



**Brown Lake/Boumiera:
Posthuman Screen Poetics for the Anthropocene**

by
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**Doctor of Philosophy
(Communications)**

under the supervision of:

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CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

I, Samantha Lang, declare that this thesis is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy (Communications) in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Technology Sydney.

This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

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ABSTRACT

This creative practice-based PhD thesis consists of an exegesis and creative works, which together investigate the possibilities of a non-traditional screenwriting poetics and filmmaking practices in response to Brown Lake, North Stradbroke Island, Queensland, Australia, with the aim of affording the lake an active voice. Since approaching the Anthropocene critically is an unsettled concept, this thesis engages with it as a connector term that brings cultural, ecological, and geological debates together, generating challenges for new creative responses. In doing so it builds upon and extends a growing body of academic inquiry that seeks to respond to the conditions of the Anthropocene using imaginative methods.

The creative component of this thesis is comprised of two ‘screen maps’: a Cinematic Virtual Reality film, *Anthropocene VR* (2018) and a moving image work *Brown Lake/Boumiera* (2021). These research artefacts engage with hyperlocal, experimental, immersive methods, to make visible the existence of non-human and human relationships, through what I term ‘posthuman screen poetics’. As multimodal forms these screen maps re-imagine the future in terms of a representational justice for all.

This exegesis focuses in particular on the works of theorists in ecofeminism, post-human knowledge, and environmental humanities to de-centre the human through screen practice. It asks,

What creative strategies – through non-traditional screen practices – might an ecofeminist and posthuman conceptual framework offer for opening up new imaginaries and new subjectivities of a place as complex and entangled as Brown Lake in relation to the provocations presented by the unsettled concept of the Anthropocene.

Furthermore, it asks how might we, through screen practice and image making, activate and reanimate a greater reciprocity of care and attention between place, beings, and non-beings? It considers how Brown Lake’s body of water acts as a carrier for multiple histories – geological, ecological, and cultural – in a flow of endless events. It engages the screen idea as a mode of inquiry to connect this unsettled concept and other entangled narratives of place with relocated cinematic forms to create cartographies of an ‘otherwise’ of Brown Lake.

This thesis makes the claim that screen practice as a research methodology can articulate alternative perspectives, story structures, and screen experiences that reorientate perceptions of, and feelings about, the more-than-human aspects of place. This small act of resistance and activism within the limits of late-capitalist settler frameworks of power writes nature into the narrative as a protagonist, engaging affirmative ethics and critique with creativity.

KEYWORDS

Anthropocene, Cinema, Cinematic Virtual Reality, Creative Practice, Ecofeminism, Geontopower, Geopoetic, Nature, Photofilmic Forms, Place, Posthuman, Posthuman Screen Poetics, Screen Idea, Screen Map, Screenwriting.

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A big acknowledgement is due to the curator of Prototype, Lauren Carroll Harris, and to Alexandra Burke, who commissioned the major creative iteration of this doctoral project. Thanks also to Lauren for her brilliant curatorial essay. Create NSW were instrumental in providing resources for the *Anthropocene VR* as Proof of Concept for a bigger series of VR films. The Bundanon Trust provided two artist residencies during crucial periods of this research.

This thesis was produced and written during one of the most intense phases of my life, and perhaps the Earth's. I pay my respects to Gadigal and Bidjigal people of the Eora Nation that a major part of this thesis was written upon, and to the Quandamooka people of Minjerribah, where we filmed *Brown Lake/Boumiera*.

To Raymond Walker, Petrina Walker, Kaleenah Edwards, the family of Oodgeroo Noonuccal – thank you. Katie Noonan, too, for the collaboration that saw Oodgeroo's poem 'Dawn Wail for the Dead' translated into Jandai language and spoken by her great-granddaughter Kaleenah Edwards.

A special thanks goes to family and friends that have helped shape this research. Alice Addison, Siobhan Hannan, John Maynard, Bridget Ikin, Jacqui Payne, and Sue Laganza kept me afloat.

