SYMPOSIUM PROGRAM
ENVIRONMENTAL WRITING: CREATIVITY AND SOCIAL EFFICACY
7 June 2018, Forum Theatre, Arts West Building, University of Melbourne, 9 am – 5 pm

9.05 Symposium welcome – Amanda Johnson and Saskia Beudel

9.15 KEYNOTE – Professor Alexis Wright
The Swan Book
Professor Alexis Wright will be in conversation with Dr Hayley Singer

10.15 Dr Lara Stevens
SpiderActs: Ecofeminist performance art

10.35 Dr Tom Doig
Writing about activism, writing as activism, writing against activism: instrumentality and irony in Hazelwood: Stories from the 2014 Mine Fire

Image: ‘Supported Exotic: Dragon Tree’ (Amanda Johnson, 2010, oil on canvas)
10.55 – 11.25 AM
MORNING TEA

11.25 Ms Wendy Somerville (co-authored paper with Dr Bethaney Turner)
Meeting Cullunghutti: Composing and decomposing with the mountain

11.45 Dr Cameron Muir
Shadow places of the Anthropocene

12.05 Dr Saskia Beudel
Citizen science: frogs and global warming in local landscapes

12.25 – 1.30 PM
LUNCH

1.30 KEYNOTE – Professor Tom Griffiths
Australian ‘nature writing’

2.30 Dr Mireille Juchau
Literature, landscape and solastalgia

2.50 Ms Suzy Freeman-Greene
Ecological historical fiction: Green turtles on Heron Island

3.10 – 3.30 PM
AFTERNOON TEA

3.30 Dr A. Frances Johnson
Writing disfigured environments

3.50 Dr Laura Jean McKay
Pet sounds: Nonhuman animal resistance in fiction

4.10 Dr Hayley Singer
A brief literary field guide to writing the fleischgeist

4.40 – 5.00 Wrap-up – general questions and discussion
ABSTRACTS

KEYNOTE
The Swan Book
Alexis Wright

The Swan Book, Alexis Wright’s third novel, is set 100 years from the present in a world ravaged by the ‘bad weather’ (25) of wild storms, years of drought, high temperature, blizzards and winds. The novel opens on the plains of the Gulf of Carpentaria, within a military patrolled camp. Here, beside a swamp, a girl is ripped from the bowels of an ancient gum tree. The girl is Oblivia Ethyl(ene) and she has been brought into a world pushed into ‘an unstoppable catastrophic slide of destruction and hatred’ (26). Literary scholar Jeanine Leane describes Wright’s fiction as ‘Aboriginal realism’ (‘Historyless People’ n.p.), as it weaves intricate layers of Aboriginal stories of place, politics, and spiritual beliefs. Jane Gleeson-White refers to The Swan Book as ‘perhaps the first truly planetary novel’ and even ‘the first great novel of climate change’ (‘Going Viral’ n.p.) tracking the toxic entanglements of rubbish dumps and climate wars.

The Swan Book speaks of dead trees, ghosts, lost kin, new kinships and swans; histories of swans, swirling gyres of swans. The Swan Book is a novel of nested and entangled stories. As Wright writes them, stories are ecologies and politics. They offer survival strategies. They are also viruses, leaping from mind to mind, in the wake of colonial invasion.

Professor Alexis Wright will be in conversation with Dr Hayley Singer

KEYNOTE
Australian ‘nature writing’
Tom Griffiths

In Australia we have a vigorous academic field of environmental history, but we tend to see its antecedents and inspirations as coming mainly from overseas. We rightly acknowledge the influence of American and European, and increasingly African and Asian historians, in shaping our international discipline since the 1970s. But Australians are less conscious of the distinctive popular environmental literature of their own land. And we’ve even had overseas scholars visiting and telling us that we don’t have our own tradition of ‘nature writing’. But we do – although there are good reasons why we might not call it that. I’d like to explore what an Australian literary lineage of ideas about local ecology and landscape looks like.

