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Aviva Reed

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La Trobe University

Aviva Reed

Flowerlands: The written word as world maker

Abstract:

Place is alive. Exploring my relationship with the land I live on pushes me to articulate a vision for place beyond the Cartesian perspective of object/subject. Instead of asking, what is this place I am in relationship with, I ask, who is this place I am in relationship with? I shift the western cultural narrative through recognising agency to the assemblage of non-humans that entangle to create life. I bring myself into a relationship with an entity rather than in space. Written expression shapes onto-epistemologies, which then shape how we interact, make laws, and care for the world. Our western institutional approach to structure and grammar are complicit in the written word being a world maker. This, coupled with an imperialism of the English language, makes for a powerful combination in shaping cultural narratives. Once the written word becomes embedded within concepts, both the conventional placement and the very definition of what is noun or verb, we begin to make meaning based on these placements and rhythms of ideas. All too often, the placement of object/subject within the sentence shapes our relationships with/to, and so often reiterates the hierarchical thinking embedded within Cartesian dualism. The process of exploring the written world as world maker encourages me to question decisions based on categorisation and orders of concepts when establishing a narrative for my work. The value of writing as part of my practice asks me to use a vigilant and ongoing re-framing of conventional language towards alternate perspectives of ecological thought.

Biographical note:

Aviva Reed is a transdisciplinary visual ecologist. Her practice reframes scientific theories, particularly concepts associated with evolution and ecological categorisations. Her work moves between performance, ritual, lecture, publications, and visual art. She explores time, scale, and relationship, using storytelling, visualisations, soundscapes, and conversation.

Keywords:

Place-making, nature-writing, ecology, indigenous knowledge systems, Victorian volcanic plains

An awakening

During Covid 2020, I met a remnant grassland in my neighbourhood of Darebin. Darebin means *swallow* in woi-wurrung language. I witnessed love affairs between flowers and bee, lichen and mineral. I watched ethical time unravel. I began a love affair with the entangled creatures that have lived on this land for millenia. I discovered the vulnerability of these love stories. These grassland love stories are on the brink of extinction.

How can I care for you, flowerland grasslands?

How can we rematriate you?

The world we currently reside within is witnessing an intense ongoing ecocide. Indigenous peoples and many scholars have called for the reframing of cultural narratives around nature/human relationships as an ethical obligation to the more than human world, to both stop and recover from this ecocide. This paper passes a critical lens over the scientific language of the natural world that has plagued the onto-epistemologies and created the ‘western cognitive empire’ (Santos, 2007). The perpetuation of western narratives that center the human experience do so at the detriment of all other life on this planet. An ecologies of knowledge approach (Santos, 2007) encourages us to embed, unpack, rethink, acknowledge, and reflect ourselves into the future by actively embedding a multiplicity into onto-epistemologies. This provides a fertile ground for contemporary and emergent liveliness to birth in the current age.

This paper also explores ideas drawn from Deborah Bird Rose’s notions of multispecies knots in ethical time. The bridge to understanding ethical time requires a re-language of our human relationships with the more than human world and the acknowledging of our relationality. Using nuanced and subtle language-ing of relationships within ecological worlds, my personal phenomenological, scientific, and historical encounters with remnant grassland patches of the Victorian Volcanic Plains found within the Darebin Shire become a way for me to re-frame my world.

When I’m seeking where I am in time, I look for the flowers. Who is singing their sugar song right now? And like a symphony of time, the bulbine flower sang yellow. A seasonal cue. The bulbine told me where I was, in time, in place, with wind, sun, water, and sugar. It showed me the volcanic plains. There are not many bulbines left in our volcanic landscape. Hiding, surviving, thriving, tubers nestled into crevices. Survivors. There are only 10 individual plants of the twining fringe lilly living in the wild. And the chocolate lillies smell sweet.

I have been watching shape shifting matter dancing with time, with me. Feeling into the stories of the land. When ancient seas and rainforest gullies covered by fields of lava from the earth’s core became weathered by long, deep million-year rain, wind and lichen, turning basalt into clay pans. I have been watching the swelling clay embrace fibrous roots and the flowerland grasslands and fungi grow from the volcanic rocks. I can feel the longtime cultivation by fire and digging stick in the landscape, gardens of tubers and grains amongst the sheoaks. I can no longer hear the bandicoots that spread the spores and kept the soil healthy.

