

Deakin University

Emily Potter

‘No nails new under the sun’: Creativity, climate change, and the challenge to literary narrative in Thea Astley’s *Drylands*

Abstract:

Thea Astley’s millennial novel *Drylands*, a self-declared ‘book for the world’s last reader’ (1999, title page), offers an opportunity to reappraise literary narrative and creative experimentation in a time of climate change. This essay takes this up by reading Astley’s text as a paradoxical account of literature’s failings to either nourish or repair a drought-ridden, economically, environmentally and empathically beleaguered town in regional Australia. Astley’s vision is ostensibly declensionist, wherein the only hope for the future seems to lie in the inevitable ruins of the present. Within these ruins lies the fate of particular, historical creative forms, most notably the literary novel, which, as an expression of Western epistemology, is now evacuated of meaning. On the one hand, Astley seems to offer no reversed fortune for her characters or the textual practice that ironically brings them to life; however, the essay offers a further, dissonant reading of the text through a perspective of distributed agency which, as climate change unfolds, is where possibilities for literary work may lie.

Biographical note:

Emily Potter is a Senior Lecturer in Literary Studies at Deakin University. She researches, and has published widely, across literary studies, postcolonial studies, place-making, and environmental cultural studies. Her forthcoming monograph on Australian literary engagements with non-indigenous belonging, *Field Notes on Belonging*, will be published by Intellect in 2018.

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Climate change bears an ambiguous relationship to creativity in contemporary environmental discourse. On the one hand, it is widely represented as a force of de-creation, of things—systems, communities, life—coming undone. On the other hand, it is simultaneously read as a trigger for creative response, in the remaking of practices, politics and cultural narratives that challenge the prevalent logic of Western modernity and imagine ecological relations differently. This ambiguity is apparent in paradigmatic approaches to climate change and efforts of environmental remediation that position recuperation or renewal as the hopeful outcome of dissolution, as well as in the classic dialectic of creative destruction that has become influential in cross-disciplinary ecological thought (Swyngedouw 2006; Harvey 2007). To see climate change as both creative and destructive at once is also in sympathy with the view, posed by critics such as Clark (2014) and Morton (2013), of this phenomenon as multiplicitous, and always exceeding a single reality. In Morton's rendering of climate change as a 'hyperobject' outside of familiar epistemological parameters—human time scales, for instance, or linear emergence—there is no singular 'thing' that is climate change, something that suggests the co-habitation of contradictory effects such as creativity and destruction.

This essay posits a further way of thinking about the creative-destructive realities of climate change through a focus on creative agency rather than creative effects. In doing so, it doesn't contest these previous positions, but rather emphasises creativity and creative practice (and their undoing) as more than barometers of climate change, and instead as participants in its unfolding. The posthumanist shift away from human-centred renderings of ecological relations over the last twenty or so years informs this conceptual approach. Thinkers such as Whatmore (2002), Barad (2003) and Hawkins (2006), have challenged the allocation of material efficacy and political work to humans alone, influenced by assemblage theory, the philosophy of science, and relational ecologies. Out of these perspectives comes an imperative to recognise distributed agency in the liveliness of things, whether in processes of creation or decreation. The forms and forces of material efficacy push against old ideas of the singular human agent authoring the world. In such a spirit, this essay approaches the creative work (in this instance, the literary text), and its work of creativity (what it does and how it does it), as an ongoing production that enrolls multiple participants across material and immaterial realms. This has implications for literature's role in a time of climate change, and more specifically for how we might engage with literary narrative as ascendant epistemologies run aground in the face of environmental limits.

Thea Astley's millennial novel *Drylands*, a self-declared 'book for the world's last reader' (1999: title page), offers an opportunity to reappraise literary narrative and creative experimentation in a time of climate change. This essay takes this up by reading Astley's text as a paradoxical account of literature's failings to either nourish or repair a drought-ridden, economically, environmentally and empathically beleaguered town in regional Australia. Astley's vision is ostensibly declensionist wherein the only hope for the future seems to lie in the inevitable ruins of the present. Within these ruins lies the fate of particular, historical creative forms, most notably the literary novel, which, as an expression of Western epistemology, is now evacuated of meaning. This is a cultural collapse that mirrors the environmental decay all around, and Astley seems to offer no reversed fortune for her characters or the textual practice that ironically brings them to life.

