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La Trobe University

Ilka Tampke

Written with the Forest

Abstract:

In June 2021, as research for a novel about humans and forests, I undertook a commitment to walk in the forests of Gebhurr (Mount Macedon) every day for one year, and to document the thoughts arising from each day's encounter as an in-situ drafting exercise; in essence, to attempt to write the forest—or my experience of it. Out of this structured entanglement with the poetic possibilities of place, a novel arose. Poststructuralists have long queried the idea of the author as a text's single originating point, just as ecologists and environmental philosophers have questioned the unique status of human subjectivity in relation to wider notions of ecological thoughtfulness. In this article, I will briefly consider what is meant by the term 'forest' and its history as a metaphoric terrain, before describing my own year-long in situ forest writing project. In interpreting this, I draw on existing frameworks that explore the blurred boundaries between environment and human thinking, including Freya Matthew's ontopoetics, Vicki Kirby's grammared biologies, and Australian Indigenous notions of narratively-patterned environments, as well as thinkers of European forests such as Bachelard and Heidegger. I draw widely from the existing research into the relationship between forests and human creativity, in order to argue that the forest may hold a legitimate claim to authorial acknowledgement of works developed within its realm.

Biographical note:

Ilka Tampke teaches fiction at RMIT University. Her first novel, *Skin*, was published in seven countries and shortlisted for the Aurealis Awards and longlisted for the Voss Prize. Her second novel, *Songwoman*, was published internationally and won the Small Press Network Book of the Year 2019. She is currently completing her PhD in creative writing at La Trobe University. ¶

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Introduction

I push my chair back from my desk. Caffeine hums through my veins and sweat prickles my neck in my writing room with its window that doesn't open. My thoughts loop, blur, flatten into an undifferentiated static within which I can't find the midrib of the scene. The shape. The words.

Ten minutes later, I've parked the car, leashed the dogs, and slipped on my raincoat. I cross the threshold into a realm of trees, the ecological, sensory, poetic, and what Robert Pogue Harrison might call 'judicial' (1992, p. 63) otherworld that is a forest.

Immediately my sinuses flood with phytochemicals, my lungs tingle with the cooler air, my vision fills with patterned light filtered through the dendritic spawl of the canopy. Quite literally, the edges between me and forest are permeable. The microorganisms that live in my gut and on my skin were inhaled and absorbed from the forest yesterday and almost every day for the past two years. My endocrine system has been altered by the plant chemicals emitted by trees, just as forest volatile organic compounds have strengthened my immune system (Antonelli et al., 2020). The shape of my calves and the stability of my gait are inscribed by an unsealed terrain of exposed roots, mud, loose stones and fallen branches. My body has been forested.

But it is the way the forest affects my thinking, my ideas and my words that most interests me as a writer. About ten, maybe twenty, minutes into my walk I notice that cognition has loosened. As research into the impact of forests on human health has revealed (Li, 2019), the parasympathetic nervous system has been engaged, my muscles are relaxed yet my senses are awake. My attention meanders from bursting wattle buds to curtain crust fungi on a rotting log. And then it happens. An idea. An image. A narrative event. A pathway through something I've been working on. I stop and pull out my phone to press record and murmur my thoughts into the microphone as I continue walking – experience has taught me that these small flares of creative phosphorescence fade as quickly as they appear. When I listen later, I'll hear the crunch of my footsteps, the gargle of a currawong, the heave of my breath. My thoughts are not separate from these things. Swamp wallaby. Budding wattle. Mud from recent heavy rain. The forest's material and atmospheric field have become the theatre of my imagination, forming not only the scene and subject of my creative work, but the method or ground in which it is created. Could it be possible that the porousness between me and forest is not just biological, but poetic, imaginative, linguistic?

As a novelist who lives and works on Dja Dja Wurrung country an hour north-west of Melbourne, I have been writing with, in, and about forests for the past decade. My initial curiosity about their effect on my writing arose in response to experiences like the one described above, which I know will be recognisable to many writers or artists: I had *ideas* when I went there. When I started forest walking – maybe once or twice a week – I noticed that solutions to narrative problems seemed to arrive in my thoughts. New directions for the work would present themselves. It became so reliably productive, that I started postponing difficult

thinking until I could get there. I started walking with specific questions. The forest answered. At times it seemed uncanny. Walking was part of it. Researchers have clearly established a link between walking and creativity (Oppazzo & Schwartz 2014). But it was not *only* this. Walking around the block, for example, did not produce the same depth and dynamism of ideas. Something *different* happened in the forest. Something to do with the way place thinks.

