LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Emotional Landscapes, or Running with Cormac McCarthy During a Pandemic

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The COVID 19 pandemic is one in which I have been confronted by the traumatic experiences of the future. In 2020, living in Victoria, Australia, there is a clear emotional resonance in the landscapes commonly associated with apocalyptic texts focussed on environmental and social destruction. Part of literary landscapes, their meanings, and their implications, is the emotional connotations associated with them. That is, one notices, perhaps wrongly and often in hyperbolic terms, warning signs, a foreshadowing in events that are transpiring around them, particularly if those events are perceived to be traumatic and seem to echo established knowledge.

In parts of Australia, New South Wales and Victoria in particular, the arrival of COVID 19 was proceeded by the worst bushfire season on record. The bushfire season, stretching, approximately, August 2019 through February 2020, had a calamitous impact on the environment and on the sensitivities of space and well-being, personal and collective. To demonstrate how future memory influences an emotional interaction with landscape and space, a physical landscape scarred by fire and an emotional space scarred by dramatic change and upheaval, I will look briefly at the impact of the bushfire season and the ongoing COVID 19 pandemic, and how this has influenced my own perceptions of landscape and space.

It is difficult to articulate the significance of the recent bushfire season. Werner and Lyons, for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation reported that 'more than 12.6 million hectares' (Werner and Lyons 2020) of land had been burned. However, this number was revised to 18.1 million hectares when Northern Territory fires were included. One result of the fires was that '11.3 million Australian adults, or 57 per cent of the Australian adult population, were physically affected by smoke from the bushfires'. Further, 'over 1 billion

animals were killed in the fires' and billions more were displaced because of habitat destruction. The number of animals killed excluded 'bats, frogs or fish because there weren't any density estimates available for them'. Duckett, Mackey, and Stobart, from the Grattan Institute, Australia's most recognised and influential public policy think tank, stated in a report prepared as a submission to the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements, that 'a January 2020 survey of 3000 Australians found that more than half (54 per cent) felt anxious or worried about the safety of themselves and others during the fires' (Duckett, Mackey and Stobart 2020: 8). On top of this, it concluded that 'if global temperatures continue to rise to 2°C above pre-industrial levels, bushfires in Australia like those of 2019-20 will be about eight times more likely' (8). Perhaps, the best way to articulate the magnitude of the fires for people outside of Australia is found in the BBC.com article *Australia fires: A visual guide to the bushfire crisis*: 'The amount of land affected across the country - more than 10 million hectares - is now comparable to England's land area of 13 million hectares' (BBC 2020). By the time bushfires were under control the area burned far exceeded the size of England.

The images and stories of devastation were relentless and pervasive, invasive and overwhelming. Images of desperate evacuations, fire fronts with flames at 70 metres high and clouds of smoke that made day look like night, were accompanied with concerns that this would be a common occurrence. I am a high school English Literature teacher and I live on the rural/urban fringe in the Yarra Ranges Shire, Victoria. These bushfires did not reach my area, but the smoke was ubiquitous for weeks. As summer eased into Autumn at the beginning of March, the impact of COVID became more pronounced.

In Victoria there have been, at this time of writing, two COVID related lockdowns. The first, initiated March 16, 2020, came after the Premier of Victoria, Daniel Andrews, declared a state-of-emergency. This meant the closure of non-essential businesses and schools and people were encouraged to work from home where possible. This lockdown eased gradually at the end of May, with schools and universities reopening for in-person classes. Yet, COVID 19 cases again increased and in June, the beginning of Winter, restrictions were reintroduced and tightened further. By August 2, 2020, a stay-at-home order was in place. Murray-Atfield and Dunstan, reporting for the ABC, announced 'an evening curfew will be implemented across Melbourne… forbidding anyone from leaving the home except for working, receiving or giving care, or visiting their partner. Under the stage four restrictions, Melbourne residents will only be allowed to shop and exercise within 5 kilometres of their homes' (Murray-Atfield and Dunstan 2020). Only certain work that was defined as necessary was permittable, while public transport was significantly reduced, and police checkpoints were randomly set up to monitor for those violating new lockdown conditions. Likewise, government directives reminded those in impacted areas that the 'curfew is in place between the hours of 8pm until 5am. This means you must be at your home during these hours' (Victoria State Government, Department of Health and Human Services 2020). People found outside of their homes without reasonable cause, a concept that appeared to have several definitions, could be fined $1652 and/or arrested.

The bushfire season and the COVID situation combined to mark a trauma, the extent of which is yet to be fully measured. Yet, the feeling of it was recognisable. There was an emotional tone that I had seem in films and read in books; and it became a remembered emotion from texts that examine future potentialities. So that, oddly, this strange, new, and unsettling space, characterised by isolation and foreboding, still felt curiously recognisable.

