

Copyright © John Charles Ryan 2016. This text may be archived and redistributed both in electronic form and in hard copy, provided that the author and journal are properly cited and no fee is charged.

**“Vegetable Giants of the West:”
Plant Ethics in the Photography of Australian Karri (*Eucalyptus
Diversicolor*) Forests, 1890 to the Present**

John Charles Ryan

Abstract: This article examines photographic representations of the karri trees of South-western Australia from colonial-era to contemporary times. In the context of the emerging field of plant ethics, I argue that photography is a vital medium for understanding and fostering ethical attitudes towards botanical life and, more specifically, towards old-growth trees. Whereas the earliest Australian images of karris focused on either the aesthetic or utilitarian value of the trees, contemporary photographers, exemplified by John Austin, demonstrate an acute concern for the ethical treatment of karri forests in the face of intense industrial pressures.

Keywords: plant ethics; landscape photography; karri eucalypts; Western Australia

Introduction: Plant ethics and old-growth forest photography

As a subset of environmental ethics (Desjardins) and an analogue of animal ethics (Gruen), the field of plant ethics has been forwarded in recent years by philosophers (for example, Hall; Heyd; Koechlin; Marder; Pouteau). Whereas the environment, generally, and animals, specifically, have been subjects of ethical theorisation, plants have received less attention. Plant ethicists seek to redress this lack by advocating for the moral consideration of the botanical world in everyday life. On the whole, theorists argue that, while we must eat, drink and use plants, including trees, for our survival, the treatment of vegetable life matters and their lives should have dignity. A contentious case of plant ethics in the public domain is the Swiss government’s 2008 Federal Ethics Committee on Non-Human Biotechnology report, entitled *The Dignity of Living Beings with Regard to Plants* (Swiss Confederation), inspired by emerging scientific research into the sensitivities of flora. For the authors of the report, codified in the Swiss constitution, that plant roots distinguish between self and non-self implies forms of sensitivity in the botanical world that should be considered in ethical terms, notwithstanding the general socio-political “refusal to understand plants as something other than living automatons” (Koechlin 79).

With the field of plant ethics as a conceptual starting point, this article provides an historical analysis of the ethical attitudes towards trees evident in the photography of old-growth forests in Western Australia. In examining the arboreal images, my approach reflects Rod Giblett’s notion of “photography for environmental sustainability” (Giblett and Tolonen 228), foregrounding the potential of photography to serve as a medium for promoting ecological awareness. However, in contrast to Giblett, I focus on the old-growth forests of South-western Australia as a particular case in point and track the development of plant ethics in the

photos from historical to contemporary times. Furthermore, I adopt a definition of the term *old-growth* from the National Forest Policy Statement as “forest that is ecologically mature and has been subjected to negligible unnatural disturbance [...] in which the upper stratum or overstorey is in the late mature to overmature growth phases” (qtd. in Lindenmayer and Burgman 51). Hence, my aim here is to link the discussion of plant ethics to studies of old-growth landscape photography through the example of the karri trees of Western Australia.

To be sure, the tradition of old-growth forest photography is global in extent, reaching well past the borders of the isolated state of Western Australia. For instance, the pioneering American landscape photographer, Ansel Adams (1902–1984), took images of the majestic redwood forests of California (Alinder 230). The Polish photographer Lech Wilczek produced pictures of the Białowieża Forest, one of Europe’s last remaining old-growth tracts. In the island state of Tasmania, Peter Dombrovskis (1945–1996) photographed the ancient myrtle trees of the wild southwest corner (Ennis, *Intersections* 96). Likewise, since the colonial era of Western Australia, karri trees and forests, of the eucalyptus genus, have captivated photographers. The visual charisma of *Eucalyptus diversicolor*—its remarkable size, striking verticality, trunk textures, colour patterns—continues to engross contemporary photographers attempting to devise vocabularies to translate their experiences of the colossal trees to a visual medium.

Whereas historical commentators have been inclined to dismiss the aesthetic virtues of other Western Australian gum trees, such as jarrahs (*E. marginata*) and marris (*Corymbia calophylla*) with their wild asymmetries and strange exudations,¹ karris have been extolled in more consistent terms for classically beautiful qualities: smoothness, sleekness, gracefulness, grandeur, sublimity. As one of the tallest eucalypt species in the world, second only to Victoria and Tasmania’s mountain ash (*Eucalyptus regnans*) (Boland et al. 286), the karri tree—as evident in its earliest graphic representations—fulfills human longing for solitude, serenity and a glimpse of the divine in nature. However, in stark contrast to the appreciation of karris as inspirational, late nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century photographs of surveying and logging activities convey a much different story. Instead, the visual representation of karris reflects tenets of utilitarianism in which massive old-growth trees are resources to be exploited or behemoths to be overcome for the sake of a settler agenda to clear and domesticate the landscape (Crawford and Crawford; Hutton and Connors 193–4).

