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Borrowed connectivity: A fictocritical enquiry

Abstract:
This paper is a fictocritical examination of my current research in/with/for the Nightcap National Park, which both argues for, and provides a material example of, the value of the fictocritical form for the interdisciplinary study of place and its place beings. Research within the environmental humanities, with its feminist influences, in critiquing the dualistic proposition at the heart of most Euro-patriarchal research, necessarily troubles the enforcement of the structures of both research methodology and knowledge creation. Creativecritical writing collapses the artificial, binary separation between critical and creative forms and, through its neologic construction, interrogates the primacy of critical thought. Research which explores embodied thinking, entanglements, co-becomings and coproduction of knowledge/s is only possible from a non-dualistic cosmological position, making it incapable of meeting the paradigmatic demand for objectivity which characterises most normative academic enquiry. Rather than diminishing the value of such research, this divergence liberates the researcher to explore alternative responses to the inquiry. Fictocriticism seeks to understand theory through embodiment, placing the researcher squarely in the field of study, always and already entangled. The fictocritical form represents both the process, and the product of the research.

Biographical note:
Rebecca Ryall (white, non-Indigenous, she/her) is a PhD candidate in environmental philosophy with Flinders University of South Australia, living on the unceded lands of the Widjabul Wia-bal people in the far north of NSW. Her doctoral research explores relationships with/between the nonhuman and more-than-human place beings of the Nightcap National Park.

Keywords:
Place, fictocriticism, creativecritical, entanglement, Nightcap National Park

To be an interloper requires separation

For seven years I walked the trails of Nightcap National Park, without noticing the towers. I knew they were there, of course, as it is their height which draws me along the creek flats and up the mountain, and I leave my car in the bitumen carpark between them. But I always considered the towers to be *outside* the forest. I would register their low hum as I returned to the car after a day of bathing in the sounds of birdsong and wind in the treetops, and that hum would signal that the end of the trail was near. It was a day in late autumn that the towers first revealed themselves, in a different and ontologically fruitful way. On the return leg of a long walk, I held my phone aloft, attempting to capture the sound of the golden whistler – unidentified by me at that point. The wind in the treetops was wild, distorting the recording. I was stopped in my tracks by a building roar that obscured all other sound. Mystified, I turned in a circle, attempting to locate the source of this frightening sound. Through the trees, upslope from the trail, I spied something red, with straight edges that did not belong in this "natural" landscape. My heart skipped and I was strangely afraid of this interloper. What was it? A few steps to the left showed the straight, red something rising into the sky and a slow understanding dawned: it was the source of the disturbing sound – the wind narrating its passage through the steel structures of the northernmost tower; the dominant sound in the forest.

These red towers, jutting arrogantly against the sky, ask questions of me (us?) about how we understand, value and inhabit place. They demand we pay attention to the notion of a boundary, the very idea of separation – in this case, the separation of the protected park from the access and maintenance areas of these telecommunications transmission towers, and the separation of my "self" from the self of the forest and that of the towers. They question our determination of what 'protection' looks like, its changing context and cultural inscription, and the temporal aspects of all the above. The wind, and its play through the metal latticework, tells a different story of entanglement, one that brings unexpected nuance to my doctoral research exploring connection with Country.

The towers are protected for their capacity to facilitate emergency communications. The protection strategy stipulates that the structures remain accessible, requiring the maintenance of a bitumen road leading to the high chain-link fences, also (apparently) necessary for security reasons. The fences enclose an area around each tower, presumably keeping out all but those with authority to be there, and also describing a space which is kept clear of all vegetation (also with no authority to be there?). On the eastern side, these fences delineate what is national park and what is not. The use of herbicides, as well as mechanical means, ensure that the towers, and the road used to reach them, are kept clear and accessible. My access to the national park is regularly denied by a closed gate at the bottom of the hill, with slashers at work, clearing the roadsides up to the towers.