Poststructuralists have long queried the idea of the author as a text's single originating point, as in, for example, Roland Barthes' canonical description of a text as "a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash" shaped by the "innumerable centres of culture" (1977, p.146). In this article, I follow a (wooded) path attentive to 'nature' rather than 'culture', in questioning the forces at play in the production of a text (noting, with Vicki Kirby, how productively this nature/culture binary might be challenged to allow us to recognise the ways in which nature has its own grammar, syntax and language). I will introduce you to the forest with whom I most frequently write, mapping out its material and metaphoric terrain, before describing my year-long in-situ writing project, in which I delved more deeply into the entanglement between forest and my imagination.

Of the small number of studies investigating the relationship between forests and human creativity, the findings clearly reveal that forests make people more creative (Plambech & Konijnendijk, 2015; Yu & Hsieh, 2020). In these studies, researchers attribute their findings partly to the particular kind of attention that forests elicit, what psychologists Stephen and Rachel Kaplan have termed spontaneous attention, or 'soft fascination': the ability to experience environmental features unnoticed, stimulating the brain without being mentally tiring, the opposite of the kind of vigilant attention demanded by urban environments, such as busy footpaths or heavy traffic (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989).

However, the blurred boundaries between forests and human thinking have been considered through a diverse range of theoretical frameworks beyond the biological and psychological. This includes (but is by no means limited to) accounts of biological life's inherent textuality as described by new materialists Kirby (2010) and Timothy Morton (2010), panpsychist understandings of reality's onto-poetic communicativity as conceptualised by environmental philosopher Freya Mathews (2003), as well as the phenomenological explorations of forest poetics by European thinkers such as Gaston Bachelard and Martin Heidegger and those who write about them, such as Jeff Malpas. Underpinning any thinking of place and writing, must be the Australian Indigenous notions of narratively-patterned environments, particularly those of the Dja Dja Wurrung, Taungurung and Wurundjeri peoples, whose story traditions interweave with the mountain I walk on. I do not attempt to speak for these in this article, except to notice, with interest, where they appear to intersect, corroborate, or inflect the western theoretical frames that I call on in my settler's grappling with place.

These multiple frameworks, to which I will shortly return, follow very different paths, and have different ontological emphases, and yet they arrive at, I suggest, a similar point at which the poetic intelligence of place challenges the notion of a singular human author. The forest, I

argue, may hold a legitimate claim to authorial acknowledgement of works developed within its realm.

What is a forest? How might its particular material and metaphoric configurations shape human thought? What does it mean to write in—with a forest? Like its broader cousin ‘nature’, ‘forest’ is a term that is both intuitively familiar and almost impossible to define. The Journal of Biodiversity, Management and Forestry describes it as “an area of land dominated by trees” (Reich, 2022). But beyond this, the definitions start to fragment according to a number of variables: how big is the area? How dense are the trees and what species? Are they regrown or old growth? Are the trees actually present or have they been logged? How managed is the area? How biodiverse? What is its purpose (Chazdon et al., 2016)? Like most things ecological, it becomes truly meaningful only in the realm of the specific, the local.

The forest *I* am writing with is wet sclerophyll and temperate rainforest on the slopes of a six-million-year-old dormant volcano, which stands at the meeting point of Wurundjeri, Taungurung, and Dja Dja Wurrung country, called Geburh (Mount Macedon) in Central Victoria. Its most prevalent tree species are manna gums and messmates with several large groves of Mountain Ash at higher altitudes along with a smattering of snow gums. The understory includes bracken, tree ferns, heath, poa, hazel pomodaris, as well as dandelion, blackberry and remnants of rhododendrons that were once cultivated in a nursery on its crest. The forest is criss-crossed by walking trails, dirt-bike trails and fire trails, as well as small creeks and watercourses that swell in heavy rainfall. Most of the year, the mountain is cold, drizzly, and cloaked in mist. Animals I have encountered there include swamp wallabies, cockatoos, rosellas, wedge-tail eagles, echidna, wombats, kookaburras, feral goats, foxes and deer, as well as mosquitoes, leeches and ants. Along its borders are colonial mansions, discarded washing machines, and lots of empty beer bottles.

