Against Place (the Lyrebird Shows the Way)

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In this essay I argue that “place” (hereafter capitalized in order to emphasize its artifice) is a conceptual imperium, and that Place-based poetics are therefore versions of aesthetic imperialism. A Place is a giant shopping mall for the mind: we can get lost in it for hours, days, forever, all but entirely oblivious to what’s going on outside, in the weather, on the street. I am far from the first to point out that Place is not an ideologically free basis for landscape, and I don’t want to propose that Places do not or cannot exist—on the contrary, they can acquire extraordinary significance. I don’t want to say, either, that the concept of Place is devoid of complexity or interest (there is much to think about, and value, in Place¹). However, I do want to argue that it is impossible to create a Place without negating to some degree the diffuse lives and forces on which its composition depends; my position is that Place-based writing doesn’t encourage the right kind of attention. Later on, the lyrebird will come to the rescue, but for now I will address two key Place problems.

¹ See, for example, J.E. Malpas. 1999. *Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topography*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.

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Firstly, Place is inseparable from what Val Plumwood calls “shadow places.”² Valorization of Place, particularly one’s homeplace or origin, is problematized by the inequities of the global economy and, consequently, Western culture. This culture, Plumwood writes, “creates a split between the singular, elevated, conscious ‘dwelling’ place, and the multiple disregarded places of economic and ecological support.” Place-based writing compounds this situation “by encouraging us to direct our honoring of place towards an ‘official’ singular idealized place consciously identified with self, while disregarding the many unrecognized, shadow places that provide our material and ecological support, most of which, in a global market, are likely to elude our knowledge and responsibility” (Plumwood 2008, 139). Furthermore, the privileging of rootedness in such writing excludes dispossessed and dislocated identities.³ But Plumwood doesn’t want to dismiss Place altogether—Place is a crucial site for grounding activism and critique; the problem, rather, is that Place-based writing often simplifies the environmental project by treating attachment to Place “as unified, innocent, and singularistic” (Plumwood 140). Instead, proper ecological thinking “has to be much more than a literary rhapsody about nice places, or about nice times (epiphanies) in nice places.” Ecological poetics must therefore avoid “substituting a simplistic ideal of atomic places for recognition of the multiple, complex network of places that supports our daily lives” (Plumwood 2008, 139). Place, then, obscures other Places.

Unfortunately, however, the flaws that Plumwood outlines are only part of the problem. The more subtle, but arguably more damaging, consequence of such poetics is that Place is a generalization: as a signifier, Place belies the complexity of any networked, multispecies terrain. Thus, Place is related to other problematic terms such as “environment” and, worst of all, “nature.” To be sure, each of these terms has its use, but each term opens the way (clears the terrain) for profound violence; each eradicates difference, idiosyncrasy, and the lives of myriad individual beings and transcorporeal partnerships. Accordingly, Place says nothing

² Here I draw on an earlier discussion of Plumwood’s shadow places. See Stuart Cooke. 2011. Echo-Coherence: Moving on from Dwelling. *Cultural Studies Review* 17(1): 23046.

³ For further details on the problematic relationship of Place-based discourse to global, environmental justice movements, see Ursula K. Heise. 2008. *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

about the particular relationships—the *communities*—of beings that are fundamental for ecological flourishing. After all, Places are not pre-made containers into which organisms are inserted by an omniscient creator; rather, Places are made *by* particular communities of particular organisms and their ancestors (Morton 2012, 51)—Place, in other words, has no a priori ontological value. I don't want to push this point to its limits, however: as Plumwood makes clear, it's not that all writing about, or from, or for places is simply *bad*; rather, the question is one of attention—yes, place is there, it opens, it welcomes, it encloses, but look a little closer at that pronoun: what is “it,” who lives there, who made it? We need to wake up. We know too much about the biosemiotic complexity of nonhuman systems, which is to say nothing about what we should already know about Country: everywhere in Australia, the land is speaking and listening, and alive with human and more-than-human life.⁴