The "field"

The Mount Nardi area, at the western edge of Nightcap National Park, was identified by white settlers as useful for the health and well-being of north coast residents, with a proposal to set aside a portion as a health resort discussed at public meetings and by the Lismore Chamber of

Commerce in 1910 (“Public Meeting at Dunoon”, 1910, July 5), 1915 (“Nightcap Mountain”, 1915, March 26) and again in 1920 (“Lismore Chamber of Commerce”, 1920, June 24). A portion was set aside for the people, as a recreation area for residents of Lismore and surrounding shires and for ongoing timber production, with this portion legally protected as a National Forest in 1937 (“National Forest Reserved for the People”, 1937, May 17). According to newspaper reports in 1947, the Forestry Department was planning to develop the summit as a health resort, including a tennis court and pool (“Nightcap as Resort for Tourists”, 1947, October 2).

The Nightcap National Park was declared in 1983, following the successful “Nightcap Blockade” – credited as the first time in Australia, and perhaps the world, that protestors physically blockaded a site (“Terania Creek Landmark”, 2019, August 17), using their bodies to disrupt the work of loggers. Many of those young protectors remain in the area today, and recently celebrated the forty-year anniversary of these historic events. The pool and resort never eventuated, and it was only the committed actions of those hippies in the 70s and 80s that conferred ultimate protection of the area as a National Park. My gratitude for their efforts is boundless, their legacy – sixty-odd kilometres of walking trails – providing my playground, research field, therapy room.

Nightcap’s value to *my* health and well-being was intuited by my good friend, Lee, in August of 2015, as I dealt with a punishing schedule of caring for my eldest child, hospitalised following major abdominal surgery, whilst maintaining the school-soccer-music lessons routine for my younger children at home, an hour away from my daughter’s convalescent bed. Lee sprang me from the hospital one day and introduced me to Nightcap, and we visited every fortnight thereafter as I bore witness to the slow and painful death of my firstborn in October of that year. I haven’t gone more than a few months in the years since without visiting Nightcap and other parks in the area. The nonhuman and the more-than-human beings of Nightcap have witnessed my deconstruction, informed my ongoing reconstruction, and have proven the wisest of beings. This forest, as a space, has acted as container for my disintegration, its place-beings far from impassive witnesses to, and receivers of, my tears, rage and confusion. The place beings of Nightcap have accepted my bitterness and confusion and, in return, have gifted me lessons that bring solace and understanding.

“Look,” comes the gentle call, “see how I accommodate this space within myself?”, and in the slim trunk before me, an illustration. The call originates from the dark recess, a hole in the trunk, the inner space strung with delicate spider webs, themselves adorned with little scraps of dust, tiny insect bodies and flowers smaller than a grain of rice. The walls of this empty space accommodate the reaching progress of several types of climbing plants, their glossy leaflets pressed flat against the scarified inner wood of the tree. Ants and small insects move purposefully from place to place. Through this subtle interaction, my loss is contextualised, my grief given shape and the awful absence in my psyche is made manifest, embraced within the contours of this healthy, vigorous expression of life.

The "observer"

I am a white, non-Indigenous researcher of settler descent with a broken lineage, which family lore suggests came from Ireland five or so generations ago. I am long separated from a cultural connection to land or Country. I have lived in my current home for twelve years, and in the broader geographic area of unceded Widjabul Wiabal Country since 1999. These decades of living where I do have informed the building of a connection to Country which, through a Euro-patriarchal lens, is difficult to define or qualify. In fact, Wiradjuri scholar[1] (and my first teacher in Indigenous ways of knowing) Professor Norm Sheehan, and his Bundjalung colleagues Uncle Charles Moran and Uncle Greg Harrington, suggest that "there are understandings here [in Australia and the Global South] that have never been held in the North" (Moran et.al., 2018, p. 75). This observation addresses the need for adopting Australian Indigenous onto-epistemologies in pursuit of knowledge production about/with/for this place. Leading Narungga scholar Dr Lester Irabinna Rigney cautions that Indigenous knowledges "can only partially be understood from within inherited Western scientific research traditions" (2016, p. 37), further supporting the requirement to seek out other, more appropriate ways of knowing. Walking here, on Widjabul Wia-bal Country, the forest demands to be known, and not just in a botanical, entomological or ecological way. Country's voice grows louder as I develop relationships of familiarity with the other-than-humans of these places. The infernal hum of those towers adds to the chorus, seeking communication with me on this journey of understanding.