As State Forest it is now protected, and its plant communities grow seemingly according to their own determinations with only minimal human intervention. This sense of vegetal autonomy is part of what draws me to the forest: the dynamic frisson of being within a design matrix patterned by forces other than human, (what Pogue Harrison has referred to as ‘anarchic matter’ [1992, p.62]), but how true is it to say that this forest is not shaped by humans?

Although the forest is native and appears to my unecologically-trained eye as ‘natural’ or ‘original’, it is almost entirely regrown after having been extensively logged in the late 1800’s for its tall species hardwoods. Its terrain is ecological, but also historical, political, spiritual. Within its settler-colonial timespan, it is scarred and storied. As a pre-colonial forest it would also have been shaped by human interactions and technologies such as fire. The distinction between human and non-human determination is less clear than initially appears.

One thing I *can* know, as a creative writer who attempts to attune to the symbolic, is that the forest is metaphoric. Potowami botanist, Robin Wall Kimmerer says “I’m a plant scientist and I want to be clear, but I am also a poet and the world speaks to me in metaphor (2015, p.29). For me, the forest speaks of what is entangled, diverse, rhizomorphous, densely webbed in its

structures, intensely relational. It makes it impossible to maintain the fiction of separateness. Its trees are not old and yet it speaks of something ancient. Its towering forms and granite boulders evoke a structured enormity; its coiling mists suggest what is diffuse and part-seen.

There are no corners. No surfaces that aren't permeable. Nowhere I can look without seeing something that breathes. I'm completely surrounded by living organisms, beneath, around and above me. The only other time I have been so wholly encased in living tissue is in the womb. It is a damp, green, seething mother, what Australian mycologist Alison Pouliot would describe as a place of 'thrilling complexity' (p. 8).

In his exploration of forest poetics, French phenomenologist, Gaston Bachelard is aware that something hums beneath the material surface: "One feels that there is *something else* to be expressed besides what is offered for objective expression," a "hidden grandeur" or "depth" that seeks expression through poetic attunement. For Bachelard, the metaphoric salience of the forest is its "immediate immensity" (1958, p.186). I too encounter life manifest in a kind of amplified intensity, from the enormous height of the Mountain Ash (the largest flowering plant on the planet) to the delicate minuteness of the Yellow-stemmed Mycena, stretching the imagination across a breadth of scale which enfolds vastness and intimacy.

Perhaps it is in the very nature of metaphor, to draw out what is alike in two unlike entities, that certain more-than-figurative relations are revealed. It was my burgeoning awareness of the forest's metaphoric annunciations, and their capacity for mutual disclosure between forest and myself, that led me to want to investigate further. What would happen if I pushed a little harder on the forest's metaphoric lever? How much could I ask the forest to help me write?

In June 2021, on the winter solstice, I commenced a year-long structured practice of daily walking and writing in the forest of Mount Macedon as a way of investigating these questions. The intention of my practice (nicknamed *Mountain 365*) was to document the thoughts and images arising during each encounter as an in-situ journaling exercise, in essence, to write with the forest, to record the interplay of place and imagination, as it occurred in real time.

The structure was very simple: I would visit the forest every day for one year, (allowing a few days off without condemning the project to failure), walk for minimum of thirty minutes, then write a minimum of two pages sitting on the forest floor. I did not want to research the forest itself so much as the images that arose in my mind when I was immersed in it, what Bachelard would call a 'phenomenology of the imagination' (1969 p.xiv). Or as Australian philosopher of place, Jeff Malpas, puts it, "to look at the intelligence of place is thus to look both to the character of place and the character of our encounter with place" (2015, p.1).

