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# Plants, Processes, Places: Sensory Intimacy and Poetic Enquiry

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# Plants, Processes, Places: Sensory Intimacy and Poetic Enquiry

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## Abstract

As an arts-based research approach, poetic enquiry has been theorised and applied recently in the social sciences and in education. In this article, I extend its usage to eco-critical studies of Australian flora and fauna. The Southwest corner of Western Australia affords opportunities to deploy arts-based methodologies, including field poetry, for celebrating the natural heritage of a region of distinguished biodiversity. I suggest that lyric practices in places such as Lesueur National Park and Anstey-Keane Damplands in southern Perth can catalyse embodied engagements with flora. The outcome of these practices is the invocation of the multiple senses—including the proximities of touch and taste—towards senses of place involving physical interactions with plants and their habitats.

I will discuss poetic enquiry in relation to the limitations of landscape aesthetics. Visual aesthetic modes tend to frame botanical environments as a succession of images. In contrast, an embodied aesthetics closes visual distance towards sensory intimacies and experiences of ecological processes as sensations. Throughout the article, I use an interlude structure that shifts between theoretical elaborations, narrative vignettes that contextualise the poetic practice, and the poems themselves initiated in the field. A continuum between visibility and multi-sensoriality emerges and potentially deepens human appreciation of flora. Poetic enquiry into flora is a means for exploring this continuum towards an understanding of what intimacy with plants in a place entails.

## Keywords

poetic enquiry, flora, multi-sensoriality, embodiment, process, place

Intimacy obtains only where the intimate—world and thing—divides itself cleanly and remains separated. In the midst of the two, in the between of world and thing, in their *inter*, division prevails: a *dif-ference*. (Heidegger 1971: 199)

## Praxis

In 2008, I began research on the aesthetics of Southwest Australian flora.<sup>1</sup> Having previously studied environmental philosophy and design, I was aware of the problematic relationship between aesthetics and landscapes.<sup>2</sup> From the outset, I felt that aesthetic theory and its practices focused on the distillation of spaces into objects, rather than the exploration of human sensory intimacy with lived places. Vistas, views, vantage points and pleasing prospects reduce land to the picturesque, transforming the fields of contact in which sensations happen into surfaces.<sup>3</sup> Yet, not only a physical array to be admired distantly, places comprise felt intersections—those brushes with plants and animals, those encounters with non-human life arising from physical closeness. Immanent experiences of place—engaging the senses of touch, taste and smell in particular—engender attachment and affection through the emotions and the body.<sup>4</sup>

According to the environmental philosopher Allen Carlson (2000: xvii), aesthetics can be defined as ‘the area of philosophy that concerns our appreciation of things as they affect our senses, and especially as they affect them in a pleasing way’. In my thesis on aesthetic experience of plants, I set out a notion of multi-sensory aesthetics through the exploration of encounters with plants in their habitats. Working within the interdisciplinary academic field of cultural studies, I have attempted to poeticise the embodied place of contact ‘in the midst of the two, in the between of world and thing’, in Heidegger’s terms. My field-based approach responds to the tendency in popular culture to reduce the botanical world to a consortium of beautiful objects. The *dif-ference* brings me closer to plants through poetic engagements that linger in the ‘middle voice’ (Carter 1996: 331) towards connectivity through the senses. I prefer to think that I grow and change along with the plants. Rather than detached viewing of landscapes, I have taken an interest in gestures of smell, contacts involving taste and proximities of touch, those untidy sensory entanglements with the world, or what Serres (2008) refers to as our ‘mingled bodies’.

For example, soundscapes and smellscapes, though invisible, can bring about sensation, especially as the senses interact among themselves and with the wor(l)d. As the geographer Paul Rodaway (2002: 64) maintains, smell evades the kind of spatial organisation at the centre of visual aesthetics: ‘Smells infiltrate or linger, appear or fade, rather than take place or situate themselves as a composition’. However, as far as I can surmise, *taste* itself has become indicative of visual desirability.<sup>5</sup> Aesthetics, as I know it, *captures* living things in images as a science of perception.

