Storytelling for Lost and Threatened Places
An Environmental Humanities Symposium

Monday 2 June – Tuesday 3 June 2025

THE UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY

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Sydney Environment Institute

Symposium Abstract

This symposium will explore our contemporary biodiversity and climate crises through a focus on place and story. How might attending closely to place-based stories open up new opportunities, but also dangers, in our efforts to make sense of and respond to global processes of loss and destruction? As storytellers, what would it mean to deploy a 'patchy' approach to the Anthropocene (Tsing et al.), acknowledging that contemporary environmental transformations, while planetary in scope, touch down and take radically divergent forms in different parts of the world and amongst different more-than-human communities?

Far from layering meaning over a pre-existing world, we are interested in stories as technologies of both world making and unmaking. In this context, we aim to explore the role that stories (in their many forms, across diverse media) play in shaping not only how places are conceived and defined—how their borders and identities are understood—but also how, or whether, they are valued, managed, inhabited, or simply discarded, perhaps to become "sacrifice zones" (Reinert) or "shadow places" (Plumwood). In short, we aim to explore how stories both enable and disable diverse possibilities for understanding, valuing, connecting to, and resisting the destruction of the many threatened places around us. As well as the challenges and possibilities of scaling place-based stories to speak to, and intervene in, processes of environmental transformation that extend well beyond their borders. At the same time, we are interested in how stories might provide a powerful means of summoning up, holding onto, and perhaps even stitching back together some of the many places and relationships that have been, or will be, lost.

In taking up these big questions, we aim to be mindful of the responsibilities and limitation of telling others' stories, human and not (Birch, Wright, Haraway), and of the need to hold onto an understanding of places as historically layered and temporally entangled: and as such, to remember that contemporary processes of loss and transformation take place in the wake of, and are haunted by, past and ongoing processes of colonisation, globalisation, militarisation, and more. And yet, despite their limitations and challenges, an attention to stories remains a vital part of any inclusive, creative, effort to understand and imagine our current predicament and its many alternatives. In that light, this symposium ultimately aims to explore and take up the fraught work of "storytelling for Earthly survival" (Haraway).

Organisers

Thom van Dooren, Kirsten Wehner, Cameron Muir, Andrea Gaynor, Zoë Sadokierski, and Natalie Osborne.

This symposium is being co-organised by several research teams working in related areas: Narrative Ecologies of Warragamba Dam Discovery Project (DP220101258); Shadow Places Special Research Initiative (SR200201032); Living on the Edge: Caring for Australia's Threatened Places (National Museum of Australia and Sydney Environment Institute). The symposium is jointly hosted by the **Sydney Environment Institute** at the University of Sydney), the **National Museum of Australia**, the School of Humanities at the **University of Western Australia**, and the **Visualisation Institute** at the University of Technology Sydney**.**

References

Birch, T. (2018) "On what terms can we speak?" Refusal, resurgence and climate justice. *Coolabah*, 24/25, 2-16.

Haraway, D. (1992) The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others. In *Cultural Studies,* (Eds, Grossberg, L., Nelson, C. & Treichler, P.A.) Routledge, New York.

Plumwood, V. (2008) Shadow Places and the Politics of Dwelling. *Ecological Humanities, Australian Humanities Review*, 44,

Reinert, H. (2018) Notes from a Projected Sacrifice Zone. *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*, 17, 597-617.

Tsing, A.L., Mathews, A.S. & Bubandt, N. (2019) Patchy Anthropocene: landscape structure, multispecies history, and the retooling of anthropology: an introduction to supplement 20. *Current Anthropology*, 60, S186-S197.

Wright, A. (2016) What happens when you tell somebody else's story. *Meanjin*, 75.

Venue

The main symposium venue will be on the University of Sydney Camperdown/Darlington campus in the **Wilkinson Building** (G04). A full campus map is available here: https://maps.sydney.edu.au/. This building is accessible from both City Rd and Maze Cr.

The symposium will be in the **Wilkinson Lecture Theatre 250** (G04.02.250). The lecture theatre is on the City Rd side of the building, just inside the main building doors.

For interstate participants staying at **Veriu Broadway**, the building is a 15-minute walk. From Broadway, you can either walk down City Rd or cut through Victoria Park. Buses also frequently leave from Broadway and go down City Rd, stopping right near the building (e.g. 423, 426, 428, 430).

