

Preface

The papers presented in this edition of *etropic* were originally delivered at the fifth biennial *Tropics of the Imagination Conference* held at the Cairns Institute of James Cook University on Thursday 17th September 2015.

The conference was open to researchers and postgraduate students with an interest in culture and creativity in the tropics, and to individual artists and arts workers in the field as well as those employed in creative industries. Members of the general public with an interest in these fields also attended.

The focus areas for the 2015 conference included:

- Self as Place; Place as Self
- Art as a mediator of embodiment/emplacement
- Art and the bioregional imagination: connecting creative vision, ecology and place
- Multispecies beings and becomings
- Tropical polyartists and arts fusion
- Imagining the tropics through digital arts
- Imaging the tropics through scientific and technological creativity
- The tropics and the mysterious

This selection of papers opens with a study by Robyn Cheshire and Ryan Daniels which analyzes the work of four contemporary painters (Firth-Smith, Silver, Watson, and Cheshire) who have been inspired by the landscape of North Queensland, in order to consider the ways in which their work reveals a spiritual connection to place. But the appeal of the tropics, imagined as a pristine verdant paradise replete with exotic plants and enigmatic animals, belies the impact of human activity on the region. Robyn Glade-Wright therefore examines the capacity of artists to represent ecological change and offer new ways of comprehending our place in the tropics. This aim also informs “Placemaking through Dasein: Painting Tropical Space” in which the authors look at the role of art in understanding place as a construct of the imagination, and reactions to the real and lived experience. The authors show that the making of a place by the activities and actions within place constitute over time notions of what things are, what they mean and how meaning is constructed from symbolism and kinaesthesia. In “A Pathway to Truth about Self” Karen Argus utilizes picturebook text and visual arts while combining creative responses with professional understandings as well as experiences and learnings from childhood through to adulthood, to work towards an improved understanding of self. The art work used has a Far North feel being a multi-voiced story with unexpected sympathies. In “Uncertain Futures: Coral

Bleaching and the Loss of Innocence, Beauty and the Sublime” the author examines the capacity for art to secure belief through reflective understanding in relation to the moral predicament of anthropogenic climate change. Works from the exhibition *Exodus: Coral Bleaching and Heat Stress* by the author are used to call attention to habitat degradation due to climate change. In “Women in Unity: Re-Imaging the Female Body in Art” Laurel McKenzie shows that earlier art and theorizing about binaries which associated maleness with mind and culture, and femaleness with the body and nature, have been ‘disrupted’ by recent work theorizing about embodiment. In the work of some contemporary feminist artists the body is not rejected as a subject around which feminist practice can be based; rather, exaggerating the binary opposition of female/nature/body *versus* male/culture/mind is a strategy for disrupting its logic.

Moving to literary study, Richard Lansdown reconstructs the thinking of English novelist D. H. Lawrence who spent six weeks on land in the tropics, at Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) in March and April of 1922, before travelling on to Australia and, ultimately, to America. His trip coincided with a state visit from the Prince of Wales, the future ill-starred Edward VIII, on a far grander tour of India and the East that would end in Japan. Lawrence had views on the future monarch, and monarchy at large, brought out by seeing Edward in attendance at the Perahera festival at the Temple of the Tooth. So ideas religious and political did get aired in a tropical surrounding. Travel is also key to Michael Davis’ “Entangled Tropical Knowledges: Towards a Poetics of Knowledge and Place-Making in Nineteenth Century Voyaging Narratives”. Meetings and encounters between voyagers and local people take place around conversations and communications concerning local environmental knowledge. This paper looks at these ‘knowledge encounters’, to consider the complex poetics of entanglements between local Indigenous knowledges and Western modes of knowledge and representations of the local environment. Davis concludes by reflecting on the role of historical representations of entangled tropical knowledge formations in present day concerns about climate and environmental change. In “The Spectre of History” Daly also considers the influence of individuals in shaping and influencing a society, as well as the degree that the collective consciousness of the people of a country impacts upon history. The essay questions the perception of Australia as an egalitarian society, with its ethos of ‘A Fair Go for All’, particularly in the context of Indigenous and Torres Strait Islanders, the original inhabitants of Terra Australis. Narrowing the focus to Cairns in North Queensland, Carol Libke looks at the ‘new pioneers’ during the rebuilding phase of Cairns following the Second World War, drawing on numerous interviews she conducted with subjects. Also focussing on a regional context is Pauline Sherlock in “The Tyrannies of Distance: From Cairns to the Melbourne International Comedy Festival”. Sherlock shows how living in Cairns, a long distance from a major comedy centre, poses problems in gaining practice and exposure as an emerging stand-up comedian.

In the field of education in the tropics, Jocene Vallack outlines her work with children making up plays about local stories. Local people are interviewed and their anecdotes recorded. The children then analyse and interpret the data, which is then synthesized into a written play script. This ‘Theatre as Research’ approach is a tool for integrating the teaching of local history with the Arts.

Two papers address the phenomenon of the cyclone in the tropics. In “The Cyclone As Catalyst” Ute Haring and Reesa Sorin examine the impact of tropical north Queensland’s 2006 Cyclone Larry on children’s wellbeing, as expressed through their drawings and narratives. Experiences of children during three stages of a cyclone event, the lead up, landfall and finally the aftermath, are examined and discussed to present a broad perspective about how children express fear, resilience and hope for the future. Art and narratives give children a voice through which to express feelings, as well as being a tool for healing and encouraging children’s resilience. Findings to date suggest that children’s perspectives supply significant contributions to our understandings of natural disasters such as cyclones. In his study of Vance Palmer’s writings about cyclones, Chrystopher Spicer finds that Palmer develops the cyclone as a trope of apocalypse, an unveiling and realization of the new inherent within the destruction of the old. As a result of experiencing both the terror and the mystery of the apocalyptic cyclonic event, Palmer’s characters realize they have transcended fears and inadequacies within themselves, enabling them to re-create new lives and new worlds. In “‘All the world’s a stage’: Place and Identity in David de Vaux’s *Cassowary Hill*” intimations of sublimity in tropical nature also sustain the intentional travellers and sophisticates who travel to the North Queensland area.

This selection of papers offers innovative thinking about art, culture and nature in the tropics, and should serve as a grounding for further study.

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