Nevertheless, a valid objection to this sort of polemic might be that Place is valuable for a progressive poethics because of its *inclusiveness*. Place orients and gathers—diverse experiences, histories, and animate and inanimate things—into its field (Casey 1996, 24). Diversity is a fundamental aspiration of liberal criticism and politics, too. But I would argue that we need to be very careful with such a notion. Diversity and inclusivity, as Noah Harari reminds us, are actually fundamental to imperial ideology, as well:

Cultural diversity and territorial flexibility give empires not only their unique character, but also their central role in history. It's thanks to these two characteristics that empires have managed to unite diverse ethnic groups and ecological zones under a single political umbrella, thereby fusing together larger and larger segments of the human species and of planet Earth. (Harari 2014, 212)

Despite their basis in diversity, however, empires are:

one of the main reasons for the drastic *reduction* in human diversity. The imperial steamroller gradually obliterated the unique characteristics of numerous peoples ..., forging out of them new and much larger groups. (Harari 2014, 213; my emphasis)

⁴ Crucially, Country is not place: Country is composed of many places, as well as many stories, poems, spirits, and species. See Deborah Bird Rose. 2004. *Reports from a Wild Country: Ethics for Decolonization*. Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 153.

For as long as we have a record of it, Harari argues that imperial ideology “has tended to be inclusive and all-encompassing.” Certainly, this ideology has often emphasized important differences, racial, cultural and otherwise, between those with power and those without, but “it has still recognized the basic unity of the entire world, the existence of a single set of principles governing all places and times.” The apparent benevolence of such a vision is also the source of its violence: benevolence justifies an empire’s existence, and thereby nullifies arguments for rebellion and attempts by independent peoples to resist the “steamroller” of imperial expansion (Harari 2014, 219). Indeed, it is precisely such expansion that First Nations’ sovereignty tries to resist. To quote Kevin Gilbert at the Tent Embassy, for example, Aboriginal people “have never claimed citizenship of the oppressor, the people who have invaded our country.” Inclusion in the Australian nation-state was “imposed” on Aboriginal nations, “very much against the[ir] will” (Gilbert 2008, 85–86).

I am skeptical, therefore, about claims for value based on concepts of inclusion, such as appeals to Place that rest on its capacity to gather “under a single umbrella” the innumerable materials, forces, and organisms that inhabit any given landscape. Such claims risk reiterating an old version of North American poetics: the will to include is the will of an emergent empire, the Whitmanian collation of myriad, far-flung parts with long, endlessly connectable lines that could, in theory, span all the way to the moon. We would be constructing what Heriberto Yépez calls “pantopia,” or total Place: “space where All has been accumulated” (Yépez 2013, 156). Here, the poem is “a *place* for gathering;” the pantopia gathers “a simultaneity of names, data, everything-ologies” and destroys demarcation and difference along with it, because in the “*total place*” of such a poem everything occurs together, “in a zone where time... is no longer” (Yépez 2013, 157; emphasis in original). What such pantopic gathering proposes is that, through the relentless accumulation of things and details, the nation state might find its identity: through analysis of component elements, we will forge an idea of the Whole.⁵ Of course, this procedure has been profoundly effective, but the error “has consisted in our taking things as if they were part of the *same universe*.” Our image of the Whole is false, therefore, because the parts we’ve analyzed do not belong to a single, shared universe. There *is* no single universe. Instead,

⁵ Yépez capitalizes “whole” for similar reasons to my capitalization of Place.

recalling Jakob von Uexküll's concept of the *umwelt*, Yépez argues that each thing "is an expression of its own universe, distinct from the others:"

The Whole cannot be analysed. In reality, there is no such thing as the *Whole*. All the Wholes that civilization has thought are absolutist fictions, totalitarianisms. Each thing is the expression of a distinct universe. There is no single macrocosm. (2013, 99)⁶

Similarly, instead of "absolutist fictions" like Place, Nature, and so on, I am advocating for multi-species *communities* (always plural). There is no longer any "land" to serve as the inanimate stage for a subject's actions or to fill the container of an empty state; there are only series of ongoing interactions between mutually animate entities [human, animal, plant, spirit ...]. But instead of simply appropriating Country as the conceptual moniker for such a vision (thereby enacting yet more theft of Aboriginal intellectual labor), non-Indigenous poets need to do their own work. We need to expand the sphere of our relations, and learn from them. How to deal, then, with such diversity? How to articulate such multitudes without shaving away particularities? The lyrebird shows the way ...