Map of Wilkinson Building

For those coming from elsewhere, **Redfern** is the closest train station, and the building is a 10-15 minute walk from there. Alternatively, it is a roughly 20-25 minute walk from **Central**. From Central you can also catch one of the many buses that go down City Rd. Most of these busses leave from Railway Square, located between George St and Lee St.
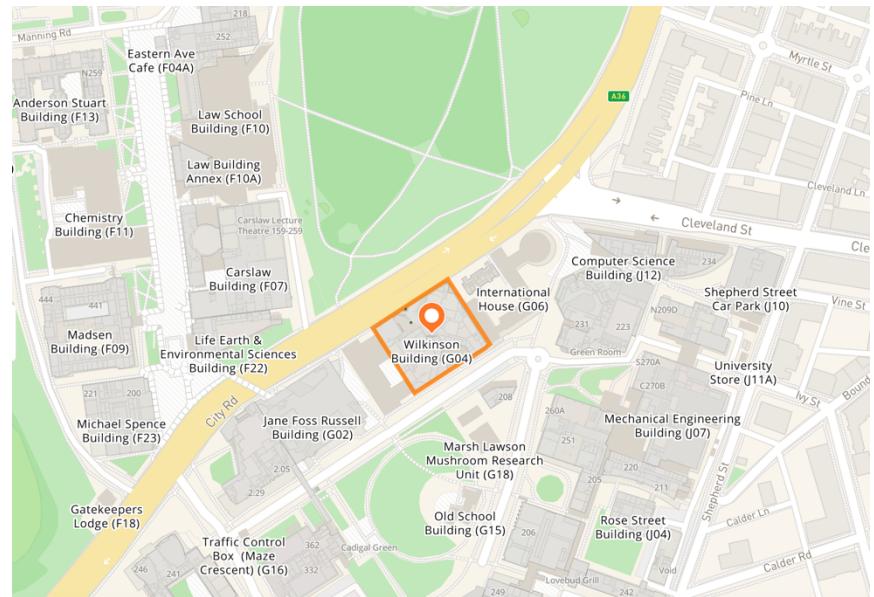
Multispecies Storytelling Event (6:00-7:30, Monday 2 June)
This event on Monday evening will be held at the University of Technology Sydney in the Jones Street Foyer, Corner of Jones St and Broadway. It is located a 10-15 minute walk from the main symposium venue.

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The University of Sydney Camperdown/Darlington campus and the University of Technology Sydney are located on the traditional lands of the Gadigal/Cadigal people of the Eora Nation.

General Information

Catering
The symposium will include catered morning tea, lunch, and afternoon tea each day. In addition, tea and coffee will be available each morning before we start, from 8:30am. All catering will be vegan. If you have other dietary needs/preferences that you did not include in the registration form, please let us know as soon as you can.

Multispecies Storytelling Event (6:00-7:30, Monday 2 June)
On the first night of the symposium (Monday 2 June), we will host a Multispecies Storytelling Event at the University of Technology, Sydney (a short walk from the conference venue). This event will be curated by Andrew Burrell (UTS Visualisation Institute) and will go from 6:00-7:30. Drinks and snacks will be provided. Further details below. To manage numbers, this event will have a **separate registration process**. If you would like to attend, please register here: https://events.humanitix.com/multispecies-storytelling.

Dinner
There is no formal dinner planned as part of the symposium. After the Multispecies Storytelling Event we anticipate that those symposium participants who are able to stay on for dinner might head to one of the many nearby restaurants. One good option, just across the road from UTS, is Spice Alley where there is a broad range of food options to choose from (https://spicealley.com.au/).
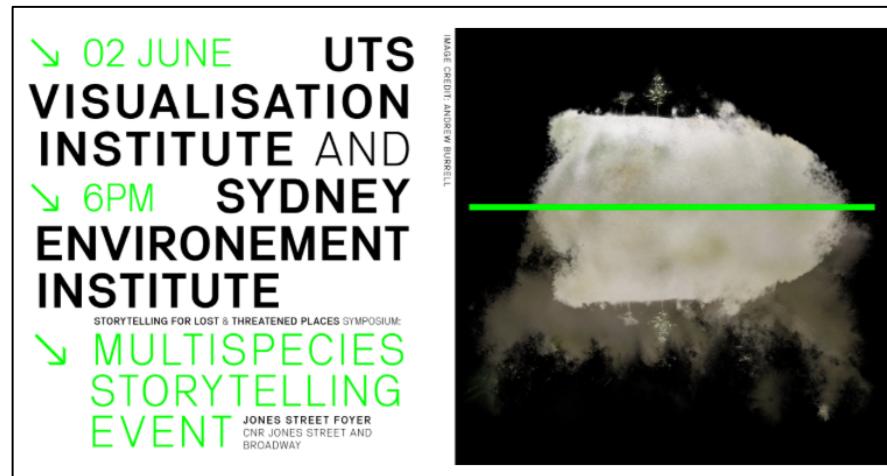
Overview of Symposium

DAY 1: Monday 2 June

Welcome: 9:00-9:10

Session 1: 9:10-10:40 – Presentations Session

Morning Tea 10:40-11:00

Session 2: 11:00-12:30 – Presentations Session

Lunch 12:30-1:30

Session 3: 1:30-3:30 – Skills Session

Afternoon Tea 3:30-4:00

Session 4: 4:00-5:30 – Presentations Session

6:00-7:30 – Multispecies Storytelling Event

Venue: Jones Street Foyer, Corner of Jones St and Broadway, University of Technology Sydney

DAY 2: Tuesday 3 June

Session 5: 9:00-10:30 – Presentations Session

Morning Tea 10:30-11:00

Session 6: 11:00-12:30 – Presentations Session

Lunch 12:30-1:30

Session 7: 1:30-2:30 – Presentations Session

Afternoon Tea 2:30-3:00

Session 8: 3:00-4:00 – Discussion Session

DAY 1 | Monday 2 June

9:00-9:10   **Welcome**

Thom van Dooren, Kirsten Wehner, Cameron Muir, Andrea Gaynor, Zoë Sadokierski, and Natalie Osborne