In taking a position polemically for sensory interestedness and bodily entwinements, I noticed that my academic prose began to suffer from the same stasis I was arguing to counteract. I needed poetic insertion, moments of movement and sense infusion dimpling the carapace of theory I was hiding under. *Entry points*. The poetry would intend to exhibit *praxis*, as derived from the Marxist tradition ‘implying not just practice, but the ideological assumptions undergirding and/or deriving from practice’ (Phillips 1999: 599). For me, *praxis* is reflexive; theory is continually moulded by practice, and, conversely, practice by theory. These interludes are spaces of in-betweenness—interstices in the text—that ground my theoretical ratiocinations. Literally meaning ‘between play’, an interlude intervenes between the longer segments of a performance (a thesis, in this case). Unlike an intermission that disrupts continuity with a pause, an interlude preserves the flow of the work. As part of my *praxis*, poetic interludes affirm my position, not as a disembodied voice speculating, but an embodied presence participating in the sensuous plant life about which I produce knowledge.

***Interlude I: Lesueur National Park, Jurien, Western Australia***

A jaunt through the knee-high vegetation atop Mount Lesueur north of Perth, Western Australia in 2009 was my first excursion into the rich heathlands known as the *kwongan* (Beard & Pate 1984: xvii-xxi). ‘Understanding parrot bush’ narrates an induction. My body-based investigation of the flora of the Southwest region of WA began with *Dryandra sessilis*, also known controversially as of 2007 as *Banksia sessilis*.<sup>6</sup> Through the shifts between discord and ease in the structure of the writing, the poem expresses acculturation to a place through a curiosity about its flora. As a newcomer to the Southwest, the quality of harshness for which Australia’s plants are known, strikes me as the obverse of the silken texture of the flower itself. The land is characterised more accurately as an intersection of extremes: softness and

hardness, distance and proximity, and scarcity and density. I have grappled with the multiple narratives used to describe Parrot Bush, including the master narrative of taxonomy. *Budjan*, as the plant is known to the Nyoongar, the Southwest Australian Aboriginal people, is also designated by an abundance of ever-evolving technical and colonial names that reflect histories. As a crucible for these heterogeneous meanings, the poem provides a deliberately disjointed, even unnerving, rumination.

***Understanding parrot bush***<sup>7</sup>

beside the rusted out

Survey Corps station

*: budjan in the Dreaming*

bolted into limestone occiput

punted by prevailing winds

*: sessilis after Banks*

perfect example of endurance

condensed between ocean

and inner limestone enormity

turret of petals, stamens silky

helter-skelter inside an armamentarium

*: josephia in early taxonomy*

you adapt your downy insides

softer in hardness, more loving in

the hardnesses, this land,

a place of beetles' rest ringed

by tough unflinching spikes

*: virile many-flowered dryandra*

fair seas west off of Jurien

polygonal interruptions south

*: prickly banksia, coarse to touch*

made bold and brash by abrupt

inversions of colour and the shock

that enfolds light-bathed pupils

funnel of mine smoke

intruding upon the low heath disarray

*: a man's flora, shaving-brush flower*



There are over 8000 species of indigenous plants, or more than 14 times the number of species found in the entire United Kingdom.<sup>9</sup> Thirty-five percent of the plants in the Southwest are endemic—found to occur under natural, uncultivated conditions only within the region (Paczkowska and Chapman 2000).

Yet, factual accounts only go so far in promoting appreciation and even less far in bringing about sensation. I have come to understand *landscape* as both an aesthetic and scientific abstraction based in visuality. But, for me, plants pierce through appearances with their sensorial particularities. This is where poetry comes into play. The plants exact attention, gesture and contact that can make for eco-critical—or at least sense-rich—landscape poetry. Wildflowers impart character to a landscape, but most commonly they are the affectionate objects of sight. The Australian visual artist Gregory Pryor (2005) acknowledges the ‘loaded aesthetic appeal of the flower’.<sup>10</sup> Unlike the movement of animals, the subtle motility of plants requires a sensory awareness in order for us to be vigilant about their conflation with static objects of art. The geographers Russell Hitchings and Verity Jones (2004: 11) plainly note that ‘vegetation is something passive in contemporary understanding: to be in a vegetative state is to be without mind. Yet the root of the word “vegetative” is associated with activity and enlivened animation’.

