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'Under the Forest' & 'Ladyswamp': a radio play and a sonic poem.

Dr Patrick Van Der Werf
Dr Josephine Scicluna

Deakin University

'Under the Forest' and 'Ladyswamp' are the first outputs of the ongoing Lyrebird Project, so named in acknowledgement of its major inspiration, a text of folk history called *The Land of the Lyrebird*. The two pieces deal with locations that are united by the flow of water from the upper catchment of the Tarwin River, to the river flats near the South Gippsland coast. Thematically (poetically) and literally (geographically) the flow is from Erosion to Silt. The pieces are also united by a sound design that acknowledges the need to subvert the actual sounds of location in the reproduction of location in poetic terms.

'Under the Forest' explores the process of memory becoming amnesia as it follows the destruction of the forest, the becoming mud and finally the naturalization of the landscape into farmland. A teenage boy is lost to the forest and each member of his family secretly searches for his remains as the forest gives way.

'Ladyswamp' is based on a local Gippsland story of the so-called 'lady of the swamp', Margaret Clement, who lived with (and survived) her sister for many years in the swamp that had returned to claim their land after silt accumulated in the network of drains on the property. Their story is of the tension between different versions of the same landscape. This sound poem also explores pathways conceptually as formative of our sense of place. The ritual wading through the swamp of Margaret Clement – the body of a woman becoming swamp – haunts and is haunted by a bigger story of land whose ownership is contestable.

*The Land of the Lyrebird*: Context and background

*The Lyrebird* project takes its name and inspiration from what Paul Carter describes as 'one of the most remarkable compilations of settler records' (1987: 151): *The Land of the Lyrebird*. This text is remarkable for a number of reasons, not least of which is that it brings to life in vivid detail a place which no longer exists. It outlines the processes by which the destruction – or rather transformation – of place is enacted. And even more than that, it covertly and sometimes overtly forms a nuanced critique of this process of amnesia. Curiously, even though the narrative has something of the grandeur of the sort of frontier mythology, which forms such a prominent role in the North American sense of nation building, it somehow manages to narrate its own erasure. The text is at first blush a heroic colonial tale of conquest against the harsh forest, but it is also a major work of natural history, which incorporates the forest and its process of becoming memory. The end point of the narrative structure of the book is a deflating return to normality, where the narrative looks back to what was left behind in the forest.

*The Land of the Lyrebird* is composed of numerous recollections and experiences of the first settlers, as well as more specialised essays on – for example – roads, the dairy industry and aspects of the extinct or barely extant natural history of the area, also written by the settlers. Part of the sense of erasure comes from the impetus of the book itself, that the process of making was an attempt to preserve not the place, but its memory; that the text becomes a kind of last-ditch captive breeding...
Our journey down the river takes the project to the edge of the boundary of the Land of the Lyrebird, location.characterises both radio pieces acknowledged the need to abandon authenticity in the reproduction of an aesthetic representation we planned to do. However, as stated earlier, the sound design which In this research we decided to enter into this country and seek traces that might contribute to the Inlet, but in the high country itself it fragments into two branches, then into many tributaries which snake their way through gullies often hidden by scrub. The river becomes both treacherous and unnameable.

The river is an uncertain presence in Lyrebird accounts. It drains the high country south to Anderson’s occupation of the fertile east. More significantly though, the Tarwin appears to have traditionally formed a contested border between the Bunurong of Westernport and the Gippsland Kurnai. The nineteenth occupation of the fertile east. Much time and money were invested in finding a viable route through this country.
The inland country of South Gippsland, the aptly named ‘Great Forest’ was not occupied by Europeans until the 1860s-1880s. The country was steep and so heavily forested as to be almost impenetrable. The Indigenous presence in this land is barely covered in The Land of the Lyrebird, though one telling and somewhat eerie passage by T.J. Coverdale describes finding ‘tornahawks…all on the surface, showing they couldn’t have been there any length of time…’ (Land of the Lyrebird, 2001: 31). It seems likely that in Gippsland, as elsewhere, the pastoralists had more contact with the indigenous populations than did the selectors who came after them.