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It's not all smoothy smooth...

(Braidotti 2017)

We have been lulled by films, and other sources of images, to believe that our future is going to be grim – so we clutch on to the present. Many of us feel that there is nothing we can do to make change possible, or even desirable. We have lost our future image literacy in leaving it up to the experts and filmmakers to create it for us. But we can reclaim our ability to image socially just and an ecologically sustainable futures, and filmmakers can be part of this journey, if they chose to. (Hurley 2008, p. 354)

FORMAT OF THIS THESIS

This Doctor of Philosophy (Communications) thesis is comprised of a creative component and a written exegesis. The creative component is my primary contribution to my field of knowledge. It was realized through two iterations of a moving image screen project, each framed by the research concerns of this thesis. The outcomes of each iteration were public screenings and exhibitions at Australian art galleries and museums, conferences, and a public access online platform. These included:

- *Brown Lake/Boumiera* (2021) at Australian Centre for Moving Image, Melbourne (2021),
- Part of *Her Beauty, Her Terror* at Moreton Bay Regional Art Gallery, Queensland (2021),
- Fisher's Ghost Prize Finalist, Campbelltown, NSW (2021),
- Asia Pacific Triennale GOMA, Brisbane (2022),
- Powerhouse Museum, Sydney, NSW (2022) and open access online at Prototype (2021/22),
- *Anthropocene VR* (2018) at the Create NSW 360 Degree Conference, Sydney, NSW (2019), and
- ANU Environmental History Workshop, Fenner School, Canberra, ACT (2018).

The full video link to *Brown Lake/Boumiera* (2021) can be located here:

<https://vimeo.com/541473926>

The full video link to *Anthropocene VR* (2018) can be located here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x1xJgUMey3s>

The structure of the written exegesis comprises five chapters. Chapters One to Four move through a theoretical framework, the genealogy to my screen practice, a contextualising of *Brown Lake/Boumiera*, and an analysis of my screen idea. Chapter Five concludes the exegesis.

OVERVIEW

Ethnography today, only makes sense ethically and politically as autoethnography (Emmelhainz 2021, p. 1)

This thesis comprises two creative research artefacts and an exegesis. The exegesis contains my personal reflections on the position from which I am writing, and it acknowledges the personal connections I have to the lake on North Stradbroke Island known to me as both Brown Lake and Boumiera. I want to acknowledge that this research project on Brown Lake was instigated from my position as an outsider to this place, despite family ties and personal entanglements that are intertwined with North Stradbroke Island/Minjerribah. My emplacement serves as a point of reflection throughout this thesis.

I recognize that any non-Indigenous screen practitioner and/or academic in Australia is working on unceded land. While another way of approaching Brown Lake/Boumiera would have been to focus more on Indigenous cosmologies of place, I have chosen to largely draw upon a Western knowledge framework that includes ecofeminist theory, posthuman knowledge, and continental philosophy to navigate the complex subject matter of this thesis. I acknowledge that there are limitations with taking this position, but I have also found connections between these discursive modes that both allow for acknowledgement and attribution and prevent improper or unnecessary use of Indigenous knowledge systems.

Like the space between Brown Lake/Boumiera's two names, I am situated between different knowledge systems and creative practices, and I recognize multiple ways of seeing, hearing, reading, embodying, experiencing, and relating with the lake. I feel a responsibility to speak from a Western acculturated perspective, if only to unlearn that perspective and find another. This thesis has unfolded across six years, during which there have been some seismic cultural shifts around Brown Lake and on the island generally, as well as in the larger context of the planet. I have attempted to respond to these as nimbly as the research and my personal circumstances would allow.

Some of my understanding of the lake has been informed by prior and longstanding relationships with members of a family who are part of the Goenpul Dandrubin people living on Quandamooka Country. Their ancestors were the first humans to inhabit the area surrounding Brown Lake and they continue to be custodians of that Country, taking responsibility for care of the land, sea, and waters of the area.