My appreciation of Southwest plants—and my budding aesthetic ideas—confronted an impasse. I needed to infuse the language of flora with *process*, as both ecological and cultural dynamism and movement, to balance the language of stasis that I saw as endemic to a landscape mode of appreciation. Such a mode freezes plants in space and time towards idealised representatives, not individual organisms or lives but members of a collective species.<sup>11</sup> In Heideggerean phenomenology, in contrast, plants epitomise *physis*, a standing forth and going back, a revealing and concealing (Heidegger 1977: 284-317). A process approach to plants counteracts *Ge-stell*, the extraction of a moment in the life of a plant, the strong suit of taxonomic science and the conceptual basis of most botanical image-making (Heidegger 1977). On this point, Feenberg (2005: 30) argues that a plant symbolises:

Rootedness in the earth from out of which it emerges. It stands forth from the earth by going back into the earth, sinking its roots into its source. This double movement—standing forth and going back—characterizes the specific motility of living things.

At one level, my poetic interludes attempt to express how plants grow and decay through time in relation to a place, how their sensuousness changes through the seasons and with respect to human contact.

***Interlude II: Jarrahdale, WA***

Considered the first expert on Australian timber, the early Western Australian forester Ednie-Brown (1899: 10) commented:

Taken as a whole, there is nothing particularly picturesque about the appearance of a Jarrah tree or forest of these. Indeed, the general effect of the species, en masse, is dull, sombre, and uninteresting to the eye.

Clearly these observations indicate that he imported perceptual sensibilities to Australian forests, based in appearances and subtended by a managerialist approaches to ecology. However, there are multiple narratives—Aboriginal, embodied and poetic—of the jarrah tree (*Eucalyptus marginata*) that come into contact, and at times conflict, with scientific concepts of treeness. In Nyoongar belief, the *kaarny* of a recently deceased person would be caught and placed in the burned-out trunk of a jarrah to pacify its restlessness (McCabe 1998: 6). For me, the quintessential act of embodiment is physically entering an old tree and feeling the volatile processes of fire, time and age that hollowed out its core, leaving a tunnel to the sky. The jarrah forest can be a venue for outdoor sport, an antidote to the city and a reservoir of visual beauty. Although many things, the jarrah forest can also be a place that commands spiritual respect (Trigger and Mulcock 2005). I posture myself in relation to the corpus of the jarrah, inviting situations in which bodies reach proximity. I am not looking at the tree, as Ednie-Brown did, but looking at the forest from within the tree as an inversion of the picturesque mode of appreciation.

***Inside a jarrah tree, a black tunnel reaching skyward*<sup>12</sup>**

neatly burned-out innards;  
this tree lives on as skin,  
still supple and twisting in pleats,



but where did the heart go, and the breast bone  
and the heavy, unctuous insides?

the spine endures,  
knobby column ripped bare  
by a magnificent thrust of liquid fire;  
but what about the soul, where is its perch now?

outside, the grass trees don  
verdant headdresses over charred land,  
and kino sap stamps red  
insignias along marri trunks.

have you ever breathed inside a tree,  
and felt the cool glance of air  
where once a molten river ran  
seeing the outside from within?

as witchetty grubs or kookaburras might,  
clawing skyward towards a portal of light?

I would not stand here forever.

## Processes

Process has been my guide. However, there have been two distinct but interrelated processes to consider: my creative writing and research approach along with the life events (e.g. flowering) of the plants I would write about. My poetry in the field began with physical sensation through gestural exploration of plants, stimulated by a general curiosity about the flora of the region. An initiate from North America, I have needed to learn the languages of Southwest Australian places as my second tongue. My body has been the means of exploration and language acquisition. Beginning in 2009, I have recorded my sense impressions in a field notebook that indexes the sensory features of the plants along with the vistas engulfing them. I then turn the stream of consciousness into verse in the field. Metaphors emerge sometimes to express consanguineous relationships between my body and the bodies of plants. Each poem is finalised several

months after my experience in the field, creating a gap of time into which can percolate a menagerie of technical facts, namings and lore along with lingering bodily traces. I also take photographs. The final layout of my thesis employs a palimpsest style. My interludes superimpose words over images to suggest the mixing ground of visual appeal and sensorial narrative. I also wanted to bring into play the idea of the overlaying of colonial nomenclature onto indigenous names for plants.

