

CRISIS NARRATIVE OF LANDSCAPE

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Landscape is a construction of the mind within the contemporary world. The elements of nature, ecology, urbanity, the sublime, and even the profane swirl across the surface in the scars, reflections and symmetry in a cacophony of colors put forward in the elements we call landscape. I narrow my landscape to consider the changing stories being created, heard or repeated that reference weather.



Fig 1. The Gates of Bei Gao. Still from video. Lisa Anderson, 2011



Fig 2. Wheatered Edges #4. Digital Print. Lisa Anderson, 2011

IS NATURE IN ME OR AM I IN NATURE [1]

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The Landscape I am mainly concerned with touches on all of these elements, however, I narrow my search to consider the changing stories being created, heard or repeated that reference weather.

The weather literally shapes the land, the architecture, the color of the sky and the density of the waters. The weather and its archive highlight the depth of history through challenging and shifting story telling about place.

As people, animals and plants migrate across the world, often pushed by the extremes of weather, the stories of particular places also change. The story we overwhelmingly hear now is one of disaster, of extinct species and of the forced movement of people. Often these disasters are the result of human challenges and scientific overcoming of weather and land.

However, the disaster elements like all good stories are told in many ways; within this chapter is the relatively new understanding of people as separate from nature, something perhaps embodied in Thoreau's influential understanding and books about wilderness, as nature. We see this in the idea of frontierism, where we became the conqueror with a civilized attitude that was outside nature. [2]

The idea of nature as a separate part of the ecology – and this is discussed in detail by Tim Morton in *Ecology without Nature* – suggests that we become aligned with the potential to divorce ourselves from any common good or shared experience with the land. We are encouraged in frontierism to create log cabins in inhospitable places, cut holes in the earth, shift tonnes of carbon from one side of the globe to the other, to take up residence on Mars as a future for the planet. That is scrap nature and start again policy. Just expand the frontier. [3]

Thus, my own aesthetic context and action includes looking closely at the stories of place that are often told in indigenous communities as both a keening for a past and a record of what happened. These stories feed an understanding that at times keeps pace with the weather changes recorded. This is the science of proving the winds and rain, the record of temperature and earth-shifts. The science of geology is reflected in the stories of the peoples over time.

For instance, many years ago there was a plan to mine a certain hill/ridge in remote Australia. The local peoples' stories forbid access to the site as sacred. It was the dreamtime sleeping place of a monster native frog. The last time the frog was awoken, the earth was separated and the frog vomited across the land with the soft surface soils washing away to the sea and leaving behind a dry desert; the people, animals and plants had to move or adjust. Thus, to disturb the frog would cause trouble across the land as again it would vomit. Eventually, despite the sheer disbelief that fear of a vomiting frog would stop big business mining, which is the all pervasive force in Australia, the rights of the traditional owners was upheld by the High Court.

The giant frog stays sleeping in the hill. It is worth pointing out that they wanted to mine uranium. Recent disasters around the world, such as the Tsunami on the coast of Japan that caused untold damage to the environment stemming from the Uranium fuelled power stations, could in legend be the result of a vomiting frog; or any similar legends that exist around the world.

These stories abound, and we ask ourselves who tells the story of the *Crisis in Landscape* now? Was it James Cameron in *Avatar*, where good and bad were depicted as government and big mining (very Australian that), and memories are stored in a tree with cloud-like qualities? [4] Or, is the story of Landscape told by David Attenborough, who whispers to us the details of shifting creatures across the planet? [5] Or, is it in the new geology comparisons in the TV series *The Universe* comparing our landscape with that of other planets as a goodbye wave at the past and a jump to the future? [6]

Within the potential TARDIS of the Internet we have many stories of landscape, with a hierarchy of stories shifting from the scientifically proven, to the stories we, as a people want or are willing to make up and share.

My recent video work *The Gates of Bei Gao* is created in the small hutong or suburb in the North of Beijing. This area has many children; a sign of unregistered people due to the one-child policy introduced in an attempt to maintain sustainable population levels in China. The next small hutong has already been torn down to allow the government to modernize. The sustainable farming carried out by these people, and the sifting and recycling of rubbish, another local task, are being closed down with the village. These people have already swelled their numbers by moving from the country areas to the edge of the city, due to drought and dust blowing in from the desert. The film hints at Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*, to scope this dilemma of a shifting landscape in the hazy dust of evening light.

These stories are research backgrounding my artworks to begin attempting to understand landscape as a touchstone for story, as an important element in the making up of an ecology, and in understanding the shifts in migration due to weather, and the imperialism of taking the land and treasure once remote or difficult to obtain.

My recent photographic exhibition *Clouds and Roses* exploits the similarity of story in locations around the world: perhaps like Tolkien in *The Lord of the Rings*, where he speaks often of the distant mountains. His characters explain throughout their journey across the landscape the make up and mapping of the world as always headed toward the distant mountains. This tenant of creating a story with common touchstones gives a familiarity to something that is also from somewhere else. [7]

My digital photographs *Weathered Edges*, include a combination of the Elgin Marbles, with the torn wallpapers of a long deserted traders' hut in the High Arctic. Both are objects that tell, hint and are formed by our romantic idea of landscape. The appropriated landscape in our mind is fuelled by the story, which I see as a weather story of a forced migration and a landscape under contest. The Elgin Marbles were stolen by an Englishman: he hacked them out of the wall, and paid a bribe to the occupying force in Greece to steal them across the border. He attempted to sell them almost everywhere he stopped, before they eventually came to reside in the British Museum. Every time I walk through the Museum, I hear a high pitched English voice explain that the Greeks just left them out in the weather and would not look after them like we do: they have become British because of this claim to protection from the weather.