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Saskia Beudel

Citizen science: frogs and global warming in local landscapes

The vast and intangible scale of global warming may be an impediment to more people taking action to curb climate change (Morton; Frameworks; Spence et al). Science tells us that climate is shaped by Earth’s interactive ocean, atmosphere, land and ice systems all linked to human activity. But impacts can seem, depending on your location, far-removed from the places we know best and care most about. In the face of such amorphous threats, Rob Nixon suggests that nonfiction writing can help the ‘unapparent appear, making it accessible and tangible’. In a forthcoming essay for The Conversation I reflect on participating in a citizen science project that monitors the impact of global warming on frog behaviour. Larger questions lurk behind the essay: is Nixon right, can literary writing assist with apprehending imaginatively threats that ‘remain imperceptible to the senses’? Can interviews with environmental scientists also assist with this process? Might enhanced apprehension and sensation of the impacts of global warming on local surroundings (where Earth ‘speaks back’ to us as Michel Serres says) also enhance care for the world around us?

Tom Doig

Writing about activism, writing as activism, writing against activism: instrumentality and irony in Hazelwood: Stories from the 2014 Mine Fire

Nobel Prize-winning oral historian Svetlana Alexievich (2013) observes that ‘the barricades are a dangerous place for an artist … They ruin your vision, narrow your pupils, drain the world of its true colours’. She also wryly admits that ‘I’ve spent my entire life on the barricades’. In this presentation, I reflect on my own experiences as a writer on the ‘barricades’ of the 2014 Hazelwood mine fire disaster, witnessing and documenting the social turmoil that followed. I came to the Latrobe Valley as a disillusioned climate change activist looking for different ways to engage with the ‘long emergency’ (Kunstler, 2005) of human-caused global warming. While living ‘embedded’ within the newly-formed advocacy community of Voices of the Valley, I was privy to an inspiring case study of how crisis can radicalise people and catalyse social change (Kreps, 1998). I quickly wrote a short book, The Coal Face (2015), with a clear objective: to put pressure on the state Victorian government to reopen the Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry.

As I continued working on a longer book about the disaster, my instrumental goal was to draw attention to the need for Hazelwood Power Station to shut. However, before my manuscript was finished, the power plant did close – leaving me both vindicated (as an activist) and confused (as a writer). It became painfully obvious that the world is too mutable, too much of a ‘moving target’, for book-length journalism to presume to effect change in a direct, or even comprehensible, way. In the process, I came to re-evaluate the ongoing campaigning of Voices of the Valley,
perceiving their behaviour in an increasingly ironic light. This reached an ambivalent crescendo at a work barbecue on Friday 31 March 2017, the day that Hazelwood Power Station finally closed for good.

Suzy Freeman Greene

*Ecological historical fiction: Green turtles on Heron Island*

Heron Island is a tiny coral cay on the Great Barrier Reef, about 80 km north-east of Gladstone. Today it houses a tourist resort, but on that site, between 1925 and 1932, a cannery made turtle soup and extract. A catch of 25 green turtles a day made about 900 tins of soup. Females were flipped on their backs when they came ashore to lay eggs and left until high tide. Hunters would then decapitate them and remove the carcasses by boat. Because they were mostly killed before laying, by 1929, turtles were in short supply.

My creative work-in-progress is a novel set on Heron Island during this time. It tells of a group of naturalists who visit the island, encountering the cannery and a government scientist, F.W. Moorhouse who lived there for some months studying the turtles. I am drawing on historic accounts written by scientists, journalists and Moorhouse himself, and have made several field trips, most recently in December during the laying season. Through this work of ecological historical fiction, I hope to draw parallels with our present age of extinction, in which six out of seven sea turtle species are endangered. Evoking this defunct industry, I hope to convey how attitudes – and ideas of what is ‘normal’ – can change.

A. Frances Johnson

*Writing disfigured environments*

I will present and discuss speculative prose poems from my recent collection *Rendition for Harp & Kalashnikov* (Puncher and Wattmann 2017). These poetic ‘dross scapes’ form the basis of an ongoing project examining environmental aftermath and toxicity in relation to war. They eliminate the comforts of the pastoral, relying heavily on intertextual writing strategies to blur and ultimately collapse linear assumptions of time. Thus they aim to challenge capitalist notions of sustainability that propose that future environmental reparations will lead to ecological restoration and new natural arcadies. In other words, these poems foreground environments that exist in a ‘permanently disfigured state’, bearing witness to ‘landscapes and environments which exist after nature’ (Daniels and Lorimer 2012, 5). A question for the work-in-progress is how to avoid environmental apocalypticism (Marland 2015, 123), and how to make space for new ways of thinking about the new and vivid ecologies in which we are enmeshed (Morton 2010 and Bennett 2010).
Mireille Juchau