My poetry evokes—and mimic at times—the processes of plants in order to express how they change. I have come to the awareness that the unconscious grouping together of living plants and objects of art rests on the perception of shared stasis. The contemporary plant morphologist Rolf Sattler identifies how this problem has entered scientific understandings. He transfigures the classical binary between stasis and movement by arguing that anatomical structures themselves are processes:

Structure tends to be considered static, whereas process is dynamic. If we mistake the map for the territory, we conclude that plants consist of structures within which processes occur. On closer inspection we learn, however, that what appears static is in fact also dynamic. (Sattler 1994: 451)

Sattler suggests that the map (the static appearance of form, for example) is not the territory (the complex place of bodily interaction). In contrast to an atomistic view of nature as an aggregation of stable things, process elicits ‘temporality, historicity, change, and passage as fundamental facts’ (Rescher 2000: 3). A postmodern practice of plant ecology would accommodate ‘indeterminism, instability, and constant change’ (Hagen cited in Phillips 1999: 579). Correspondingly, an embodied aesthetics of plants and places would reflect such qualities of dynamism. Rather than immobilised parts, plants can be defined by energetic relations with other creatures in habitats. A sense-rich aesthetics would hold process as an underlying basis for appreciating places through our sensory entanglements.

Importantly, the poet Carl Leggo (2007: 166) reminds us that the term *poetry* is derived from the Greek ‘to make’. The root of *poetry* is *poiēsis*, which may also be defined as ‘in-becoming’. I prefer to define *poiēsis* as ‘in-the-making’ to describe an activity—including one in words—that reveals a process of ongoing engagement with the world, under constant refinement and embodying movement, much like living

places themselves. The artist Andy Goldsworthy (cited in Mabey 2010: 154) professes a comparable creative sympathy for the dynamic interplay between surfaces and depths:

*Movement, change, light, growth and decay* are the lifeblood of nature, the energies I try to tap through my work. I need *the shock of touch*, the resistance of place, materials and weather, the earth as my surface. I want to *get under the surface*. When I work with a leaf, rock, stick, it is not just the material itself, it is opening into the *processes of life within and around it* [italics added].

Heidegger (1982: 59) refers to poetry as ‘an experience with language’. Poetry is one way of apprehending the world *in-becoming*; plants as organisms are in the process of becoming. As a form of enquiry into flora, poetic practice is the undergoing of an experience through the *poiētic* co-generation of plants and language. Language traces seed opening, flower decay, the appearance of barrenness after wildflower season, seed germination, flower irruption and the appearance of fertility after spring rain.

But how would I write these nuances? What ideas would guide the praxis? The concept of *adéquation* offered a promising premise. The ecocritic Sherman Paul (cited in Tredinnick 2005: 282) describes *adéquation* as ‘an activity in words that is literally comparable to the thing itself’. Paul (cited in Phillips 1999: 587) further refers to *adéquation* phenomenologically as ‘a literary equivalence that respects the thing and lets it stand forth’. Yet, *adéquation* alone seemed too potentially distanced, according to Paul’s definitions, for the exploration of intimacies with plants. The Australian postcolonial scholar Paul Carter’s invocation of the middle voice offers a basis for interconnectivity that fits comfortably with my view of praxis as reflexive engagement over time. Carter (1996: 331) defines the core quality of middle voice as ‘folding time in the sense that it dissolves the subject-object relation, grounding each in the other, continuously redefining both in terms of each other, so that the two sides exist echoically or simultaneously’. The middle voice involves ‘discontinuous partial selves, or the self as historical process’ (White cited in Carter 1996: 331) or a self that is a ‘process of continuing becoming’, in Smith’s terms (cited in Carter 1996: 331). Dialogic rather than deterministic, the middle voice can entail a more broadly developed sense of self and place *vis-à-vis* plants and language.

