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BUSH COSMOLOGY: John Anderson's 'non-Euclidian Eucalypt' in *the forest set out like the night*

## Introduction

[Slide 1]

I am going to talk today about John Anderson's 1995 book-length poem *the forest set out like the night*. John Anderson was a Melbourne poet, who travelled extensively around Australia and retained a life-long fascination with the landscape and natural environment of the country. *The forest set out like the night* is an extended meditation on the Australian landscape. I want to discuss three aspects of the poem which for me suggest, in different ways, Anderson's conception of landscape as multiple and systemic. I will discuss the implications of 'setting out' as a cultural narrative and as a mode of composition which echoes movements in contemporary Australian painting. I will then consider Anderson's use of drawings as part of his text and conclude by examining how the poem attempts to negotiate multiple literatures and traditions, specifically those of Europe and Aboriginal Australia. I am picking out a few points to discuss but will quickly mention that a number of other readings could be staged which I have not gone into, but which might include reading the poem alongside open-field poetics, the site-specific modernist long poems of Olson & Williams or through an eco-poetic framework. For this short 'take' I am concentrating mainly on material from the subsection *Love the Cartographer's Way*.

## Setting Out

*The forest set out like the night* (from here on *the forest*) can be thought of as the document of someone who has 'set out' into the countryside. Anderson was a bushwalker and camper. In a short memoir his friend Ned Johnson said "he walked,

he slept on the ground in the open, he knew places intimately.” (Johnson 2008)  
Anderson’s poetry is a record of this intimate knowledge, gained from a desire to write from within the landscape. *The forest* offers a series of close observations of different objects, moments and registers of experience. The bush is seen as a network of connections and relations such that;

The animals and trees also came about in a community of each other’s suggestion  
Perhaps a balance of suggestion and counter suggestion  
(Anderson 1995, p. 52)

Anderson’s ‘setting out’ is differentiated from the ‘setting out’ of explorers who venture into places to classify and to survey. [Slide 2] He is also not collecting post-card scenes of a visited wilderness, a commodified image for later display. The point of Anderson’s engagement seems, to me, to be more about how looking closely reveals the strangeness and unknown qualities of the bush.

But the poem does engage with the classifying impetus of western science. Sections of *the forest* resemble the field notes of a geologist or botanist, complete with latin names. However Anderson offsets scientific language with lyrical and sensory descriptions, so that “the leaf names our fingertips” (Anderson 1995, p. 52). [Slide 3] Anderson also undoes the authority of taxonomies and names with wordplay;

Billabong, Deniliquen, grandiloquent, soliloquy  
Denili lilly quin  
Deniliquen, a place of water lillies and  
Billabongs (Anderson 1995, p. 95)

This section shows the presence too of Aboriginal language in the work. The juxtaposition of scientific and Aboriginal vocabulary evokes the linguistic overlays of colonisation, where land is re-claimed and re-named by the invader. Anderson decentres, but does not discount western science. He seeks to remind us that the ‘proper name’ is a construct. [Slide 4] Stephen Muecke offers a related thought in his book *Reading the Country* when he highlights the problem of assumed origin that the use of family-tree linguistic models causes in the study of Aboriginal languages. The idea of a root language, a ‘Proto-Australian’ is, he says, inaccurate. (Muecke 1984, p. 71) Muecke, influenced by Deleuze and Guattari, suggests that the tree be viewed

from above, “with roots and branches fanning out in all directions...life flows both ways along its strands the roots having no more of the ‘origin’ about them than the leaves.” (Muecke 1984, p. 71)

[Slide 5]

This sense of a non-linear, rhizomatic tree that is understood in relation to other objects is apparent in *the forest* where:

The eucalypt appears to have a peculiar relation to the cosmos, the greater universe. The branches seem to follow a thousand centres in the sky. (Anderson 1995, p. 73)

This brings me to another kind of setting out, that which denotes the arrangement of and relations between objects in a space. Anderson’s interest in the spatial experience of the Australian bush is reflected in the composition of his poem. Returning to the last two lines;

The gum opens to the night, presents faces to the night sky which recede and advance like space itself.