The animating question that would guide me was also simple: what did I think in the forest today? I brought no intentional attitudinal state to my walking. I allowed my thoughts to roam freely and curiously without direction, although I would now and then re-anchor myself in my senses and take notice of what I was seeing, hearing, feeling etc. I walked in a state that Bachelard would describe as *reverie* (1989), a state that is dream-like with no loss of

consciousness, and one in which the imaginative terrain might be freely traversed. I *did* bring, however, a positive emotional orientation toward the forest – a pre-existing affection and inclination to care – which intensified over the year, and which Poelina et al. might describe as a ‘feeling-with’ encounter with place (2020) using a language that was “kinaesthetic and empathetic” (p.13).

I completed the project on the 21st June 2022, having walked every day, save for a short stint in hospital and a couple of children’s birthdays – sometimes only thirty minutes, mostly an hour or more. Far from requiring self-discipline, the practice became compulsive, addictive. It was stressful if I *couldn’t* get there. I filled three thick notebooks with words about the forest but as well as this, I produced a work of fiction that was utterly different to anything I had written before.

Unlike my first two books, set in Iron Age Britain on the cusp of Roman invasion, the novel I wrote during *Mountain 365* is itself set on Geburrh. It tells the story of a woman who becomes fatally injured while walking on a remote part of the mountain, giving her only hours to live unless she is found. Facing what she believes is her certain death, she undergoes a moral, maternal and place-based reckoning in her last twelve hours of life. Her entrapment allows her to *see* the forest in a way she never has before. She grapples with the violence the forest has done to her as well as her own violence as mother, as colonist.

Over the course of my year of forest writing, many of my daily reflections found their way into my novel. The whole practice – walking, foresting, journaling – became so inextricably intertwined with composing a novel that at times it barely felt like I was consciously directing the book. I simply walked in the forest and narrative images arrived, which I documented, then later transposed into the story. By the end of the year a novel existed, but was it entirely my work? In what sense had the forest created the story?

It’s not that it wasn’t hard (it was) or that I did not apply my own creative labour to resolving the material (I did). I cannot point to any specific elements or qualities in the resulting text that are attributable to the forest as opposed to my non-forest self. I cannot compare this forest-led book to an imagined version written without the forest, because the forest *is* the book. The entire imaginative fabric of the work arises through a sustained encounter with place, and I acknowledge here that this is a statement easier to intuit than to evidence.

Writers commonly walk through the world, often in nature, as a way of stimulating or clarifying their thinking. It is seen, I would argue, as a pleasant foil or adjunct to the real business of slogging away at a desk. My experience, in *Mountain 365*, was that the biggest creative insights, the most powerful images, the particular phrasing of key or climactic sentences, came to my conscious mind as I walked in the forest. My desire is to understand why that was so, what co-creative forces are at play.

As Kaplan & Kaplan showed (1989), forests effect the human mind by inducing a state of soft fascination, or what architect, Juhani Pallasmaa, describes as an intuitive, ‘polyphonic’ grasp

of the ambiance, arising in settings of safety or nourishment (2015, p.143). “This multisensory, intuitive, and vague perception and cognition,” Pallasma continues, “has also been identified as one of the characteristics for the creative mind.” (2015 p.143) Soft fascination, reverie, responsive attentiveness, feeling-with place: are these the mind-states in which human-forest co-creations might arise?

Forests, of course, have always shaped human thinking, functioning almost as an antecedent or a matrix for thought itself. Pogue Harrison reminds us that humans have turned to trees to:

...forge their fundamental etymologies, symbols, analogies, structures of thought, emblems of identity, concepts of continuity, and notions of system. From the family tree to the tree of knowledge, from the tree of life to the tree of memory, forests have provided an indispensable resource of symbolization in the cultural evolution of humankind, so much so that the rise of modern scientific thinking remains quite unthinkable apart from the prehistory of such metaphorical borrowings. (1992, p.8)

But if the idea of humans thinking *about* forests is ancient, then notions of forests *themselves* thinking is much newer. Contemporary ecologist, David Haskell raises the question of the forest as mind, albeit with caution not to anthropomorphise trees into “leafy people”:

But just as dangerous as projecting human fairytales onto forests is the overzealous rejection of all analogy between human minds and the networked flow of information within ecological communities. Mind emerges from relationships among living cells. We experience one manifestation of these relationships inside the bony plates of our skulls. Other minds may exist within other living networks. (2017)

Ecologist Suzanne Simard is more willing to directly compare humans and forests, claiming “trees don’t have a brain, but the network in the soil is a neural network and the chemicals that move through it are the same as our neural transmitters” (as quoted in Kellaway, 2021).