The volcanic plains

I live within the bioregion currently referred to by the government and scientific regulatory bodies as the Victorian Volcanic Plains (VVP) (Williams et al., 2015). I will use the term volcanic plains and erase the word Victorian, of which places these multispecies into a distorted colonial English blood line narrative. Passing a critical lens over the languaging of this plant, animal, fungal, and mineral community as the ‘Victorian Volcanic Plains’, places us in contentious territory, for the naming of beings by the English colonial forces brings with it layers of erasure from the peoples who lived and co-evolved in ethical time with this assemblage of plants, animals, fungi, and mineral for millennia, each with their own languaging of these systems, words in deep relation and acknowledgement to the beings and their very existence, the words are of the landscape.

I may offer the naming ‘Victorian’ to the dead, dying, and deeply damaged, often obliterated regions of these now endangered volcanic plains. By doing this, the naming of the perpetrator does not get erased from the narrative. But, the remnant pockets of survivors, the perseverance of the peoples, plants, animals, and fungi deserve to be relinquished from the Victorian overlord and settled into the country names of which they have emerged within. Many First Nation language groups live and share their lives with these lands, including the Bun Wurrung, Dja Dja Wurrung, Woi Wurrung, Watha Wurrung, Djab Wurrung, Djargurd Wurrung, Gulidjan, Keeraywoorroong, Kee Woorroong, Wirngilgnad Dhalinanong, Dhauwurd Wurrung, Peek Woorroong, Koornkopanoot, Wooloo Woorroong. For the First Nations of these basalt volcanic plains, this place is literally in their bloodlines for they are collaborators with a millennia old landscape (Bennet & Moreton, 2020). For the Second Nations, these landscapes ask that we first see them, acknowledge them before we can then care for them.

Intricate, entwined and entangled, the assemblage of lives merge. Gardens full of tubers, lillies, daisies, and grain.

Before the land was colonised by the British, before it became a dry dust desert of species from other lands, with only 1% (Williams et al., 2015) of its pre colonising communities surviving, it was a thriving flower land grassland and gardens of First Nations living with it. And before it was a home for emerging life, it was a basalt lava stone landscape. And before it was a flowing basalt plain, it was a silurian sedimentary sea with gullies of gondwanian rainforests. These rainforests can be seen as memory in the landscape, coal pockets of stored sunlight. And the old rivers can be seen in the rocks. The ethics of time holds these stories in a sand granule, in the chemical memories of its silica.

I have lived on this land for a decade, and hadn’t realised I was so amongst volcanoes, for the volcanoes shape this land. A deep time, long time, ongoing time catastrophic symphony of magma, of at least 400 volcanoes bubbled, gushed, down river gullies, forging a landscape. An 80,000 km squared of basalt plains covering the ancient silurian seafloor and braided wetlands of the south, starting from 800,000 years yesterday. The last eruption was 5000 years ago at Berrin (Mt. Gambier), the lands of the Bungandidj peoples. Berrin holds a blue lake called Warwar, the sounds of many crows. This realisation of the place that

holds my dreaming body has changed who I am in the landscape. There are still sleeping volcanoes amongst us. Mount Cooper is the closest volcano to me, on the edge of the Darebin Creek. Problematically holding the name of early settler, Horatio Cooper. It is very old and the highest peak in Naarm (Melbourne). A monument to time. Of time. Slow time, rock time. Dissolving rock. Soil. Who are you soil?

Cryptocrusts are lichen, microbe, and mineral communities. A surface layer of life. An embryonic community, pioneering under sun, wind, and rain. Both weathering the rock and holding the soil together. Our cryptocrust communities are ancient and still persist within the intertussock spaces of grasses and burnt landscapes. Cryptocrusts. Holding water in the soil, creating germination and food for insects and amoebas. Fragile to the hard hoof. Fragile to being disturbed and blown away. Atop the basalt rock, the slow dissolving, weathering, creates grey sticky clays, loamy red soils.

Swell, contract, swell, contract, swell, contract ... wet ... dry ... wet ... dry ... wet ... dry ...

