The Radical Imagination: A Nature Writer Reflects

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Abstract

Imagination is a deeply radical force, yet some postmodern orthodoxies dismiss it as naive modernism. I disagree. Nurturing an ecocentric ethic requires re-imagining ourselves and our world, a process in which storytelling excels. When I first began nature writing I wrote relatively straightforward natural history. Eventually, I saw that I could not write about the natural history of a place without enquiring deeply into its social and political history. Without history, there is no possibility of political engagement.

After considerable reflection on my own writing praxis, I came to ally myself with ecofeminism and post-colonialism. Neither is unproblematic, but their understandings of the operations of power allow the possibility of pursuing genuine encounters across the intra-human divides of gender, class, race and ethnicity, as well as the species barriers set unnecessarily high by our current culture. Imagination is the shortest bridge between the local and the global. It unlocks the door to a radically different future. We should not be afraid to use it.

Keywords

Imagination, ecofeminism, post-colonialism, nature writing.

Introduction

Many years ago, when I first began as a nature writer, my work consisted mainly of relatively straightforward natural history narratives, albeit tales infused with a political commitment to conservation. My writing draws from science (especially natural history), biography, autobiography, literature, ethics and politics, but whatever expertise I possess is that of the writer, the storyteller, rather than that of the disciplinary specialist. There are perils and pleasures in such interdisciplinary work. Eventually I came to understand that I could not write about the natural history of a place, without enquiring deeply into its social and political history. In this process, I confirmed
my belief in the power of writing as a political praxis.

From Science to Story

My early writing career gave me a great deal of experience criss-crossing the borders between literature (the discipline I was trained in) and science (a discipline I both desire and deconstruct). I want to throw light on scientific discourses, not produce ‘science-lite’. All the while, therefore, I keep sight of the fact that the material for my stories is factual rather than fictional, and this entails certain responsibilities. Over the years I acquired and refined a set of professional approaches to facilitate my wanderings across disciplinary territories where I am not a resident. My interest in the narratives of the natural sciences is qualitatively different from those producing scientific research as a primary activity. My concerns are a mixture of ethical, political and spiritual matters. Added to which, my methods of expression are literary rather than technical.

In taking from the discourse of science, however, I avoid violating the conventions of how scientists tell those stories to themselves: that is, I take great pains to make sure that my science is right according to the lights of its own discourse. Making sure the science is accurate is very different, however, from wholesale importation of the scientific information with all its linguistic features intact. The initial reaction from the scientists concerned is often to re-gender Judith Wright’s words:

Great Heavens, they said to [her], look what you’ve done; you’ve turned what is into There’s No Such Thing; now we must turn it back.¹

It involves some interesting negotiations at times to convince scientists that while my work looks like, and is, a different beast, it is not a beast infested with the lice of scientific inaccuracy. What I do is displace the scientific narratives from their original context and tell them as stories in a different way, with different accompaniments and for different purposes. Not the least of which is introducing the scientists as human beings engaged in a particular practice, thus deliberately subverting the disembodied agent position demanded within the discourses of scientific disciplines.

My aim is to steer a course between the reductionism of scientific views of nature and the reductionism of transcendental renderings of the environment. I do not wish to contribute to the ‘nature as cathedral’ collection. I particularly want to resist the notion of: ‘A-contextual biology, [b]iology in which the effects of human social history have been magically erased. Biology in which everything is caught unchanging in the clear resin of the eternal present.’²

I also wish to engage history with the same blend of critical, reflexive respect I accord science. Yet, in a world that has been challenged by postmodern critiques, where some allege that everything is a species of narrative, how does history distinguish its truth claims? In the end, I am employing them for storytelling, anyway, but—as with science—I take great care to ensure that the historical facts and claims embedded in my stories have been cross-referenced and where possible checked by several sources. This reflects my allegiance to the factual truths of history, and is the primary way history distinguishes its truth claims.
The outcome of such purposive rearrangements of science, history and personal story is not, therefore, what is traditionally regarded as fiction, but insofar as it deliberately uses traditional narrative techniques, neither is it easily categorized as traditional non-fiction. This reflects my allegiance to the meta-truths of history’s stories. My work, therefore, inhabits the dangerous discursive space between fiction and non-fiction. The following quotes illuminate that space from two different perspectives:

I do not distinguish between fiction and non-fiction writing. I only distinguish between imaginative and pedestrian writing.\(^3\)

and

I do not want history to enable me to escape the effect of the literary but to deepen it by making it touch the effect of the real, a touch that would reciprocally deepen and complicate history.\(^4\)

Such blurring and hybridity is most certainly one of the pleasures of interdisciplinarity. On the other hand, it can be very perilous indeed to erase all boundary markers between the referential and the real. I strenuously resist claims that history is dead and the world no more than flat synchronic text. Understanding that literature and history are mutually constitutive does not entail blurring all distinctions between the referential and the real. I believe the distinction matters a great deal:

Our belief in language’s capacity for reference is part of our contract with the world; the contract may be playfully suspended or broken altogether, but no abrogation is without consequences, and there are circumstances where the abrogation is unacceptable. The existence or absence of a real world, real body, real pain, makes a difference. The traditional paradigm for the uses of history and the interpretation of texts have all eroded—this is a time in which it will not do to invoke the same pathetically narrow repertoire of dogmatic explanations—but any history and any textual interpretation worth doing will have to speak to this difference.\(^5\)

If we do not ‘speak [effectively] to this difference’ we may find ourselves in the invidious situation of having no grounds on which to challenge Australia’s very colonial Prime Minister when he claims that there was no such thing as a ‘stolen generation’ of Aboriginal children. Such a statement is akin to the propaganda of those who aver that there was no such thing as the Holocaust. Such abrogation of historical reality is pernicious. unacceptable and very far from random. In the words of Conley: ‘Eradication of memory, like that of biological diversity, is a necessary step in the program of transnational capitalism’.\(^6\)

**Pernicious Amnesia**

Without agency, without history, there is no possibility of political engagement. Without political engagement, there is little possibility of moving towards something more lively than our current constructions of culture. This is a belief shared by those millions who have struggled long and hard to have their histories/herstories heard: women, indigenous people, the colonized, the assorted oppressed. As Plant says:
Speaking for what has been abused in today’s corporate empire has required claiming our history—whether the story of the oppression of women, or the definition of what it has meant to be a ‘man’, or the violent domination of other, non-white people, or the callous disregard for the wellbeing of other species.7

I am not (quite) so paranoid as to subscribe to conspiracy theories, yet it does seem more than coincidental that shortly after these hidden histories began to be taken seriously, the very notion of the power and relevance of history became devalued. Yes, certainly, ‘ladies and coloured friends’, you are very welcome to join the game now—because we all know the real game’s not over there anymore. According to our records, history has gone the same way as god: dead.

There is a well-documented trend among some cultural theorists to celebrate a superficial cynicism, and deny the possibility of writing as a political praxis with some potential for impact/action/influence beyond the endlessly deferred chain of signifiers of world-made-text.8 As Salleh wryly notes, ‘the postmodern style has already called one generation of students off the streets and into the salon’.9 As an ecofeminist writer and a world citizen, however, I strenuously resist the passive closure of such a view. One of my chief concerns is resisting the closure of the intellectual space in which it is possible to imagine real social change, so my engagement with postmodernism is not without reservation.

Postmodernism: Which Brand?

So much shelters under the commodious rubric of postmodernism. If excerpts of its various texts were ever to be collated for the enlightenment of future generations, it would end up much like that other grand narrative, the Bible. Both are capable of lending themselves to any manner of argument across the spectrum, from the politically reactionary to the politically resistant. Critics of postmodernism also span the spectrum. I do not wish to ally myself with the reactionaries who dismiss postmodernism by refusing to engage with its concerns at all. I am happy to embrace its liberatory discourses: the breaking down of hierarchies, binaries, hegemonic science; the opening up of diversity, difference. I am less sanguine about the ecological and political consequences of its flattening, world-is-text reactionary discourses. The best approach in this context, therefore, seems to be to briefly examine two of the major catechisms of postmodernism that have been co-opted for reactionary and even nihilistic politics. They are, firstly, the severance of the referent from the real and, secondly, the related loss of history/memory.