Hereafter I want to situate lyrebirds as totems of an Australian poetics. This is not to imply that Australian poets descend from the lyrebird, or have an innate understanding of lyrebird poetics. Rather, it's more likely to be the other way around: the lyrebird is a strange attractor toward which we might venture, if we learn to pay attention. To be precise, references to "the lyrebird" conflate two distinct species of the genus *Menura*.⁷ The *Menura* is impossibly ancient—and, possibly, the source of all song (Low)—and irrevocably contemporary—lyrebird compositions are inextricable from what is happening *now*, in the lives of *this forest*. Thus, in their traditions and their history they carry with them the continent's deep past, but they are always engaged with the challenges of the Australian contemporary, including habitat destruction (chainsaw

⁶ Yépez's argument here could accord with relativistic physics. As Carlo Rovelli explains, all objects experience time differently, depending on their speed and proximity to other mass. As a consequence, "[n]ot only is there no single time for different places – there is not even a single time for any particular place." See Rovelli, Carlo. 2018 *The Order of Time*. Translated by Erica Segre and Simon Carnell, Allen Lane, pp. 36–7.

⁷ This genus consists of the Albert's lyrebird (*Menura alberti*) and the superb lyrebird (*Menura novae-hollandiae*). Their combined habitats span much of south-eastern Australia, from south-east Queensland to southern Victoria.

calls) and population growth (mobile phone calls, or samples of human footfalls along walking tracks). They cannot be wholly appropriated or inhabited, then; it is not our Place (i.e. it is far beyond it) to copy, translate or transplant a lyrebird's ontological complex. Rather, lyrebirds encourage a pragmatics reminiscent of John Cage, where one can "imitate not nature but 'her manner of operation'" (in Retallack 205). The lyrebird's "manner of operation" combines collage with original composition, where sampled components do not replicate completely their sources but are instead compulsively fragmentary, producing a diversity of miscellany rather than seamless integration or the complete replication of another's body.⁸

To be sure, there is already an emergent canon of human poems about these extraordinary poetics. It is too easy, however, to obfuscate the lyrebird beneath a mottled literary history that is more about trends in Anglo-European writing than Australian birds. In turn, my interest in what follows is not to illustrate different modes of lyrebird *representation* in Australian poetry; instead, I am trying to work from a structural pragmatics focused on what lyrebirds can teach us about collaging a multi-vocal poethics. With that in mind, two foundational examples of lyrebird encounter in modern Australian poetry deserve recognition here, as much for the way they illustrate the remarkably different ethical apparatuses of their poets as for the residual traces of lyrebird encounter that permeate their structures.

On the one hand, "Lyrebirds" by Judith Wright (Wright 1994, 176) is almost an anti-lyrebird poem, in that, all lyrebirds are rendered absent in it, and substituted with an archetypal bird of the poet's imagination. "Over the west side of this mountain"—presumably Mount Tamborine in south-east Queensland—is a Place Wright refers to as "lyrebird country." But that's as close as we're going to get: after ten years on Tamborine, she says, "I have never gone. / I'll never go." We *could* go down there to catch a glimpse, to hear a snippet, but instead the poem retreats into the realm of the imagination—a realm which, in typically Romantic fashion, is invested with the power to produce an almost life-like replica of that

⁸ For more on lyrebird composition, see Norman F. Robinson and H. Sydney Curtis. 1996. The Vocal Displays of the Lyrebirds (Menuridae). *EMU* 96, 258–275. For more on the poetics of the Albert's lyrebird in particular, see Stuart Cooke. 2019. Towards an Ethological Poetics: The Transgression of Genre and the Poetry of the Albert's Lyrebird. *Environmental Humanities* 11(2): 302–23.

