

Flinders University

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Introduction: 'Climates of Change', papers from the 2017 AAWP annual conference

Biographical notes:

Patrick Allington's novel *Figurehead* (Black Inc.) was longlisted for the 2010 Miles Franklin Literary Award, and his essays, short fiction and critical writings have appeared widely. He is a former editor of the University of Adelaide Press, and is currently a Lecturer in English and Creative Writing at Flinders University.

Piri Eddy is a writer and playwright based in South Australia. His work has featured in such places as *Westerly* and Radio National. He is currently completing a Creative Writing PhD at Flinders University.

Melanie Pryor writes about landscapes and the body in contemporary nonfiction. Her work has been published in *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, *Meanjin*, *Overland*, *Southerly*, and *Lip*, and her travel memoir was highly commended in the AAWP Chapter One Prize in 2017. She is currently completing a PhD in creative writing at Flinders University.

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As we were proofreading this introduction, the new(ish) Prime Minister of Australia, Scott Morrison, responded to the warnings of a special report by the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change by defending the Australian coal industry (Hannam & Latimer 2018). In reference to the Green Climate Fund, set up by the nations that make up the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in support of developing nations responding to climate change, Morrison added, 'Nor are we bound to go and tip money into that big climate fund. We're not going to do that either. I'm not going to spend money on global climate conferences and all that nonsense' (Karp 2018).

In her joint paper with Rose Michael in this special edition of *TEXT*, Cat Sparks quotes Margaret Atwood's suggestion that the second decade of the twenty-first century is a time of 'everything change' (see Atwood 2015). Perhaps 'everything change' is a permanent state of affairs, with each current moment seeming pivotal to those living through it. But 2018 does seem a time of acute uncertainty, with climate change bringing into sharp relief many other disruptions, whether unwelcome or welcome, profound or trifling. The phrase 'everything change' seems a more apt slogan for the here and now than, say, 'she'll be right, mate' – or, for that matter, 'all that nonsense'.

Writers are well placed, if they choose to be, to confront 'everything change'. After all, change creates tension, and tension is a key element of plot. This special edition takes its theme from the AAWP 2017 annual conference, 'Climates of Changes' (hosted by Flinders University, November 2017). In part, the conference theme hoped to provoke responses from creative writers, researchers and teachers to environmental concerns. But the conference theme was also deliberately broad: 'climates of change' rather than 'climate change'. The conference convenors hoped for, and received, proposals for presentations that engaged with ideas of change in many contexts and from many perspectives.

This special issue of *TEXT*, which includes revised papers first delivered at AAWP 2017, follows suit: several papers directly address elements of environmental change in the context of writers and writing, while other papers focus on other types of change. Such variety resonates for us as editors of this special edition. In a single day, after all, a person might despair for the future of the Great Barrier Reef, fret over but defend the higher education sector, take joy in a new bud on a rosebush (while pulling a couple of fresh weeds from the garden bed), hear a new song, reverse an opinion, interrogate the past, read a few pages of a new book, get grumpy, taste some new food (and spit it out), sign a petition, make a new friend, draft and delete a new sentence. If some of these seem more mundane or mild than the radical changes the environment is undergoing, they are still ripe for contemplation. After all, a small change can sometimes have a profound impact.

As editors, we are also delighted to include several jointly written papers (five of thirteen). We find these papers heartening not merely for their spirit of collaboration and shared purpose, but because they offer critical voices that sometimes fold together and sometimes individualise. Researchers from the creative arts persistently bring an open, self-aware and creative spirit to their work. As such, they are ideally placed to resist, and to show how others might resist, the cult of impersonality (in both senses of the word) and impenetrability that continues to exist, albeit at reduced levels, across the broader research landscape. And as Ariella Van Luyn puts it in her joint paper with Robyn Glade-Wright, 'Personal stories are not static; already I'm aware of the multiple versions of drafting I've done on this one, as the act of narrating a life causes me to rethink its meaning.'

In her paper which begins this special issue, Rosemary Williamson ponders words and floods in Australia, arguing that popular magazines 'play an important, if not always obvious, role in influencing perceptions of the natural environment'. In Williamson's view, this occurs in part through the descriptive language that writers of feature articles in such magazines use when describing and reporting so-called natural disasters. In examining *Australian Women's Weekly* feature articles on floods from 1934, 1955, 1974, 1986, 1990 and 2011, Williamson hopes 'to prompt interrogation – by writers and teachers of writing – of the ways in which nature is characterised as a non-human other in such popular non-fiction'.

Paul Munden and Anouska Zummo think about weather in a different way, using British violinist Nigel Kennedy's 'radically new version' of Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons* as a starting point for an absorbing discussion on music, poetry, biography, translation and more: 'In an era when climate change seems to have run amok with our seasonal expectations, one might reasonably be confronted with some radical re-ordering'. This paper, which includes new translations of Italian sonnets written in the original *Four Seasons* score and perhaps written by Vivaldi, reflects on Munden's biography-in-progress on Kennedy. Munden is, the paper states, approaching the task as a poet not a traditional biographer: 'a maverick subject needs a maverick literary form to do it any kind of justice'.

Rose Michael and Cat Sparks, meanwhile, consider how contemporary Australian speculative fiction, or spec-fic, responds to contemporary political and environmental challenges. In part,

the paper is a survey and an appraisal of recent Australian spec-fic. But Michael and Sparks also use themselves as case studies, with each reflecting upon their personal experiences as spec-fic writers to consider how spec-fic can and does engage with real-world concerns. Similarly, Debra Wain and Penelope Jane Jones are concerned with 'how cli-fi novels can interrogate climate change by making use of food as a symbolic and narrative device'. From their shared perspective as writers of fiction, they engage with both food theory and literary studies to consider how Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy can serve as an exemplar for other cli-fi writers. At times, their discussion adopts an urgent tone: 'As practitioners, we need to offer up both warnings and solutions within our fictions that contain within them the climate as something more than an adversary for the protagonists to battle against or a backdrop for their survival narrative'.

