

# ECOLOGIES OF SILENCE

AN EXPLORATION OF 'STORIED MATTER' IN COLONIAL AUSTRALIA

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## ECOLOGIES OF SILENCE: AN EXPLORATION OF 'STORIED MATTER' IN COLONIAL AUSTRALIA

Rising in popularity since its appearance in 2012, New Materialism offers a philosophical reframing of the role and status of human culture in the natural world. Disrupting anthropocentric approaches, New materialism interrogates ethical exclusion and silencing of non-human beings, proposing new models of ethical engagement and inclusion.

Post enlightenment approaches to the environment, particularly those of contemporary Western culture and critical thinking, demonstrate widely reductionist and separatist views. Where humans have been considered to be dominant in a hierarchical view of the natural world, with superior communication, reasoning, planning and emotive capabilities, New Materialism posits that this interpretation misses the ecological complexity in which human culture is enmeshed. Further, it suggests the presence of alternative, non-human, forms of expression demonstrated by the natural world encoded in those forms.

As the global ecological crisis escalates, we need to reconsider the relationship between human and non-human – to reimagine environmental ethics, and to reposition the human as entangled, not superior. New Materialism offers a philosophical pathway towards achieving harmonious cultures in a multispecies world, an approach vastly different from the environmental engagement in Colonial Australia. The intention of *Ecologies of Silence* was to examine the absence of ethical value and of narrative agency of the natural specimens in the Meigunyah Collection.

Utilising the specimens in the Eucalypt Cabinet (Figure 1), crafted by Grimwade in 1919, *Ecologies of Silence* aims to view each of them as 'a site of narrativity, a storied matter, a corporeal palimpsest in which stories are inscribed'<sup>1</sup> – responding to the form of the specimens through ekphrastic prose, interwoven with critical text. The outcome would be a creative exploration of the ways this agency might be articulated to demonstrate an 'embodied narrative', as opposed to their presentation by Grimwade as 'disembodied' scientific specimens.

The project expanded through the course of the research to include Grimwade's text, *The Anthography of the Eucalypts*, paintings in the Meigunyah Collection, Grimwade's unpublished autobiography and a selection of personal photographs.

Grimwade's Eucalypt Cabinet presents a fascinating intersection between colonial ambition and a personal relationship to the Australian landscape. I began by viewing the cabinet during a talk given at the Ian Potter center, and later more closely examining the contents of the

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<sup>1</sup>Opperman S, Iovino S, *Material Ecocriticism*, Indiana University Press, 2014, p 451

drawers through extensive photos provided by Ian Potter staff. Intending to consider the form of each specimen as poetic dialogue, I found that the vast array of specimens, nearing 170 in number, presented a cacophony of shape, color and scent.

Russell Grimwade demonstrated an enthusiasm for botanical science. Despite that, the Eucalypt Cabinet bears no scientific labelling. It appears to evidence a fascination with the landscape and its parts that reaches beyond documentation - raising the question whether he intended the role of the cabinet to be more *wunderkammer* than an encyclopedic collection. The research of one of the other recipients of the Meigunyah award, Wey Yao Wong drew my attention to this absence of scientific curation and I grew intrigued by Grimwade's motivations.

I considered a range of paintings in the Meigunyah collection, to better understand the typical representation and depiction of the Australian wilderness at the time Grimwade was actively engaged in preservation and botanical enquiry. I found consistent depiction of the wilderness, either as muted background to the endeavors of human enterprise, or as an unknowable and frightening entity that demands taming.

Backgrounding is described by Val Plumwood in her work *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993) as the failure of a group who perceive themselves to be superior to identify other groups as ethically relevant. She frames this as both exploitation, and a denial of dependency. Many of the paintings in the Meigunyah collection represent the parched and tumbled landscapes of Australia in a way that contextualizes the human narratives. Of the paintings available, William Strutt's *Bushrangers* from 1852 (Fig. 2) seemed to best capture this approach. On the other hand, the noble challenge of taming the dense and monstrous bush is best articulated in John Skinner Prout's work, *Fern Tree Valley* from 1847. (Fig. 3)

These works offer a context to better understand Grimwade's relationship to the natural world around him. I next approached *The Anthography of the Eucalypt*, (Fig. 4) published in 1920 and featuring 79 plates of natural specimens, currently held in the Baillieu Library. It was this work that provided the basis for my final creative outcome. Examining the photographs caused me to realize that if I tried to voice the narrative held in the form of the natural specimens, as I first proposed, I would only achieve the same outcome as Grimwade. Ekphrastic, prosaic or not, to apply my voice to the specimens would ultimately produce an anthropocentric outcome. One fixed in humanist language, following a linear format and locked into a singular, fixed form. Perhaps not so dissimilar from the rigid forms and descriptions stuck in the pages of the anthography. (Fig. 5-6)