This feeling, its point of origin, has been explained by Allison Landsberg. Landsberg, writing about the impact of cinema and mass culture mediums on memory, sees that there is the possibility for people to develop what she terms prosthetic memories. Landsberg sees that 'prosthetic memories originate outside a person's lived experience and yet are taken on and worn by that person through mass cultural technologies of memory' (Landsberg 2004: 19). This theory suggests that the experience of the lived world can blend with the fictional world and that such prosthetic memories can shape behaviour, understanding, and awareness. Landsberg sees that such memories 'develop after an encounter with a mass cultural representation of the past, when new images and ideals come into contact with a person's own archive of experience' (19). As such these memories are personal rather than public or collective. Indeed, Landsberg argues that prosthetic memory is 'less interested in large-scale social implications and dialectics than in the experiential…in the ramifications of these memories for individual subjectivity' (20). Perhaps prosthetic memories may also provide an archive that informs the future, or what might be called future memories.

The foundation of Landsberg's prosthetic memory formation, is that memories 'derive from a person's mass-mediated experience of a traumatic event of the past,' (Landsberg 19) and that this gives meaning to the present. The present inevitably informs observations, hopes, and fears for the future; what the future might be, what it will look like. That is not to say that landscapes from post-apocalyptic texts are literally present, although visions of millions of hectares of scorched earth are deeply confronting, but what is present is the emotionality of these landscapes, the feelings shaped by the narrative in which they exist.

The relationship between prosthetic memory and narrative is found less in the theories of narratology that apply to the structure of fictional texts and more in the realm of narrative psychology. Indeed, narrative psychology provides clear linkage between Landsberg's notion of prosthetic memory and the ways in which the experience of fictional landscapes can manifest in the lived experience. Brian Schiff sees that narrative psychology is founded on the 'ideological commitment to the priority of intention and meaning in human lives and interactions' (Schiff 2006: 21) and that the 'narrative form is a critical vehicle for articulating selfhood and identity' (21). For Schiff, the development of narrative is innate, and, for individuals, narrativizing selfhood and identity is both a retrospective process and a prospective process, one that is premised on previous experiences and existing understandings. Another way to say this is that the retrospective and the prospective are premised on memory. If we consider that some of these memories are prosthetic memories, then we can better understand how fictional texts, and their landscapes, shape a lived experience. Landsberg is clear, that 'prosthetic memories are not 'socially constructed' in that they do not emerge as the result of living or being raised in particular social frameworks' but rather 'prosthetic memories are transportable' (21). That is, they are not bound by time, and

thus these memories can emerge from texts describing very strange and alien experiences. It seems that what often binds these memories to an individual is a resonant emotion.

Patrick Colm Hogan sees that 'story structures are fundamentally shaped and oriented by our emotion systems' (Hogan 2011: 1). Hogan is not alone in this position. David Herman likewise contends that emotion is crucial to narrative, stating that 'emotionology constitutes a major resource for both the production and the understanding of narrative' (Hermann 2007: 322). And so, it seems reasonable to conclude that dystopic texts, those that predict or hypothesise how the modern world will fail and fall apart, also generate memory, emotion, and narrative potentialities. Hogan states that when an 'emotional memory is activated, we may or may not think of the event with which it is associated. Rather, we feel the emotion' (Hogan 2011: 3). I felt the emotion of the context I was in, the post-bushfire and frightening COVID space, one that offered great uncertainty and a fragile future.

The government lockdowns meant I was teaching online, but it also meant I no longer had to engage in seventy-minute drives to and from work. I confess to being someone who loves routine and consistency. Part of adapting to these lockdown changes meant changing my exercise routine, which initially seemed of minimal consequence. I have always been a runner. Yet my running was almost exclusively on treadmills at the local gym and had been for decades. To maintain my running routine, I had to shift to the outdoors, to inclement weather, to an unpredictable space. I decided to set off from home around 5-5.30 am along a recently opened rail trail, one that followed the path of a train line that had been abandoned in 1980, after ninety years of service, and that was later removed. This trail cuts through the rich farmland of the Yarra Valley. But setting out around 5-5.30am meant that the world around me was barely visible. Indeed, the only light available was that coming from the moon; and most often that was obscured by heavy fog, cloud cover, rain, or some combination of these. This landscape was foreign but it evoked familiar emotion, one of anxiety and uncertainty. Yet, it also one that had me thinking about where this anxiety and uncertainty came from and why.