***Interlude III: Anstey-Keane Damplands, WA***

The Mangles Kangaroo Paw (*Anigozanthos manglesii*), also known as the Red and Green Kangaroo Paw, has been the floral emblem of Western Australia since 1960 (Corrick & Fuhrer 2002: 83). Nyoongar people have known this iconic Southwest plant by its traditional name *kurulbrang*; the tender rhizomes have been traditionally consumed before the emergence of the flower (Hopper 1993: 65). In 1834, botanist David Don (1835: 266) published the first formal description of a cultivated Mangles Kangaroo Paw:

This singularly beautiful species of *Anigozanthos* was raised in the garden at Whitmore Lodge, Berks, the seat of Robert Mangles, Esq. from seeds brought from Swan River by Sir James Stirling, the enterprising governor of that colony, by whom they had been presented to Mr. Mangles.

Like other species such the donkey orchid, the kangaroo paw draws its common name zoomorphically. The new flower 'capped in green' is concurrent with the onset of spring, the season in which 'colour is gestated', but soon the complex blossoms 'resign to brown'. Through colour process, the poem signals the passing of a season within itself. As a macrocosmic unit of change, a season consists of constant microcosmic instances of transformation that herald its overall passage. The poem is haptic.

**First Kangaroo Paws<sup>13</sup>**

they speak charmingly this way—  
up briskly from tawny earth  
candelabras of crayon red, capped in green,  
the old tentacles darkening to crimson;

refractions of sunset imprinted in soil  
but spiraling back to dust already under  
zephyr swoosh and swivel of gum leaves.

the roos closer to ground than me  
imbibe root steams of warm earth—  
stutter and overstep razors  
of *Isopogon* and pricks of *Hakea*

leap, pant against barb wire bush.  
wind-spurred rain skittles over ground  
hankering for sun, colour is gestated;

spry newbies in variegated cradles,  
kangaroo paws crane necks,  
resign to brown, shrivel pubescent hope  
in glistening perimeters

I breathe into conch shell flowers:  
bristly hairs ping my nose,  
the shimmering season shucks off.

## Poetics

The plant-poet nexus surfaces in the literature of most cultures. Poet-botanists from William Wordsworth to D.H. Lawrence wrote at the boundary between the categorisation and appreciation of the plant world.<sup>14</sup> My botanic-poetic interludes extend this rich tradition, but I have tried to take Henry David Thoreau's ideal to heart. I have aimed to 'nail words to their primitive senses' by expressing bodily encounters with flora (Thoreau 1862/2007: 29). I knew that the polemic slant of my thesis would be of the mind rather than the felt intimacies 'in the between of world and thing'. Thus, the interludes are meant to create a kind of chemistry between sensation and analysis, a style employed by other scholars of arts-based enquiry.<sup>15</sup> A short preamble contextualises each poem, and theorises its arts-based underpinnings. The interludes aim to concretise aesthetic ideas, without glossing over my bodily presence or my position as writer and researcher.

In particular, since the beginning of my project in 2008, I have drawn from the writings of poet Carl Leggo in using poetic practice. Leggo (2007: 167) suggests that the zones between analytic and creative research are dynamic places, accessible through poetry as 'textual spaces that invite and create ways of knowing and becoming in the world'. A botanic-poetic interlude opens a space, a pause for rumination, a breath for reflection and an opportunity to express sensuous contact. Whereas Leggo emphasises the capacity for poetry to balance the logos-privileged discourses of the social sciences,

poetic enquiry may be similarly extended to the natural sciences where the attainment of pithy truths has produced specialised ways of knowing places. Poetic enquiry into Southwest flora summons the ‘two mingled voices’ of literature and science (Hayles 1990: 176-177). The act of writing poetry can foster relationships between plants, people and places that span the two cultures of objective knowledge and subjective insight.