The images in the anthography are gently, almost emotionally posed, in rich sepias and greens. They both echo a period of life, movement, and growth, and highlight a violent human interruption of natural processes. Curious as to the motivations behind the artistic

capturing of Grimwade's Eucalypt samples, I turned to his unpublished autobiography and finally, his personal photo collection. In the autobiography (Fig. 7) I collected sentences and examples of the language Grimwade applied to natural elements, as well as encounters with wildlife and plants. The phrasing employed by Grimwade when describing the natural world seems at times to be strongly juxtaposed to his didactic accounts of daily minutia and enthusiastic documentation of encounters with scientific and mechanized developments. The occasional use of poetic language '...memory is a grey colour ...'<sup>2</sup> perhaps, surprisingly reveals something of an emotional, artistic inclination. The personal photos of the Grimwade family show wide, sprawling country vistas, rivers, paddocks and gardens, as often as they show the industrial and mechanical developments of early Melbourne. (Fig. 8-9) Both the occasional creative flare in the autobiography, and the prevalence of Australian landscapes surprised me. Whilst the photographs of landscapes might just evidence an interest in photography, the sweeping array of natural settings, coupled with the prolific accumulation of natural specimens in the cabinet, and the graceful posing of the samples in the Anthography, together suggest something of wonder in Grimwade's relationship to the land around him. If this were the case, it would surely be at odds with the approach towards nature demonstrated by the sorts of men Grimwade admired and sought to be like, the "...explorers, pastoralists and industrialists: men like James Cook, John Macarthur and Grimwade's own father, the industrialist Frederick Sheppard Grimwade."<sup>3</sup>

In my final creative outcome I sought to apply a New Materialist approach – to find space for the samples and specimens collected by Grimwade to speak for themselves, in the way they best can, through form and movement. I have also tried to articulate the tension that I felt to be at play between the public figure of Grimwade as active preservationist and enthusiast of the arts, and his private relationship with, and desire to better understand, the non-human world.

I chose video art as the form, photographing the 79 plates from Grimwade's anthography, first layering them over one another at different speeds and opacities, to create a sense of movement. Eager to show Grimwade represented as a human form, caught in a complex, enmeshed relationship with the natural world, I was inspired by philosopher Donna Haraway's explanation of the era in which we live as 'tentacular'<sup>4</sup>. I created a tentacular suit as a blank canvas, enabling the specimens to be projected over the human form, to sit above it, and to be given shape and movement by it. This is intended to contrast with forms which are covered, obscured or have the human project their expectations on them, as a blank and

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<sup>2</sup> Grimwade R, Unpublished autobiography, 1949, care of the Meigunyah Collection Ian Potter Museum of Art

<sup>3</sup> Skerit H, Experimental gentlemen: Making the past present in the Sir Russell and Mab Grimwade 'Meigunyah' Collection, University of Melbourne Collections, no.10, June 2012, pp.15-23

<sup>4</sup> Haraway D, *Staying with the Trouble*, Duke University Press, 2016, p 117-125

non-agentic ‘screen upon which humans project their intentions, meanings, signs, and discourses’.<sup>5</sup>

Presenting the human as a disrupted, distorted and faceless entity evokes an archetypal, rather than individual figure. I highlight the tension between Grimwade’s emotional relationship to the Australian Landscape and an increasingly mechanized culture. Sound artist Jake Steel recorded a track for this purpose titled ‘*Saw Attack 3*’ which is distorted recordings capturing movement in a scrap metal sculpture. This plays over the top of the video work.

The process of engaging with the Meigunyah collection with New Materialism instigated a broad and varied enquiry, which I had not anticipated. The process deepened my understanding of approaches to non-anthropocentric values, co-emergent modalities of thinking and potential philosophical pathways for intertwining the material and the discursive. My expectations of Grimwade were challenged, and I found myself more deeply invested and engaged than I had previously expected. It was fascinating to unpack the complexities of Russell Grimwade’s bequest when framed with New Materialism, and I am grateful to have had the opportunity to do so.