Yet this essay will argue that Astley's bleak view also opens up productive lines of thought for reconsidering the shape and work of literary narrative in a time of climate change. These, it will conclude, fold into a more-than-human terrain of possibility where a collaborative future for creativity becomes apparent, enabled by paradigms of distributed agency. Crucial to this critical project is the reconceptualisation of the literary text as an actor in the world, rather than a passive tool of authorial or readerly power and meaning. This is something that post-humanist ecological thought has also advanced. Morton, for instance, has called for literary texts to be recognised as non-human actors in his account of object-oriented ontology, in which the object retains non-relational agency as a 'weird entity withdrawn from access, yet somehow manifest' (in Bennett 2012: 226). Yet as Bennett contends in response to Morton, from her new materialist perspective, relationism does not mean full disclosure or subjection to another's power. Instead, it signals the affective entanglements of bodies, not all of them human, which do things in the world. The literary object, and its composition of words, page, reader, writer, and ecology of production and reception—including atmosphere and sensations—are all 'bodies', in Bennett's terms (2012: 225). The essay will examine how Astley enables a way of considering literary texts as bodies that still matter in a transforming ecology, even while literature's claims to exceptionalism are rendered empty and anachronistic. Creativity, in this climate, comes to new understandings.

Drying up

Astley's *Drylands*, which was co-awarded the coveted Miles Franklin Award in 2000 (with Kim Scott's *Benang*), makes no explicit reference to climate change, which was still nascent in public awareness towards the close of the 1990s. Yet the symbolic threat and physical unfolding of a rapidly warming world are everywhere in the text. Named after the book's fictional setting, the small Queensland town of Drylands, the title plays with an obvious double entendre as it presents a bleak and desiccated world, falling apart both environmentally and culturally. This is a dispossessing place, the town, founded on an original dispossession, and ultimately pushing its residents off lands that no longer sustain them. It is a place of withering futures. Astley makes explicit and repeated analogy between this state of environmental alienation and the community's failure of sociality, which provides the back-story to all of her characters, with a potent brew of anxiety, repression, violence and melancholy fuelling this failure. On display here, is what Stephen Turner calls 'the malignant cultural body of the settler [Australian]' (1999: 23) turned rotten with the unresolved legacies of its past, including environmental legacies. Human and meteorological conditions in the town are strongly interlinked. This is a landscape without hope, drained of good will and full of weary individuals disconnected from each other. And it just keeps getting drier.

Drylands is focalised through Janet Deakin, a woman from the city, sick of urban alienation and with a romanticised view of outback community life as tight-knit and inclusive. She moves to Drylands with the idea of contributing to the town's cultural life as a writer and book-seller, having purchased a newsagency that she hoped would become a centre for local literary life. Instead, we meet Janet when she is already disillusioned, her aspirations to cultural life crushed by the 'unuttered demands of local taste' (12) which prefers "'men's" magazines, the bosom-thigh buskers, [and] the car and gun monthlies' (7) to the latest literary fiction and journals. The physical

decrepitude of the town sets the scene for Janet's disillusionment, and Astley's descriptors of Drylands' decaying environment and community life are emphatic. This is a place of 'sapless weather' (11) and 'worthless land' (111), 'a town to escape to, rot in, vanish in ... run from' (16) amidst a 'landscape whose gullies and small streams had almost forgotten the pollution that clogged them' (32).

Janet watches the sky as it misleadingly swells grey with clouds that never unload their rain over brown and thirsty lands. 'Dying stocks and impossible debts' (244) inform the tensions behind the daily encounters of Drylands' townsfolk, 'a sluggish mix bubbling briefly, subsiding briefly' (17), and propel the exodus of ruined farming families in their beat-up cars, 'rattl(ing) away along the gravel roads until their petrol ran out' (245). Any hope for a change in the weather—a recuperation out of dissolution—recedes for the novel's assembled cast of alienated characters, whose lives are battered as much by the harsh and wasted environment as by their own lack of possibility. Under the mind-numbing whirr of ceiling fans, beating uselessly at the heavy heat, the stagnant town and community continues in its demise.

Drylands' material and social dessication suggests the death of sustaining narratives and the evacuation of creativity. In this climate, words 'thud ... like small stones' (167), kisses 'drop ... to the floor and fragment' (217), while 'emptiness puts its arms about you and gives a Judas embrace' (272). Here, 'spite has no end' (265), a 'grin isn't a grin ... it's a slit in a cavern', and 'small splatterings of rain' are 'as offensive as spit' (287). Division is stressed between individuals and figured in the impenetrability of dry lands upon which fragility and innocence are debased, ruined like the rusted 'cages and tanks' (32) that smatter the landscape of abandoned farms. This sun-scoured refuse of lives and profitability echoes the 'mournful tune of loneliness' (281) running through the town. Racism and sexism are endemic forces in the six narratives of Drylands' residents, framed by Janet's focalisation.