The telecommunications towers atop Mount Nardi act as a waypoint on the map of knowledge I have been conducting as part of my doctoral research into dialogues of entanglement/s with the other-than-human. A waypoint is a stopping place in a longer journey, as well as a reference point which helps us determine where we have come from and where we are going. I also think of the towers as a node – a point of intersection or branching. Given their purpose of facilitating communication, the towers represent, too, a point of connection – allowing me to connect with the wider world through my mobile phone and GPS device and, similarly, bringing that vast world to this point, here, where I examine theory as it plays itself out within my body and in my bodily entanglements. After all, as (white, settler-descended) feminist posthumanist scholar Astrida Neimanis reminds us, "the embeddedness of bodies within contexts, within specific possibilities and matrices of power, cannot be transcended" (2017, p. 62); it is through parsing theory via "the various sensory apparatuses" (Neimanis, 2017, p. 57) of our body that we either make sense of, or problematise, such theory.

Intersections

Thirty percent of the Nightcap National Park area burned at the start of the Black Summer of 2019–20, which saw wildfires rage down the east coast of Australia. Seasoned firefighters and landowners alike opined that the behaviour of these fires defied their understanding. Areas that "shouldn't" burn, such as the old growth rainforest in Nightcap and elsewhere, did, and fires seemed to come from unpredictable directions. Walking in Nightcap now, the trees clearly display the fire's path. I am heartened by the regrowth and interested to see who returns first. Walking in Nightcap three months into the post-fire recovery, in the heart of the park I

encountered a deathly stillness, an area decimated, blackened fallen giants obscuring paths and an army of the dead thrust skyward. There was no movement, no birdsong, not a skerrick of green to be seen.

It seemed I had walked into the despair at the heart of my own psyche. This forest draws my grief from me and, on this day, I wept for the destruction, internal and external. Driven toward remediation of some kind, in the heart of the silence, I performed a series of trauma release movements, whispered a promise to the forest that together we will heal. I visit this area weekly now, bring my performative offerings of trauma release forms, tai chi and qi gong, create ephemeral artworks and, eventually, weep with joy at the appearance of tremulous new growth amongst the ashes. Joy turns to amusement and then to mild annoyance as the rampant new growth reaches first my knees and then higher, grasping at my clothing and scratching my skin as I walk by.

I go to the forest, first and foremost, as a human being, seeking comfort and understanding. Having suffered significant and traumatic losses in my not-so-distant past, the forest presents as a therapy room, where I can work through my grief and gain a sense of perspective. To the scholar, the forest provides a classroom, its many place-beings the teachers. Through them, I come to an embodied understanding of entanglement, a realisation that all is interconnected and that my experiences cannot be understood or integrated as discrete or separate.

Surveying a large and established tree fallen to the forest floor, I wonder, did this tree mourn its passing? Do tree's neighbours grieve, or the myriad epiphytes who called tree home? It is clear that tree, lying prone now in the leaf litter, possesses continued vitality. Where the trunk reclines, the processes of decomposition – themselves integral to the life of this place – deconstruct what was "tree" and from this construct "soil", the medium for further growth and nourishment. Fallen treebeings are clothed in a carpet of spongy mosses sporting tiny seedlings and little fungi wearing dainty caps. Reclining trunks are slowly consumed, subsumed, incorporated into the living processes of the complex ecology of this place, from which they cannot be separated as individuals. So, can tree be really said to be separate from soil? And what of this designation as "dead"? And how do these questions relate to me, a human?

