

Fence Lines, Story Lines

Kerb #32

By Georgina Reid

“We are living off expired or expiring stories. Stories that expire can no longer dance with you. They are lethargic or stuck, they can’t move things in generative ways anymore...Many of these expired stories give us a sense of security, purpose, and direction—precisely because they seem stable and solid. Thus, we become attached to them and get used to their weight in our lives. If we notice they are dying, we refuse to accept it and we put them on life support because we fear the void left in their place...”

- Vanessa Machado de Oliveira¹

Words are unsteady things. Sometimes they create doors, other times they build walls. When writing about land – by which I don’t mean only a physical piece of ground; rather all that grows from, with and because of it – boundaries of words are ever-present.

The English language might be imagined as a slack-wired farm fence, made not of rusted wire and mesh but words. On the inside: ways of thinking and seeing deemed worthy of perpetuation, protection and sustenance. Kept out: the unruly and challenging stories that speak of other ways of being, seeing and valuing.

What I’ve been doing for the last decade as a writer and editor is wandering this fence line, wire cutters in hand, making holes for unsaid and under-valued ways of seeing, storying and being to enter. Inviting them in to mingle and dance in the hope of finding sense in these strange times.

Strange is an understatement. *Uncanny*, maybe. *Turbulent*, absolutely. *Transformative*, unquestionably. However complex it is to define the place we stand, how we got here is clearer. As scholars like Val Plumwood, Donna Haraway, Carolyn Merchant and Freya Mathews have articulated, the tangle of environmental crises we find ourselves in can be traced to one particular species acting out variations of one multifarious story – human exceptionalism accompanied by mechanistic and dualistic approaches to the more-than human world.

Theologian Thomas Berry suggests the ‘deepest crises experienced by any society are those moments of change when the current story becomes inadequate for meeting the survival

¹ Machado de Oliveira, V. (2021). *Hospicing modernity: Facing humanity’s wrongs and the implications for social activism*. North Atlantic Books.(p15)

demands of a present situation'². Are the stories being told by us Western moderns about human/land relations capable of meeting the survival demands of our present situation? Or are they doing the work of reinforcing the fence, tightening the wires, raising its height?

Stories of production and property, extraction and control – often emerging from the scientific-rational bent of post-Enlightenment Western thought – continue to shape how we see and act upon land. The language used is typically mechanistic, denying animacy and agency to all beings without eyes.

There's the settler/colonial language of *clearing the scrub*, and *getting rid of the rubbish* (*rubbish* typically referring to an endemic plant community); the real estate bumf of *improved land* or *lightly timbered land* (note the use of the word *timber*, not *tree* or *forest*. A tree, it seems, is not a being but a product.) Don't forget the lifestyle media language of the backyard as *blank canvas*, the unending *makeovers* and *stunning transformations*. The myth of *tabula rasa* (when, ever, has land been a blank slate?).

Mechanistic (*green infrastructure, nature-based infrastructure*), economic (*asset classes, ecosystem services, amenity value, natural resource management*) and militaristic (*deployment, tactical urbanism, intervention*) language abounds. My favourite of all such words: *maintenance*. A car is maintained, as is a nuclear reactor and a coffee machine. Is this really the best word we have to refer to caring for, and sustaining, life and land?

What worlds are being built and sustained by these words? What worlds are unseen, unstoried, because of these words?

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Theorists typically define landscape architecture's *raison d'être* as relational. As Simon Swaffield and M E Deming suggest, the discipline's 'basic position has consistently related to stewardship—the protection and enhancement of the conceptual, material, and phenomenal relationships between human culture and nonhuman nature.'³

If landscape architects shape relations with land, and questionable relations with land are at the core of global environmental and existential crises, the stories told by landscape architects really matter. The values these stories implicitly or explicitly espouse, the meanings they ascribe and the language they use have the potential to shape how individuals and societies

² Berry, quoted in Charles Massy, *Call of the Reed Warbler*, 2017 (p557)

³ Deming, M. E., Swaffield, S. R., & Swaffield, S. (2011). *Landscape architecture research: Inquiry, strategy, design*. Wiley. (p18)

think, feel and act in regards to the land with which they live. This is a huge responsibility and opportunity. It might be some of the most urgent and necessary work of our times.

This is the focus of my PhD research in the landscape architecture program at the University of Technology Sydney. I have, as always, plenty of questions: What are the constraints around language and expression within the discipline of landscape architecture? How to story – through landscape architectural practice – human/land relations in ways that honour the aliveness of all involved? What does a language of aliveness sound like, and what might it do?

Within landscape architecture words are typically used to describe and explain visual outputs like plans, sections and illustrations, but they can do much more. Drawings document reality. They're typically precise and measurable, offering a perspective hard to access with words. Writing exists in the real and tangible but also the poetic and imaginary – it allows for ambiguity, ties meaning to ideas and representation, and can tell multiple stories at the same time. Drawing might be the best tool for documenting a gate, while language might be best employed as the tool to open it. We need both.

What happens if writing – as a tool of creativity, exploration and speculation – is embedded within the design process? What happens when the poetic capacity of language is employed not only to describe function, but to seed new human/land relations?

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I will now tell you three stories about one landscape: an inherited narrative, a tale of desecration, a love story. I share them to suggest the boundaries we create with words are fixed and flimsy at the same time; they are not singular, indestructible structures but a tangle of paradox, complexity and meaning.