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9:10-10:40   **Session 1: Presentations Session (Chair: Kirsten Wehner)**

Lilian Pearce: Storytelling toxicity critically, and with care

Tessa Fluence: Stories as leverage: Advocacy, loss and the politics of place

Cameron Muir: Shadow places, story, and slow listening

10:40-11:00   Morning Tea

11:00-12:30   **Session 2: Presentations Session (Chair: Andrea Gaynor)**

Gemma Sou: How to translate research into a comic

Vahri McKenzie: Ripairian: Trash tales and weedy words enlivening shadow places

Catherine Hamm: Learning with place: Activating speculative fiction for hopeful climate futures

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12:30-1:30   Lunch

1:30-3:30	**Session 3: Skills Session (Facilitator: Zoë Sadokierski)** Venue: Chau Chak Wing Museum, University of Sydney In groups, we will use the Chau Chak Wing Museum collection to explore a range of different approaches to more-than-human storytelling, including creative nonfiction, visual mapping, sketching and creative writing. Participants will be asked to sign up for one of the following group experiences: **1: Imagined landscapes and relational worlds** How might we use visual mapping to imagine past and future landscapes? **2: Field notes – inside / outside** How might the way we observe and document animals change between an encounter in a museum and in the wild? **3: Wish you were here – postcards from a museum** How might we story the lives of other animals, from different narrative perspectives?
3:30-4:00	Afternoon Tea
4:00-5:30	**Session 4: Presentations Session (Chair: Thom van Dooren)** Danielle Celermajer: Raveling Paul Magee: Unsettling the obviousness of our language here Peter Minter: *One Song No Song*: The awakened cosmos in experimental poetics
6:00-7:30	**Multispecies Storytelling Event** Venue: Jones Street Foyer, Corner of Jones St and Broadway, University of Technology Sydney Join us for an evening celebrating stories that cross species boundaries. Curated by Andrew Burrell (UTS Visualisation Institute) the event will include readings and performances by Andrew Burrell, Andrew van der Westhyzen, Blake Lawrence, Lizzy Nagy, Peter Minter, Vanessa Berry and Zoë Sadokierski, an exhibition of creative works from the UTS Visualisation Institute, with drinks and snacks provided. To manage numbers, this event will have a **separate registration process**. If you would like to attend, please register here: https://events.humanitix.com/multispecies-storytelling

DAY 2 | Tuesday 3 June

9:00-10:30	**Session 5: Presentations Session (Chair: Natalie Osborne)**
	Kirsten Wehner: River Country: Building cultural capacity for re-storying waterways
	Andrea Gaynor: Engulfed: Storytelling for suburban frontiers
	Affrica Taylor: Grandmother baglady yarns. From Wiradjuri Ngurambang, Adelong NSW
10:30-11:00	Morning Tea
11:00-12:30	**Session 6: Presentations Session (Chair: Cameron Muir)**
	Emily Potter, Donna Houston and Fiona Miller: Repairing places for adaptive futures: Community-led repair work in climate-affected regions
	Michael Chew: Ecological storytelling across borders: Expanding environmental photovoice through multi-sited dialogue
	Vic McEwan: Artistic interventions within a contested river system
12:30-1:30	Lunch
1:30-2:30	**Session 7: Presentations Session (Chair: Andrea Gaynor)**
	Zoë Sadokierski and Thom van Dooren: A bird, a flock, a song, and a forest: The decline of Regent Honeyeater life
	Storying Geography Collective (Natalie Osborne): Reflections on collaborative experiments in storytelling
2:30-3:00	Afternoon Tea
3:00-4:00	**Session 8: Discussion Session**
	Led by the symposium organisers, this final session will offer an opportunity for discussion of the larger themes and broader questions raised by the event.

Abstracts and Bios

Lilian Pearce: "Storytelling toxicity critically, and with care"
This paper explores some of the ways that stories have permitted, perpetuated and resisted toxicity in Broken Hill (NSW) and Port Pirie (SA), sites of mineral extraction and processing. Turning collectively to archives, reports, and field research helps to critically identify alternatives to dominant narratives around cause, consequence, and responsibility in contaminated communities. Paying attention to experiences of toxicity by First Nations, by women, and by non-human species in particular helps to identify compounding inequalities and relationships of power. But then what do we do with these stories? Based on my own experience of how my work has been responded to, I consider the need to take great care when stepping into the role of storyteller/researcher to avoid encouraging a type of disaster-fetishisation that others those living with our collective waste. How might we give credit to individual agency, commitment to place, and collective resistance, while also using our platforms for storytelling to demand environmental justice for all?

Dr **Lilian Pearce** is an award-winning interdisciplinary environmental humanities scholar working across the fields of history, geography and politics. Her motivation is to advance just agendas in environmental management. With a growing record of influential publications and public engagement, she is passionate about building the contribution of the humanities and social sciences to addressing urgent social and environmental challenges. As Post-doctoral Research Fellow at the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation at Deakin University, Lil works collaboratively with First Nations, conservation practitioners, and communities living with contamination. Her first book will be out soon through Upswell.