Despite its social science focus, arts-based research can be broadened to include flora. Ardra Cole and J. Gary Knowles (2007: 59) attempt to legitimise arts-based research as a ‘mode and form of qualitative research in the social sciences that is influenced by, but not based in, the arts broadly conceived’. Lorri Neilsen (2007: 93-104) uses ‘lyric enquiry’ to describe research practices characterised by song-like outcomes. Monica Prendergast (2009: xxxv) defines poetic enquiry as ‘a form of qualitative research in the social sciences that incorporates poetry in some way as a component of an investigation’. Similarly, Carl Leggo (2007: 168) characterises poetic enquiry *poiētically* as ‘a way of knowing, being, and becoming in the world’. Poetry traces the becoming of bodies across fixed points, such as aesthetic imagery and factual pronouncements. Importantly, for Leggo (2007: 168), poetry expresses ‘ongoing engagement’ with the world beyond the demarcations between the creative arts and social sciences imposed by the academy.

Poetic enquiry can become ‘geoautobiography’, or the narrative exploration of one’s personal history in relation to the story of the land (Porteous 1996: 244). An embodied aesthetics in which the materiality of a place interplays geoautobiographically with the body of the researcher emerges in the work of arts-based researcher Suzanne Thomas (2004) who deploys poetic enquiry to develop a research approach to coastal Canadian islands. She writes: ‘I experience island as an inter-subjective, corporeal encounter—my human body moving in relation to natural bodies of island(s); my body and the bodies of islands in relation to one another, and to the immensity of the sea’ (Thomas 2009: 128). In the poem ‘Prima materia’, Thomas writes of the body of a dead seal: ‘Ripe flesh, rotting skin/ lie transmutable/ carrion, offal, microbe, maggot/ dissolving body returns to earth’ (Thomas 2004: 170). Her body is a sensorium, the senses as a whole acting as the interface between herself and what she studies. Her senses move between distance and proximity, and her poetic outcomes soften the subject-object assumptions between humans and landscapes, feeling and

intellect. The work of Thomas reminds us that bodily decay is an enveloping *poiēsis*, especially connected to the immediacy of smell.

Expanding the idea of geoautobiography, I liken my approach to 'geoautoethnography', or the exploration of one's personal, visceral relationship to places. Having qualities of ethnography, which provides the human context of an investigation, such an approach links research choices and behaviours to a place. Poetic enquiry incubates personal memories, cultural histories, quirky anecdotes, taxonomic nomenclatures, metaphorical associations and emotional insights. Whereas my thesis could have taken the form of an entirely polemic Foucauldian study of plants, it evolved into a more hybridic and ficto-critical piece of work, blending analytical and sensory writing. In addition to bodily engagement, I relied also on taxonomic guides, such as the Department of Environment and Conservation's *FloraBase* to understand the plants with which I have been working.<sup>16</sup> As a caveat, my connected sense for subjectivity, while a critical working principle for forwarding my idea of botanical aesthetics, recognises the improbability of the dissolution of the observing subject and observed object. The historian and philosopher Patrick Curry (2010: 206) characterises such a position as a 'viable middle way, grounded in our embodied, imperfect, unstable, liminal nature'.

***Interlude IV: John Forrest National Park Near Perth, WA***

Leggo (2006: 148) advocates a balance between quantitative inclinations and qualitative feeling, that we become 'present and open sensuously to the whole earth'. He promotes a sense-rich rumination on the natural world as a:

Poetics of research in long walks on the dike where I listen to light, smell the line of a heron startled into slow motion by my presence, taste the screeches of eagles and hawks, poke with the roots of alders and aspens into the black earth, see the scent of the seasons. (Leggo 2001: 177)

Like Henry David Thoreau, Leggo (2006: 151) enters into the fabric of the world through a bodily eye, through *corporeal* participation: 'What I want is to revel in what I am seeing, to see with the whole body, so that my body is rendered alive, is written in the poems'. As an example of a poetic narrative of openness to plants, 'Sunday zamia swagger' plays on the condition *zamia staggers*, a toxic shock known to develop in cattle grazing on the zamia palm. I was intrigued by the dual notions of a plant as a poison to be shunned or destroyed by colonists, but a nutriment to be consumed and fostered by Aboriginal peoples as *djiridji*. I

wanted to get close to the villainous species through the embodiment of walking. The result was not only a confrontation with the cultural history of a plant, but a rediscovery of the essential expressions of gestural curiosity and sense openness.