Considering these divergent, and, at times, conflicting, attitudes towards karris, this article provides a critical overview of the photography, from historical to contemporary times, portraying individual trees or larger karri forest communities. Whereas some images pivot around ideals of untamed wilderness, fundamentally excluding human figures or anthropogenic impacts, others illustrate—in close detail—the recreational or techno-industrial histories of the eucalypt forests. The discussion will focus exclusively on *E. diversicolor*, rather than jarrahs, marris and other indigenous tree species found throughout karri country. In order to narrow the material further, the discussion centres on the karri forests between the Western Australian towns of Manjimup and Northcliffe, excluding the transitional ecological zone between karri and tingle communities (*E. jacksonii*) as well as the trees of Walpole, Denmark, Mount Barker and Albany farther south-east. The delimited geographical area comprises the towns of Pemberton, Windy Harbour, Quinninup, Crowea, Karridale and small localities. Within this selected area, I selected photographs either for their appeal, originality, skill or technique, or because the creator is a well-known historical figure—or an important living personae—in Australian art, literature, conservation or ecology.

The overview of karri photography is organised historically by the broad divisions Colonial Era (1829–1901), Early Twentieth Century (1901–45), Late Twentieth Century (1945–88) and Contemporary Period (1988–present). Some of the greater art-historical contexts in Australian, North American and European landscape and old-growth arboreal photography will be addressed. However, the discussion will centre on understanding the karri images, contextualising the photographers and attempting to elicit the attitudes towards karris evident in the representations. The interpretations of images in this article will orient principally towards ecological readings of the interactions between humans and trees in karri country. Thus, it is useful to acknowledge reception theory (also known as reader-response criticism) as a conceptual framework in visual communication. Reception theory examines medium-audience interactions and situates the picture-viewer nexus as a site of meaning production (Barbatsis 271). According to this framework, images cannot exist independently of the entwined processes of reading and response. Audiences are active; texts are indeterminate and always open to semiotic possibilities. The emergence of meaning at the intersection of image and viewer underscores the centrality of the interpretive process (Barbatsis 271). In examining photographic representations of karris, I recognize that the process is inherently guided by plant ethics, articulated in documents such as *The Dignity of Living Beings with Regard to Plants*. Hence, the approach to the photographs will reflect the indeterminacy of “texts” as emphasized by reception theorists. Although alternate readings of images will be presented where possible, the dominant mode of reading will be ecocritical.

A region of unusually high rainfall located in the extreme south-western corner of Western Australia, *karri country* roughly occupies a long, narrow belt between Nannup, Manjimup, Denmark and Albany consisting of about 300,000 hectares typically 16 to 25 kilometres in width and running parallel to the Indian Ocean coastline (Boland et al. 286) (Figure 1). Rolling terrain and acidic, low-nutrient soils characterise the area. With an annual median rainfall of 800 millimetres, the tall gum habitat corresponds approximately with the so-called High Rainfall Zone—one of three biogeographic zones within the South-west Botanical Province. The greater region is an international biodiversity hotspot extending from Shark Bay in the north-west to Israelite Bay east of Esperance in the south-east, including the Perth metropolitan area (Hopper). The most recent version of the Interim Biogeographic Regionalisation for Australia (IBRA), first proposed in the 1990s based on prior models by the botanists John Beard and Stephen Hopper, divides the High Rainfall Zone into three subregions: Swan Coastal Plain, Jarrah Forest and Warren (“Australia's Bioregions”). Karri country exists chiefly in the Warren, with the exception of outlier communities at Many Peaks (east of Albany), Mount Barker and the Porongorup Range (north and north-east of Albany, respectively), which will not figure in the discussion.

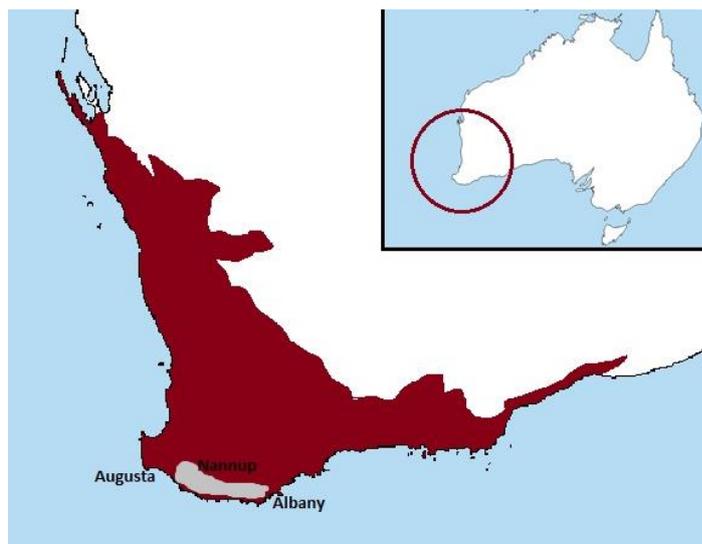


Figure 1. Map of karri country (grey) located approximately between the towns of Albany, Nannup and Augusta, Western Australia in the South-west Botanical Province (red) (2013). Modified version of original image from Public Domain via Wikimedia Commons.©