There's something here to be learned about resilience, recovery. This landscape has been scoured by fire, the view dominated by blackened trees, many dead and yet still reaching, many more sprouting their new growth, weird and misshapen, but growing nonetheless. And the birds are not bothered by the black, by the strangeness; regardless, they sing and play, their colours vibrant against the blacks and greys as they gorge on clouds of hovering midges. The leeches have returned, blindly climbing my boots and socks, sensing warm blood beneath.

The Black Summer fires which raged through here, eating the old growth forests, reveal themselves in a different way when they are observed in the context of the passage of time. Despite the visible scars of that catastrophe, life here goes on. Fire-scarred trees, standing twenty or thirty metres high, flex and pose, cracks appearing in blackened bark through which their pale muscularity is glimpsed, Incredible Hulk-like. And those who've snapped and fallen

sprout modest skirts of new growth.

The towers and the park

Mount Nardi is on the unsexy, western side of the park, less famous (read: developed) than the picturesque Minyon Falls to the east and a gruelling eight-hour hike from the Rummery Park campground. The park's western entrance is reached by a bitumen road from Nimbin, originally built to provide access for the aforementioned telecommunications transmission towers, erected at the peak of Mount Nardi in the early 1960s as television made its way to the area. The towers transmit FM radio and television frequencies, as well as providing mobile phone and internet communications for nearby residents. It was the presence of the towers – deemed essential infrastructure – that ensured the protection of this side of the park during the Black Summer bushfire, and which necessitated a rapid response to significant landslips caused by the 2022 flooding. Many local roads remain impassable two years on from those floods, but access to the towers was restored within days.

The three towers stand at 45m, 91m and 122m high (RFNSA), far above the rainforest canopy and the nearby peak of Mount Matheson, which sits at 800m above sea level. They provide a navigational landmark for many, and are clearly visible from the main road heading north, from the carpark at the trailhead on the western entrance to Nightcap, and again at several points along the Mount Matheson loop as it swings around to the north. They announce themselves on the return journey of a bushwalk along the Mount Nardi loop, emitting a low-level hum that is first mistaken for a light aircraft or earth moving equipment somewhere nearby. In a high wind the towers shriek, all but drowning out the golden whistlers who inhabit the trees nearby. At the end of a forest immersion their humming is an intrusion and a harbinger of a return to "real" life.

The towers and their fences

I'm fascinated, too, by the fences surrounding the towers. Tall constructions of heavy wire, adorned with metal signage warning of trespass and penalties, and under the watchful eyes of CCTV cameras monitored by God-knows-who in places unknown. Each fence describes a flimsy boundary – protecting whom, and from what? On one side, the telecommunications towers stand tall and imposing, their metal structures decorated with dishes and antennae whose purpose I cannot fathom, their structures singing with the high winds passing through. On the other, 20,000 acres of World Heritage Listed Gondwana Rainforest, home to the only known population of the rare and endangered Nightcap Oak (Environment NSW) – an ancient Gondwanan species only formally identified in 2022.

Through the action of the fences, the telecommunication towers and their surrounds are separated from that which they are not – the National Park – and vice versa. The hum of the wind passing through the tall towers functions to draw attention to this separation, for it requires us to consider at which point one begins and the other ends? Presumably the fence marks this point, but plants are generally disrespectful of fences, as are the myriad nonhuman beings whose daily toil must take them back and forth over our arbitrary boundaries many times a day.

I find, as have others before me, that "the fence lines fail to contain and sever physical and temporal relational entanglements that stretch across space and time" (Turner & Somerville, 2020, p. 235). Those fences have no hope of keeping out the high winds – part of the more-than-human –of this place. More concerningly, a wire fence cannot take account of the impacts of electromagnetic frequencies on the flora and fauna of the park (nor those resident within the bounds of the fence, whose well-being and agency are of no less consequence than those protected by the park).