Notions of forest intelligences are at the forefront of contemporary research, but as this essay attests, I am chiefly interested in the *co-thinking* we do with place, the ways in which *my* mind is constituted by the forest. Could I argue that my (creative) mind exists outside the “bony plates of my skull”? That I need the forest to think? What exactly *did* happen during my year in the forest?

Environmental philosopher, Freya Matthews might describe the encounter as *ontopoetic*, a framing wherein “reality is not only relational in its structure, in an ecological sense, but also potentially communicative and responsive to us” (2017, p.223). Against a metaphysical or panpsychist backdrop, Matthews maps out world as subjectivity or a self “in the sense that it is a psychophysical system with its own project of self-realisation and self-increase” (2007, p. 10), a minded materiality which can “rise up from the passive plane of representation and actively join us in the making of meaning” (2017, p.223).

What is key in Matthews’ conception of reality’s inner subjectival dimension is that it is responsive to the terms by which it is addressed. So, put simply: if I approach the forest, for

example, as a commodity, a storehouse of building material with no inhering communicativeness, I am far less likely to experience it as poetically or meaningfully expressive than if I make my address in terms that provide a narrative or poetic frame of reference (2007, p.8). Such an address, Matthews continues, characterises the invocational practices common to many religious or spiritual traditions throughout history (“to invoke the world is to ask it to manifest its self-meanings to us” [2017, p. 224]). The invocational emphasis is on practice, rather than theory, as the mode of an onto-poetic encounter, one which may be as simple, she suggests, as walking (2017).

There was something in the ‘call and response’ nature of my encounter with the forests of Geburrh, in the way that the forest spoke back to me in terms of the novelistic narrative framework of my address, that resonates with Matthews’ onto-poetic account. This inter-subjectival interaction, rooted in place and mediated by narrative, feels close to what I experienced; I walk in the forest, but the forest also walks me. I think in the forest, but the forest also thinks me. “Who speaks,” asks Bachelard, “the dreamer or the world?” (1969, p.39).

Over the course of the year, the novel I was writing became more and more interested in the forest. With every interaction, the desire to write about it grew. I discovered more things to say. Further questions were raised that pulled me back and held me there longer. The images that animate my novel were forest-born. The forest made me less important, yet more productive. The more attention I paid to it, the more I felt myself dissolving into its thoughts. It seemed to take charge of the narrative. It continues to do so.

At this point, I want to make it very clear that I am not suggesting, in these musings on forest subjectivities, that I have produced a work that ‘speaks for’ the forest or ‘gives it a voice’. Such an assertion would betray a hubristic inflation of my representational powers and intrude into the domain of this mountain’s custodial knowledge traditions, wherein preceding and originary relationships between Country and First Nations people are powerfully and narratively voiced (Black, 2011; Yunkaporta, 2019). Instead, I am interested in how my thinking, my being, is more ‘made of place’ than I had previously understood, that this forest, indeed, voices me.

This idea is beautifully expressed by site-specific visual artist, Gregory Blair, who identifies a particular kind of thought that arises out of a contemplative relationship with place, “one that ontologically fuses place and thinker together” (2014, p.vi). He describes this merger as a “topographical convergence of situated contemplation that creates a localised episteme, or in other words, ‘place-produced thought’”, arguing that, within this reciprocal relationship between place, thinker, and thought, “the agency of place plays a far more significant role than it is routinely ascribed” (2014, p.vi).

In developing his ideas about place-produced thought, Blair looks at the physical environments where several significant philosophers of place, including Heidegger, developed their ideas. Heidegger remains a relevant, (if problematic), thinker of place, not least for me because he himself walked regularly and deliberately along the mountainous paths of Southern Germany’s Black Forest to conceive the ideas for his major philosophical works. I have a life-long familial

connection to these forests. I come into relationship with his ideas through the sites of their conception as much as through their textual form.