Will the Real World Please Stand Up

Let us look at the contentions inherent in the first claim. Unfashionable extremists in one direction subscribe to the most naive of empiricisms, and hold that there is a one-to-one correspondence between the world-out-there and human knowledge and human representations of the world-out-there. No intellectuals of repute have subscribed to this belief post Karl Popper’s theories of falsification.10 Naive empiricism, however, remains the cornerstone of many commonsense understandings of the world, whether those of redneck fundamentalists or scientific hacks. Fashionable extremists in another direction, Baudrillard being a representative case, assert that all human apprehension is
reducible to nothing more real than tirelessly recombinant simulacra.¹¹

Between these extremes are the more nuanced positions, some of which offer the possibility of a regenerative ecopolitics. Along with Buell, I would like to avoid opposite reductionisms: reductionism at the level of formal representation, such as to compel us to believe either that the text replicates the object-world or that it creates an entirely distinct linguistic world; and reductionism at the ideational level, such as to require us to believe that the environment ought to be considered either the major subject of concern or merely a mystification of some other interest.¹²

As Conley notes, few of the major postmodernist theorists seriously deny the existence of the real, in the sense of the physical world; rather they deny the human ability to directly apprehend the real.¹³ Under this paradigm, we are forever separated from the world: it can never be anything other than a screen that passively receives our projected symbols, signs and desires. The potential benefits conferred by this recognition of the limitations of human knowledge are humility, and the recognition of equality in diversity. It can never be a bad thing, for instance, for subscribers to metanarratives such as feminism to recognize that it is incumbent upon them to strive for reflexivity and remain cautious about the persistence of middle-class, Anglo hubris.

Yet the ascendency of the referent untethered to the non-human natural world is rife with potential dangers. If the premise is taken to its logical conclusion—that is, if no referential system has deeper connection with ‘the real’, and each is as valid as another—then the possibility of sustained, large scale resistance and critique disappears. In Salleh’s words ‘[A]ntirealism becomes defeatism by assuming the relation between words and actions to be unknowable’¹⁴ It seems suspiciously convenient, for instance, that it is now fashionable in some circles to conflate the world with the linguistic and cultural constructions humans project on the world. How timely to dispose of inconvenient concerns about the ‘real world’ when hypercapitalism is doing its damnedest to make most of the non-human, natural world literally disappear.

Conley has made a detailed analysis of the possibilities for environmental thought from within a thorough understanding of the French poststructuralist oeuvre. As well as finding many places generative of positive ecological values, she also sums up two forms of ecological disparagement, one that claims that humans must reject nature and accede to culture and the other that does away with nature altogether by means of achievements in the technology of simulacra.¹⁵

In my view, the first describes the point at which modernism fails, the second the point at which postmodernism fails to establish a robust, regenerative ecopolitics. I acknowledge the usefulness of theoretical claims about the constructed nature of reality, often aimed at disrupting naively empirical, frequently fundamentalist, commonsense notions about the essential nature of the world. Nonetheless, as Buell contends, their usefulness is exceeded when such claims are elevated to the conceptual dominance that they were originally designed to dismantle:
From an ecocentric standpoint a criterion built on a theoretical distinction between human constructedness and non-human reality (Lopez’s theory of the two landscapes) is far more productive than a criterion based on the presupposition of the inevitable dominance of constructedness alone (Foucault’s theory of discursive formations).\textsuperscript{16}

In other words, although the real world may never stand up and distinguish itself from discursive constructions, it exists and requires our respect and care. Not to mention the fact that we—and all other lifeforms—are dependent on this existence. Neglect and abuse of the non-human natural world that was once justified in the name of a superior, transcendent reality can now be glossed over on the grounds of nature’s unreality. Humans as a whole would do well to learn how to stand up for the real world in the face of seductive discourses that can be used to justify the continuation of such long-standing systematic abuse.

Ultimately, the major critique I have of postmodernism is its failure of imagination. This failure means that postmodernism’s most critically reflective insights remain politically neutered. It frequently lacks the capacity to carry its critical reflections over into political activity working for change. In some instances it even celebrates this incapacity. That is why I prefer to embrace ecofeminism and post?colonialism, which offer the possibility of standing up for the ‘real world’, without at the same time falling into the grand old trap of evangelical colonialism.