Dry summers create cracks in the clay and wet winters inundate clay pans creating boggy wetlands. Home for soil seeds. Nestled into crust. The clay soil cracks and rips tree roots apart. But grassy roots meander through the clay, fibrous roots binding. Cracks create underground homes. For striped legless lizards and spiders, and grubs and bugs to escape from fire and magpie attack.

The volcanic plains were once a wondrous labyrinth of connected wetlands and water birds in seasonal flux and flows. A deafening crescendo of life, the crickets sang, the birds blacked out the sun. The flowers covered the landscape and sang seasonal songs of sugar. Grass choreographed by the wind, landing on prepared ashbeds.

The grass and flower meadows were so vast, with an ongoing biodiversity we can hardly conceive of in present time. A global basalt home for migrating creatures looking for invertebrate and reptile feasts, chasing sugar around the globe. The volcanic plains dance in symbiotic relationships to the beat of time. The rain drums, the fire burns, the carbon pumps, the sugar spikes, and the Bursaria, caterpillars, and ants keep each other alive. While the bulbines sing in spring.

Who are you Themada?

Themada is otherwise known as kangaroo grass, a dominant grass of the 'southern' hemisphere. The volcanic plains are home to hundreds of different grasses, wind pollinated plants, though Themada, the kangaroo grass abounds. When we find them in our landscapes, especially urban, they often tell us about where we are: that this landscape is a remnant place, a window into pre-colonisation. A community of beings who have lived together for millennia, living multiple love affairs. Themada is friends with the lillies and daisies because

it is a tussock grass. The introduced grasses are not such good friends with their sprawling nature. They choke the flowers to death. Death to ethical time.

The arrival of European peoples, animals, plants, and fungi from other lands saw a swift assault on the beings who have always lived with the volcanic plains. The volcanic plains became basalt mines, paddocks, and fenced off 'private property'. Gardens of plants escaped into grasslands, grasses who run, and don't build tussocks. They are no friend of the lilly and orchid. Beaten, trampled, and eaten, the sheep and colonisers, ripped inside out the land and its inhabitants, for metal and gold, dehydrated it by re-routing rivers, and starved the landscape of fire. An apocalypse of colonisation. The loss of a species ... leads to the loss of a species ... which leads to the loss of a species. A genocide of ethical time.

The removal of First Nation peoples by force and genocide from the land meant it no longer had its millennia old collaborators to care for diversity, to burn and harvest, to watch and learn and sing and care for country. Only 1% of the volcanic plains still has these old communities living within it. We call them remnant. I call them survivors of a holocaust. An abrupt disruption to millions of lifecycles, creates abrupt disruptions to more lifecycles. *The colonising process continues to eradicate life.*

The apocalypse continues. With bulldozers. And sheep. Fences and suburbia. An extinction vortex in full tilt. To protect our vulnerable grasslands communities who are found in tiny refugia throughout the landscape, we fence them, from rabbits and dogs and people. Our fences act as a boundary, to protect them, a bit like a prison. Our planning, with its best intentions, makes sure these millennia old ecosystems can't spread, with seeds in the wind into the lawns of 'private property'. Like a prisoner on your own land. Beware the mower, beware the housing development, beware the edge of the planning zone (Williams et al., 2015).

Who are you, place of the purple and yellow flowers?

Figure 1: *Flowerlands: Forged by fire*, Aviva Reed, 2021. Watercolour and charcoal on paper.

Ethical time

Indigenous Potawatami scientist Robin Wall Kimmerer (2015) speaks of her experience within the ‘academy’, when she requested to do a Doctorate of Philosophy on beauty within the science department. Why does the beauty of yellow and purple flowers exist together? she asked. The science institute laughed at her, telling her this was not science, and that she should go to art school for such inquiry. Robin Wall Kimmerer is a trans disciplinary scholar. She persevered and through a scientific process found that the co-existence of these particular colours speaks to a wider community of particular insects and thus increases opportunities for pollination and for insect nutrition, thus demonstrating that beauty, survival, and thriving are complementary, through a process of co-evolution.