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<sup>5</sup> Oppermann, S, Iovino, S 2014, *Material Ecocriticism*, Indiana University Press pg 89





**Figure 1:**

Specimen Cabinet, Eucalyptus and Brass, The University of Melbourne Art Collection, Gift of the Russell and Mab Grimwade Bequest 1973, 1973.0755



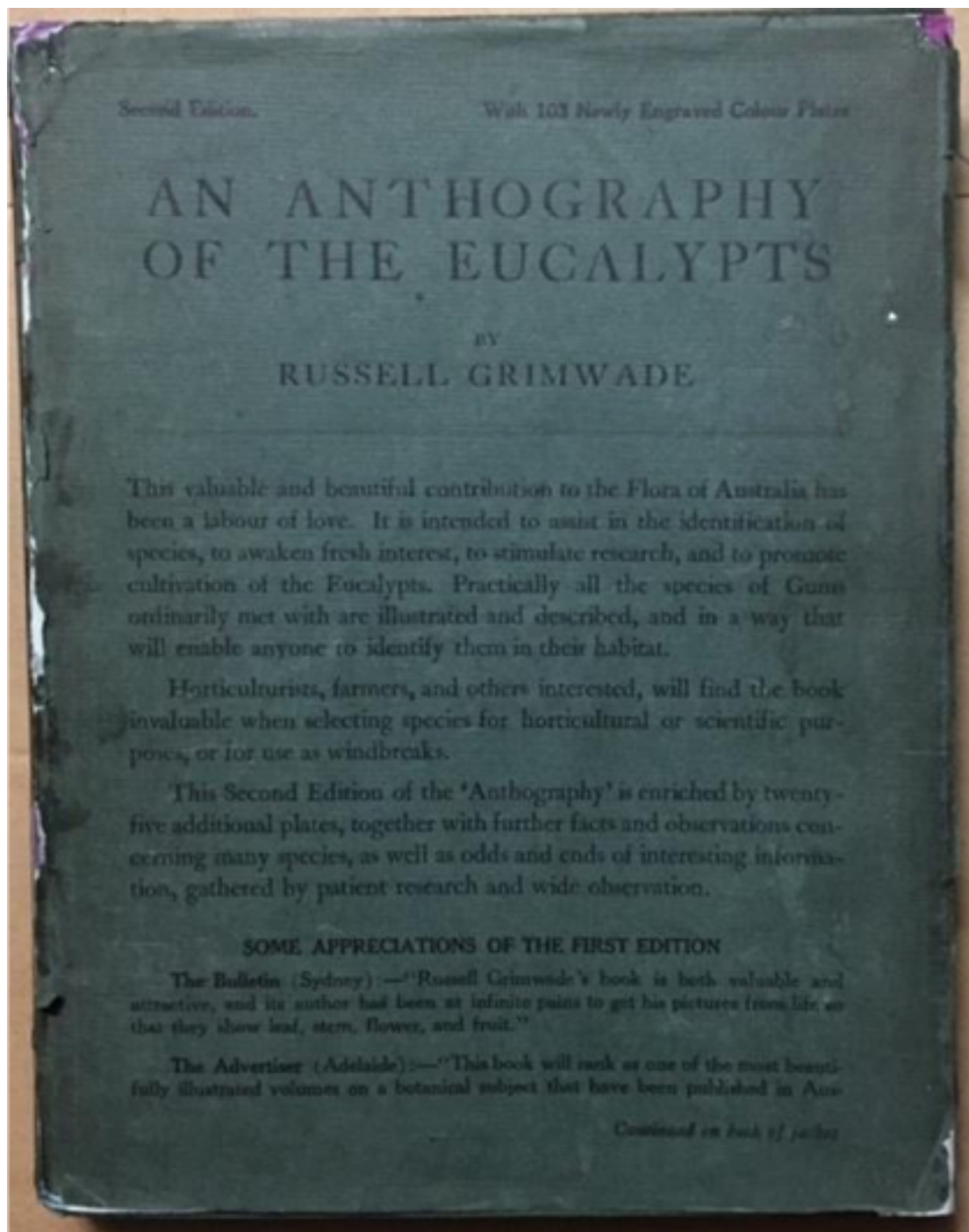
**Figure 2**

William Strutt, Bushrangers, Victoria, Australia 1852, c.1887, oil on canvas, 75.7 x 156.6 cm. The University of Melbourne Art Collection



**Figure 3:**

John Skinner Prout, Fern tree valley, Van Diemen's Land, c. 1847, watercolour, 74.5 x 55.5 cm (sight). Reg. no. 1993.0024, purchased 1993, the Russell and Mab Grimwade Miegunyah Fund, University of Melbourne Art Collection.



**Figure 4**

An Anthography of the Eucalypts by Russell Grimwade.

Author. Grimwade, Russell, Sir, Edition. 2nd ed. Published. Sydney :  
Angus & Robertson





Figure 5

An Anthography of the Eucalypts by Russell Grimwade.

Author. Grimwade, Russell, Sir, Edition. 2nd ed. Published. Sydney :  
Angus & Robertson



Figure 6  
An Anthography of the Eucalypts by Russell Grimwade.  
Author. Grimwade, Russell, Sir, Edition. 2nd ed. Published. Sydney :  
Angus & Robertson

CHAPTER 2.