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Tessa Fluence: "Stories as leverage: Advocacy, loss and the politics of place"
How can stories transform how a place is seen – and whether it's protected or discarded? In this talk, I'll explore storytelling as a strategic tool of intervention that shapes meaning, shifts power and galvanises resistance. Drawing on my work in environmental advocacy campaigning, I'll reflect on how narratives can influence public sentiment, reframe places as sacred, valuable or disposable, and drive political action. I'll examine the challenges of scaling local narratives, the role of emotion in public engagement, and the tensions between the complex messiness of reality versus cut-through messaging for campaign goals and brutal media cycles. I'll also explore the ethical tensions of public storytelling – whose voices, whose truth, and under what constraints? In a time of ecological unravelling, I ask – what political work can stories do, and how might they help us hold on, resist, and imagine alternative futures?

Tessa Fluence is Head of Public Engagement at Environmental Justice Australia, where she leads strategic communications and campaigns on ecological collapse, climate change, and justice for First Nations and frontline communities. With over 15 years' experience in advocacy and public engagement, she has also worked as Public Narrative Coordinator and Change the Story Lead at the Australian Conservation Foundation, where she shaped narratives and mobilised communities to influence national discourse. Tessa holds Arts and Law degrees with honours, studied visual communication in Germany and a has PhD in cultural studies from the University of Melbourne.

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Cameron Muir: "Shadow places, story, and slow listening"
Over the past few years, I've been visiting some of the most ecologically damaged places in Australia - snow gums dying in the high country, a uranium mine cut through a First Nations dreaming site, shearwaters feeding their chicks to death with plastic - and spending time with the people who live and work there. In these shadow places I've been listening to First Nations custodians, scientists, and cultural workers about how they live with the damage and what they're doing to heal and care for these places. I keep going back, sitting with folks, walking Country, sometimes becoming a participant and collaborator. This project has changed my approach to storytelling. It's become less about capturing or explaining, and more about relationship, responsibility, and being present. It's slow, uncertain work. Often I feel way out of my depth. In this talk I want to reflect on how story has become both a way to pay attention to damaged places and a way to build relationships with the people who care for them.

Cameron Muir is a writer and historian whose work explores connections between people, place, and the living world. His writing blends personal essay, reporting, and environmental history, and has appeared in *Griffith Review, Meanjin, Inside Story, Overland, The Guardian, Australian Book Review, The Canberra Times, Wild Magazine* and *Best Australian Science Writing*, among others. His work has been shortlisted for the NSW Premier's History Awards, the Eureka Prize for Science Journalism, and the Bragg Prize for Science Writing. With Kirsten Wehner and Jenny Newell he co-edited *Living with the Anthropocene: Love, loss and hope in the face of environmental crisis* (NewSouth, 2020), and was a Fellow at the Rachel Carson Center in Munich. He is currently a Research Fellow at the University of Western Australia exploring 'shadow places' in the Australian Anthropocene with Andrea Gaynor. His work regularly involves collaborations with artists, curators, scientists, and communities on projects bringing together creative practice, story, and ecological care.

Session 2

Gemma Sou: "How to translate research into a comic"
Researchers are increasingly expected to creatively communicate their research, and comics have become one of the most popular ways to do this. However, guidance on *how* to translate research into comics is lacking. Drawing on my experience translating research on disasters into four comics I will give a step-by-step guide for researchers wanting to take the exciting leap into creating comics. I'll talk about some of the key stages and issues including: The language and conventions of comics; Deciding which findings to communicate; Writing the script; Choosing and working with an illustrator; Developing characters. The presentation will draw on disasters, comics, and creative methods literature to explain how and why certain steps and processes are taken when communicating research as comics. This presentation uses examples from research on disasters, but it is purposefully designed to invite those researching diverse topics who are interested in using comics to creatively narrativize and communicate their research to a wider audience.

Gemma Sou is a development geographer whose main body of work focuses on how families understand, experience and respond to disasters during their everyday lives. She also explores the politics of aid in postcolonial societies experiencing climate disasters and is passionate about translating work into creative forms (particularly comics), working alongside artists and disaster-affected families. In October 2024, Sou began a post as Senior Lecturer in Monash University. Before this she completed her PhD in the Global Development Institute at the University of Manchester, UK. She then took up a Lectureship in the Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute at the University of Manchester. From 2020 to 2022 she held a Vice Chancellor's Fellowship at RMIT University in Melbourne. www.gemmasou.com

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Vahri McKenzie: "Ripairian: Trash tales and weedy words enlivening shadow places"
The presentation will share storying techniques from the multi-artform work-in-progress project Ripairian. While the techniques are mobile, the project grew from a specific place on the lower Mandoon Bilya/Helena River in Boorloo/Perth. This part of the Bilya is a 'shadow place' in Plumwood's (2008) sense, historically (mis)used—as a railway workshop, brickworks, tannery, and abattoir, amongst other industrial and agricultural uses—to provide material, economic and ecological support for people dwelling beyond its immediate environs. Upstream, water is pumped into a weir to supplement drinking water, meaning the Bilya doesn't regularly flow. It is also hard to get to: private properties and fences block access to this place zoned Railways and Parks and Recreation.

