocide as well as ecocide, that demands liberation and justice for all, and a system that puts people and planet over profit.' Precisely how we articulate all the connections and how we respond to the interlocking crises is varied. In this issue of *Swampen*, we do what we can with the tools that we have—various forms of critique and creativity—to offer up thinking, making and doing towards a decolonised,

demilitarised and sustainable future. Rather than seeing ourselves as too small and powerless or too peripherally regional to make a difference, we must do what we can within our places and communities to respond to ecological crises. The contributions to this issue propose certain forms of resistance and creation as the method: solidarity with Indigenous struggles, support for diverse knowledges and cultural differences, and centred on collective and regionally specific modes of care.

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