For Heidegger, place is revelatory, couched as a clearing or an unconcealing where being comes to presence, ontologically intertwined with ourselves. He maintains that “when we speak of man and space, it sounds as though man stood on one side, space on the other. Yet space is not something that faces man. It is neither external object nor an inner experience. (1997, p.334), which is echoed in Pallasma’s claim that spatial experience is an exchange, “as I enter a space, the space enters me, and the experience is essentially a fusion of the object and the subject.” (2015, p.135).

Heidegger’s assertion that being emerges only in and through place (Malpas, 2008, p.60), speaks to an ontological orientation that is originary in Australian Indigenous philosophies, wherein “place serves as a fundamental existential constant. Place is a measuring device that informs us not only of where we are at any time, but of who we are. Place and being are inextricably bound” (Briggs & Graham 2020). For Indigenous thinkers such as Mary Graham, the question of dividing thinking from place is moot: “Aboriginal logic maintains that there is no division between the observing mind and anything else: there is no ‘external world’ to inhabit” (1999). The fact that such ontological blurrings between being and place might be voiced by thinkers from such different terrains and traditions, speaks to a truth that transcends culture and lineage.

These ontological blurrings all serve to trouble my certainty that the authorship of the poetic work I produced out of a sustained and deep entanglement with the forest is exclusively my own. But how do I imagine that a story, an object constituted by written language, is rendered, if not by my fingers around the pen or at the keyboard, my words, my imagination? As philosopher podcasters, Ryan Engley and Todd McGowan so mockingly confirm in their disavowal of New Materialism, “a [book] is never going to create itself” (2020). But in the cracks that form with the seismic movement of subjectival instability, poetry wells. Narrative pours into the rift.

Malpas, Heidegger, Bachelard, Matthews, and many others, turn to poetics to make sense of the meaning of place, not merely as a descriptive tool, but as a way of conceptualising the nature of reality: “Such a poetics may be seen as actually another form of topography, although it can also be seen as having its own character as an attempt, not to ‘map’ place, but to respond to it, to give expression to it, perhaps to evoke it—that is to bring it to some sort of appearance” (Malpas, 2015, p.5).

This innate, topographical poeticism is compellingly unpacked by Australian feminist theorist, Vicki Kirby. In a radical rethinking of the Nature/Culture binary, Kirby (2011) asks us to reconsider Derrida’s deconstructionist conception of language as synonymous with culture, with the power to subsume Nature itself in its architecture:

The explanatory and productive power of Culture has assumed global proportions.... Indeed, so powerful are these revelatory and constitutive capacities that they have even unveiled Nature as Culture's creation. (p.13)

Kirby's claim is that this conception unwittingly upholds a binary between language the lost originary nature that it represents, locating humans at the origin of language itself. By assuming that an absolute breach separates Culture, or the intricate structures of agency, information, and its interpretation, from something that preceded it, two autonomous domains are inferred. Culture then absorbs the rupture as its own defining energy and the presumed evolution of this "secondariness" is made synonymous with the birth of human thought and language. Language becomes compensation for loss of nature (p. 36).

She observes that many of the world's phenomena, from ant behaviour to soil structure to cellular communication to lightning strokes to the translation capacities of our immune system, appear to be textual, underpinned by an algorithmic order that "shares some workable comparison with natural languages" (p.72). Timothy Morton makes the same observation in relation the algorithms programmed by tree genomes in forests: "one can accurately estimate how many trees they have by studying the pattern of branches and twigs on just one tree" (2010, p.4). "When we zoom into life forms," he argues, "we discover textuality" (2010, p.5).