The Traders' Huts images also tell tales of people in the wrong place: the attempt by the Hudson Bay Traders as an Imperialist merchant group to trade for furs and gold allowing them to set up settlements. Often these were outposts only visited by the lost in search of fortune. When I visited the hut, which is heritage and UNESCO protected, I had armed shooters in readiness against the polar bears as I quickly took images in the very limited time available.

I have also long visited Lake Mungo in remote Australia. The local indigenous people have allowed me access to the site and story in a very generous and sharing way. They have taken me, or drawn maps for me to follow across the dried lakebed, to various places of significance. The series of lakes dried out some twenty thousand years ago, leaving behind the memories of muddy footprints that tell the stories of dancers, hunters and tribal meetings. The footprints are documented and hidden again as memory of the lost.

The site is of the oldest known ritually cremated human remains, dating some sixty-five thousand years. They are known as Mungo Woman and Mungo Man. These have been documented and re-buried away from prying eyes by the local groups. The site has a long-term history from early, and clearly very fruitful, nomadic peoples as a major meeting place. Then as a rest and watering point for trade and coaches moving across the shifting desert and lonely plains.

They ran cattle there until the 1970s when the local graziers handed the land back into the care of the traditional owners. Much of the local aboriginal population had died off from contact with white civilization, mainly from syphilis and influenza viruses. The site also had Chinese immigrant stockmen, who built the shearing shed.

The local Chinese workers would look across the dried lakebed to lunette being revealed by the continuous weather shift as the long-term drought progressed. They called the lunette the Walls of China in fond memory of the Great Wall. In the evening's shimmering light it does indeed remind one of the Great Wall and all that it stood for in a vain attempt to keep the people and stories of the nomads of the deserts out.

The multi-channel video installation that I had intended to show here *sand:bone:clay* invites us into this world of change. Of looking and walking in a landscape that references all landscape through story, through a sense of specialness, a wilderness, a thin layer of earth that reveals the broken bones from burials, the remains in middens, the clay balls for heat and what once would have been really good fishing places.

The Walls of China forms a semicircle shape protecting the lakebed from the giant moving sand dune behind. The dry lakebed serves to channel the drought breezes that carry nothing but sand and dry heat that slowly strip back the layers in the soft brittle remains of the lunette and reveal the histories.

The tribal groups have died or been forced from the land and they cling to these stories; allowing archaeological and anthropological intrusion in an attempt to regain their lost past.

The imaginary landscape of our mind is as real as the landscape presented within the images as they rely on storytelling, on the comprehension of a greater narrative being told. The work soundtracks the fear and the loss of the people and land to the intrusions of occupation, and later to archaeology.

My video work *Katiyana: Night Snow* is a lament for a dying way of life and a people in the High Arctic. The imagery was developed while I was doing an artist's residency on a Russian Icebreaker. This group of people told their stories in song, drumming and the ancient keen of throat singing. They gathered along the beachfront, placed themselves at the meeting point, which is in the sun and out of the chill wind on one side of the washed up freighter-shipping container.

They sang the songs of their past, stories of bravery and hunting; of recognizing the guardian with animals and ice and their sacrifice and oneness within their ecology. The stories are also of the Government resettlement into small communities to assist in keeping the north peopled, yet able to be supplied with food, shelter, education and medicine. All the things that remote communities cut off by the weather require.

The Inuit wore a mix of traditional and modern clothing, taking up the singing and dancing across generations. Their small community has been ravaged by change. The mining companies send in workers and equipment for the gas seams that are now accessible due to the climate warming. Drugs and alcohol come with these men and the best attempts cannot stop this. Furthermore, the warming seasons now mean that polar bears come into town more frequently seeking an easy meal. People are such slow moving defenseless creatures under certain circumstances.

The series of artworks that I made from this experience and continued Internet contact with the Inuit artists I worked with there is a lament to the dying culture and the shifting weather and the change it brings.

The *Truth About SnoDomes* is an installation work that explores the sense of loss, and details a place. It tells the story of being there. The story of the location, of the landscape as something connected. Not something that deconstruction would put a line around and segment away.

Furthermore, my current work looking at the *Crisis Narrative of Landscape* also reaches to the stars, to the stories of the intention to build other worlds not just in Vast Park and Second Life but on other planets. My current project also explores touch with landscape and the interaction we have with the skin of the planet. I have begun collaborating with Professor Dias in Tianjin University to work with a new form of robotic hand designed essentially to clean solar panels on satellites.

These are the beginnings of stories that will tell of a different relationship to landscape. Perhaps Tolkien's distant mountains of the Middle Earth are replaced with the distant mountains of the Moon, told in our new stories of the planet and will speak the science of geology over biology.

My questions and attempts to bring together the various elements to suggest the narratives of landscape strives not to simplify or concentrate on the romantic vista, or the nomadic periphery but to combine our research within the flux of our current weather crises. This exploration will source the new narratives as enclaves within science, film, architecture and sociology. The layers of memory adopted within the imagery touches on shared belief systems, spatial planning and geopolitical reconstructions.

The meeting place of the Earth's surface is cradled within these images and the often-intimate exploration of the story. The basic concern is that within past and present actions can be found a future that revels within the sense of belonging. The future could be based within a continuing paradigm or shift

into greater understandings of technologies, new and ancient technologies to outline our potential for creating and investing in a future and visible world.

The projected images and context expand the basis that within the narrative of place, however that can be tapped into, could lay an understanding of the future landscape. This element begins to question and push the science of weather, land and the movement of peoples as a fission wherein may lie a new approach. Thus, using art within this space could create through spectatorship a more contemplative approach to the narrative of landscape and the crisis unfolding before us.

References and Notes:

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5. *The Life series, DVD, dir. David Attenborough* (London: BBC, 2008).
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7. *J. R. R. Tolkien, The Lord of the Rings* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1969).