And yet, limited access and official neglect have allowed graffiti culture, and my own work, to flourish. My creative responses can be considered a co-creation with the entities and phenomena the Bilya offers in abundance, especially rubbish, weeds and graffiti, whose material and figurative affordances inform our storytelling. I will also share my stumbling towards a cultural humility necessary

to riverwork. Despite the work's playful title that gestures towards efforts to repair, as a non-Indigenous person I prioritise culturally respectful ways to collaborate in this specific place where I am a recent arrival.

Vahri McKenzie is an educator, artist and scholar whose work frames creative engagement as a model of, and practice for, ways of being together in a complex world. She is passionate about shared creative experiences that are transformative for individuals and for communities, and responds to local situations to develop concepts for participation and collaboration. Vahri develops transdisciplinary applied arts research projects with industry and government partners, working with artists, arts-workers and organisations to evaluate creative practices using methods that position artistic contributions as new knowledge. As Arts and Cultural Management Course Coordinator at WAAPA, Vahri teaches and publishes about the many ways artists and arts workers contribute to making a better world.

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Catherine Hamm: "Learning with place: Activating speculative fiction for hopeful climate futures"
Coming to know your local Place as more than a nice place to play or go for a walk requires paying attention and building connections in ways that move beyond humans acting on, or for the environment. In Australia, this begins with respectfully and intentionally foregrounding local First Nations perspectives and attending to the ways in which you are entangled with local knowledges and stories, histories, landforms, waterways, multi-species communities.

In this session, I will share stories generated with local Places, children, and multispecies communities. Drawing from Karen Martin's (2016) guide for storytelling, I share stories that I have lived, alongside young children, Grandmother Tree, Rainbow Lorikeet, and Lilly Pilly. Responding to Donna Haraway (2016), I activate SF (speculative fiction, speculative fabulation, science fact) to generate multispecies storytelling for earthly survival, and wonder how speculative fiction might challenge prevailing narratives of climate anxiety and despair and instead foster a sense of agency and possibility. These stories take place on Kulin Country, and work to make visible the ways in which humans can get to know their local Place by being *called into connection* (Rose, 2015), respectfully foregrounding First Nations perspectives, sustainability and climate action in the everyday.

Associate Professor **Catherine Hamm** is a settler to the Kulin nation, her ancestors are uninvited arrivals from the United Kingdom. Catherine spent summers being grown up by Wurundjeri, Boonwurrung and Bunurong Countries in the Kulin Nation and Tyerenotepanner Country in lutriwita/Tasmania. Catherine's work activates her commitment to respectfully foreground First Nations worldviews in early childhood studies. She co-leads the Learning with Place © (www.learningwithplace.org) research project that seeks to generate and document innovative pedagogies that support children, teachers, and communities to build ongoing relationships with their local places and multispecies communities. Catherine is currently co-creating a children's television pilot, *Walking with Lilly*, based on the Learning with Place research project.

Session 4

Danielle (Dany) Celermajer: "Raveling"
To invite others to imagine loss and absence is to beckon them into a vacuum, where it is likely cognitively and emotionally difficult, if not impossible, for them to tarry. What can they hold onto, connect with and care about once unravelling is over and no story remains? The challenge of telling stories that will invoke emotional connection and an ethics of care is especially fraught when the loss is not simply of a life that existed and can thus be filled in with rich detail drawn from the past, but of lives that would have unfolded across time that has not yet come, and never will. This paper explores an alternative approach to storying loss at scale. Starting with the very personal story of my aunt, who was murdered in the Shoah at 12, and whose unlived life has accompanied mine, I will lay out the beginnings of a form of storytelling that ravels what has been unraveled, of animals, forests and ecological relationships, inviting readers into the thick fabric of lives given existence on the page such that we might be present to their absence.

Danielle (Dany) Celermajer is Deputy Director of the Sydney Environment Institute and lead of the [Multispecies Justice project](#) at the University of Sydney Over the last decade, she has turned her attention from uniquely intra-human injustice and human rights to injustices and violence against the more than human world and their intersection with injustice against particular groups of humans. Through the experience of living through the black summer bushfires as part of a multispecies community, she began writing about a new crime of our age, [Omnicide](#). Her creative non-fiction book, *[Summertime](#)*; Reflections on a Vanishing Future (Penguin Random House, 2021) was written in recognition of the critical urgency of conveying the complex conceptual recognition of the multispecies harms of the climate catastrophe. Her latest book, co-authored with other members of the Multispecies Justice Collective is [Institutionalizing Multispecies Justice](#), Cambridge University Press, 2025.

