

Nature Strikes Back!

Genres of Revenge in the Anthropocene

Editors' Introduction

Nicole Matthews and Catherine Simpson

It seems increasingly possible that our immediate descendants, and perhaps many of those now living, will face the ultimate challenge of human viability: reversing our drive towards destroying our planetary habitat. ... The appearance of ecological crises on multiple fronts ... suggests we need a thorough and open rethink which has the courage to question our most basic cultural narratives.

Val Plumwood, 'Nature in the Active Voice'

RIDLEY SCOTT'S BIBLICALLY-INSPIRED EPIC, *EXODUS: GODS AND KINGS* (2014), with its 'ten plagues' (of locusts, flies, frogs, thunder and hail amongst others) reminds us that tales of nature wreaking revenge on an errant humanity are nothing new. While providentialism is no longer the dominant paradigm for making sense of 'natural' disasters, anthropogenic climate change as a consequence of unfettered industrial capitalism appears to demand that we replace 'at-the-hand-of-God' with 'at-the-hand-of-humanity'. However, this simplistic substitution can, at its most reductive, render that thing we call 'nature' as passive and defeated.

Starting with Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), there is a tradition of activist writing which invokes, with great emotional power, nature extinguished: a place where 'no birds sing'. Important and influential as this approach to storying the natural world has been, there are other ways of talking about the Anthropocene.

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In her last address, 'Nature in the Active Voice', feminist philosopher Val Plumwood called for alternatives ways of writing that might be 'open to experiences of nature as powerful, agentic and creative, making space in our culture for an animating sensibility and vocabulary'.

But what kind of stories might we be told of this agentic non-human world? Cli-fi (or climate fiction) has (re)emerged as one place where tales are told of imminent disaster, inexorable global warming and the sixth mass extinction of species (Bloom, Holmes). Humans—their habits, their ignorance, their ubiquity—might seem to be inevitable central figures in this kind of genre fiction. But instead, these narratives of ecological change often present an unexpectedly feral, unpredictable environment where an aggressive nature runs rampant (Simpson). Such stories shift our perspectives on causality, risk and the (sometimes) unintended consequences of human action, relocating 'our embeddedness in and dependency on nature' (Plumwood) to the terrain of the sublime rather than of sentimentality.

We know the dangers of tales of human impotence in a moment of imminent disaster. But what are the consequences of telling the story of anthropogenic climate change as if we were already in the 'age of loneliness' (Wilson), as if humans alone were reacting, relocating and reconnecting as a consequence of environmental change? This issue of *Australian Humanities Review* excavates the resources of popular genres to explore how new ways of imagining agency beyond anthropocentrism might be forged. The essays in this section consider the affective potentiality of stories of hubris, revenge and fear, and begin to think through the colonial politics of border policing across diverse and composite bodies.

'Today', remarks Adrian Tait, 'it is difficult to read Ballard's description of a drowned world without calling to mind the growing evidence for anthropogenic climate change'. In 'Nature Reclaims her own: J. G. Ballard's *The Drowned World*', Tait argues that the science fiction subgenre of 'cli-fi' emerges much earlier than usually asserted (Bloom). J.G Ballard's novels about environmental anxiety are key precursors. Published in 1962, the same year as *Silent Spring* and forming part of his 'disaster quartet', *The Drowned World* is also Ballard's most prescient book, claims Tait. It highlights, not only our vulnerability to the impact of global warming, but also 'the fragility of personality and individuality, the cults around which post-modern societies have (self-reflexively) constructed themselves. *The Drowned World* calls it all into question'. In Ballard's fictive world humankind survives, enduring 'the twilight of the west' (Orasmus 14) within transformed geographies and strange and fertile ecologies. As Tait argues in this paper, *The Drowned World* is significant because it presents, 'not just a change in the way human beings live, but a fundamental change in human *being*'.

Drawing on the discipline of environmental history, Ruth Morgan's paper considers the 1980s as a key moment in which understandings of and political sensitivities concerning global warming were forged. Her paper explores the modalities offered by science and science policy on the one hand and science fiction on the other as ways of articulating the 'slow violence' of climate change. The repertoire of narratives available to fiction writers, such as Australian George Turner, author of the dystopian novel *The Sea and Summer* (1987), she argues, enables them to map the uncertain futures of a warming world across a landscape of real and familiar places.

The final two papers have film as their primary focus. Belinda Smaill's essay is concerned with the intersection between modernity and non-human animals. In her article, 'Documentary Film and Animal Modernity in *Raw Herring* and *Sweetgrass*', Smaill argues that a number of recent documentaries are moving away from a more simplistic dichotomy of nature versus humans to a filmmaking terrain that is more nuanced and multilayered. She makes the point that although animals may appear 'indifferent' to human modernity, they are constantly subjected to and defined by it through, in particular, the ethnographic gaze and the changing conditions for human labour. Smaill, through the lens of a sustained consideration of the long take, asks 'how animal ontology and materiality might be accounted for in the non-fiction moving image'.

Continuing the focus on documentary film, the final paper considers an animal that is often seen as emblematic of human failure to manage the environment—the cane toad. In 'Tales of Toad Terror and Tenacity: What Cane Critters can Teach Us', Cath Simpson proposes that the conquest of this critter, as playfully narrated in Mark Lewis' two documentaries, offers us productive retellings of the relationships between Australia's native, non-native and human animals. Simpson suggests that Lewis's use of the genres of quirky comedy and documentary, and his deployment of deep focus and 3D, make these films exemplary pieces of science communication. They also tell a very different suite of stories about animal lives, beyond tales of eco-nationalism and human hubris. With \$20 million already spent on scientific intervention to control the cane toad problem (Israel), Simpson concludes that a thorough rethink is required, which may demand a certain 'stepping back' to 'let the world do the doing' (Matthews). This provocative argument, implicit in Lewis's portraits of cane toads as companion animals and road warriors, suggests how popular culture might push us towards new, often uncomfortable understandings of a world in which human beings and their detritus are inscribed in the very geology of the planet, while the shape and future of its ecosystems are by no means ours alone to determine.

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