What is of interest to us here is not the contested pre-occupation history, but the sense of disconnection the settlers immediately have from any historical continuity or prior ownership.

The recollections are at pains to record first impressions and to describe in great detail the place and ecology as they found it. Coverdale again:

You might stumble on to a precipice, a river, or a mountain, all invisible a few minutes before. Perhaps the scrub would change from mask to hazel, or perhaps from either to sapling country, where the great old forest trees suddenly disappeared or lay around like giants slain on the battlefield of some elemental war (Land of the Lyrebird, 2001: 104).

The only human marks Coverdale records in this account are the marks – ‘blazes’ – left by the various surveyors who had cut tracks and divided blocks. The accounts mostly have a flavor of both Darwin and the Old Testament.

Geographies: The Tarwin River

We reached the Tarwin River on January 1st, 1878, and I pegged out 320 acres FRANK DODD (Land of the Lyrebird, 2001: 130).

The Lyrebird project has developed a shadow, which is the Tarwin River. The Tarwin is significant in accounts of attempts to both settle and to find easy access between Melbourne and the early pastoralist occupation of the fertile east. More significantly though, the Tarwin appears to have traditionally formed a contested border between the Bunurong of Westernport and the Gippsland Kurnai. The nineteenth century anthropologist A.W. Howitt has Kurnai territory beginning at the Tarwin (1996: 71).

The river is an uncertain presence in Lyrebird accounts. It drains the high country south to Anderson’s Inlet, but in the high country itself fragments into two branches, then into many tributaries which snake their way through gullies often hidden by scrub. The river becomes both treacherous and unnameable. In this research we decided to enter into this country and seek traces that might contribute to the aesthetic representation we planned to do. However, as stated earlier, the sound design which characterises both radio pieces acknowledged the need to abandon authenticity in the reproduction of location.
As mentioned earlier, the Tarwin River formed a contested border between the Bunurong and Kurnai. Other stories haunting it regarding the land: both Indigenous and colonial.

By the Clement sisters required a vigilance, a constant maintenance to keep the water channels from swamp' story seemed to be a microcosm of the bigger narrative explored in 'Under the forest' of the Land of the Lyrebird (Scicluna & Kazas, 2011) looks for traces in the land, of bones and memories as it follows the destruction of the forest and the naturalization of the landscape into farmland. In The Road to Botany Bay, Carter writes: 'To transform the forest into an inhabitable interior, light had to be made dark and the dark light. The tall had to be laid low, revealing widening horizons (1987: 269).

Further, 'To build a house out of the split remains of the forest was not so much to destroy the tree as to climb inside it and raise oneself up' (269).

This is the process which needed to be explored in the radio play: that the arbitrary nature of arrival in such a context requires a further process of transformation. In The Land of the Lyrebird there are many photographs, which illustrate this process of becoming. The images carry an eerie liminal quality of life and death, where the tall trees remain as corpses as the ground beneath is opened up to the sky. (see url http://www.Writingfix.com.au). Mr A Gillan (along with his sister 'Miss Gillan' who writes about the destruction of the Lyrebird 39), appears to have a strong affinity for the forest. He writes:

In looking around, the horizon bounding the view presents a jagged outline of trees, some green and full of vitality, whilst others stand out prominently with gaunt and bare branches bereft of their foliage, and appealing as it were to heaven against their destruction by the hand of man (144).

In the play, the search for the remains of the lost teenager, Caleb, becomes a process of coding the land with meaning, a way of making difference that can be talked about. But it's a search, which closes down conversation, as each member of the family internalizes the sense of place and goes off in search without ever saying that this is what they are doing. By the time the bones are found they are simply reburied, silently.

The burial like all stories of this lost land becomes uncertain. One of the key tensions in The Land of the Lyrebird is the way transformation of the land occurs. Several accounts describe how the scrub returns, or how early crops are destroyed by plagues of caterpillars. More particularly, there is the constant presence of mud as the soil is stripped bare:

And then, when the rains came, my father and I sat on the veranda and watched our soil wash down into the creek. And we both asked the same silent question - did we bury those bones deep enough? (Van Der Werf, 2011).