In the darkness of my early morning running, I started to think about Cormac McCarthy, probably because I am an avid Cormac McCarthy fan, and I see in his work a prophetic understanding of the world. McCarthy writes about the past, the present and the future, and their relationship to each other. His texts stretch from the terrors of the past in *Blood Meridian* to terrors of the future in *The Road*. It was *The Road* that kept at me and so I started to re-read it before bed. Its landscapes were instantly recognisable, not because I anticipated worldwide destruction of the type the text deals with, but because the old normal was gone and the future had lost its mundane certainty. The new context changed the way I saw my world, the way I felt in the world. The blackness in the text, its emotionally distraught landscapes, thematized my running. The unnamed man in the text, its protagonist, became me. Just as he strived to maintain a positive perspective for his son, I found myself doing the same for my children and for my students. Lydia Cooper sees that the unnamed man in *The Road*, who wanders with his son, is 'a man whose questions about the capacity of humanity to be redeemed are questions deriving from his own geographically, culturally, and nationally specific heritage' (Cooper 2017: 549). The culturally, and nationally specific heritage, however,

is hardly distinct from many other geographic locations. Geographic locations, as in literary geographies, are transferable. The reader, the viewer, accumulates these geographies when they engage with texts. These experiences shape perception, as Landsberg makes clear, and they can resonate, emotionally, when the lived experience intersects with that found in fiction. The geographies in *The Road* lurked in my memories and I recognised them when I was running. 'Nights dark beyond darkness and the days more gray each one than what had gone before' (McCarthy 2006:1). Running in this new landscape, in the cold and frost of Winter, I contemplated what the future might be for myself and, like the man in McCarthy's novel, I worried about the future for my children and my students because I could not allay their fears.

I began to wonder more and more about this vaguely seen landscape that I was running through. Not about its shape, so much as its meaning, the ideas embedded within the fog, the cold, the rain, and the greyscale of the sky as a shabby first light appeared. I used my phone to photograph the world I was running through (Figure 1), to see if the images corresponded to what the man in *The Road* described: 'When he woke it was still dark but the rain had stopped. A smoky light out there in the valley' (49).

Figure 1. Coldstream, 22 July 2020, 5.53am.

I worried also about running beyond the 5km boundary permitted under lockdown laws. Yet, there was no one else on the trail. I would run somewhere between 14-17 kilometres and see no other signs of human life.

> How would you know if you were the last man on earth? he said.
> I dont guess you would know it. You'd just be it.
> Nobody would know it.
> It wouldn't make any difference. (180)

At times I stopped, stood, and listened for a sound, a sign of the modern world ticking over, but it wasn't there. I came to see the mornings as an exercise not in developing physical fitness but in acclimation.

My days became a blur of online classes full of worried students in their final year of high school asking unanswerable questions about what might happen to their end-of-year exams, and how they would achieve the results necessary to gain entry into a tertiary institution. And these questions were, to me, increasingly absurd. At night I dreamed, very vividly, about running, about the unknown landscape, about being lost. 'And the dreams so rich in colour' (20). These thoughts troubled me, I did not want to fall into nihilism, but they also seemed certain. I wondered, however, about reforming the landscape, changing the emotional relationship. Again, I was led by Cormac McCarthy. This time the novel *Cities of the Plain*, the third volume in the Border Trilogy. For it seems that like Landsberg, McCarthy is aware of the vagaries of memory and its need to organise and categorise, to find a point of reference, as a comfort and as a way to shape the landscape into something that serves a purpose. 'The events of the waking world… are forced upon us and the narrative is the unguessed axis along which they must be strung. It falls to us to weigh and sort and order these events… Each man is the bard of his own existence' (McCarthy 1998: 284). I wondered if I could be not only the man in *The Road*, but also the boy that the man worked so hard to keep alive, to nurture and to inspire.

In seeing myself as the boy rather than just the man, or as something of both, my emotional relationship to the landscape changed. My running changed. I still set off in bitter cold and rain, but I slowed down, I was late for class, and waited for the sunrise, for the light, the fire. And I thought about the ways that future memories can still be changed.

> Is it real? The fire?
> Yes it is.
> Where is it? I dont know where it is
> Yes you do. It's inside you. It was always there. I can see it. (McCarthy 2006: 298)

The emotionality of complex and disparate literary geographies, those that exists in texts, are a grounding force whose meaning derives from blended memories, memories we collect from experiences and narratives, those felt personally and vicariously. Future memories, like prosthetic memories, can be changed, re-remembered. In re-remembering the future, the present landscapes become possibilities and hopes for something better.

Figure 2. Yering, 4 September 2020, 6.49am.

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