1.

A map hangs on the wall of my parent's house in central New South Wales. Farms named by numbers, ready to be subdivided and sold as part of the NSW Government Closer Settlement scheme in 1909.

Ours was Farm Nine and the words used to describe the country include 'good agricultural land, undulating country cleared and fit for agriculture', 'ringbarked with the exception of a few trees', 'timber picked up and burnt in patches'. This is the language of cultivation, of the moral imperative of improvement.

The notion of *good country* storied my relationship to the land I grew up on. It was good because it was productive; because the white box trees that once peppered the landscape were now confined to gullies and hillsides inaccessible to the plough; because the rich volcanic soil could grow wheat and lucerne and oats again and again and again. The land's capacity for productivity supported, in a very pragmatic sense, my family. It kept us together and afloat.

2.

This story of productivity relies on the erasure of a constellation of many others, told over tens of thousands of years. The land I grew up with is Wiradjuri land.

I feel a deep awkwardness and shame in trying to navigate the story of violence, theft and denial underpinning my family's presence on Wiradjuri land. The word I return to is desecration. Definition: 'To take away its consecrated or sacred character from (anything); to treat as not sacred or hallowed; to profane.'⁴

It is not appropriate for me to interpret the specific ways in which the Wiradjuri people storied this land. They are not mine to tell, and I don't have permission. Indigenous groups across the world have particular narratives, laws and ways of being that are specific to people and place. However, what seems to be universal across many cultures and religions, and throughout most of human history, is the foundational belief that land is source, land is sacred. Dr Mary Graham, a Kombu-merri and Wakka Wakka woman of South Eastern QLD and Adjunct Associate Professor in Political Science at the University of Queensland, writes:

*'The land is a sacred entity, not property or real estate... The land, and how we treat it, is what determines our human-ness. Because land is sacred and must be looked after, the relation between people and land becomes the template for society and social relations. Therefore all meaning comes from land.'*⁵

This makes deep sense to me. And yet. I think about a hillside covered in ringbarked trees a few kilometres from our farm. We'd drive past it sometimes and talk about the man who did it. Who spent months – maybe years – with his axe, cutting hip-height channels in tree trunks. Days and days of death.

⁴ "Desecrate, V., Sense a." Oxford English Dictionary, Oxford UP, September 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1202901058>.

⁵ Graham, M. (1999). Some Thoughts about the Philosophical Underpinnings of Aboriginal Worldviews. *Worldviews: Environment, Culture, Religion*, 3. <https://australianhumanitiesreview.org/2008/11/01/some-thoughts-about-the-philosophical-underpinnings-of-aboriginal-worldviews/>

We all sensed the desecration inherent in his actions. But at the same time we failed to see that the only difference between our land and his – between him and us – was that on ours the trees had been killed, piled up and burnt years earlier, making it easier to deny the violence of our presence.

3.

My parents sold our farm in 2006. They decided quickly, and I rushed home one last time to pack up my things. My family don't do contemplation – here we were at the end of a life-place-time chatting incessantly about anything, everything, but.

That afternoon the thick, cool walls of our house stopped feeling like home. I sat on the back step, put on my boots, and like an elastic band stretched and released, I shot through the garden and out into the paddocks. I walked for hours. Down long rows of trees we'd planted years earlier, across contour banks carved into curving land, slipping through slack fence wires and tip-toeing through cracked mud in half-empty dams.

I eventually found myself laying face down on a bare patch of red earth, crying into the dirt. I wanted, in a way I had never known, for my body to merge with the land. I needed to stay there, dug in, held.

There is a part of me that has never left that spot, that moment. I am that soil. It is something I know without knowing.

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After a decade of publishing, writing and editing stories about human relations with the more-than-human world, I have a feeling that every person who works directly with land – landscape architects, artists, farmers, gardeners – has their own version of the third story. A sense of wonder and communion; of coming home and being held. A feeling that land is more than simply matter or a blank canvas for our projects; that it might be, as philosopher Freya Mathews suggests, 'a communicative subject' and an 'active co-respondent'⁶.

There's a universality to these experiences yet they're rarely articulated. They're hinted at, skirted around or hidden by more acceptable narratives. The language we have for such stories either doesn't fit the encounter, is seen as not worth sharing, or is unspoken due to fear of ridicule. Such stories include too many unsteady words like spirit, mystery, animacy, awe; they

⁶ Mathews, F. (2003). *For love of matter: A contemporary panpsychism*. State University of New York Press.

land too close to new-age spirituality, are perceived as too romantic and naive, too unquantifiable. Perhaps most confronting is this: the knowing embedded in such encounters fundamentally destabilises the accepted language of production, extraction and improvement.

Stories that speak of love, shared liveliness and sacredness need to be sustained, shared and spoken. They are not the expiring stories Vanessa Machado de Oliveira writes of in *Hospicing Modernity*, rather they are vital, alive and desperate to dance with us.

To create and tell such stories in order to re-imagine human relations with land – beyond bureaucracy, utility, property – is not silly, romantic or unrealistic. It might be a deeply rational path forward, helping us find a place to stand where the ground is not only steady but thrumming with exuberance, spirit and aliveness. A place where it's possible to see that just as we work on land, land works on us.