**Sunday zamia swagger<sup>17</sup>**

by the fire, Sunday morning I imagine *by-yu*  
so meander out to the folds between rolling land  
higher to the scarp where the red gums thicken;

a Qantas jet groans, the sun strikes sporadically,  
under the path of flight through autumn clouds—  
from its lonely nook, a dusky roo breaks into  
fricatives;

cross-hatches of wash-outs and dirt tracks  
to the bitumen wending west to Swan View—  
a scenic vista, lugubrious cars slanted at the edge  
a woman with a crew-cut extinguishes a butt  
a faceless man slinks into the peace of nothingness

others pass slowly | the way to better things:

an imperturbable hydra, squat black trunk  
leaflets stiff as blinds, crisp as piano keys played  
*forté* in one long swipe through seven octaves  
tawny cones leaking aloe, striking the nostrils  
*larghissimo*, tessellations of earth acridities  
eerily dying back into a rotunda of arachnid legs

Grey observed 'violent fits of vomiting'  
Vlamingh, 'no distinction between death and us'  
savouring its bready fruits, unsoaked like hazels  
cattle staggered at the poison of the New World,  
encased in the sweet flesh of a nut.



## Places

I have come to feel that sense of place forms best for me through experience of plants in a place over time. When I first came to Perth in 2008, I read the works of the Western Australian ecologist and author of *Sense of place*, George Seddon. He expressed an initial aversion to Southwest plants: 'The country was all wrong ... All the plants scratched your legs. The jarrah was a grotesque parody of a tree, gaunt, misshapen, usually with a few dead limbs, fire-blackened trunk, and barely enough leaves to shade a small ant' (Seddon 1972: xiii-xiv ). In *Landprints*, twenty-five years later, Seddon's language blossoms with intimacy. He describes a 'profusion of creamy spikes' of *Melaleuca huegelii* and *Acacia rostellifera* 'wind-sheared into a dense mound which protects the soil and moulds the landscape' while *Templetonia retusa* 'puts out its brick-red pea flowers in spring' (Seddon 1997: 13). Seddon records his identity in-becoming in a new place. His growing identity gathered together personal, public and natural histories and rested on a continuum between bodily aversion (*the country was all wrong*) and aesthetic revelation (*the flowers are all right*). As eco-humanities writers have noted, place can be 'embodied spatiality', entailing physical permeability between people and a place (Rose and Robin 2004).

The British nature writer Richard Mabey (2005: 152) comments that 'plants are part of what makes a locality, differentiates it, makes an amorphous site into a place, a territory, an address'. My interludes attempt to convey place consciousness through plants as the processes of cultural history, ecological meanings, sense invocations and my polemic self. To this, Porteous (1996) suggests that sense of place occurs narratively. Furthermore, for Susan Griffin (1995: 9), sense of place can be a sacred act of consciousness and embodiment:

If human consciousness can be rejoined not only with the human body but with the body of earth, what seems incipient in the reunion is the recovery of meaning within existence that will infuse every kind of meeting between self and the universe, even in the most daily acts, with an eros, a palpable love, that is also sacred.

As 'Sunday zamia swagger' relates, common gestures of curiosity enable intimate connections to places as sacred 'even in the most daily acts'. The spatially transformative quality of walking, as an example, contests exact geometries with shiftings of shapes and the perception of patterns: circles become lines, spheres are seen as assemblages of squares in places that constantly refuse two-dimensional

constructions. Carter (1996, 178-179) uses *peripateia* to connote 'a measuring-out of consciousness spatially...the ground where one walks provides the metre of one's thoughts. The lie of the land, its irregular stresses and *glissandi*, provides...home'. Walking is the definitive act through which my body extends into the world, gestures towards plants, makes contact and creates intimacies. In Heideggerean terms, this is a *movement* from a 'covetous vision of things' to an intermeshing with world. It is ultimately a language-based conversion from 'the work of the eyes, to the "work of the heart"' (Heidegger 1971: 136). For me, sense of place importantly involves becoming intimate with the plants of my surrounds and through the kinds of bodily encounters I have described. At the close of my project, I arrive at a metaphor: the delta of plants, processes and places is nourished by the watery tracings of poetry and sensory intimacy. And whilst there can be proximity, there is also *dif-ference*.