*Literature, landscape and solastalgia*

In a recent essay, Teju Cole noted, ‘Far from any notion that the real disaster is yet to come, we should recognize that the disaster is totally here, simply not evenly distributed ...’ How can literature capture our strange moment in which climate change devastation is both already unfolding and yet to reach its zenith? What are the psychological effects of living with the prospect of profoundly destroyed landscapes, of ‘anticipatory preparation’? These were some of my preoccupations when writing my novel, *The World Without Us*, which explores the relationship between our external and internal landscapes. Rather than write the dystopian futures common to several novels on climate change, I hoped to capture the devastation that has already arrived, the landscapes that are already being memorialised. What does a climate change novel look like without didactic messaging or a narrative hurtling towards cataclysm? In its ability to detail the effects of a changing world on inner life, to depict solastalgia – ‘the homesickness you have when you’re still at home’ (Glenn Albrecht) – literature is uniquely placed to counter reductive, cataclysmic narratives. But what forms should this literature take?

Laura Jean McKay

*Pet sounds: Nonhuman animal resistance in fiction*

Instances of interspecies communication and miscommunication occur in almost every interaction humans have with other animals. Nonetheless, in fiction, nonhuman animal characters as communicative subjects are often depicted as stand-ins for human meaning. In this paper I discuss the ways in which contemporary fictions that write beyond the human engage in subversive subtexts of nonhuman animal resistance. I consider the meeting point of attempted contact between species through Val Plumwood’s concept of ‘speaking meat’ and apply this to a discussion of my creative practice – the development of a novel manuscript, *The Animals in That Country*. I argue that contemporary storytelling that depicts shared communication attempts to put words to the complex relationships between human and nonhuman animals – a reality for which the language barrier usually provides a convenient shield. Through this lens, the nonhuman animal protagonist is no longer an allegory or stand-in for human meaning in fiction, but a destabilising, transgressive and resistant figure.
Cameron Muir

*Shadow places of the Anthropocene*

Shadow places are sites of extraction and production that provide for our material comfort, yet in the words of Val Plumwood, they are places ‘we don’t know about, don’t want to know about, and in a commodity regime don’t ever need to know about’. Plumwood argued we should expand our notions of responsibility and awareness to include all the places that nourish us, and that environmental writing must be ‘more than a literary rhapsody about nice places’.

How do we write about the broken and disregarded without overwhelming, without preaching, without being drawn into the narrow politics of the day? How do we ensure the people, places and histories we encounter challenge our own subjectivities? How do we participate as well as develop a critical position? How can we draw on scholarly tools and research to help our writing?

My talk is based on reflections on field trips reporting on coal seam gas protests in western NSW and marine plastic debris around Lord Howe Island for *Griffith Review*.

Hayley Singer

*A brief literary field guide to writing the fleischgeist*

Literally, *fleischgeist* means “flesh ghost” or “meat spirit”. The term acknowledges meat as a substance endowed with significant chthonic (underworld or deadly) force. The term *fleischgeist* acknowledges that there is a frenzied spirit in the air and in our collective consciousness – a meat mania. It also describes a consciousness finely tuned to the lively world of fleshly beings, those enmeshments, movements, transformations, situated knowledges and historic specificities that tangle animals and humans together. *Fleischgeist* is an important new critical term to develop because it provides provocation for serious imaginative play and engagement with the lives and deaths of animals caught up in the system of industrial animal agriculture—those animals usually ignored, forgotten, defaced, defiled, occluded and occulted from the cultural scene. In this paper, I offer a brief literary field guide to the way some contemporary writers track the foreshadows, the after/lives and the ghosts of meat; how they write meat as a vibrant matter, as a narrative subject and as a haunting and haunted substance.
Wendy Somerville (co-authored paper with Bethaney Turner)

Meeting Cullunghutti: Composing and decomposing with the mountain

In our efforts to push beyond representational modes of knowing and being, in this project we set out to meet the mountain, Cullunghutti, in embodied, visceral ways that attune our bodies in place to the affective force of these encounters. Our aims are methodological and ontological as we endeavour to express and map the entanglements of our Aboriginal (Koori) and non-Aboriginal, human and more-than-human research collective in this colonised place. We do this by recounting and reflecting on our multisensorial engagements walking the mountain, capturing vignettes of the mountain in image and sound-with humans present and without, and yarning with Koori people connected to this Country. What we find is partiality, fragmentation and the breaching of boundaries that enable us to sense the relational entanglements of human and more-than-human—memories, resonances and imaginings of the Mountain. The liveliness of the Mountain resists efforts to ‘know it’, instead inviting us to continue to meet with it in multiple, open and agile ways. In this way, the Mountain and our encounters with it are ongoing compositions of togetherness-in-alterity marked by movements; moving with and being moved by ‘response-ably’.