The idea of co-evolution shifts the usual perspective of individual evolution, for it is through relationality that beings develop mechanisms of survival. The prevalence for yellow and purple flowers to co-exist has developed over millennia, and has impacted the insects who have then evolved in response, over millennia. These relationships are examples of ethical time. It speaks to thinking with temporal diversity through the lens of generations, co-evolutions, patterns, and rhythms. Ethical time acknowledges that future generations are dependent on the experience of the present and thus any harm to the diversity of generations, of the present is a form of death to the future (Rose, 2012). Current anthropogenic change is witnessing a death of the future to the remnant grasslands of the Victorian Volcanic Plains, with only 1% of their original range remaining (Williams et al., 2015). This death of the future to these surviving organisms is also a result of the attempted genocide on the Indigenous peoples of the Volcanic Plains, whom with their absence has meant these grasslands are not cared for in a way that allows them to exist, to thrive.

Kin studies

Remembering that words are world makers, we can learn from alternative languaging of the world, in English and other. Kimmerer (2015) offers an alternative narrative to the Cartesian dualistic approaches of subject/object within the sciences. She offers rich insights into being an investigative ecologist who is in relationship with her inquiries, rather than separate, through incorporating the lens of her Indigenous Knowledge systems to know/be in the world. She refers to fellow beings as Ki, a modern languaging of seeing the living world as kin, as family. This draws from the ancient Indigenous systems worldwide whom have language systems embedded with these ancestral, relational contexts. By acknowledging the ancestors in the landscape we acknowledge ethical time as being embedded into our personal narrative, as all life is kin.

Kin studies disrupts traditional science narratives. The term ‘kin studies’ as opposed to ‘environmental case studies’ (Kangieser & Todd, 2020) offers the academy a new language-ing to investigation. Kin studies bring the observer into the experience, as a form of phenomenology, where ‘the world is experienced in its immediacy’ (Abrams, 2012, p. 35), and the human is embedded in the site, thus directly relational to the story of a place. Who am I to be in this place? Who are these beings in relation to me? Kin Studies embeds a relational ethic

into the enquiry, for you are no longer other, but rather amongst relations. When we use this lens, we can also use scientific ponderings, yet with an intimacy and care that helps us to build relationships, ‘no longer an observer in an observed world’ (Graham, 1999). This is an example of an ecologies of knowledge approach. My kin studies of the local Darebin grasslands led me to grieve, research, and build an intimate, loving relationship with the remnant survivors in the landscape. I realised how important it is to see these survivors and support their attempts to recover from an ongoing genocide.

How the western cognitive empire talks of, to, and with the natural world has enabled the capitalist agenda to see a dead world that can be exploited. The use of language – such as ‘natural resources’ full of ‘ecosystem services’ – removes an animateness of the world and in doing so, removes the world from our very being. This language-ing is embedded deeply into scientific, economic, and every day western prose and means we do not see the living world as deserving of ethical care and thus enabling aenocide (the termination of a species as an attack on time coined by Hatley, 2012). David Abrams has explored ideas around language and its affect on relationships and onto-epistemologies through his text, ‘The Spell of the Sensuous’ (2012). He conducts a sensitive analysis of the power of words and the profound affect the written word has on the cultural evolution of humanity. He notes that the very affirming of animateness allows words to develop for the ‘depths of our ongoing reciprocity with the world’ (p. 56). He extensively explores the oral language practice of Indigenous peoples worldwide and their use of language in prayer, ritual, and story, being not only about communicating amongst fellow humans but also ‘to converse, to renew reciprocity with the surrounding powers of earth and sky. Here words do not speak about the world, rather to the world’ (p. 71). The language we use to describe and make deductions of our phenomenological experiences carries different significances amongst people globally.

The scientific prose enacted in western scientific enquiry denies any reciprocity with nature. Western scientific language uses words that portray a living world as ‘inert, mechanical, and determinate’ (p. 71), or as previously mentioned, as in service to the human project. Through doing this, we not only do the living, fluxing, and emerging world a disservice by not seeing and supporting its essence, but ourselves a disservice by muting our relationality to the world around us, beyond the human. Once we activate a language that honours the beingness of life everywhere, ‘we find ourselves alive in a listening, speaking world’ (p. 86) and can recognise the aenocide that is occurring as a deeply unethical act.