#### Biographical note

John Ryan is a doctoral candidate at Edith Cowan University where he has been working on a thesis called *Plants, People and Place: Cultural Botany and the Southwest Australian Flora*. Thesis chapters have been published in *Australian Humanities Review*, *Continuum* and *Nature and Culture*. His poetry has appeared in *Bukker Tillibul*, *dotdotdash*, *Yellow Field*, *Landscapes* and *ekleksographia*. In 2012, he will be published in the collection *Fremantle Poets 3: Performance Poets*. He lives near Forrestdale Lake, Western Australia.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> For an account of this project, please see J Ryan 2009 "Plants that perform for you"? from floral aesthetics to floraesthesia in the Southwest of Western Australia', *Australian Humanities Review*, 47: 117-140, <<http://epress.anu.edu.au/ahr/047/pdf/10.pdf>> (accessed 29 April 2011)

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, A Berleant 2005 *Aesthetics and environment: variations on a theme*, Burlington: Ashgate Publishing

<sup>3</sup> For a geographer's understanding of landscape, see D Cosgrove 1998 *Social formation and symbolic landscape*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of the autocentric senses, see J Porteous 1996 *Environmental aesthetics: ideas, politics and planning*, London: Routledge, 31

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- <sup>5</sup> Kant trifurcated perception into the senses, reason and imagination. Taste as a metonym for aesthetic judgement can be identified in, for example, I Kant 1974 *Anthropology from a pragmatic point of view*, The Hague: Nijhoff
- <sup>6</sup> The controversy of the restructuring of the *Dryandra* genus was described to me by K Collins, personal communication, 9 September 2009, Banksia Farm, Mount Barker, Western Australia
- <sup>7</sup> J Ryan 2011 'Understanding parrotbush' *Katoomba incantation*, Allahabad: Cyberwit, 54-55
- <sup>8</sup> See for example the brilliantly photographed travelogue by S Breeden & K Breeden 2010 *Wildflower country: discovering biodiversity in Australia's Southwest*, Fremantle: Fremantle Press
- <sup>9</sup> This statistic was relayed to me by M Bennett, personal communication, 13 September 2009, Hopetoun, Western Australia
- <sup>10</sup> See para 9 of G Pryor 2005 'Black death: species extinction in WA', *Artlink*, 25(4), <<http://www.artlink.com.au/articles.cfm?id=2227>> (accessed 15 April 2011)
- <sup>11</sup> See J Ryan 2009 'Why do extinctions matter? mourning the loss of indigenous flora in the Southwest of Western Australia', *Philament*, 15: 51-80, [www.arts.usyd.edu.au/publications/philament/issue15\\_pdfs/RYAN\\_Why%20Do%20Extinctions%20Matter.pdf](http://www.arts.usyd.edu.au/publications/philament/issue15_pdfs/RYAN_Why%20Do%20Extinctions%20Matter.pdf) (accessed 15 December 2010)
- <sup>12</sup> J Ryan 2011 'Inside a jarrah tree, a black tunnel reaching skyward', *Katoomba incantation*, Allahabad: Cyberwit, 33
- <sup>13</sup> J Ryan 2011 'First kangaroo paws', *Katoomba incantation*, Allahabad: Cyberwit, Allahabad, 28
- <sup>14</sup> For an overview of the tradition of poets writing about plants, see M Mahood 2008 *The poet as botanist*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- <sup>15</sup> See for example J Knowles 2001 'Writing place, wondering pedagogy', *The art of writing inquiry*, eds L Neilsen, A Cole & J Knowles, Halifax: Backalong Books, 89-99
- <sup>16</sup> See for example Department of Environment and Conservation 2011 'FloraBase: Santalum spicatum', <<http://florabase.calm.wa.gov.au/browse/map/2359>> (accessed 17 April 2011)
- <sup>17</sup> J Ryan 2011 'Sunday zamia swagger', *Katoomba incantation*, Allahabad: Cyberwit, 17