However this is not an action research project like that of academic and filmmaker Elisabeth Povinelli, whose rich collaboration with Karrabing Collective has produced such meaningful research through creative practice (Povinelli 2016). Her filmmaking, books, ideas, and concepts around geontopower have nonetheless provided a meaningful reference point throughout my studies.

My friends, the traditional custodians of Quandamooka Country have been, and are currently, engaged in their own scholarly research within the academy. This is the Country of poet and activist Oodgeroo Noonuccal and Indigenous feminist and author Aileen Moreton-Robinson. Equally, on Minjerribah there has been significant research, with fruitful collaborations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars, archaeologists, anthropologists and, sometimes, artists. Archaeologist Annie Ross and her work in Traditional Ecological Knowledge, in conjunction with Dandrubin Goenpul elder Dennis Moreton, bears testament to new knowledges that are produced through cross cultural collaboration (Ross et al. 2011).

Given that much of this creative practice-based research took place across the COVID-19 pandemic, I was not able to visit the lake or the island during most of 2020 and 2021. Hence, I was obliged to use some of the ‘rough’ digital content that I had collated from prior field trips to Brown Lake while staying at Moreton Bay Research Centre. I did, however, make a very short trip to complete the moving image work in February 2021 before going back into lockdown in June 2021. My research for this thesis is framed by, and limited to, those early field trips, as well as historical records, hydrology and geology reports, newspaper articles, and publications from the North Stradbroke Island Museum, all of which have contributed to my understanding of the entangled narratives of Brown Lake. Such entangled narratives appear repeatedly in a late-liberal settler environment such as Australia. My aim in creating the sonic and visual interpretations of Brown Lake is to acknowledge through screen practice the science, geography, geology, history, ancient and modern cultures, and non-human elements in dialogue with each other there. My screen works aim to creatively interrogate the act of witnessing the non-human as the primary mode of sensing the world.

COVID IMPACT STATEMENT

This thesis was undertaken across 2020 and 2021. The New South Wales and Queensland governments' lockdown and border closures impacted this project in the following ways:

Creative component

My screen work *Brown Lake/Boumiera* was commissioned in March 2020 with a Sydney Film Festival screening scheduled for June 2020. The project was substantially delayed due to lockdown and the prolonged Queensland border closures. As a result, the format of the project shifted. At one stage I planned to use only rough draft footage to meet a new delivery deadline of January 2021 for the Prototype series launch. That deadline changed to April 2021, again because of COVID-19. I re-imagined the project once more and attempted to visit Brown Lake in December 2020. After I arrived, I learned I had been a close contact of someone in Sydney, and I was obliged to remain in lockdown for the entirety of the visit. In February 2021, I spent three days filming at the lake. This meant a compressed post-production period before the screening of the final version of *Brown Lake/Boumiera* at ACMI in April 2021. Thus, the precarity of the COVID situation affected my access to the lake. This then meant I needed to rethink the work repeatedly to accommodate changing circumstances. Finally, the second lockdown period (June to October 2021) began one day before the opening of the exhibition 'Her Beauty, Her Terror' in Moreton Bay Regional Gallery, where my work was installed. While I was able to fly to Queensland, when I arrived I was informed by the gallery that I could not attend either the opening or the artist panel due to the government restrictions put in place that morning. A second artist panel was arranged, but on that occasion Greater Brisbane went into lockdown the week before, and I was able to attend only by Zoom.

Exegesis

The second New South Wales lockdown from June to October 2021 was the period I had allocated to writing most of the exegesis. Across that period, due to changing circumstances, for three months I was the sole household carer for my two children. Juggling schooling and part-time work made it impossible to work on the exegesis. In truth I also lost momentum. This meant that I was not able to re-engage with the exegesis until late January 2022.

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