“splendid bird,” and which, in similarly Romantic fashion, proceeds to take over the central position in the poem’s field. The ethical imperative, Wright tells us, is to leave some things alone, free of the colonizing eye, so that they “inhabit nowhere but the reverence of the heart.” The problem with this imperative, however, is that it borders on complete *erasure* of lyrebirds: by gesturing instead to a Place which contains them, the poet is able to ignore the birds’ living bodies.

Rather than consulting the lyrebirds, then, rather than taking the time to bear witness, we invent them with our minds, imagining everything from “a brown head” to “the high symmetrical shape of the perfect lyre” (which the Albert’s lyrebirds of Mount Tamborine do not have). Thus, the poem invents one of those glorious, epistemological fictions that fuel so much colonial desire—then, the *deferral* of such desire is necessary for the poem’s elaboration; in a way, “Lyrebirds” is one big tease, a carefully controlled flirtation that shows just enough of the object to keep us interested: here are the lyrebirds (stanza 1), but we must not look at them (stanza 2), but don’t leave yet, I will show you a form (stanza 3), but don’t get too excited, the rest “ought to be left secret” (stanza 4). Desire mixed with protestant morality? Colonial dreams are fine, as long as you work hard for them? If we are wary of charging Wright so harshly, we could argue that, colonialist imagination or not, she actually contradicts herself, but beautifully so. That is, in refusing relation with the lyrebirds, in closing them off from her view, she nevertheless proceeds to imitate their form in her mind’s eye—proceeds, in other words, to mimic, to multiply, to become a lyrebird. Ultimately, while “Lyrebirds” is ostensibly about ignoring lyrebirds themselves, the poem is laced nevertheless with the residue of a careful attention to their poetics. If the lyrebird is still a figment of our imagination at this point, at the very least we have established an ethical geography based on our commitment to another form of life, however archetypal. Place has been broken up into lyrebird and human worlds.

On the other hand, we have Les Murray’s “Lyre Bird” (1994, 21). If Wright’s poem is a directive to leave the lyrebird alone, Murray’s instead assumes not only an intimate relationship with his subject, but also the ability to *translate* the lyrebird’s mind. After all, where Wright organized for Treaty and Aboriginal sovereignty, Murray’s Australia was given to

all through the glory of God.⁹ Thus, Murray can mimic a “[l]iar made of leaf-litter,” with costume design, dancing, and music of multiple time signatures quickly following in a cacophony “in any order.” There are, of course, value judgments here: the bird is a liar, deceptive, and inauthentic rather than prodigiously talented, and the different facets of his performance produce chaos rather than sublime complexity. But—and this is a big, Les Murray-sized “but”—what’s interesting is how the repetition of the first-person pronoun allows the speaker to shimmer between avian and human form. The poem, after all, is in a book called *Translations from the Natural World*; here, it would seem, is the natural world’s translator par excellence:

I mew catbird, I saw crosscut, I howl she-dingo, I kink
forest hush distinct with bellbirds, warble magpie gargle ... (1994, 21)

Like the lyrebird, Murray is a polyglot, and throughout *Translations* he displays his own, considerable talents of mimicry. We also know, though in less detail, about the poet’s autism; the ability to mimic preformed arrangements of behaviors, dialects, and gestures was most likely an important survival skill that he developed early in life; “miming,” says the lyrebird poet, “is all of I.” In approaching their sonic and syntactical complexity, then, Murray is able to produce a vibrant block of becoming, or the transmutation of two previously unaffiliated forms (English poetry and lyrebird) into something entirely new (the ethological poetics of *Translations* is almost unique in twentieth-century poetry). The implication of these points is that, in acknowledging the specificity of the lyrebird’s world, in treating the lyrebird itself as a subject worthy of poetry, Murray approaches the bird’s sonic and syntactical complexity; the result, then, is mutually beneficial: in bearing them witness, lyrebirds renovate his poetry. Then, against the grandiose ambitions of such a project rests the small size of the poem itself—just 13 lines—suggesting incompleteness [of a sonnet], uncertainty, and a kind of humility.