Kirby's claim is that rather than being a system of representation that stands in for a lost, originary, pre-linguistic world, the systematicities of language are the inhering grammar of life itself:

If it is in the nature of biology to be cultural—and clearly, what we mean by "cultural" is intelligent, capable of interpreting, analyzing, reflecting, and creatively reinventing and memorializing—then what is this need to exclude such processes of interrogation from the ontology of life? (2011, p.75)

She invites us to think about language as "beginning not with the loss of origin that textuality replaces, but with an original (worldly) writing through whose radical interiority, the referent presents itself" (p.46), and that we, in our linguistic, encultured selfhoods, are iterative of an earthly syntax:

Protagoras's aphorism "Man is the measure of all things" gets more interesting. Instead of reading this as an anthropocentric relativism, or the unique capacity of a creature whose distance from the world defines what we understand as an instrumental objectivity, humankind emerges as an expression of the world's measured subjectivity. (p.39)

Within Kirby's framing, I am not so much an author as an instance of that which the world authors. My words are not sovereign, but iterative of a wider linguistic order. It is a radical repositioning with immense implications of which Kirby is well aware:

This "political physics" will inevitably muddle and reorient our moral compass, unsettling sedimented wisdoms about location, about what constitutes embodiment, and asking why a single perspective might prove more comprehensive and entangled than seems possible. (p.20)

And yet the idea of tuning into a grammared reality, a forest whose thinking precedes my own, is creatively thrilling. What might emerge? What might we write? If patterning exists in the forest, as Morton attests (2020, p.4), and I am microbially, chemically, cognitively, ontologically merged with the forest, then surely this pattern must play out in me.

Disruptive as Kirby's ideas might seem, the understanding that language inheres in the material world is one that has been embedded in the forest I walk in for at least sixty thousand years. Within Australian Indigenous philosophies, place, stories, law, and emotions are connected and co-emergent. First Nations thinkers recognise the inherently patterned character of the "universe and everything in it" (Yunkaporta, 2019, p.3), in particular the relationship between language and Country:

The several hundred oral languages Indigenous to Australia are all parts of the ancient growth forests of the human mind. These rich ecology of utterances, from an Indigenous perspective, are *derived from the very earth itself*. [emphasis added] (Poelina et al. 2020)

Within my understanding of First Nations epistemologies, singing and storytelling are more than ways of sustaining knowledge; they are generative practices which enliven and affirm the perpetually unfolding the creation of the land itself. The very fabric of my forest is poeticised.

These Indigenous materialisms, as Alison Ravenscroft argues, pre-empt many of the so-called 'new' materialisms. However, "nowhere in this work", she says of Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter*, "will a reader find the names of the great First Nations intellectuals for whom all matter is indeed vital" (2018).

It is a privilege to walk on land that is sustained by such profound narrative and ontological relationships. As a settler Australian, Indigenous story traditions are not mine to grasp. But materialisms such as Kirby's offer me culturally appropriate ways to enter into a sense that language lies at the thrumming core of this forest I love so much. What words might, arise, as writers, if we meet a forest, not with a sense of ourselves as the exclusive bearer of language, but as a co-collaborator, a readiness to let the place write itself in us?

In light of these framings, my sense of authorial exclusivity is shaken. Perhaps the book *has* created itself. Perhaps I am inscribed and patterned, thought and written, by the forest and all its shimmering grammars, to which I returned day after day, seduced and fascinated, for one full orbit around the sun, to which I continue to return. I feel a kind of addiction to the smell, the phytochemicals, the soil microbes, the blood and muscle orchestration of walking, a dependence on this immersive, encasing vegetal depth for my mind to do its creative best.

That a vitality, thoughtfulness, poetry, language or grammar inhere in the material world is an understanding arrived at through environmental, post-structural, phenomenological and metaphysical lineages as well as underpinning the world's most ancient continuing philosophical tradition. This may point to, I suggest, a profound ontological truth unbound by

culture or tradition. The convergence of these theorists, despite their often radically different epistemological origins, might itself be seen as evidence for the claim that they are all, in some sense, making: that the notional veil between the material and the mental is very fine indeed.

Out of my involvement with the forest, a novel has emerged. The forest is in the language, the imagery, the story, the atmosphere, of the text. It has shaped every sentence. The originating idea for the novel was conceived among the trees and, with every subsequent return, the forest gripped my imagination more deeply, bending the narrative further and further toward itself. My book would not exist without the forest, so how am I so certain that I wrote it alone? How is it *not* the forest's creation? Is failing to cite its authorship a form of ecological plagiarism? Might asking these kinds of questions help to foreground the poetic potencies of the more than human entities – forests, rivers, oceans, soils – that so urgently need to be heard?

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