Evie, a visiting creative writing teacher from the city, is sized up as a meddling outsider by the patriarchal order that dominates the town. 'And who the fuck are you?' she is asked (90). 'Some two-bit bitch teacher from the city out to see how the other half lives' (90). Evie feels like an intruder as she walks along the sagging streets of Drylands, and the 'indefinable terror' (80) she senses when she first arrives finds its form in the domestic violence she witnesses. There is an 'in-grown self-sufficiency of secrets' (80) here that mirrors a sense of menace coming from the landscape. Through each of its narratives, a predatory tone conveys an unsafe world constantly on the verge of uncontrollable violence. Benny Shoforth's story elaborates the anxieties that motivate the persecution and bigotry of Drylands' inhabitants. Inherited behaviours closet historical legacies that unsettle the town and the narratives it chooses to tell about itself. With both non-Indigenous and Indigenous parentage, Benny is another character on the outside of the community, his background and 'indeterminate' colour generating disquiet. But equally disquieting, it seems, to the dominant culture is Benny's ability to remake his home, time and again, over his years of dispossession and persecution. This provides a stark contrast to the efforts of settlers who, as the self-identified victims of environmental and economic adversity, continually 'lose' against the land and are threatened perpetually with un-homing, despite their material and social advantages. The home-in-a-cave that Benny sets up in a National Park far outside Drylands, complete with lounge-suite and bookcase, is an intolerable affront to settler security, parodying white domestic culture in an 'uncivilised' context.

Writerly redemption

Janet initially sees herself as distinct from the other residents of Drylands, more refined in her tastes, and this is affirmed in the spatially elevated perspective she occupies, as she sits at her desk in a small room above the news agency. From here, however, she feels the encroachment of Drylands' decay, coming for her too. With the weather unleashing its heat, day after day, she determines to make 'use [of this] place' and to take advantage of her position as 'a watcher rather than a participant' (14). She will, she decides, surrounded by interpersonal, environmental and poetic decay, regain meaning in her life through a narrative reinvestment of value in the word, and thus in the world. She will write a novel—like Astley—'for the world's last reader' (6). Distance affords critical reflection, Janet supposes, enabling personal enlightenment through the work of her pen, within a broader malaise of disaffection and violence. The novel thereby raises as a central concern the question of literature's role in a socially dysfunctional, environmentally ruinous, and culturally vacuous Australia: an Australia, in the words of reviewer Kerryn Goldsworthy, 'going to hell in a handbasket' (1999: 30). It also raises challenging assumptions, ironically handled, about the capacity of literature to bring meaning to the lives of which it speaks. There is a tension here, for while Astley seems to mock Janet's ambition, she also affirms her own belief in the worthwhile purpose of literary fiction, which the novel overtly pits against a cultural preference for electronic entertainment. Indeed, Janet's decision to creatively produce in response to perceived cultural and environmental collapse is in keeping with the redemptive investment in literary writing and reading evidenced broadly in modern Western culture.

This idea that literature can 'improve' the reading subject spiritually, emotionally and intellectually, and that the writer is therefore tasked with moral purpose, is critical to the development of the novel in the eighteenth century, and what Richard Kerridge (2012) calls 'the mission of English' more broadly, evident in the evolution of the discipline now more commonly known now as literary studies. These were strongly influenced by liberal humanist ideas that pitted a moral, social project against the evils of industrialisation and its elevation of rationality and commerce over beauty, transcendence and the ephemeral. Influential within this was the idea that 'inward' improvement was the way to social change and human happiness (no longer alienated in the Marxian, but also in the contemporary social sense), put in blunt contrast to the externally oriented, prosthetic pleasures of consumerist culture. As Kerridge writes, in this tradition, 'literary study is an attempt to build a substitute for a premodern culture that has been lost—one in which the arts have public meaning connecting them with ordinary work and leisure' (2012: 15). Importantly, Kerridge contends, this 'substitution' involves an attention to 'the natural world and the interdependency of its different elements' (15), violently denied in industrialised society—the fossil-fuelled world that has brought us to our climate-altered present.