“Lyre Bird” is dogged by a factual issue, however, which informs the poet’s ongoing wariness of the lyrebird’s method. Lyrebirds are much

⁹ For more on the different positions of Murray and Wright with regards to Aboriginal land rights, see Les Murray and Judith Wright. 2003. Correspondence. *Southerly*, 63(1): 162–80.

more than mimics: in fact, both species of lyrebird make their own, non-sampled sounds, too, which they use as a kind of glue for their collages, and these collages are endlessly revised and recombined over the course of a performer's life. But for Murray this supreme "liar" is so steeped in mime that he is unable to do anything more than copy what is already there ("I alter nothing. Real to real only I sing [...] The miming is all of I."). There is a problematic politics of authenticity at work, therefore, though I would be uncomfortable about claiming that Murray is unaware of this (given the aforementioned ambition of the book). Nevertheless, the structure of the poem does suggest that Murray is ultimately skeptical of the lyrebird's creative abilities—or, at the least, that he does not identify completely with them. This is because the poem's ostensible humility is belied by the final couplet, when suddenly, for no apparent reason other than to instantiate a conclusion, the speaker steps out of the first person and into the third. The effect is to tear the poem's cognitive center from that blurred, human-avian body and lift it into a position of overseeing above the entire lyrebird species:

The miming is all of I. Silent, they are a function
of wet forest, cometary lyrebirds. Their flight lifts them barely a semitone.
(Murray 1994, 21).

It is telling that this shift to the third person occurs after a passage of pure mimicry, full of chainsaw growl and screaming owl, which culminates in that problematic claim about the relationship of miming to the I. It's as if the poet has balked at the implications of the poetics on display: having subsumed himself in a glorious arrangement of samples, he stops, shudders, and discards the bird's body on the forest floor. The desire to demarcate the lines of a Place has resurfaced: the language reverts to a detached, observational documentary mode, tinged with the classificatory tendencies of zoology; the poem ends, apparently cleansed of any lingering lyrebird affect. Really, the poet proposes, I am no lyrebird, I can enter and exit such bodies at will.

Just like a lyrebird.

If our two foundational examples of lyrebird poetics struggle to resist the urge to accumulate diversity into a single Place, if they stumble over the implications of human and more-than-human encounter, and if these hesitations translate into structural disjunctions, then thankfully we have examples from the twenty-first century that propose less anxious forms of

Australian geography and more-than-human relation. In Duncan Hose's "lyrebird" (2011, 9), for example, we find something like a combination of the methods of Wright and Murray: the poem leaves the bird itself alone, while nevertheless imitating its manner of operation. Refracted through multiple images of Ned Kelly, Hose's lyrebird poetics occurs in a series of phrasal fragments, like segments of larger ideas:

Ned Kelly as landscape—Sid Nolan's idea

Ned Kelly member of the family

Ned Kelly as bully

Ned Kelly softy

keeper of paycocks. Ned Kelly as ploughshare

Rosella can of condensed [...] ([2011](#), 9)

In part, “lyrebird” affirms the lyrebird as the ancestor of [Eastern] Australian aesthetics. As Ned Kelly’s image multiplies, as his image becomes a signifier of increasing complexity, we start to track a path across the cultural geography of the continent’s eastern side, from Surfers’ Paradise to Tasmania (with a brief detour via Adelaide). But the journey is impartial, fragmented, and open-ended; there is no teleology here, no object for conquest. Just as importantly, the poem itemizes, lists, acknowledges, but always resists the temptation to *gather* assortments into homogenized regions. In other words, the poem proceeds according to surprise and wonder rather than survey and categorization.