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Paul Magee: "Unsettling the obviousness of our language here"
The word *Foreign* comes to us from *foras*, the Latin for 'out of doors.' When the Howard government greeted the new century by merging the older departments for Immigration and Indigenous Affairs, it was playing out that very strange inheritance. The paper reports on a project aimed at peeling back the obviousness of the official language here, apparently English. Actually, *Australia*, meaning "the southern," was used as an adjective by both Ovid and Cicero in the 1st Century BCE, to describe the then putative South Pole. The paper proceeds to discuss a series of dialogues made up on the spot by Paul Collis, who is Barkindji, Jen Crawford and I, all 3 poets in and around Canberra, and six Barkindji, Kunya and Nyempa interlocutors, Paul's kin from Bourke and Brewarrina, outback New South Wales. The project constituted a sort of listening exercise, to do with approaching place and people without the usual words. What does Bourke look like once you take that name (from Sir Richard Bourke, born in Dublin in 1777, distant relation of Edmund Bourke) from it? Each dialogue was organized around a guiding set of questions, *What is a river?* being the first. But actually nothing is made up on the spot. The rivers of story from which culture proceeds contoured our answers, including to the second of these questions, *What is*

fiction? Answers included the town all around us. But we also talked of the trees and the plants, the hospital, pharmacy and supermarket outside. How we know where we are going.

Paul Magee studied in Melbourne, Moscow, San Salvador and Sydney. He is Professor of Poetry at the University of Canberra, where he directs the Centre for Creative and Cultural Research. His most recent books are *Suddenness and the Composition of Poetic Thought* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2022) and *Later Unearthed* (Puncher and Wattmann, 2025).

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Peter Minter: "*One Song No Song*: The awakened cosmos in experimental poetics"
How can radical thought about poiesis, poetry and poetics contribute to our mutual encounters with amplified ecological change and environmental crisis? In this presentation I share new work from a poetry manuscript that, in a long series of experimental sonnets, foregrounds East Asian and First Nations non-dualist modes of representation and thought. As exemplars for a non-dualist stance toward reality, the poems actualise modes of poiesis in which, to echo the words of David Hinton, renowned scholar and translator of classical Chinese poetry, the cosmos is awakened to itself. By displacing "the lyrical interference of the ego" (Olson) such a poetics offers practical and philosophically compelling ways to tell embodied stories from within "place" that supplement and revitalise, rather than extract, aesthetic and environmental value. The discussion will include ideas from Aboriginal Australian lawman and writer Bill Neidje (Gagadju), as well as philosophers and writers such as Deborah Bird Rose, Val Plumwood and Gary Snyder.

Peter Minter is a poet, poetry editor and writer on poetry and poetics. His poetry is widely published in Australia and internationally, and he is the author of numerous award winning and translated books of poetry such as *Empty Texas, blue grass* and *In the Serious Light of Nothing*. He was a founding editor of *Cordite Poetry Review*, poetry editor for leading Australian journals *Meanjin* and *Overland*, and has co-edited anthologies such *as Calyx: 30 Contemporary Australian Poets* and the *Macquarie PEN Anthology of Aboriginal Literature*. He teaches at the University of Sydney with a research focus in Transcultural Ecopoetics and First Nations, Asian and Pacific literatures and arts, and their interdisciplinary interplay with western experimentalisms.

DAY 2
Session 5

Kirsten Wehner: River Country: Building cultural capacity for re-storying waterways

Abstract to come

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Andrea Gaynor: "Engulfed: Storytelling for suburban frontiers"
For those dwelling in the more established parts of Australian cities, it is often difficult to imagine – and perhaps more unsettling to dwell upon - the sometimes violent process through which the older multi-species worlds of their home place were once eradicated and replaced with houses, roads, parks, shops and other infrastructure of urban life. Most urban histories describe pre-colonial landscapes and, increasingly, the lifeways and experiences of the local Aboriginal people before and through colonisation and urbanisation. But rarely do they grapple with the detail of how the upheaval of urbanisation was experienced by more-than-human communities. Storying this process can provide opportunities for reflection on those places engulfed by urbanisation and the meaning of this radical transformation: what is sacrificed, and what might be saved or re-gained. In this talk I explore these questions by homing in on relationships between children and birds in postwar Dandenong, a place already transformed by more than a century of timber extraction and pastoral/agricultural development, and in the 1950s a country town set to be rapidly engulfed by Melbourne's expanding postwar urban frontier.

Andrea Gaynor is a Professor of History and Australian Research Council Future Fellow at The University of Western Australia. As an environmental historian, she seeks to research and tell historical stories that can spark ideas, conversations and action toward more just and sustainable societies. Her ongoing research and activism have focused on nature conservation, community-led land management, agriculture, fisheries, and urban sustainability.

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Affrica Taylor: "Grandmother baglady yarns: From Wiradjuri Ngurambang, Adelong NSW"
In this session, I 'show and tell' my carrier bag of hand-stitched yarns – with a big nod to Ursula Le Guin and Donna Haraway. These are my baglady yarns, crafted as a tribute to my maternal grandmother, and the blasted Wiradjuri Country that grew her up on the Adelong goldfields in the late 19th century. These yarns are the materialisation of some personal research I've been doing - hanging around in Adelong, and tracing how the threads of my gold-mining settler ancestors' lives were knotted into the dispossession and desecration of this Country and its kin. Obviously, this involves looking beyond the heroic pioneering narratives on display at the tourist sites, and

uncovering some hidden stories of colonialist and extractive violence and excess. Encouraged by Anna Tsing's insistence that it is still possible to 'find life in the capitalist ruins', I also hoped that these 'killing' stories would not be the only ones I'd uncover. I eventually found some life-sustaining stories of care and repair sequestered away in the handicraft displays up the road in the Tumbarumba Pioneer Women's Hut. They've allowed me an otherwise way to thread myself into the fabric of my inheritance.