This strong tradition has continued to inform ideas of literary work beyond the discipline, and into the public realm. Unsurprisingly, given this oppositional history to industrialisation, it is particularly evident in the increasing discussions taking place about the contributions of literature to the urgency of climate change action. What, many critics are asking, can literary texts offer an environmentally challenged world? The anxiety is palpable. In April 2016, Robert MacFarlane asked: 'How might a novel or a poem possibly account for our authorship of global-scale environmental change

across millennia—let alone the shape of that change? Old forms of representation are experiencing drastic new pressures and being tasked with daunting forms of new responsibilities’. MacFarlane is not alone in expressing these misgivings, with other writers, including fiction writers such as James Bradley, who has speculated that ‘a good novel about climate change’ cannot rest on convention. Instead, he proposes that it ‘might sit on the borderland between fact and fiction ... [and] be less interested in representing the world than actually recreating it... beyond the neatness and coherence of conventional fiction’ (Bradley 2010).

The idea that literary fiction might need to change, structurally, to engage adequately with climate change is one quite recent response to the field’s anxiety of purpose. At the turn of the millennium, however, there was a more optimistic and often uncritical investment in the ‘feeling’ capacities of literature (that ‘inward’ improvement) to have significant effect on environmental action. In this paradigm, the writer is understood to write with purpose, and if successful, transforms a reader’s sense of, and engagement with, the problem of climate change. Broadly put, in the development of ecocritical thought there has been a notable trend for literary fiction to be celebrated for its assumed ability to model a range of contemporary and future environmental contexts; its speculative parameters have been seen to afford a *realistic*, and through this, affective, engagement with climate change scenarios. There is, within this, an identified, linear correspondence between representation, feeling, knowledge and change. In their collection *Hearts and Minds: Creative Australians and the Environment*, for instance, Pollak and McNabb advance such an approach (2000). For these editors, literary texts offer empathetic and affirmative ways of positioning the human subject of environmental crisis in the world. ‘If a[n] environmental horror is described in a novel’, they argue, ‘complete with the human element and the emotional consequences, a reader is touched—and takes to heart what is at stake’ (2000: 12). Pollak and McNabb address the privilege of reason over feeling in modern Western thought, resituating the imperative to respond to environmental challenge in the ‘heart’ rather than the ‘mind’ as a radical and restorative gesture. As a conduit for feeling, literary representation, they contend, allows for ‘a parallel rejoicing at [environmental] splendours and anger at [their] vandalism’ (McGregor quoted in Pollak and McNabb 2000: 29).

This perspective on the capacities of literary work strongly echoes the ‘information deficit’ model of climate change communication prominent in the millennial years, and still influential. According to its advocates, public responsiveness to the challenge of climate change lies in the provision of accurate information, communicated in targeted and nuanced ways—ways that foster the right kind of feelings and responses. The form and mode of communication matters because it bears responsibility for how information, or data, (which itself directly relates to the real and is thus considered unbiased) is received. The poetics of communication are considered crucial to the reception of facts. Where facts are not available, imaginative hypotheses based, again, on recognition (of as yet unrealised but imminent truths) and feeling is a related role attributed to literary fiction. Novelist Ian McEwan, for instance, has spoken of the need to communicate rigorous scientific data effectively, and the role of discourse, or ‘talk’ in this process (2005). Ecocritical scholars have also situated literary responses to environmental crises, climate change included, as potentially revelatory, affording insights or understanding otherwise hidden and foreclosed—as Louise Westling writes, to ‘make “visible” ... the “invisible” environmental dangers that their readers could not

have imagined' and 'to live vicariously in potential worlds our science might bring to pass' (2012: 84).

What is apparent in these discussions is the understanding of literary work as a medium particularly suited to opening up the realities of climate change (be these already here or yet to come) *because* of its fictional remit and imaginative capacities. In such assessments of the value of literary contributions, the text is configured as a uniquely equipped conduit for climate change truths. Ironically, too, for a textual medium, it is conferred the capacity of materialising, and making perceptible, the famously ineffable qualities of climate change's complex unfolding. The writer appears as both say-er and see-er in this discourse, implicitly tasked with purposeful work. These 'special' capacities of literature to access the feeling subject and illuminate, as well as presage, truths, are critical to the writers' perceived responsibility at the turn of the millennium, as the world rapidly warms.

From her room in *Drylands*, Janet performs these ideals. Her writerly motivations are deeply redemptive, and, as the novel makes a symbolic connection between blasted environments and embittered, emotionally bereft communities, she makes repeated contrast between the emptied cultural life of the town, contextualised in environmental ruin, and the meaningful promise of her ambition to write. A poetic spatial register associates the waste and failure of Western modernity with flat, exposed and alienating surfaces. Conversely, the realm of art and feeling is figured through a spatiality of depth, nuance and immersion, an experience of being engulfed by imaginative truth. 'A story should fester', Janet proclaims, it 'should spread its attractive bacteria until it absorbs the whole body' (Astley 1999: 16).