(Anderson 1995, p. 73)

A sense of mobile space, advancing and receding where focus shifts from trees and ground to stars and sky is key to the way Anderson perceives the bush as an open system. The poem mixes micro and macro perspectives deftly so that a reader sees multiple views, telescoping on small details of insects and seedpods before travelling outwards to view the landscape as an entirety. [Slide 6] The gum tree is often the meeting point for these mixed perspectives being both rooted in the ground and branching to the sky. In this section [pages 74 & 75] we see galaxies winding through the gums to the earth’s trunk, the inverted “Milky Way at our feet” echoed in the “starry delicacy” of Australian native flowers and grasses.

This idea of advancing and receding space is also important for a number of contemporary Australian painters, both European and Aboriginal, who use mixed and unconventional perspective to depict the landscape. In his book of essays *who wants to create Australia* Martin Harrison has discussed visual representation of Australian landscape, and particularly of inland and desert areas. (Harrison 2004, p. 31) Harrison

suggests artists such as John Olsen, [Slide 7] Ian Fairweather, the Papunya Western Desert painters, Tony Tuckson, Rover Thomas [Slide 8] and John Wolseley all work with the “predominant modal figure [...] of sedimentary levels, of above and below” (Harrison 2004, p. 32) in their depiction of the Australian environment. I would like to speak in more detail about John Wolseley, [Slide 9] who has remarked that the Australian landscape “has not really been painted yet – except by some singular artists and, of course, Aboriginal ones” this is due, he says, to the imposition of European or other foreign models “on something most peculiarly different.” (Grishin 2006, p. 9)

Wolseley spoke at the launch of Anderson’s final collection *The Shadows Keep* and located a number of shared concerns in their work (Catalano 1999). Wolseley, like Anderson prefers to work in situ, rather than from afar. He lives in the areas he paints and employs site-specific practices such as burying sections of the painting and incorporating found materials like ochres and charcoal. Wolseley, like Anderson, has a trace of the amateur naturalist in his work, with detailed sketches of birds and insects included alongside journal texts, map-like topographical sketches and chance experiments with found materials. Sasha Grishin writes that Wolseley’s non-traditional landscapes are focused on “depicting the actual landscape and its component parts, rather than translating it into terms of a European scenic convention.” (Grishin 2006, p. 53) Anderson and Wolseley in their work both reject an idea of landscape as easily framed scenery. [Slide 10]

Wolseley’s large-scale works are often formed of smaller sheets, assembled such that the ‘seams’ remain visible. Anderson too works with fragmented texts that are interspersed with white-space and graphic elements like page-break marks. In both cases discrete pieces come together as a complex system. For both Anderson and Wolseley collage, fragment and multiple perspective are key modes for composing a work that reflects the historical and ecological complexity of the landscape.

### **Drawing the Tortoise & Lizard**

Anderson also brings his text into dialogue with drawing through the inclusion of a series of sketches in ‘Love the Cartographer’s Way’. [Slide 11] The drawings are

diagrammatic and recall both field journal sketches and the flattened shapes of rock-art. They are based on two dream-images recounted in the poem; [Slide 12] a jumble of tortoises and stones in a creek at the foot of a gum tree and three lizards resting in a curved formation on a rockface.

This assemblage of tortoises, lizards and gum tree becomes part of a morphology of aspects of the bush. [Slide 13] The canopy of the gum for example is related to the clusters of tortoises, the curve of the lizards equates to the shape of a gum leaf.

Anderson comments in the poem on the act of drawing itself; [Slide 14]

The tortoise is the shell  
                                  the circle  
The lizard is the stick  
                                  the line

(Anderson 1995, p. 82)

Drawing and poetry are here linked by the suggestion that both require an attentiveness to how forms are seen and represented. The poem explores how we are able to imagine the gum tree both as sticks and circles and as lizards and tortoises. The drawings and text extend and activate one another. [Slide 15] Anderson in turn, extends the gum-lizard-tortoise system outward fashioning it into a kind of personal and at times mystic, cosmology;

The lizard points to the inspiration of all forms in heaven

The tortoise show their realisation on earth.