Lara Stevens

SpiderActs: Ecofeminist performance art

Performance artist Rachel Rosenthal says that ‘[t]he sewers of the human psyche are clogged with the corpses of children, animals, women, animals, slaves, animals, prisoners, animals, animals, animals’. This paper reflects on how ecofeminist performance art can plumb the sewers of history to expose the shared exploitation between the natural world, women and other ‘others’. I will read excerpts from Not Now, Not Ever, a polylogue I’ve written for solo performance. Not Now, Not Ever is a mash-up sing-and-dance-a-long to Julia Gillard’s ‘Misogyny Speech’ and a meditation on what it means to bring a girl-child into the twenty-first century. In a world that is warming, sinking, outlawing crop diversity and running short of fresh water, it asks: can Spider Woman fight evil, weave her way to justice, feed her children, finish the ironing and still be prime minister?
BIOGRAPHIES

Saskia Beudel
Saskia Beudel is an essayist, novelist and nonfiction writer. Her books, *A Country in Mind*, *Curating Sydney: Imagining the City’s Future* (with Jill Bennett) and *Borrowed Eyes*, have been shortlisted for the Adelaide Festival Awards, NSW Premier’s Literary Award and the Dobbie Award. A recent essay is included in *Open Spatial Workshop: Converging in Time* (Monash University Museum of Art, 2017), which was shortlisted for the NGV’s Cornish Family Prize. A new research project explores narratives formed through interviews with environmental scientists. She currently lectures at the University of Canberra; and was an Environmental Humanities visiting fellow at the University of Edinburgh in 2018.

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Tom Doig
Tom Doig is a journalist, editor and academic. He is the author of *Mörön to Mörön: two men, two bikes, one Mongolian misadventure* (Allen & Unwin, 2013) and *The Coal Face* (Penguin, 2015), about the catastrophic 2014 Hazelwood Mine fire. *The Coal Face* was joint winner of the 2015 Oral History Victoria Education Innovation Award. Tom is currently a PhD candidate at Monash University, writing a longer book about the Hazelwood Mine fire, to be published in 2017.

Suzy Freeman Greene
Suzy Freeman-Greene’s essays, journalism, critical writing and fiction have been published widely in places such as *Meanjin, Good Weekend, Island, Australian Book Review, The Age* and the *Australian* magazine. She is currently the arts and culture editor of *The Conversation*. From 2000-2015, she was an opinion columnist at *The Age*, where she has worked as a features editor, news editor and feature writer. She has also taught writing at the University of Melbourne.

Tom Griffiths
Tom Griffiths AO is a historian whose books and essays have won prizes in history, science, literature, politics and journalism including the Douglas Stewart Prize for Non-Fiction, the Ernest Scott Prize for History, the Eureka Science Book Prize and the Prime Minister’s Prize for Australian History. He is the author of *Hunters and Collectors* (1996), *Forests of Ash: An Environmental History* (2001) and *Slicing the Silence: Voyaging to Antarctica* (2007). His latest book is *The Art of Time Travel: Historians and their Craft* (Black Inc., 2016). He is the W K Hancock Professor of History and Director of the Centre for Environmental History at the Australian National University.
A. Frances Johnson

Mireille Juchau
Mireille Juchau is a novelist, essayist and critic. Her third novel, *The World Without Us*, was published by Bloomsbury in Australia, UK and the US. It won the 2016 Victorian Premier’s Literary Award and was shortlisted for the Stella Prize, the NSW Premier’s Literary Awards, the Adelaide Festival Awards and the Voss Literary Award 2016. Mireille is currently writer in residence at the University of Sydney’s Charles Perkins Centre, researching a book about epigenetics and doubling.  
[www.mireillejuchau.com](http://www.mireillejuchau.com)