\textbf{The Post?colonial Ecofeminist Quest}

Neither ecofeminism nor post?colonialism is unproblematic, of course. Regenerative politics will always fall short of Utopian visions. Ecofeminism recognizes the political impotence of seeing various forms of oppression as isolated phenomena, instead of the same phenomenon in different disguises, a shape-shifting enemy.\textsuperscript{17} Any theory that attempts such a degree of inclusiveness is certain to arouse suspicion. Is this just another grand narrative in petit récit’s clothing (post?colonialism is open to the same charge). What seems clear from an ecofeminist perspective can be less evident for those engaged directly in a particular ongoing power struggle. For example, many environmental movements are very lacking in reflexivity about the gendered nature of their structures and strategies. Black women, on the other hand, may well claim that they have enough on their hands dealing with the discrimination they face in terms of gender and race, without being called on to fight for what seems to be a greenish-white middle class agenda. Such scepticism is in fact a direct and eminently reasonable response to the racism and sexism unconsciously reproduced in single-focus power struggles, such as white, middle-class feminism or green organisations that do not seem overly concerned when toxic waste dumps or mobile phone towers end up in some other, less privileged, backyard.

However, the ecofeminist understanding of the nature of power does not demand that people’s political praxis should be spread too thinly over too many issues. Rather, it advocates staying at the forefront of the radical struggle that is most central to your positioning, while at the same time keeping tabs on the operation of power. In other words, it says to the male eco-warrior, ‘Do
your primary work, but realize that unless you also keep struggling against
the reproduction of patriarchal power structures, you are contributing to the
problem you are trying to solve’. It suggests to the feminist that gaining a more
equal position in a system that is systematically destroying the earth’s non-
renewable resources may be the ultimate in pyrrhic victories. It challenges the
scientist, male or female, to create their science with a view to the ‘triple bottom
line’: social and environmental, as well as economic sustainability. Ecofeminism
is perhaps the best and fullest expression of the old environmental saw: think
globally, act locally. Ecofeminism is not seeking closure and assimilation to
a ‘new, improved world view’; rather it seeks ongoing co-creation of in-the-
worldness, as it is located in a specific time-space.

Indigenous people and colonized people have every right to balk at the term
‘post-colonial’. I spell post?colonial with a question mark inserted between the
first and second syllables precisely to mark my scepticism of the claim embedded
in its deployment as a noun, a statement of current fact. I am not inclined to take
seriously the claim that this settler society of ours has relinquished its colonial
grip. On the other hand, I am attracted to the notion of the post?colonial as a
verb. In this form it indicates a movement, a process that can be engaged in
across all the discourses available to us.

Longley talks about the overlapping of the postmodern and the post?colonial
when cultural workers move past resistant contents (alternative histories,
for example) into new forms of representation.18 This requires radical acts
of imagination. Australia is a settler society engaged in preliminary, highly
ambivalent attempts at reconciliation with the indigenous people of this
continent. Simultaneously, there are the beginnings of a movement in natural
resource management towards an assessment of colonial land use practices,
and a recognition of the urgent necessity of reconciling our living patterns with
the broader ecological needs of the non-human natural world.19 Both processes
have a long way to go before achieving any lasting, positive change. Racism and
anthropocentrism are not easily extirpated, but neither are they to be taken as
enduring qualities of the entire human condition. They may be our heritage, but
they need not be our future.

What does this philosophizing mean for my writing? What is not wanted is
far clearer to me than what might serve. I know that as a nature writer I do
not want to engage in some ongoing form of neo-colonialism, some attempt to
appropriate and possess this land and its inhabitants for my own purposes. To
do this, of course, all you need to do is wax lyrical about the fauna and flora,
while conveniently overlooking (in the sense of expunging) the existence, and
the material, social and political histories of indigenous people in Australia.
At the same time, I know that I most adamantly do not want to romanticize,
generalize, appropriate Aboriginal discourses or purport to speak for them. In
this matter, as in all others, I try to keep my eye on the shadow plays of power,
and acknowledge my own position: not innocent, ecocentric. What I do want to
achieve is a modest contribution to the collective endeavour best expressed by
Donna Harraway:
So I think my problem and ‘our’ problem is how to have simultaneously an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects, a critical practice for recognising our own ‘semiotic technologies’ for making meanings, and a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a ‘real world, one that can be partially shared and friendly to earth-wide projects of finite freedom, adequate material abundance, modest meaning in suffering and limited happiness.’

Above all, I am convinced that some of our deepest truths can only be expressed poetically. It is imagination that is the final key that unlocks the door to a radically different future. Imagination is the shortest bridge between the local and the global. We should not be afraid to use it.

Endnotes


2 L.J. Christensen, See the Islands, ms, 2000, p. 113.


5 ibid, p. 15.


13 V.A. Conley, Ecopolitics.

14 A. Salleh, Ecofeminism as Politics, p. xi.


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