Ian McHugh's paper tackles concepts of 'change' by suggesting that narrative theory can be complemented by the political theory of assemblage: 'Like fields and apparatuses and networks, assemblages are a way of conceptualising formations of human social relations and power (that is, as assemblages)'. McHugh, referencing Eugene McHugh, thinks that assemblage can serve as a useful irritant: 'If a writer adopts a radical stance, and considers that "the goal of research is not the interpretation of the world but the organization of its transformation" (Russell et al. 2011: 580), then narratives, including fictional and creative works of writing, are a powerful tool for struggle'.

Several papers reflect in different ways on changes in higher education, in part against a backdrop of a sector impacted by metrics, institutional rankings and shrinking budgets. Sue Joseph and John Dale ask why the editing of academic books of collections 'garner neither research metric nor institutional praise, compared to peer reviewed journal articles or monographs'. Joseph and Dale make a plea for the value of the writing and research produced by such collections, drawing upon their own experience as editors and contributors. Their sense of collaboration goes beyond co-writing a paper: they also draw directly from audience responses they provoked during a panel discussion at the 2017 AAWP Conference, and from views solicited from senior research administrators in several Australian universities. Ariella Van Luyn and Robyn Glade-Wright, meanwhile, consider how the changing tertiary landscape impacts upon early career 'artist-academics' who attempt to establish themselves within a sector that is sometimes wary of, or bemused by, the artist as researcher. Taking an autoethnographic, 'mystory' approach, Van Luyn and Glade-Wright each draw upon their own stories and experiences to offer practical suggestions for early career artist-academics.

Two papers reflect on elements of possible change within the teaching and learning of creative writing. Shady Cosgrove appraises the creative writing workshop model in that context of budgetary pressures within Australian universities and the consequent pressure of class sizes. In drawing on the solicited views of a cohort of third-year University of Wollongong creative writing students, Cosgrove concludes that the workshop model, 'while imperfect', offers students vital opportunities to learn key skills and knowledge – but that large class sizes will compromise its value. Kay Are also reflects upon the creative writing classroom, making a case for considering 'touch as a research method' for writing that is about, and is produced during, the Anthropocene (she also records her discomfort with the term 'Anthropocene'). Drawing on what she calls 'diffractive learning', after Donna Haraway, Are argues that, 'Truly transformative learning ... must avoid the humanist atomisation of subject from object in favour of establishing students' interconnectedness with their environments.'

As with Joseph and Dale, Julian Novitz considers an area of change within publishing. Novitz assesses past and current debates around the status and qualities of the novella. He uses a sequence of novellas collectively called *The Wisdom Tree* (2016), written by popular Australian writer Nick Earls, to consider whether the digital transformation in publishing has changed the ways writers, publishers and readers perceive and appreciate the novella. The possible increased interest in the novella in Australia has implications for writers of prose fiction who may previously have been reluctant to write and pitch such works for practical rather than artistic reasons.

The final three papers in this special issue incorporate exegetical elements into their discussions. Leanne Dodd's paper aims to bring together crime fiction, and more specifically the domestic noir sub-genre, and trauma fiction. In analysing her own writing practice, including her PhD novel, Dodd aims to develop writing strategies that may enable crime fiction 'to portray narratives of trauma using textual cues'. Kerstin Kugler's paper considers the change that occurs when a person moves from adolescence to adulthood via a discussion of philosopher, psychoanalyst and writer Julia Kristeva's work on love in the context of US writer YA Matthew Quick's novel *Sorta Like a Rock Star* (2010). In applying a Kristevan lens to her reading of the teenage girl who is the main protagonist in Quick's novel, Kugler provides context and focus for her own creative practice, 'in which I seek to explore conceptualisations of growth, maturation, and subjective renewal'. Janice Simpson's paper combines a discussion of forced adoption in Australia across several decades of the twentieth century, an experimental creative work drawing from the King James Version of the first two chapters of Exodus, and exegetical commentary. Simpson's discussion sits within a context of changing perception and policies relating to adoption, 'from the more laissez-faire adoption policies of the late 1920s to those legislated in the 1960s that enshrined secrecy'. In turn, Simpson hopes that her story, embellished by social, political and moral as well as religious contexts, will change reader perspectives on the unknown or hidden stories of closed adoption.

Conclusion

'Time is an illusion. Lunchtime doubly so,' said Ford Prefect in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, a few minutes before aliens demolished the earth (Adams 1979: 22). Discussions about change – appeals to it, resistance to it – invariably link to concepts of time. For example, in her paper on flood articles in *Australian Women's Weekly*, Rosemary Williamson offers an intriguing challenge: 'Just as Australians now may be informed by an historical view of their weather, so too may writers and teachers of writing learn from looking to the past.' In herself looking to the past, Williamson exposes some of the challenges of moving beyond clichéd written descriptions of environmental catastrophes and extreme weather patterns, not least 'the persistence of the nature-at-war-with-the-people trope'.

In part, Williamson ponders 'the capacity of the writer to influence the habitual perceptions of readers or to incite action'. In many different contexts, this is a persistent theme in the 'Climates of Change' special issue, as it was in papers presented at the 2017 AAWP annual conference. Writers and, as Van Luyn and Glade-Wright put it, artist-academics are centrally placed, if they choose to be, to pay particular attention to the language all of us use to interpret, welcome, worry about, disregard or condemn change.

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