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It seemed an enormous garden. From the nursery verandah whereon lay the goloshes, a little bench and the toys of rainy days, it stretched on the one end over the asphalt yard to the green on which the swing and horizontal bar were mounted on stout red-gum posts. On the other hand, intercepted by the trellises that enclosed the drying yard, it stretched to the stableyard with the stables beyond. This was the scene of constant activity, peculiarly clean and tidy in comparison with the modern garage that supplants it. There was always something of interest going on in the stables - the horses were being fed, or clipped, or feed was going in to be hauled up by rope tackle to the <sup>left</sup> ~~feed-house~~ above, or the everlasting processes of polishing the vehicles and their harness were being carried out to the accompaniment of that peculiar spontaneous humming that was supposed to be the coachman's <sup>function against the rebellion of dust</sup> prerogative. Whatever hour of the day or night that the carriage came in, the horses <sup>were</sup> groomed and bedded down, then the carriage was washed, dried with a chamois leather and immaculately polished before being pushed into its coach house. A visit to a city theatre concluded for the house party by an hour's drive from town, meant that the coachman put out in the small hours of the morning the fish-tail burner in its glass lamp illuminating the wash. [There may have been in those days the equivalent of the Federated Union of Stablemen Employees, but, if so, their regulations were elastic enough for the work to be done with a willingness and smartness that compares sadly with the conditions of today, and the significance of the contrast is not lessened by the happiness and the contentment of the coachman and such subordinates as he had under him.]

The horse and its vehicle have been supplanted by the motor car which the present-day owner puts in his garage at any hour of the day or night after a hundred-mile drive, switches out the light and slams the door without need of thought of attending to a living animal and cleaning the polished surfaces of the vehicle

Figure 7

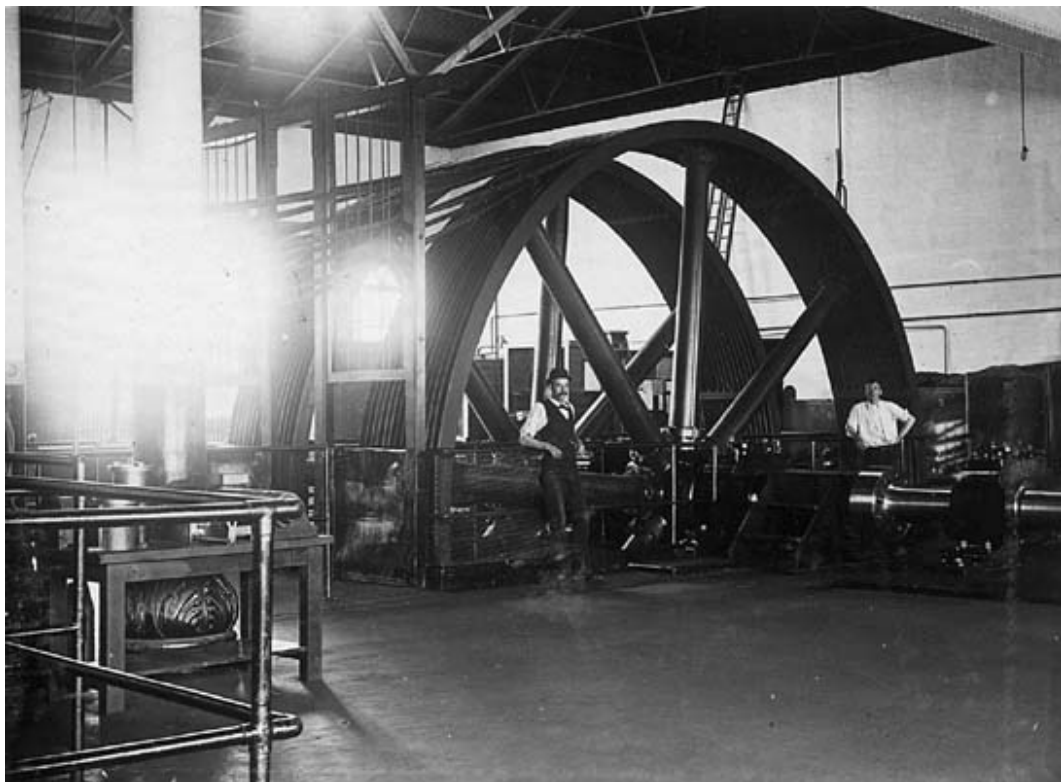
Russell Grimwade, Unpublished autobiography, 1949, care of the Meigunyah Collection Ian Potter Museum of Art





**Figure 8**

Coolart Creek, Grimwade, Sir Wilfrid Russell, 3 December 1896



**Figure 9**

Gearing wheel & driving Shaft, Sir Wilfrid Russell, March 6th 1898