The colonial era: Campbell's early karri images

The colonial era marked the beginning of dramatic environmental change in the south-west corner of the fledgling Swan River Colony. Whereas the indigenous Nyoongar people had judiciously modified the environment, especially with their strategic use of burning to cultivate plant and animal foods over their more than fifty-thousand-year history (Hallam), Anglo-Australian colonists set in motion sweeping impacts that would fundamentally alter the very composition of the natural world they encountered. By the 1850s and 60s, colonists began to look away from the more established settlements at Fremantle and the Swan River and towards heavily forested country where they anticipated new lives and untold fortunes through backbreaking effort. In 1856, Thomas Muir settled in the present-day Manjimup area to cut timber. In the 1860s, Edward Reveley Brockman and Pemberton Walcott established homesteads in the vicinity of what would later be known as Pemberton, commencing small-scale farming operations that depended on clearing karri country. However, despite their eagerness, the landscape could not so readily be interpreted by a pastoral view of the world. As the ecologist George Seddon comments, an unfounded principle guiding early activities was “the bigger the trees, the better the soil, which led to heartbreaking attempts at settlement in the karri country” (76). Within this historical context, the naturalist and ornithologist Archibald James Campbell (1853–1929) travelled to the densely forested region and produced significant early representations of karris. Campbell's work coincided with the advent of photography in Australia and its functional use by early naturalists, such as the South Australian Samuel Albert White (1870–1954), to document field observations as part of research expeditions (Jones 31).

Born in Fitzroy, Victoria in 1853, Campbell travelled to Western Australia in the late nineteenth- and early-twentieth centuries to conduct pioneering field research on birds, but also produced some of the earliest photographs of karris. Campbell is known as a founding member and former president of the Royal Australian Ornithological Club, as well as editor of their long-running research journal, *The Emu* (McEvey). He wrote of his Western Australian forays, taken between 1889 and 1920, in the Melbourne-based periodical *The Australasian*. An article from 1890 relates Campbell's observations of the birds, reptiles,

marsupials, plants and Nyoongar knowledge of karri ecology, confirming also that he stayed in the township of Karridale between Augusta and Margaret River during his earliest visit to the region (Campbell, “A Naturalist”). In an article from the 1920s, he exalts the karri as the “vegetable giant of the west” (Campbell, “History” 868). However, Campbell is perhaps best recognised for his generously illustrated, seven-hundred-page tome *Nests and Eggs of Australian Birds* published in 1901, for which he needed to travel to South-western Australia for fieldwork, including egg collecting, as indicated in personal observations throughout the text. In fact, he provides an anecdote about searching for purple lorikeet eggs in the karri forest in October 1889 (*Nests* 597).

This historical background affirms that Campbell’s images of the forests are some of the earliest taken by naturalists and, undoubtedly, rank as some of the oldest extant photographs of karris. The photographs form part of the Campbell collection, including work between 1870 and 1929, held by the National Library of Australia. On the whole, his experimentations in photography indicate diverse aesthetic sensibilities—not only pictorialised karri trees, but a range of species and compositional techniques, some of which depict people—combined with an obvious intrigue for interactions between plants and animals. Nevertheless, in the writings that accompany his ornithological descriptions, Campbell describes wantonly killing snakes and other practices that one would now regard as out-of-step with contemporary ideas of environmental ethics.

Nonetheless, his sepia-toned photograph *Karri Forest, Western Australia* (Figure 2) presents a quintessential forest scene, vertically composed to highlight the height of the trees, although the canopy remains outside the frame. The image represents the challenges of rendering perspective in, and of, the karri forest, both in terms of immediate (direct, sensory, actual) and mediated (compositional, imagistic, textual) modes. For instance, the foreground of the image, on first inspection, appears to consist of small zamia palms, or cycads (*Macrozamia* spp.). The karri trunks appear unusually slender, especially those of the background, implying that the forest is a young, regrowth environment. Additionally, signs of charring at the lower portions of the karri trunks and the stunted dimensions of the cycads suggest that fire had razed the forest recently. Nonetheless, to the surprise of a viewer, a small, partially concealed figure of a man under the most prominent karri confirms the actual scale of the composition and that the trees are, truly, old-growth specimens. With his head nearing the height of the surrounding vegetation, including the cycads in question, the man is immersed in the bush with his neck craning upward towards the karri crown not pictured.