(Anderson 1995, p. 80)

Once more the poem moves between micro and macro views, stressing interrelation as the means of placing objects in space. [Slide 16] In later pages Anderson links the lizard-tortoise system to galactic spirals, to conception and the shapes of sperm and ovum and to the left and right brain hemispheres of the brain, finally reaffirming how the assemblage encodes; “the movement from the clusters of leaves to the clusters of trees and galaxies, the infinite advance and regress of forms.” (Anderson 1995, p. 97) The lizard and tortoise are a point where text and image, earth and sky and mind and

body converge. There is a coming together too of European and Aboriginal knowledge systems, [Slide 17] through the inclusion of an Aboriginal story attributed only to Arnhem land of the 'Lighting Brothers.' (Anderson 1995, p. 87) The issue of how Anderson negotiates colonial European and Aboriginal traditions is what I would like to lastly touch upon.

### **An Australian Forest**

[Slide 18]

Anderson invites us to:

Compare a gum forest at night to a European forest.

The gum forest. Space condensed. Opens Out.

The Black Forest closes in.

(Anderson, 1995, p. 73)

The difference between the Black and the gum forest is a question that informs the whole poem. Anderson writes that, "the idea that the Australian bush is drab and monotonous is well established in our literature." (Anderson 1995, 33) The attentive and nuanced observations of his poem attempt to undo settler notions of Australian landscape as unremarkable or undifferentiated compared to that of Europe. The poem's inclusion of Aboriginal words and allusions to creation stories signals a desire to underline the significance of Aboriginal occupation in Australia. This in itself is a political move in a country with a violent history that is often wilfully forgotten. At times Anderson engages more explicitly with the history and post-colonial inheritance of Australia, writing in an earlier section of the poem; [Slide 19]

The blackberries are the tears of the country

Its buried black history

They have been here  
an Australian length of time

The country is making  
something different of all of us

(Anderson 1995, p. 12)

*The forest* attempts to tease out the question of what the ‘something different’ Australia makes of us and engages with notions of European and Aboriginal ownership and belonging to land that is contested and overwritten with loss.

Anderson is by no means the first Australian poet to introduce these themes. [Slide 20] The Jindyworobaks come to mind as a group with whom Anderson might share some ambitions, despite the stylistic differences of their poetry. Mainly active during the 1930s-50s the Jindyworobaks attempted to write poetry that responded to the Australian environment without the imposition of European models. One of the movement’s founders Rex Ingamells writes in a 1937 essay ‘On Environmental Values’ [Slide 21] that the group believed that development of an Australian culture requires;

A clear recognition of environmental values

The debunking of much nonsense

An understanding of Australia’s history and traditions, primaeval, colonial and modern.

(Ingamells et al, 1948 p.12)

The Jindyworobaks promoted the need for a better understanding of Aboriginal knowledge traditions and took up these themes in their poetry, but this often resulted in a problematic adoption of Aboriginal concepts of spirituality, and a reductive romanticisation of Aboriginal people as noble savages. The questions raised about the groups’ appropriation of Aboriginal culture are completely legitimate. And Anderson does not necessarily escape these questions of speaking and authority or voicing the other either in his work. However he allows these issues into the work noting for instance that his language “comes from Europe where moonlit reefs and shires and

shoals of leaves also glisten.” (Anderson 1995, p. 101) [Slide 22] Anderson, unlike the Jindyworobaks, does not have a nationalist agenda in mind, he is not staking a claim of ownership on the territory of his poem. He is also aware of his status as a European and the problems this poses for attempts at fashioning an ‘Australian’ literature. In referring to both European and Aboriginal traditions he is perhaps gesturing towards the possibility of a kind of bi-cultural mapping of the Australian landscape, whilst also indicating the complexities of such a proposition. It is for me, in the work, a question left open, the beginning of ‘something different.’

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