Affrica Taylor is an Adjunct Associate Professor in the Centre for Sustainable Communities at the University of Canberra and a founding member of the Common Worlds Research Collective. She holds a PhD in cultural geography and has spent decades working in Indigenous and environmental education. Her research is now situated within the environmental humanities and seeks reparative responses to the genocidal/ecocidal legacies of colonialist/capitalist excess. She draws on decolonising eco-feminist philosophy and Indigenous Land ontologies to counter human-centric dualistic paradigms, and support convivial ways of cohabiting damaged common worlds in ecologically precarious times.

Session 6

Emily Potter, Donna Houston and Fiona Miller: "Repairing places for adaptive futures: Community-led repair work in climate-affected regions"
Community-informed stories and practices of place-based repair are overlooked in responses to natural disasters and climate change adaptation in Australian regions. A more comprehensive picture of place-based repair work is vital for understanding how communities respond to environmental disaster and develop capabilities for climate-adaptive futures. The paper will discuss the capacity of SHAPE (Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts for People and Environment) methodologies, including narrative-based and creative arts methods (such as shared reading, storytelling, walkshops, photodiaries and guided conversations), to generate insight into how communities impacted by slow and environmental disasters respond through localised, informal modes of repair. It will draw on place-based work getting under way as part of an ARC-funded multi-sited project across Australia, Sweden and the UK that aims to translate methods and imaginaries of place-based repair as a resilient and climate-adaptive resource for communities, governments and organisations. This includes new and applied understandings of repair and its role in climate affected regions, leading to improved awareness of what supports successful place-based repair work, who benefits and who is potentially overlooked.

Emily Potter is Professor of Writing and Literature at Deakin University. She researches across the fields of Australian literary studies, the environmental humanities, and place-making studies, with a particular focus on regional places and communities, as well as creative and participatory research methodologies. Emily is the author of *Writing Belonging at the Millennium: Notes from the Field of Settler Colonial Place*, co-author of *Plastic Water: The Social and Material Life of Bottled Water* and is a founding member of the international *Shadow Places Network*.

Fiona Miller is a human geographer who conducts research from a political ecology perspective on the social and equity dimensions of environmental change, specialising in social vulnerability, society-water relations and climate change adaptation. Fiona is currently undertaking research on place-based practices of repair, community experiences of floods, and climate-related loss and displacement. Her research sits at the interface of critical social science and the environmental humanities, and is collaborative, interdisciplinary and applied in nature. She is a founding member of the *Shadow Places Network* and recently edited the *Edward Elgar Handbook on Climate Change Vulnerability, Environments and Communities*. She currently teaches into the human geography, planning and social impact assessment programs at Macquarie University. Previously Fiona has held research positions at the University of Melbourne, the Stockholm Environment Institute and the University of Sydney.

Donna Houston is an urban and cultural geographer specialising in urban and environmental humanities. Her research focuses on environmental justice in regions affected by climate change, planning for more caring and just multispecies cities and geographies of extinction. She explores how storytelling and creative methods can address social and environmental challenges.

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Michael Chew: "Ecological storytelling across borders: expanding environmental photovoice through multi-sited dialogue"

This presentation draws on a multi-sited participatory photography project that responds to the limitations of mainstream environmental photography - which often oscillates between romanticised wilderness, dystopias, or techno-utopian narratives while overlooking local material realities. While participatory photovoice methods provide a community grounded alternative, their hyperlocal focus risks obscuring global environmental justice dimensions.

     This research responds by integrating multi-sited dimensions into digital photovoice practice through a design-based participatory action research approach, exploring three interrelated orientations – *adapt, visualise, and influence* – corresponding to the creation, analysis, and audience engagement with photo-stories created by communities across Bangladesh, Australia, and China.

     The study can be seen to adapt photovoice as a 'patchy' methodology (Tsing et al.), expanding it to include other participatory methods such as photo-letter exchanges, photo-elicitation interviews, and community action projects. Embodied workshop and curation practices provide a counterpoint to digital abstraction, supporting dialogues across geographic, environmental and cultural difference. These reciprocal participatory methods reveal in visual ways how global material flows can co-constitute 'Shadow Places' (Plumwood).

     The research develops participatory visual approaches as relational practices that connects embodied, local acts of care across environmental (justice) divides. By prioritising these site-specific material-discursive engagements, the project expands on the limitations of conventional storytelling approaches while revealing new potential forms of reciprocal visual environmental advocacy.