Figure 2. James Archibald Campbell. *Karri Forest, Western Australia*, circa. 1890–1920. Sepia-toned Photograph. 16.7 x 10.7cm. NLA Trove.©

Another noteworthy—though questionable—photograph from the Campbell archive also attempts to capture the sublime height of what is claimed to be a karri with uncharacteristic multiple lower trunks, in the process of being overtaken by a strangler tree of unknown identity. Campbell's sepia-toned *Karri Tree*, from either the late 1800s or early 1900s, derives its title from the pencilled inscription on the reverse of the original (Figure 3). Yet, the naming of the species could be inaccurate. Despite what appear to be zamia cycads in the foreground, the central tree and surrounding forest are closer in composition to beech myrtle (*Nothofagus cunninghamii*) communities found in Tasmania and Victoria. Such crowded entanglements of vegetation are unusual for the relatively clear and clean space of the karri understory. Even so, the photo's arrangement points to one of the principal technical challenges negotiated by early photographers of Australia's tall eucalypt forests: how to encompass the full extent of the tree within the visual constraints of the camera lens. To be sure, some early photographic depictions of karris endeavour to resolve the issue by splicing three or four individual images together to encompass a tree from top to bottom in a single vertical sweep. This is true of historic photographs on display at the Pemberton Visitors' Centre as of January 2016: a rendering of the Gloucester Tree with its telltale bushfire lookout platform, an elongated image of a huge karri that depicts the complete vertical extent of the tree in order to accentuate the sawman's prowess, a photograph of a well-dressed, upper class party posing at the base of a karri with its entire bole and crown synoptically composed.



Figure 3. James Archibald Campbell. *Karri Tree*, circa. 1890–1920. Sepia-toned Photograph. 14.8 x 5.4 cm. NLA Trove.©

Campbell's *Karri Tree, 264 Feet in Height, Western Australia* shows two men paused at the base of a gigantic specimen (Figure 4). In keeping with his other images of karris, the human figures confer proportion to the composition by communicating, through visual contrast, the actual enormity of the tree. The taller and more darkly dressed of the two individuals is positioned sideways to the camera, while the other turns—his weight shifted to his left leg—to face the photographer, presumably Campbell. The second figure grips a measuring tape, which appears wrapped at least partially around the mammoth's circumference. The men's empirical interest in the karri appears not to be motivated by a naturalist's inquisitiveness or an artist's sense of awe, but rather by the prospect of converting the tree into profitable timber—and thus the physical challenge that lies ahead for them. The ambivalent semiotics of the photograph epitomises the ambivalence of settlers towards the karris as simultaneously objects of admiration and conquest. Images such as this also embody the Enlightenment-based impulse to measure and quantify the natural world—in this instance, an enormous specimen of *E. diversicolor*—in order to exert control over an otherwise unknown, unruly and potentially threatening and alienating nonhuman domain (Gascoigne).



Figure 4. James Archibald Campbell. *Karri Tree, 264 Feet in Height, Western Australia*, circa. 1890–1920. Sepia-toned Photograph. 15.1 x 10.1 cm. NLA Trove.©

Nevertheless, not all of Campbell's renderings of the karri forest depict practices of measurement, quantification, progress and, ultimately, conquest. The Campbell archive also contains delicate, skilfully produced prints that signify an innate curiosity for the karri environment. Picturesque in composition although not a photograph per se, *In the Karri Forest* exhibits a diverse range of textures—from the vertical patterns of the karri boles to the horizontal and transverse strokes of the forest foliage (Figure 5). The conspicuous absence of human impacts and figures—Nyoongar or Anglo-Australian—foreshadows the wilderness tradition in environmental representation, later instantiated in the landscape photography of Tasmanians Olegas Truchanas (1923–72) and Peter Dombrovskis (Giblett and Tolonen 93–102). Another print, *Nest of the Grey-breasted Robin, a Karri Giant*, juxtaposes two complementary views of the forest (Figure 6). The first, on the viewer's left, is a more up-close rendering of a grey-breasted robin's (*Eopsaltria griseogularis*) nest, protected in the crook of a balga tree (*Xanthorrhoea preissii*). The viewer's right panel takes a comparable perspective of *Karri Tree, 264 Feet in Height*, previously discussed, in showing two men sizing up a huge karri with its quintessentially variegated lower bark pattern. The karri dwarfs the two men as they go about indeterminable business. Accordingly, the viewer oscillates between an intimate sense of nonhuman dwelling—represented by the birds' nest—and, in comparison, a more sublime, distanced construction of space in the rendering of the karri forest and the ambiguous surveying activities of the male figures.



Figure 5. James Archibald Campbell. *In the Karri Forest*, circa. 1890–1920. Black and White Print. 14.4 x 21 cm. NLA Trove.©



Figure 6. James Archibald Campbell. *Nest of the Grey-breasted Robin, a Karri Giant*, circa. 1890–1920. Black and White Print. 20.7 x 29.2 cm. NLA Trove.©

Early twentieth century: Poignant and Hurley in karri country

The early twentieth century ushered in heightened visual focus on karris, in some measure due to advances in image-making technologies, combined with the intensification of economic activities in the forests and a sustained interest in karri timber as an international export. The photography of this period also begins to exhibit traces of car-based, pleasure tourism in karri forests. Representative of the environmental context of the early 1900s is *Karri Forest*, taken between 1900 and '09 by an unidentified photographer (*Karri Forest*). Part of the National Library of Australia's Historical Records Rescue Consortium (HRRC) archival initiative, the work consists of two glass negatives with the first portraying a relatively undisturbed eucalypt habitat, deficient of any sign of human presence and organised pictorially, as in some of Campbell's images, around a particularly large karri specimen. However, the second negative departs markedly from the first's sylvan idyll by pictorialising the consequences of logging. A conspicuous stump lies in the foreground, while

a partly felled tree rests obliquely at the image's left side. The sparser background of a forest has borne—and is in the process of bearing—intensive human impacts. Another black and white negative on glass, *Karri Falling* (1910), also exemplifies the imagery of karris produced during this period: tree fellers flee the scene of a giant tree starting to collapse (*Karri Falling*). Some of these themes, and others, play out further in the works of the pioneering photographers Axel Poignant (1906–86) and Frank Hurley (1885–1962).