To "protect humans from excessive exposure to Radio Frequency Electro Magnetic Fields [RF EMF], international guidelines have been developed that recommend limits on exposure" (Karipidis, et.al., 2023, p. 3) however, no limits have ever been set that aim to protect flora and fauna from excessive exposure. These guidelines, developed by the International Commission on Non-Ionizing Radiation Protection (ICNIRP), rely on what is *currently* known about the impacts of RF EMF on the *human* body. Animals and plants, having different bodies, will have different responses. Additionally, even if the guidelines were applicable to the bodies of flora and fauna, the wire fences are only designed to protect *human* bodies from hazard, through describing an exclusion zone to protect the health and safety of workers and nearby (human) residents.

The fence separating the towers from the park provides a material metaphor, from which to consider the concept of dualism, separating, as it does, the park from the infrastructure. It is easy to categorise these towers (and their surrounding fences) as "unnatural", in contrast to the "pristine" park surrounds; simple to suggest that they don't belong. Val Plumwood (Australian, non-Indigenous environmental philosopher, who changed her name to honour the connection she felt with her beloved mountain home and its distinctive treebeings) explains that "a major aim of dualistic construction is polarization, to maximise distance or separation between the dualized spheres and to prevent their [categories] being seen as continuous or *contiguous*" (emphasis mine) (1993, p. 49). A binary, dualistic construction, in this instance, perceives the towers as entirely separate from the forest; the fence acts as the line drawn between, in their categorisation as binary opposites – man-made/natural, human/nonhuman – and emphasises the imposed hierarchies implied by these dualisms.

Can the fence really delineate between the one area as forest (natural), and the other as man-made (unnatural)? Can the towers really be construed as separate from the places in which they stand, separate from the place-beings of the park? The fences, and the towers they protect, are constructed of heavy steel, man-made, designed to withstand the weather and the vagaries of time. If only I could see them up close. Perhaps they house delicate spider webs? Provide purchase for spreading colonies of lichens or moss? Maybe even a bird nest or two have been constructed in their sharp angles? More concretely, however, the persistent hum is present wherever one stands – "outside" or "inside" the forest. In this light, dualistic construction begins to appear useless, erroneous.

Creativecritical

The clumsy dualism exposed by the hum of the towers leaks outwards and shows up, too, in my writing. Attempting to write scholarly papers, my body speaks up and I can't keep myself out of the research or the texts I produce. Approaching the eighth anniversary of the death of my firstborn, I acknowledge the agency of grief, still at work in my body, my mind and psyche. Is it Country drawing this expression from me? Where does the grief reside, when not flowing through me? Eight years on and I still mourn for her painful passage, from tall, beautiful, haughty adolescent to pain-wracked, steroid-swollen, unrecognisable young woman. Still, I mourn for my own painful passage, the brutality of watching her cut, poisoned, diminished; the terrible certainty of the inevitable conclusion to this process. Maybe this is the connection with Country? Maybe this is why these times of forest immersion draw the grief from me? Perhaps here is that cutting, poisoning, diminishing made manifest – the body of Country analogous to the body of my beloved child; the ongoing recovery from fires and floods, kindred, too, to the adaptation required of me as mother of three, reduced and reconstructed now as mother of two? Rebecca, the scholar, cannot be divorced from Rebecca, the grieving mother, nor can my endless co-becoming be separated from that of the forest.

According to posthuman philosopher Francesca Ferrando, "the overcoming of dualisms … includes the traditional divide between theory and practice" (2012, p. 9). This is the traditional divide which privileges the objective over the subjective, the critical over the fictive, the observed over the embodied. This same divide would keep me separate from the forest, my grief separate from the research, the towers separate from the place/s in which they stand.

The beauty of fictocritical enquiry is that this style of research does not require me to compartmentalise; it problematises the 'observer's distance' demanded by Euro-patriarchal research structures. I can't remove myself from the process of enquiry, nor can I annexe my grief. To do so is to ignore my implication in the research, to ignore relationships, co-creation and co-becomings. By inserting my self and my grief into this paper, I refuse the Euro-patriarchal demand for objectivity, for mastery over the subject I discuss. Through blurring the boundaries between theory and practice, fictocriticism allows a reimagining of scholarly writing, and my observations, thoughts and feelings retain their validity, no matter where they occur. There is as much justification for doing this research on the home front as there is to be doing it in the Gondwana rainforest; every site becomes a research site – the garden, the gravel road, the forest – all are, in fact, Country, "a presence that urges an immediate responsibility to sustain it" (Kelly, 2019, p. 389).