Laura Jean McKay
Laura Jean McKay writes about humans and other animals. She is the author of *Holiday in Cambodia* (Black Inc. 2013), a story collection that explores the electric zone where local and foreign lives meet. *Holiday in Cambodia* has been shortlisted for three national book awards in Australia and her work has appeared in *The Best Australian Stories*, *Award Winning Australian Writing* and *The North American Review*. Laura is also the winner of the Alan Marshall short story award, an Asialink, Martin Bequest and Wheeler Centre Hotdesk Fellowship recipient and has recently completed her PhD at the University of Melbourne, Australia.  
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Cameron Muir
Cameron Muir’s essays and features have appeared in *Griffith Review*, *Inside Story*, *The Guardian* and *Australian Book Review*, among others. His book *The Broken Promise of Agricultural Progress* (2014) was shortlisted in the 2015 NSW Premier’s History Awards. He has been awarded the Griffith Review Emerging Writers’ Prize and an Australian Society of Authors Mentorship. He holds a PhD in environmental history from ANU and is currently working on a book about the death penalty. He is working with a team from the National Museum of Australia and Sydney Environment Institute on an exhibition about ‘Localising the Anthropocene’.
**Hayley Singer**
Hayley Singer teaches Creative Writing at the University of Melbourne. She is a Research Associate of the Melbourne node of the ARC Centre of Excellence for the History of Emotions and the current ecologies columnist for literary journal *The Lifted Brow*. Hayley's first monograph, *The Fleischgeist: a haunting*, is due to be published by SUP in 2019. Hayley is convenor of EcoFeminist Fridays, a collective of artists and scholars who engage with ecofeminist thought to reckon with our natureculture inheritances: the violent and the vibrant, the oppressed and oppressive, the static and the fugitive.

**Wendy Somerville**
Wendy Somerville is a PhD candidate at the University of Canberra and a Jerrinja woman. Her PhD topic is ‘Rummaging for stories through place, memory and archives’. She is a member of the Centre for Creative and Cultural Research at UC where she is involved in the Story Ground research project and a committee member of the UC Collaborative Indigenous Research Initiative (CIRI). She was co-investigator on a CIRI funded research project and organised three symposia on Indigenous knowledges and broadening the toolkit of Indigenous methodologies, which attracted speakers from around Australia who research with Indigenous people/knowledge.

**Lara Stevens**
Lara Stevens is the author of *Anti-War Theatre After Brecht: Dialectical Aesthetics in the Twenty-First Century* (Palgrave, 2016), editor and translator of *Politics, Ethics and Performance: Hélène Cixous and the Théâtre du Soleil* (Re.press, 2016), essays by French feminist philosopher Hélène Cixous and co-editor of *Feminist Ecologies: Changing Environments in the Anthropocene* (Palgrave, 2018) with Peta Tait and Denise Varney. She currently teaches modern and contemporary theatre and performance studies at the University of Melbourne and the Victorian College of the Arts.

**Bethaney Turner**
Bethaney Turner is Assistant Professor in International Studies at the University of Canberra. Her current research explores how more sustainable urban living behaviours can be developed and fostered in a time of human-induced climate change. Her interdisciplinary research draws on many fields including human geography, political ecology and cultural theory and, in practice, focuses on the food system from production to waste. Her work is primarily concerned with relational human and more-than-human interactions and increasingly draws on, and attempts to extend, multisensorial methodologies.
Alexis Wright
Alexis Wright is a member of the Waanyi nation of the Gulf of Carpentaria. She is an author and essayist writing in fiction and non-fiction. Wright has written widely on Indigenous rights and has organised two successful Indigenous Constitutional Conventions in Central Australia, Today We Talk About Tomorrow (1993) and the Kalkaringi Convention (1998). Her collective memoir Tracker (2017) was awarded the 2018 Stella Prize. Her novel The Swan Book (2013) was awarded the 2014 Australian Literature Society Gold Medal and the 2016 Raka Award, and was shortlisted for several other literary awards in Australia. The book was published in the UK, USA, France, Poland, and translated for publication in China. Her novel Carpentaria (2006) was awarded the 2007 Miles Franklin Award, Victoria Premier Award, Queensland Premier Award, Australian Literature Society Gold Medal, and the Australian Book Industry Award. The book was published in the UK, USA, India, China, France, Poland, Italy, and is currently being translated into Japanese. Her essay What Happens When You Tell Somebody Else’s Story (2016) was awarded the 2016 Hilary McPhee Award. She is the Boisbouvier Chair in Australian Literature at the University of Melbourne, and in collaboration with the State Library of Victoria.