A British-born photographer, Poignant migrated to Australia in 1925 under the Dreadnought scheme, which brought young men from Britain to work on farms principally in rural New South Wales (Jupp 125). After completing itinerant jobs in Sydney and outlying parts of the state, he made a name for himself as a photographic portraitist and later contributed, with Stuart Gore (1905–84), one of Western Australia's first aerial photographers, to the production of an aerial survey of the arid Goldfields region of Western Australia (Sassoon). He also became well-known for his perceptive photographs of Aboriginal Australian people, specifically individuals of the indigenous cultures of Arnhem Land. Through the encouragement of the naturalist Vincent Serventy in the 1930s, Poignant later extended his photographic reach from human portraits to Australian natural history, including eucalypts and other tree species. Much of his work came to address the interconnections between people and the land. His celebrated photograph *Australian Swagman* of an elderly man with his back to the camera pushing a bicycle loaded with his possessions along a deserted road, demonstrates Poignant's identification with the tenacity and self-reliance of rural people (Figure 7).



Figure 7. Axel Poignant. *Australian Swagman*, 1953–1954. Gelatin Silver Photograph. 50.4 x 40.1 cm. NGA Federation Australian Art and Society 1901 to 2001.©



Figure 8. Axel Poignant. *Logging in the Karri Forest, Pemberton, Western Australia, September 1935, 1935.* Black and White Photograph. 26.3 x 19.9 cm. NLA Trove.©

A master of portraiture and narrative, Poignant created a body of work especially recognised for its style and selection of angles (Sassoon). Sophistication of portraiture holds true for his images of karri forests from the 1930s. Rather than constructing an idealised, so-called “untouched,” forest scene centring on a single grand centrepiece, the photograph *Logging in the Karri Forest, Pemberton, Western Australia, September 1935* highlights the interactions between a group of male timber-getters and the karri landscape (Figure 8). The dramatic tension centres on the diminutive figure of a man ascending—probably not descending, if other images in the narrative are any indication—a karri soon-to-be felled, recognisable as such for the climbing spikes spiralling up the tree’s bare trunk. Other workers appear at ground level, inspecting downed logs and posing as if at momentary rest from the ongoing labour of clearing—or as if preparing for the imminent collapse of the tall gum. At the bottom left corner of the composition, a tin-roofed hut associated with the operation is a hive of activity on the bustling forest floor. The portrait relates less to the forest ecosystem—as we saw, for example, in some of Campbell’s photography—than to human economic preoccupations. Indicative of Poignant’s style, the photograph is an instance from a larger narrative. *Axeman Cutting the Top of the Tree in the Karri Forest, Pemberton, Western Australia, ca. 1934* depicts a logger, having completed his ascent, extending his axe back in preparation for felling a tree’s top—all set against the sky’s brooding darkness (Figure 9). A third image, *The Cut Top of the Tree Falls in the Karri Forest, Pemberton, Western Australia, ca. 1934*, completes the sequence in its dramatization of the toppling of the karri crown, with the climbing man’s silhouette hunkered down in a safe position below the main breaking point (Figure 10). The tree is rendered as a colourless, solid black adumbration, in contrast to other depictions of karris that accentuate the textural variations of the bark.



Figure 9. Axel Poignant. *Axeman Cutting the Top of the Tree in the Karri Forest, Pemberton, Western Australia, ca. 1934, 1934.* Black and White Photograph. 12.7 x 17.8 cm. NLA Trove.©



Figure 10. Axel Poignant. *The Cut Top of the Tree Falls in the Karri Forest, Pemberton, Western Australia, ca. 1934, 1934.* Black and White Photograph. 12.2 x 17 cm. NLA Trove.©

While Poignant had a clear Australian affinity, other photographers with affections for karris were more global in their creative pursuits. This is especially true of Frank Hurley, who has been called by critics “Australia’s most celebrated early landscape photographer” (McDonald qtd. in Giblett and Tolonen 83). Born in Sydney where he developed a reputation for his technical knowledge and photographic risk-taking, Hurley was appointed in 1911 by Sir Douglas Mawson as the official photographer of the Australasian Antarctic Expedition, and later served in the Australian Imperial Force during World War I, producing landmark photographic works such as *Morning at Passchendaele* (1917) that exhibited his development of new image-making techniques alongside his criticism of the war (Pike). He went on to take photos and make documentary films in Papua, the Middle East and other parts of the globe. Later in his career, in 1953, he published *Western Australia: A Camera Study*, which contains some karri imagery. It is during this later, more settled time of life that Hurley turned his eye towards the tall forests of the South-west, including *E. diversicolor*. *Giant Karri Trees in the*

Diamond Tree Forest, most likely taken in the 1940s or 50s during the production of his photobook *Western Australia*, is part of the vast Hurley negative collection (Figure 11). The image bears the name of the Diamond Tree, the notably gargantuan karri located ten kilometres south of Manjimup. The specimen is well-known for its use as a fire lookout from 1941 to 1973, and is now one of three lookout trees popular with tourists who venture to the top throughout the year. The vertical composition contrasts the bold figures of the karris pictured in the foreground with the empty horizontality of the cleared space evident in the bottom right of the background.