More importantly, from a feminist perspective, it is not possible for me to keep my body out of the research. My entanglements with this place and its place-beings are *bodily* entanglements; I know these other-than-humans through my bodily senses – I hear, feel, smell and touch them. And it is through these sensual engagements that I understand the theories. The new materialisms are artfully invoked by the tickle of spider web on my face, the passage of wind through my hair, the cold wetness of moss against my palm, the falling of my blood and tears to the forest floor.

My colleague Jennifer Eadie (white, non-Indigenous) assures me that "I", as researcher, am "part of multiple relational voices that respond, argue, explore – all while forming a text (i.e., word, image, story, or know-how) – that presents itself not as a definition but as reflection of the plurality it has encountered" (2021, p. 5), making fictocriticism an appropriate vehicle for expressing both the plurality encountered and the entanglement through which this plurality arises.

Plumwood contends that environmental degradation has an epistemic source – being the "radical separation and cultural constructions of person/property, respect/use and subject/object dualism" (2002, p. 188). She calls for the enaction of "traitorous identities" which adopt "multiple perspectives and locations that enable an understanding of how [one] is situated in relationship with the other from the perspective of both kinds of lives" (2002, p. 188). I have clear feelings of discomfort regarding those towers, indirectly proportional to the care I feel for the park, and it is apparent that I must rethink my relationship to them.

Traitorously, I wonder what happens if I begin to relate to them as place-beings, ***of*** the forest, refusing those arbitrary and illusive dualistic constructions that insist on the separation of forest from tower, just as I refuse the separation of self from forest?

Relationality refuses separation

Apalech scholar Tyson Yunkaporta insists that "nothing exists outside of a relationship to something else" (2019, p. 169). These towers are surely here, whether within my sightline or not, evidenced by the bars of reception on my mobile phone and the shriek of the wind's play within their structure. They are constructed *on Country*, which persists all around them. They share relationships with the wind, with their (imagined) resident spiders, with *me*. Emitting high frequencies, they also share relationships with every other non-human being resident in their surroundings, and all those reliant on their broadcasts across the valleys below. Their fixity, as I perceive it, can only ever be transitory in the larger story of time. They, too – being in relationship with the various nonhuman and more-than-human agents with whom they coexist – are vulnerable to rust, wind and wildfires. And let us not forget, if not for these towers, the forest may well have been left to burn, secondary to the need to protect (human) life and homes.

Borrowed connectivity

Despite my dislike of their presence, the hard angles of them, their smug fixity, I need the towers. For a start, I would not have such easy access to the western end of the park if not for them and their associated requirement for a bitumen access road. From the towers I borrow my connectivity, my sense of safety when walking alone in the forest. They allow me to locate myself in both time and space, give me a compass point and permit the dropping of a virtual pin on the GPS map of my handheld devices. They ensure that, though I am alone and remote, family can find me if needed; I can answer a phone call from school, can respond to urgent messages in a timely manner. And should I fall and break a leg, it's the presence of the towers

that ensures I can be located and brought to safety.

In order to situate myself within my enquiry and my field, I have made explicit my positionality as a non-Indigenous researcher. However, the concept of relationality tells me that 'I' am constructed relative to other beings, that "[p]eople, including researchers, are made through Country, they are part of Country and Country is part of them. We all come into existence through relationships with each other and with the world itself" (Country, et.al., 2015, p. 274). We co-create, co-become, co-evolve together. So, **I** do not exist separate from the place/s with which I engage.

Sunlight, spearing through the canopy, reveals the wonder of a spiderweb, stretched between quivering cordyline and trunk. It is silver, gilded, magical. I pull out my phone to photograph it, thinking to send it to Lee, to delight and reconnect her to this place she loves, and from which she is currently so far removed. The web is invisible to the camera. I move the phone up and down, take small steps to the left and right, snap speculatively, but still it is as though the web does not exist, refuses to be documented.