Indigenous scholar Dr Lou Bennet speaks to language emerging from country, and when shaped without a euro-centric perspective can enable a multitude of other ways of seeing and being. She in particular speaks of English language limiting an understanding of time as linear, without any words or concepts to disrupt this linearity. Ethical time may help us here (Rose, 2012). In many non-western cultures, time is viewed as circular and concurrent, and thus imbues in a landscape its ancientness and future all at once, its placeness rich in concept, connection, and thus relationship (Rose, 2012). The idea of timefulness (Bjornerud, 2008), rather than timelessness is another useful shift in language that helps shift our minds to seeing time as bursting with fullness, embodying a deep time perspective. It moves our onto-epistemologies towards a richness, a livingness, a cumulative, reflective ‘performativity of matter’ across time (Barad, 2000) within place, an attempt to encapsulate the temporal offerings that thinking/being with ethical time offers.

Dear flowerland grasslands,

I am sorry. Our ongoing threats continue.

Invasive plants not from this land: clearing and fragmentation: lack of pollination: herbicide use: I feel complicit in a genocide. Please forgive me.

Inbreeding population sizes: introduced herbivores: stock grazing: climate change: hotter, drier: please forgive me.

Introduced predators: foxes and cats introduced invertebrate: ploughing and rock removal. Please forgive me.

Ongoing residential developments: we are not loving you because most people don't even see you.

Flowerland grasslands. Your remnants are holding your stories. How can I best support your Survivors? *I'm listening to the ghost rivers and sleeping volcanoes.*

But, I am only just learning to listen. For the flowerland grasslands are subtle and soft, nuanced and intimate, but once you meet them, their delicate intricateness is seductive for they dance with the wind in golden swathes, so finely in tune to this land and climate.

Darebin, an edge where two bioregions meet, between volcanic grasslands and eucalyptus woodlands. Where insects and flowers and snakes and reptiles, spotted with wetlands and frogs meet the large hollows of owls and possum, gum blossom and shady soil. Where suburbia meets rural, meets education institutes and urban sprawl. Where kangaroos live amongst the red gums with owl bat hollows. Where cows and sheep once roamed and ate Wurundjeri gardens to extinction. Where public housing meets medium density urban housing, meets mansions, meets tiny pockets of millennia-old gardens and ecosystems. Where litter choked creeks meet Friends Groups, cleaning and planting and learning to listen. Where Wurundjeri burn the remnants on the edge of suburbia.

How can we rematriate?

While I sit with you, place, I feel everything's displacement. My displacement. The plants, animals, and fungi, forced towards a genocide, the First Nations displaced from their country, and the many peoples who populate you now and into the future, who too, are displaced, not even able to see you, for you are unfamiliar. We fence the bulbines to protect them.

I can hear everyone's ancestors singing, yelling, laughing, dancing, and crying, together, apart. Olive trees and grapes with gum and rosella. Box thorn and Bursaria standing together.

Seed stories. Who sits in the soil? What wealth remains inactivated in the soil? Will it be dormant for eternity? What plant ancestors lie in the soil, waiting to be inoculated? With ethylene gas from smokey fire, with sun or fungi friend? Bandicoots. We need you.

How can we care for you cryptocrusts? Can we transplant a soil crust? I doubt it. So old, so tied to the soil beneath. What fungi lie beneath our concrete roads? We are learning to mulch and cover the earth from solar rays, but we are mono mulching woodchips. Are we feeding you the right decay wild fungi of the volcanic plains? For we now know, there are weedy fungi too. They haven't evolved with the bulbines. And can the bandicoots ever come back? To spread the fungi spore, to build the chance for volcano life again?

I watch all these beings, these organisms being displaced. I am displaced. And displacement makes it hard to hear. And ongoing colonisation makes it even harder to hear. The ongoing languaging of disconnect and separation, the ongoing educational framing of science as not part of me, the ongoing preference for mown landscapes and roses and massive suburban lawns of buffalo grass.

Remnant Flowerland Grasslands that have survived through colonisation. Bravo! Your strength and determination to exist inspires me. I see you. And I honour you and your right to exist, persist, and evolve.

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I would like to acknowledge the rich, deep evolution of planet earth and its ongoing fluxes and flows of creation and decay through time, with time.

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I would like to acknowledge my ancestors, human and more than human, who have traversed through time, forging the relationships that have given me the opportunity to be part of life; the ancient calcium of fish bones, the oxygen from carboniferous forests, and the ongoing solar rays that shape the world.