Figure 11. Frank Hurley. *Giant Karri Trees in the Diamond Tree Forest*. Circa. 1940–1950. Black and White Negative. 16.4 x 11.8 cm. NLA Trove.©



Figure 12. Frank Hurley. *Karri Forest, Pemberton [Western Australia 2]*. Circa. 1940–1950. Black and White Negative. 17.7 x 12.8 cm. NLA Trove.©

During this period, images of karris increasingly depict the impacts of industrialised society on ancient botanical communities. Hurley's photography evokes these changing intersections between people and plants in karri country by depicting former logging tracks turned tourist routes through the forested landscape. Of relevance to these new juxtapositions of Australian culture and botanical nature during this period is Hurley's image *Karri Forest, Pemberton [Western Australia, 2]*, documenting the beginnings of the South-west botanical tourism industry during the mid-twentieth century (Figure 12). A conspicuously large karri frames the left side of the image as an automobile rounds the corner of a well-groomed road—a precursor of contemporary tourist thoroughfares, such as the Karri Forest Explorer and others, allowing public access to karri country with markedly more comfort than in the horse-drawn late nineteenth century (“Karri Forest Explorer”). Significantly, the image captures the transition from extractive to tourism industries in the South-west, heralding the formation of an extensive system of parks and reserves that continues to draw visitors from Australia and abroad today. In a similar vein, *Karri Forest, Pemberton [Western Australia, 3]* centralises the figure of a woman with her back to the camera standing in the middle of the road as a car turns the corner towards her (Figure 13). A roadside post, perhaps a mile-marker, with a white-painted top is situated directly behind the standing woman. In its numerical marking of the landscape and its alignment with the woman's body and the karri she faces, the post signifies the complexities of industrial encroachment into karri country. Moreover, the karris of this landscape are considerably thinner than those of “[*Western Australia 2*]” and thereby permit the late afternoon sun to illuminate the white boles, creating a distinct, quintessentially Western Australian, lighting effect.



Figure 13. Frank Hurley. *Karri Forest, Pemberton [Western Australia 3]*. Circa. 1940–1950. Black and White Negative. 12.8 x 17.7 cm. NLA Trove.©

Late twentieth century: Ewers, Beard and ethical consciousness of forests

The second half of the twentieth century brought technical innovations in colour photographic imagery that made possible new visual interpretations of karri forests. Cameras became less the domain of specialists and subsequently more accessible to the public, as seen by the increased uptake of image-making technology by writers, travellers and naturalists. The photography of Western Australian novelist, poet and critic John Ewers (1904–78) and

botanist John Beard (1916–2011) reveal some of the key themes and developments during the era from the beginning of World War II to the Australian Bicentenary in 1988. In particular, their work demonstrates the emergence of increased ethical concern for karri forests.

Born in the Perth suburb of Subiaco, Ewers became prominent in Perth literary circles during the World War II era and later served as founding member of the Western Australian branch of the Fellowship of Australian Writers. His novels include *Money Street* (1933), *Tales from the Dead Heart* (1944) and *Men Against the Earth* (1946)—the latter an historical narrative with proto-ecological themes originally forming part of a larger manuscript about his experiences as a teacher in the Wheatbelt region of WA in the 1930s. Ewers also published short non-fiction travelogues in *Walkabout*—a forerunner of *Australian Geographic* existing between 1934 and 1974 that integrated natural history and social observations with travel writing as an outlet for early Australian photojournalism. In an article in *Walkabout*, Ewers gives an account of the stocking of trout in Big Brook, near Pemberton, while also characterising the generous water systems of karri country: “There was an abundance of permanent running water, each tiny gully sending its contribution of spring-fed streams into the brooks and rivers that threaded their way among giant karri” (“The Trout” 35). His photos of pleasant recreational scenes in karri country, as in *Early Morning at the Swimming Pool Seen from Among the Karri*, provide welcome counterpoise to the continued proliferation of land clearing images during this period.