These assertions of the affective value of literature predicated upon the text's capacity to connect to particular truths and participate, reparatively, in an ontological project of wholism, sit in tension with the poststructural tradition that widely informed literary practice and criticism in the late twentieth century. Poststructuralism's emphasis on unstable and multiple signification and a dematerialised politics of meaning rejected the idea of fixed truths and the possibility of certain interpretation or authorial power. The persistence of these latter ideas in a broader environmental politics, however, evident in the prevalence of redemptive environmentalism (the idea that an environment can be restored or 're-wilded' to its pre-industrialised or pre-commodified state) and the frequent appeal to human sympathy and connectivity in environmental communication (such as the appeals by NGOs in the sector), continues to inform ecocritical thought. In some quarters this has involved an explicit response back to poststructuralism and its political limits in the face of climate change and other 'global' concerns. This is evident in Astley's novel, where poststructural literary and media culture is clearly aligned with the social and environmental degradation that concerns the text.

While *Drylands* can and has been read (Kossew 2000) as referencing the rise of Pauline Hanson's *One Nation* in the mid 1990s and the concerns that motivated her supporters—for instance, the divisions between city and country; the economic burdens carried by rural populations while economic and social policy favours urban dwellers; and a resentment towards difference and cultural change in favour of homogeny and 'traditional' Australian values—there is a further force of change that preoccupies the text. In *Drylands* this is the post-industrial iteration of Western modernity, techno-modernity, emblematised in the 'meaningless' noise (Astley 1999: 287) of a digitally

dominated, globalised culture. With Marshall McLuhan as her figurehead of global forecast, the battered stretches of rural Australia are redefined by Janet not as a space outside modernity and its effects, but as violated by it. The incongruity of a town ‘half-way to nowhere’ (4) yet connected in McLuhan’s vision of a global media landscape highlights the tension between a nostalgic view of the country as somehow untainted by the cosmopolitan, and the processes of techno-transformation that, in Janet’s perception, standardise global culture. Damaged lands and a frayed community are juxtaposed with a ‘blurred world of technobuzz’ (9), as the town’s entire population is ‘tucked for leisure ... in front of television screens ... Internet adult movies or PlayStation games for the kiddies’ (5).

Flattening out

Janet imagines a globe ‘full of people ... glaring at a screen that glared glassily back’ (9), and the disavowal of the literary text in preference to the shallow simulacra of hyper-reality is her main point of attack as she protests against the death of the novel at the expense of ‘the half-second grab of television, the constant flicker-change of colour and shape against a background of formless noise’ (16). ‘Out there’, she continues:

was a new generation of kids with telly niblets shoved into their mental gobs from the moment they could sit up in a playpen and gawk at a screen, starved of those tactile experiences with paper, the smell of printer’s ink, the magic discovery that black symbols on white spelled out pleasures of other distances. (240)

Her anxieties give voice to the terminal condition that Baudrillard identified in Western modernity—the privileging of image over word, historical ‘re-enactment’ as the only relation between humans and the past, and a reality-as-simulation that is ‘unendurable’ (Baudrillard 1983: 72): without depth or shadow and totally enclosing. ‘To simulate is to feign to have what one hasn’t’, Baudrillard writes (1983: 5). There is nothing substantial in this age of simulation, no anchors to truth or reality. In the too-bright light of Drylands there are no subtleties of meaning and everything is revealed while perversely differing any purchase on the real.

With individuals connected globally through satellite discs and internet cables, there is no space for retreat from these modes of ‘connection’ as the polyphonous narrative of millennial postmodernity is recast in a population tuned in, zoned out, and beamed-into twenty-four hours a day. This relation, like the violent encounters between individuals in Astley’s text, is sharp and un-generative. The ethical challenge of a medium that distances disaster and fabricates proximity in the space of the private, while unremittingly exposing its objects of focus, are not lost on Janet, as she considers the sight of broken farming families broadcast to the nation, and ‘the cruel television coverage that stripped them naked’ (Astley 1999: 245). Astley’s descriptors of a world fully exposed to a globalised media assemblage of technology and more than human design resonate with what Ross Gibson has termed the ‘quiet tyranny’ (2014: 261) of the Google Street View camera, which launched in 2007 as—alongside Google Earth (2004)—a zenith technology of global exposure. This camera methodically maps (potentially) every corner of roaded surface on Earth for interactive display in Google Street View. As Gibson argues, the possible ‘infinite itineraries’ generated by the Google camera are alienating as they invite viewers into an ungrounded magnitude through a paradoxical focus on intimacy and the up-close (2014: 256). As the camera