As I walk, the golden whistlers and Coxen's fig parrots raise the alarm, calling loudly to telegraph my presence to others. Log runners monitor my movements from the thick scrub beside the path. Invisible webs span the track, collecting on my face. Myriad unseen others scuttle through the undergrowth at my approach. Leaves of the cordyline chatter drily in an unseen breeze, barbs of the lawyer vine implore me to wait-a-while, scratching and clawing at my clothes and bare skin and tiny violets jostle for my attention in the leaf litter. Leeches attach and my blood drips freely. I am a disturbance, an interloper, and all the place beings are aware of me.

There is no detached observation here.

I feel watched.

Cultural ecologist (white, settler descended) David Abram insists that "to see the world is also, at the same time, to experience oneself as visible, to feel oneself seen … the world is perceiving itself through us … our experience of the forest is nothing other than the forest experiencing itself" (2017, p. 68). This all rings true for me, as I observe the responses of the birds and reptiles to my incursions on their place/s. The responses of those treebeings are more subtle and harder to quantify and express. Harder still, those towers. Are they aware of me? Are they responding to me? Does their hum increase in volume, or is this a feature of my growing perceptiveness? Is there agency in their known communicative capacities?

White, non-Indigenous philosopher Freya Mathews has coined the term "ontopoetics" to describe "the communicative engagement of self with world and world with self" (2009, p. 1), which is predicated on an understanding of the world as "in some sense a communicative presence, a presence with a psycho-active dimension of its own and a capacity and inclination

to create and share meaning with us" (2009, p. 1). Mathews contends that this communicative capacity responds when, through attentiveness, we send out the request (2017, p. 223).

As affirmed by Nyikina Warrwa scholar Anne Poelina and colleagues, Country has always communicated: "[r]ivers sing out compellingly and powerfully" and Country "needs humans who feel and hear Country, and respond. It needs dance, singing and loving attention to awaken its energies, animate its spirits and entities, and activate its fertilities for regeneration" (2020, p. 13). So this communicative engagement of which Abram, Mathews, Poelina and others speak is nothing new, especially here, on Widjabul Wia-bal Country, which has been inhabited for tens of thousands of years.

Edwin Lee Mulligan – a Walmajarri and Nyikina knowledge holder – suggests that "when we walk on this earth, the earth can actually feel our presence" (2021, np). In purely simplistic terms, I know that the vibration of my footfall warns the ground dwellers of my approach, that my heavy tread is responsible for the alarmed retreat of the slinky, black, land mullet. The small, banded flies who hover, inches in front of my face, maintaining a precise distance even as I walk, seem to determine their position relative to mine. I know they feel me.

Conclusion

Having *seen* the towers now I cannot *unsee* them. My ears, attuned to the registers of their different songs, cannot *unhear* them. "I hear you", I call quietly as they announce themselves; "I see you", I acknowledge as they reveal their bright and rigid forms through the trees. It is as though the fences melt away and the towers show themselves as beings *of* the forest, harmonising, in their way, with the chorus of fig parrots and golden whistlers. Their infernal hum situates me, reminds me where I am, reveals to me the unavoidable entanglements that, together, ***are*** the forest, with me an integral part, for both the short periods that I am there, and the longer times when I am elsewhere, contemplating all these things and existing still in the forest imaginary.

Notes

[1] Conventional citational practices tend to confer cultural specificity to non-white authors only, with the corollary of whiteness going unstated. This paper deploys the decolonial tactic of "marking" all scholars whose work is cited. Marking is a political practice described by Metis scholar Max Liboiron, the purpose of which is to decentre "settlers and whiteness as an unexceptional norm"(2021, p. 3), by culturally and geographically situating *all* scholars whose works are cited as a way of establishing each scholar's authority to speak. See more about citational politics and marking in Liboiron's *Pollution is Colonialism* (2021).

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