Nonetheless, most of Ewers’ visual works available in the State Library of Western Australia archives are colour photographs portraying karri logging in detail. He presumably shot *Karri Logs in the Forest, Pemberton, 1950s* during a fact- and observation-gathering trip to tall forest country in preparation for the writing of travelogue pieces for journals (Figure 14). Reflecting central themes of his novel *Men Against the Earth*, the image—rather than glorifying forestry practices or attempting to document the processes of landscape clearance objectively—hones in narratively on the disjunctures between economic interests, local livelihood and old-growth ecosystems. The efficiently cut logs appear in orderly rows with their sawn ends positioned towards the camera, as a standing karri frames the left side of the image. The lone figure of a worker, with only his back in view, inspects the scene and—apparently lost in some mode of contemplation—shifts his weight to his right leg and braces his left hand against one of the fallen karris. Visible in the background are a small equipment shed, the trace of an access road and the green thickness of the forest.



Figure 14. John Ewers. *Karri Logs in the Forest, Pemberton, 1950s*. Circa. 1950. Colour Photograph. Dimensions Unspecified. SLWA Online Catalogue.©



Figure 15. John Ewers. *Tractor Hauling Karri Log, Pemberton, W.A., 1950s*. Circa. 1950. Colour Photograph. Dimensions Unspecified. SLWA Online Catalogue.©

The composition of Ewers' images hinges on the polarising juxtaposition between the vertical orientation of the forest against the "unnatural" horizontal dominance of the fallen logs and barren ground. This visual confluence is further reflected in *Tractor Hauling Karri Log, Pemberton, W.A., 1950s*, a four-photo, narrative sequence that documents advances in motorised logging equipment symbolised by a tractor and, in particular, its sinister steel grapple extension—a veritable jaws of death—used to clasp and drag logs (Figure 15). The series' first image offers a ground-level view of a debarked tree dragged behind a tractor—itsself out of the frame—along a gritty road. A dirt cloud created by the operation obscures a vehicle parked in the bush off to the right. The process unfolds additionally in the second photograph as the tractor hauls the log between two standing trees alongside the track. The dusty residues persist. Perspective shifts in the third image, a front-end view of the tractor including the darkened image of its driver, with the desolation of the surrounding landscape appearing more pointedly, at this stage in the narrative, reminiscent of a warzone or disaster management area. The concluding snapshot furnishes a close-up view of the log-hauling mechanism as the tractor begins straining up an incline. Thus, we find in Ewers' photography a novelist's sensitivity to the emerging industrial narratives impacting karri trees combined with the advances in colour production and exposure time that arose during the post-World War II period of Australia (for example, Ennis, *Photography* 110).



Figure 16. John Beard. *Standing on Felled Karri Tree, Western Australia*. Circa. 1965–1984. Colour Photograph. Dimensions Unspecified. SLWA Online Catalogue.©

Botanist John Beard also made use of emerging photographic technologies, as evident in his sizable collection of karri images taken in support of his scientific field research into Western Australian flora. Born in London and educated at Oxford, Beard became the Director of Kings Park and Botanic Garden in Perth during the 1960s and published, throughout his long career, a body of influential scientific papers and popular texts. Some of his *E. diversicolor* captures are reproduced in the landmark *Plant Life of Western Australia*, from 1990, containing in total over five-hundred plant photos from various locales around the state. *Standing on Felled Karri Tree, Western Australia*, dated between 1965 and 1984, depicts Beard with his back to the camera gazing down at the freshly cut, reddish-tinged karri stump on which he stands (Figure 16). The sawdust piles adjacent to the tree base suggest that the toppling of the giant occurred momentarily before the photo was taken. A chainsaw rests on the stump while a worker in the background raises his axe in preparation for further processing the downed log. As he casts his eyes over the tree's exposed growth-rings, signifying the vast age of the specimen, Beard's demeanour is distinctly contemplative, approaching forlornness and melancholy. In contrast, he photographed more idyllic and iconic karri country scenes, exemplified by *Lookout on the Gloucester Tree, Pemberton, Western Australia* and *Tall Forest of Karri*, both appearing in his *Plant Life of Western Australia*.

Contemporary period: Austin and the emergence of an ethics of karri forests

In the years since the Australian Bicentenary, karris continue to resonate as prominent subjects and symbols for photographers. In the overview of images presented thus far in this article, the significance of karris to the trajectory of forms of visual representation in Western Australian is striking. The context signifies the centrality of karris to the creative imagination of artists and the public continuously over time. Although the techniques, styles, messages and ethics have changed, karri photography thrives in the present, as evident in the works of John Austin (b. circa 1950). Austin's work in particular emblemizes the emergence of an ethics of karri country.

Indeed, recent years have elicited a greater concern for the natural world in karri imagery, reflecting the advent of the environmental movement in Western countries, including Australia, during the late 1960s and '70s (Hutton and Connors). A shift in values emphasis from economics and utilitarianism to ecology, ethics and sustainability within segments of the general population has intensified concerns of conservation, natural history and connection to place. As acutely evident in Austin's work, karri photography has begun to incorporate activist themes emanating from the old-growth forest protection campaigns of the 1990s, 2000s and present. Alongside the rise of overt ecological messages within the art of karri country has been the renaissance of tourism in the South-west region, propelling a landscape art industry that takes karris, among other trees, as one of its preferred subjects. The region's vibrant tourism industry fuels a demand for compelling depictions of karri communities for the souvenir and fine-art-collecting markets. It is this tourism, in part, that drives the protection of karri enclaves.