exposes places to the eyes of elsewhere it performs a form of colonisation, recreating space as tabula rasa, open to rewriting by the all-seeing eye. Moving ‘implacably into the landscape’, Gibson explains, ‘the Google Camera gobbles up a vast territory of future prospects’. The camera doesn’t narrate but rather gives its vision over to the viewer: ‘a plethora of settings in anticipation of future values that could be poured into them’. The result is a kind of ‘narrative hunger’ (2014: 257), fostered by this disorienting possibility that is located in the future, and abstracted from the ground itself.

This is what Janet diagnoses in the world around her. The relentless nature of modernity has left language evacuated of meaning. ‘Illusory ideologies crumbled and [run] away like sand’ (Astley 1999: 293). The power of words, undermined by ‘television boom’ (203) and sapped in a climate of introversion, is further debased in a contemporary political landscape that devalues and silences social debate. This is indicated by Benny’s knowledge that ‘words mattered’ (172), even while his protests about his imminent eviction (and publicly denied relationship to the non-Indigenous mayor of Drylands) go deliberately unregistered at the local council chambers. ‘The ancient resentments rose in his mouth like bile before he could discover obliteration ... “I’m Kanolu tribe, you hear? His brother! His brother!” ... The words wouldn’t stop vomiting from his mouth’ (196). The violence of modernity as a continuum between colonial past and globalised future is made clear.

Janet’s response is to wrest back narrative control from the pervasive technology that has flattened social relations, and re-invest in the capacity of words to speak to a stable, external truth. Literature will be a salve to these ills, and she proclaims her voice ‘the constant among variables’ (244) for the decaying and disaffected town. Her novel, she hopes, will enact certainty and resolution: it will be unique, an unprecedented emergence, arising ‘from bud to fully formed calyx, sepals, corolla, biologically perfect’ (199). Her gaze ‘from above’ conveys a protected totality as she takes in the world and its ‘times’ from a seemingly objective position, one that, because of its moral purpose, is distinct from the exposing, self-interested eye of the camera. Janet’s explicit attack on postmodernism’s ‘endless reactions, and possibilities of reactions ... like some never-ending story’ (4) reflects her dismay at the disordering of textual authority, and its infection with the inconclusive and the impure. Her desire to encapsulate ‘the themes of a lifetime [spent] reading’ (10) in her novel rehearses the illusion of an ontological and epistemological ‘unitary base’ (Gibson 1999: 86) for knowledge and the production of meaning: ‘the one’ from which everything emerges.

While this might be Janet’s vision, however, it is obviously not Astley’s. Ultimately *Drylands* refuses Janet her desired authorial power, and the redemptive capacity of literature that she so invests in. The anachronism of her literary ambitions is exposed as hollow and without value. Astley repeatedly undoes Janet’s claims to any kind of special insight or authority, and amplifies Janet’s own recognition of her failing project with a broader undoing of her narrative position in the text. Notably, Janet’s eagle eye is demonstrably fraught. The sense of authorial security that her elevated position confers is ridiculed by Astley when, looking out from her window, Janet is ‘embarrassed’ (200) to see a waving hand, down below, ‘give her the finger’ (200). Further, it is common knowledge in the town that Janet watches and writes what she sees—she is no all-seeing and detached narrator. Win Briceland, resident in Drylands, makes reference to Janet ‘writing away’ and ‘putting it all down’: ‘You’ll have lots of

time for that now', she continues. 'New places. New ideas' (291). With her 'sly look' (290) and superior air, Win confirms what Janet had previously suspected: 'that she was being discussed, talked about', subjected to 'the stray question cloaked in sympathetic interest: "Janet, wotcher do in the evening, love? Must get lonely, eh?"' (200). She is inextricable from a dysfunctional network of gossip and rumour, and implicated in the town's chaotic composition, no matter how her self-image portrays this to be otherwise.

Astley's sense, as Kossew terms it, that 'even the watcher is being watched' (Kossew 2000: 178) destabilises the clear meta-narrative that Janet's voice purports to offer, and is playfully emphasised by character Evie's decision as she leaves Drylands to 'write a story ... about a woman in an upstairs room above a main street in a country town, writing a story about a woman writing a story' (Astley 1999: 99). Janet observes Evie as she scurries for the train station, intending to leave town, but equally Evie has her eyes on Janet, framed in her window, from the street below. Narrative control, and with it implied authority and authenticity, are thus opened to question in Drylands' crumbling social landscape. Franzi Massig too, the protagonist of another of the six interlinked stories, professes to be 'the watcher' (45) in his narrative but, like Janet, his position is destabilised when we discover that he is also being watched, shadowed by the man whose identity he has purloined. Issues of authenticity are again raised here as the 'copy'—living this identity for four years—and the 'original'—having been 'lost' and untraceable for a length of time—confront each other.