Similarly, when we turn to Michael Farrell's "A Lyrebird" (2017, 1–2) we don't find a colonialist grammar, either—like "lyrebird," "A Lyrebird" makes no attempt to establish regional boundaries or to demarcate a Place. Instead, the poem is a looped, multi-vocal text, which seems to weave or drift through a variety of bodies, discourses, or speakers, some of which might be a lyrebird's. That is, Farrell is sampling from the lyrebird's *field*, rather than the bird's *body* per se. This is, after all, proper lyrebird practice: just as lyrebirds will assemble those parts of their environment—avian, mammalian, and otherwise—that are of interest, the task for the human lyrebird is not to embody the bird (a la Murray) necessarily, but to produce a similarly kaleidoscopic array. So the poem is part description ("Swift-footed it stops behind a mountain ash"), part critical commentary ("All genres are destroyed at last"), part becoming-bird ("I tip my beak to the sky"), part speculative philosophy ("Somehow we're used by the earth's language") and part eco-surrealist manifesto ("Cars learn ethics

through becoming nests”). Indeed, more than any other Australian poet, perhaps, Farrell has devoted considerable creative and critical energies to exploring the implications of lyrebird poetics for conceptual, ecological poetry. For Farrell, the lyrebird invites theorization of a particularly experimental kind of ecopoetics, one that is constantly undergoing testing, revision, extension. Consequently, Farrellian ecopoetics is not about the ornamental use of fauna and, most importantly for our discussion here, is not Place-based:

[b]y ecological I mean a lyric explicitly produced *in relation to other things*, as an analogy to the social, as well as to the ecosystem, rather than a performatively enclosed or intimate address, expression or feeling. (Farrell 2018, 26; my emphasis)

Similarly, in Farrell’s “A Lyrebird,” the lyrebird engenders ecologies of particular relations, in which no one has dominion over region, in which no one can be intimate with Place, because Place is not there.

* * *

If you’re walking through the bush of south-eastern Australia in the early morning or dusk, if you’re blowing into your hands to keep them warm in that struggling, winter light, then you might have the fortune to come across a lyrebird in display. Off the edge of Katoomba, say, at the bottom of the Furber Steps, there, in Dharug and Gundungurra country, hovering above the ferns and shrubs, the thin blades of a Superb’s white lyre amidst sonic chains of bell-birds, wheezing baby magpies, kookaburras, magpie warbles, mobile phones, parrot screech, human feet, and bulbs of *joolp-joolp-joolp* in between. It’s possible you might scare him (invariably, the birds in display will be male) and he’ll dart through the undergrowth like a sooty comet until he reaches higher ground, from where, shortly after, he’ll resume. As he moves through his score, it’s easy not to notice that the surrounding forest has fallen into silence, as if it’s all on pause while he voices it, like a spring bursting out of the ground, like a medium or a conductor, channeling the field, making it cohere. He is both hidden (by ferns and shrubs) and unmistakably singular (the white symmetry of his lyre curving through greenness; his cleared, circular stage of earth). He becomes a node of local poetics: communal, fluid.

What is he *doing*? you might think, Why? Like so many things, he is driven by desire, but the stakes are particularly high: his listener needs to

like it. So he has to be bold and brilliant, but also completely deferential: “Look how I can speak this forest!” he cries, “In speaking this forest so beautifully I could become it!” The female, therefore, is attracted to a self that is perfectly many—not a dominant or transcendent self, but one whose desirability is determined by its integration with the forest and its sound-world. Here, too, the poetics of the composition are crucial: he uses many to become *unique*, rather than other. Never simply replaying entire songs of other species, his sampling is always provisional (rarely more than a few bars of anything), he never *becomes* another species or appropriates their song for his own. His composition, then, is open and fragmented, his own sounds spliced with forest music (not to mention the visual component: his feathery flourishes, his dance signature). In response to Kinsella’s lead essay in this section, here is a poet who provides, possibly, “a model [...] that traverses, without appropriation or intrusion, the different conditions of connection to the land itself” (p. 136). No, it’s not a simple model, not something we can just pluck off the shelf and put to use, and not a slogan we can chant, either, but a highly complex, and somewhat obscure, set of procedures that can only be gleaned with cultivated, careful acts of attention and consideration, and which may well take many years of rehearsal, reflection, revision (etc.) before a suitable performance can be staged.

So, not landscape, not Place, but multispecies communities. Not discrete, atomistic selves, either, but multispecies communities. No poem of my relationship to the earth, but an attempt to account for swarms of mass: an ecological ontology.

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