The sound poem 'Lady of the Swamp' (Scicluna & Kazas, 2011) has its origins in the accumulation of silt. Silt was pivotal in the (mis)fortunes of two belles of Melbourne society, Margaret and Jeannie Clement, whose family purchased Tullaree homestead, an 1100 hectare property on the Tarwin River flats in South Gippsland,1907. After Jeannie died an invalid in 1950, Margaret, so-called 'lady of the swamp' remained on the property for another two years before vanishing in mysterious circumstances. Believed murdered, her body was never found.

That these sisters persisted in occupying the land, despite their being unable to manage it in the manner of their colonial forbears, formed a strange dialectic. It became a fault line to explore. The 'Lady of the swamp' story seemed to be a microcosm of the bigger narrative explored in 'Under the forest' of the doggedness and determination of new settlers to get the land in order, which then created passageways to enable the easy flow of people, of water etc. But to maintain such an order on the property inhabited by the Clement sisters required a vigilance, a constant maintenance to keep the water channels from silting up. Thus the Swamp story could be seen to inhabit a dynamic space or a moving intersection with other stories haunting it regarding the land: both Indigenous and colonial.

As mentioned earlier, the Tarwin River formed a contested border between the Bunurong and Kurnai.

Niel Gunson, in his review article of the journals of Augustin Robinson, describes what are regarded as two levels of extinction or 'succession' of the Aboriginal population. The first level of extinction (from the 1800s on) could be attributed to Bass Strait sealers' rape of local women and subsequent spread of syphilis.
1800s on) could be attributed to Bass Strait sealers' rape of local women and subsequent spread of
disease, 'exacerbated further by brief convict settlement around 1820' (2011: 235). Gunson continues:

This then opened the land to the tribal fighting between the Bunurong on one side of the
territory and the people between the Bass and the Tarwin river on the other side…The
second extinction, or 'succession' took place much later and was caused by internecine
fighting between the Bunurong inhabitants of the Tarwin river area and the neighbouring
Garai/Kurnai or Gippsland tribe in which the Bunurong were eventually eliminated (ibid).

The writing of 'Ladyswamp' aimed to disturb the boundaries between presence and absence to see the
ways in which one invited the other. The sound design for both 'Ladyswamp' and 'Under the forest' also
tried to disturb such boundaries. Kazas describes the sounds of the swamp in the soundscape as literally
rising over the voice until the voice becomes vestigial, haunting. It loses precedence amongst the elements
of the harmonic and dissonant sounds of animals, birds and water (2010).

Declination, in its astronomical sense, is 'the angular distance of a heavenly body (north or south) from
the celestial equator, corresponding to terrestrial latitude' (The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary).
Declination also means 'the dip of the magnetic needle'; a metaphor used to suggest a shift or alteration
in consciousness.

The Clements' story was one of declination. In usage of the word 'declination' its rare meaning is also
implicit: that of 'courteous refusal'. The sisters sank into poverty, clinging to their heavily mortgaged land,
courteously refusing outside help, as the drainage channels silted up and the swamp reclaimed the land.

In our re-imagining of this story, thus is our sense of place:

We did not choose to live alone
Rather, solitude like the water overcame us
Place is a habit overcoming us
(Scicluna, 2011).

Listen to 'Under the forest'.

Read the script of radio play here (http://www.writingfix.com.au/projects/lyrebird/under-the-
forest/under-the-forest/)

Listen to 'Ladyswamp'.

Read the text of Ladyswamp here. (http://www.writingfix.com.au/words-for-ladyswamp/)

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'Ladyswamp' (2011) by Josephine Scicluna & Tom Kazas, produced by Tom Kazas, Melbourne, 10
mins, 50 secs (sound recording).


'Under the Forest' (2011) by Patrick Van Der Werf & Tom Kazas, produced by Tom Kazas, Melbourne, 24 mins, 30 secs (sound recording).