Janet's vantage point becomes vulnerable on the several occasions her news agency is broken into: the crash of a body in the yard and the sound of disappearing footsteps together convey the threat of perceptible, but unseen and unarticulated, danger. Her secluded elevation is exposed as compromised—she is caught up with everyone else, joining them in a 'peculiar sense of belonging' (153). When Janet confronts a group of youths in the street, driving her 'crazy' with their 'meaningless' (287) noise, they laugh in her face and 'dance ... about her chucking the ball from one to the other', leaving her feeling 'giddied and befuddled' and dreaming of escape 'from what she knew to be an approaching terror' (287): 'she had no idea where she might go. Only that she must' (289). The possibility of textual authority is thus constantly undone. The 'deconstruction' (293) of Janet's novel, its pages left 'shuffled out of sequence' (293) by anonymous hands when her flat is broken into, parodies her attempt at—and the text's charade of—narrative cohesion and the search, either textual, cultural or geographic, 'for the ultimate Eden' (294). Confronted by the line scrawled across her page, 'Get a life!', and groping in her mind for 'the ultimate reply' (294), Janet collapses into the laughter of failure and loss, realising that she 'would never find it' (294). There are, she concludes at the 'end' of Astley's text, 'no endings no endings no' (294). There will be no resolution to this story.

It is the end of her version of originality—the end of art as the new, as transcendent and as implicitly redemptive, a version significantly embraced by ecocritical thought—that represents the final deadening of Janet's vision for her creative practice, and with it, her own investment in Enlightenment ideals. As she runs through and rejects ways to begin her work—'*once upon a* or *many years ago* or *inadistant* country. It's been done' (4) [emphasis in original]—Janet feels the emptiness of modernity's great claims to progress and, alongside, postmodernity's failure to remake social relations in any real way: 'There are no nails new under the sun' here (5). Surrounded by her unsold library

in her upstairs flat, time compresses into what Janet experiences as an unbearable but ongoing moment of failure and unoriginality.

Literary futures

Astley's declensionist vision for the future of writing, let alone the novel, is of course unsettled by her decision to write a book in this form, expressing this view. As Goldsworthy quips, 'if she really believed that the screen had horribly taken over from the page, would [Astley] have written a book about it?' (1999: 31). Janet's correlation of creative writing with moral work, enabled by its capacity to access or call forth a pre-existing reality, is where the novel locates its real questions of precarity and ongoing value. This is the belief in what Karen Barad refers to as the culturally assumed power of language to 'reflect the underlying structure of the world' (2003: 802). The problem, though, as Astley also suggests, is that reality is not something that can be observed or captured from a distance. Her refusal to allow Janet's fantasy of spatial and imaginative separation to be sustained offers a complex layer to the book's engagement with literary narrative in a time of climate change. Among the signs and statements of alienation and distance, Janet is repositioned as an entangled participant in this world from which her writing cannot be extracted—she is a 'player' (244), like the rest of them. Her words cannot capture the real because they contribute to its enactment—they will always be partial and incomplete, even as they affect and give rise to new winds. This is where, too, Janet's position as a kind of 'forecaster' of Drylands future is also remade. Caught up within it, she will always speak from a relational position, never outside an ecological network. This enables insight, but refuses totalised accounts.

In this sense, Janet's enmeshment in the Drylands' community and its weathers—dessicating, suffocating—speaks of situated relation rather than the abstracted value of 'failure', or a linear shift from creation to destruction. To return to Jane Bennett's reminder (2012), relations between bodies in a worldly network do not necessarily entail subjection or total revelation: not everything is exposed to the light, because relations are dynamic. Networks are always in process. Because of this, a reading of Astley's text (and Janet's, too) through assemblage thinking, rather than an ecocritical perspective of literature's values-based work, refuses a terminal diagnosis. Assemblage thinking understands power and the capacity to act and be acted upon as relationally constituted, and as always emergent rather than operative through fixed formations and forces (Anderson and McFarlane 2011: 125). A range of agencies, both human and non-human, are active within these relational networks, and compose and recompose in situations that are spatially and temporally dynamic. Such 'situated assemblages' (209) give rise to forces and effect that have material consequence, but are only ever provisional, meaning that network arrangements and alliances shift and give way to other possibilities. Astley's emphasis on broken community relations and dysfunction is not disavowed in this reading. Rather, assemblage thinking encourages us to see violence and damage as relational emergences that enact particular realities, both creative and destructive. These are ones from which the writer cannot be extracted as she tells her tale.