Michael Chew is a freelance participatory designer and social ecologist whose practice-led work explores creative, participatory processes in social and environmental contexts, with a focus on storytelling across cultural and geographic borders. He draws from interdisciplinary perspectives with degrees in Participatory Design, Mathematical Physics, Critical Theory, Art Photography and Social Ecology, and has run community storytelling projects across the Asia-Pacific region. His design-based action-research PhD explored how participatory photography and other creative practices can inspire youth environmental behaviour change across cities in Bangladesh, China and Australia, and he recently completed a Rotary Peace Fellowship at Chulalongkorn University investigating distributed co-design processes with youth and environmental storytelling.
LinkedIN - https://www.linkedin.com/in/michaelchew1
Creative projects - https://www.ecoimagine.org/projects

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Vic McEwan: "Artistic interventions within a contested river system"
This presentation explores past and ongoing research that brings together diverse knowledge system to explore the role of storytelling through multi-disciplinary artistic methodologies. It focuses on work situated along the Murray-Darling River system, one of Australia's most contested ecological and cultural landscapes.

Following the 2019 and 2023 Menindee Fish Kill events, Vic McEwan was part of a multi-disciplinary team that brought together art, science and cultural knowledges to create a process for engaging with the unfolding river crisis. Now, in his role as Postdoctoral researcher at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, McEwan expands on this work as part of Professor Liza Lim's 5 year ARC Laureate Fellowship: Multispecies Creativities and Climate Communication. This project aims to transform sites of environmental conflict into spaces of exchange, connection, and shared purpose. By collaborating with artists, scientists, Indigenous leaders, and water managers, it explores how creative practice can support new dialogues around multispecies justice and environmental governance.

Focusing on four key locations—St George (QLD), Menindee (NSW), Falls Creek (VIC), and Goolwa (SA)—this research responds to the complexities of river health, climate change, industrialised river interventions and water allocation disputes. Through immersive sound, video, performance and installation, it demonstrates how art can meaningfully engage with the multi species communities of the Murray Darling System.

Dr **Vic McEwan** is an internationally recognised artist and researcher. He is the Artistic Director of multi-disciplinary arts organisation The Cad Factory and the Postdoctoral Research Associate in Creative Arts, Ecologies and Communities at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music (USyd). He is also the co-founder of The CASE Incubator studio, a national hub for the development of socially engaged arts practice. Vic's work explores the capacity for art to engage with social and environmental contexts through sound, music, photography, video, installation, sculpture and performance. His work has been presented in many site-specific locations nationally and internationally, as well as in more traditional venues such as the Tate Liverpool, National Museum of Australia and numerous regional galleries across the country.

Zoë Sadokierski and Thom van Dooren: "A bird, a flock, a song, and a forest: The decline of Regent Honeyeater life"
The south-eastern corner of the Australian continent was once crisscrossed by the nomadic flight paths of the Regent Honeyeater. For hundreds of thousands of years, they winged their way up and down this vast continent. Today, however, the species is listed as critically endangered and is just clinging to existence. This presentation tells the story of this decline, exploring the complex, co-shaping, relationships between individual birds and their flocks, their songs, and their forests. In so doing, it aims to draw out the vital importance of particular locales—of a sustaining matrix of places—in the ongoing life of this species, and the catastrophic consequences of the loss of these places.

In telling this story we will draw on our collaborative multimedia essay that seeks to bring text into conversation with images and audio to draw the reader/viewer/listener into an encounter with an unravelling world. We aim to both tell a story about this species and its places and draw out some of the many challenges and opportunities of the multimedia, multidisciplinary, storytelling approach that we adopted in this project. This multimedia essay was co-produced by a larger team including Thom van Dooren, Zoë Sadokierski, Myles Oakey, Timo Rissanen, Samuel Widin, and Ross Crates, with the additional expert curatorial and design work of Jennifer Deger, Victoria Baskin Coffey, and Caleb Kingston.

Zoë Sadokierski is Associate Professor of Visual Communication and Co-Director of the Visualisation Institute at the University of Technology Sydney.

Thom van Dooren, FAHA, is Professor of Environmental Humanities and Deputy Director of the Sydney Environment Institute at the University of Sydney.

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Storying Geography Collective: "Reflections on collaborative experiments in storytelling"
The Storying Geographies Collective is a group of academic geographers who connected during COVID to consider how we could reflect and theorise from experiences of pandemia and of place by writing and sharing stories, together. Practicing storying together, particularly the storying of geographies and places, presents a range of difficulties for traditionally trained planners and geographers. While we may be accustomed to engaging with stories *as data*, we are less practiced as story*tellers*, less trained in the form and art of telling good stories, and (often) less familiar with epistemologies that embrace stories as ways of knowing. We found ourselves grappling with the darker sides of storytelling, too. Some stories reinforce, rather than challenge, dominant subjectivities and western epistemic privilege, reinscribing – even laundering – systems that exploit and harm places and those who dwell with them. Those of us

who occupy stolen lands as settlers too often reproduce stories that reinscribe settler claims over place, white possession, and colonial futures. In this talk we will reflect on what storying together has helped us learn and unlearn, some of the political and ethical concerns we continue to struggle with as we practice storytelling, and the importance of care and connection as enablers of practice, experimentation, and accountability.

Natalie Osborne (she/her) is Senior Lecturer Urban and Environmental Planning at Griffith University, co-producer of Radio Reversal, and co-convenor of the Brisbane Free University. The **Storying Geographies Collective** comprises Uma Kothari, Fiona Miller, Sarah Wright, Joseph Palis, Phoebe Everingham. Karen Paiva Henrique, Maria Borovnik, and Natalie Osborne.