Appropriate for the end of externality brought about by climate change, where an 'outside' to the human and to its production, waste, and value, can no longer be confidently demarcated, there is no end to an assemblage ('no endings'), nor an outside stance possible within the network. Immanent to Janet's failed dreams is the end of the

authority of Western modernity and its narrative of reassurance that human supremacy, social hierarchy, and economic rationality will forge the conditions of a desirable world. Climate change signals the absolute failure of this project. Its emergence and effects put pay to the fantasy of human control over a passive nature, and destabilise the foundations of Western metaphysics. Rather than signalling the end of creativity, however, this conceptual and material transformation reconfigures the epistemological and ontological ground of what it means to create, and as a consequence insists upon a reconsideration of literary practice.

But more than the death throes of modernity, what we might encounter in Astley's novel is the text itself as that 'text-body' (Bennett 2012: 232): not an abstraction of signs (representation) alluding to a real world 'outside' but itself an assemblage of agencies and intensities that are in and of the world. These include signs and modes of representation, as well as bodies (the author, the reader, their communities and many others who move with the book through the world), technologies and forces of capital, and other social arrangements. There are also non-human forces, too, including weathers and atmospheres, which assemble in the becoming of a text. It is from this entanglement, rather than from a certain, and elevated place of feeling or perception, that the writer locates an ethical stance: in a 'loose alliance' of more-than-human collaborators, to reference Stephen Muecke, 'in which ... thoughts and feelings can balloon out and surge' (Muecke 2010: 6). In this perspective, the text is not a conduit of knowledge and feeling (what Muecke (2010: 2) calls the 'telephone line model of communication'), but rather a force that generates affects in the world. It does this not because it channels truths, or accesses 'reality', but because it entails and initiates new relations between humans, and also non-humans. It participates in networks of agency in the becoming of the world.

Here, Janet's bacterial analogy for the infective nature of stories offers new meaning: this is not narrative as omnipotent, but rather as profoundly ecological, emergent from, and operative within, these material interactions that take place beyond the form of the human subject, in the situated more-than-human assemblages of a warming Australia and its creative producers. Janet intuits this collaborative future, without value or metaphysical purpose, and still with the capacity to alienate or injure. This is not a utopia, but an inevitable transformation in how creativity makes sense at the millennium. Looking down at her disordered manuscript with 'GET A LIFE!' scrawled upon it, she 'looked around her own drunken room and her hand, drunk on the pen, hesitated to write beneath the scribbled admonition the words "TOO LATE"' (Astley 1999: 294). No longer the 'heroic', overseeing author, writing to save the world, Janet—and Astley—are caught up in it, not passive or victim, but provisionally situated. The too-much perspective of the Google camera, alienating and emptying of narratives in Janet's account, is in fact a participant too, in the relational network of story-making through which we make sense of the world. Enfolded in this way, the narrative hunger generated by a perspective of erasure and a totalising gaze gives way to the possibility of stories told in the midst of things, in the conjunction of technology, body, environment and place: 'immersed, and involved. Not critically distanced' (Gibson 2014: 262).

Astley's novel, situated on the cusp of public recognition of climate change as a world-shaping force, makes a claim, even as it counter-claims a mournful disaffection with the no-longer elevated position of literary texts in our culture, for the necessary

reimagining of literary work in such a time. It resonates with recent critical responses, flagged earlier, to the future of literary practice in the face of climate change. Literary realism, quite clearly, has had its day: its preference for individualised, interiorised narrative, and assertion of a stable, objective and external reality is undone by the dynamic and unpredictable unfolding of climate change, across multiple, overlapping time-scales and spaces, and its refusal of externality: everyone and everything is implicated. At the same time, experience under climate change is also multiple even while it is collectivised: there can be no one representative experience, no elevation of symbols, no consuming, reductive metaphors. Instead, there is the maelstrom. ‘Something... must be wrong somewhere,’ writes Tim Ingold, ‘if the only way to understand our own creative involvement in the world is by first taking ourselves out of it’ (quoted in Whatmore 2002: 2). Faced with the devastations of climate change, creativity has no other place than in the midst of all these happenings.

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