Austin has been taking black and white images of the Australian landscape since the 1970s. He came to settle in the township of Quinninup, near Pemberton, where he documented artist Howard Taylor at work in his studio, and also became pivotally involved as a photographer in the activist campaigns to protect old-growth tracts threatened by logging. Whereas much of Austin's work documents the destructive impacts of logging alongside public efforts to protect karri country, other images offer more contemplative reflections on the intrinsic beauty and spirit of the forests. In particular, three photographic portfolios from Austin's website exemplify a new ethics of karri representation in contemporary times—one concerned more ostensibly with matters of forest preservation, rather than the visual beauty, industrial uses, economic values, spiritual aspects or the symbolic dimensions of the trees *per se*. These portfolios are *Australian Forest: Karri, Marri and Jarrah* (1983–2010), *Karri Forest Logging* (1994–2010), or what he also calls *Forest Threnody* denoting a sylvan song of lamentation, and *Forest Protest and Activism* (1994–2003).

The first portfolio, *Australian Forest*, presents an array of perspectives on the forests at various times of day, including in the dawn mist, as well as close-range images of the diverse species and ecosystems that comprise karri country: zamia cycads, balgas and, notably, a melaleuca swamp comprising the bulk of one black and white photograph. Rather than representing karris as sublime objects in visual isolation from their broader habitats and partner species, Austin conveys an ecological sensitivity to the treescapes as communities both in the sky and on the ground. To be sure, the series features few signs of invasive human impacts. However, by the final image in the portfolio, a caption reveals a tragic back-story. Boorara Forest, the site of several karri and marri photographs imparting the impression of pastoral harmony, was in fact clear-felled in 2000 despite heavy opposition by local environmental groups. It turns out that Austin's photographs are among the last taken of the place, which remains solely in memory, imagination and imagery.

Forest Threnody continues the sharp departure from the idyll of the first series by foregrounding the campaign waged against the karris by industrial interests. Its opening image, entitled *Peta and Debbie on the Megastump, Gardner 08 State Forest, January 1999* (Figure 17), features the naked bodies of two protestors curled in foetal positions on an enormous tree stump measuring four metres in diameter and fourteen in circumference. According to Austin's caption, the timber of the immense karri was later deemed useless and discarded on the forest floor. *Forest Protest and Activism* continues this theme with a catalogue of protest images, some of which take place in the forests and others at urban demonstration sites in Perth. For instance, *Dawn Vigil Lane State Forest, October 1988* is a

moving interpretation of karri form that radically deviates from the sublime, picturesque and grotesque traditions that either exclude human activities more or less completely or centralise the gory impacts of saws, axes, tractors and other technologies. In this emotive composition, an assembly of tree defenders, clasping hands and forming a circle, surround a karri in which other activists sit in a platform high in the canopy.



Figure 17. John Austin. *Peta and Debbie on the Megastump, Gardner 08 State Forest, January 1999.* 1999. Black and White Photograph. 38.1 x 37.9 cm., on sheet 50.5 x 40.6 cm. NLA Trove.©

Conclusion

This broad, historical survey of karri country photography—framed in terms of plant ethics—from colonial-era to contemporary times elucidates the remarkable extent to which karris have inspired artistic production in Western Australia. The astonishing height and visual beauty of karris have always galvanised the efforts of photographers since Campbell and up to Austin. However, artists have also been captivated by the intimate spiritual and sensory qualities of the forests and not necessarily those qualities located in the lofty upper reaches of the trees. In recent years, the fragility of the great South-west eucalypts, in the face of large-scale clearance, has come into focus within some creative interpretations, as Austin’s work shows. In broad historical terms, this discussion has highlighted the contribution of photography to raising awareness and building appreciation of the environment, specifically the inimitable old-growth natural heritage of South-western Australian karri country. “Photography for environmental sustainability” (Giblett and Tolonen 228) situates image-taking as a means to foster dynamic, long-term and mutually beneficial relationships between people and the natural world, including our “vegetable giants of the west.” Hence, it is vital to consider photography as a medium for representing and stimulating an ethics of plant life in Australia and elsewhere.

Notes

1. For example, in the late 1800s, John Ednie-Brown, widely regarded as the first expert on Australian timber, commented disparagingly on the aesthetics of jarrah forests: "Taken as a whole, there is nothing particularly picturesque about the appearance of a Jarrah tree or forest of these. Indeed, the general effect of the species, en masse, is dull, sombre, and uninteresting to the eye." See, Ednie-Brown, *The Forests of Western Australia and Their Development, with Plan and Illustrations* (Perth: Perth Printing Works, 1899), 10.

Works Cited

- Alinder, Mary Street. *Ansel Adams: A Biography*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2014. Print.
- Austin, John. "Australian Forest: Karri, Marri and Jarrah." *John Austin Online*, 2016. Web. Accessed 8 June 2016. www.jbaphoto.com.au/australianforest.html
- _____. "Karri Forest Logging." *John Austin Online*, 2016. Web. Accessed 8 June 2016. www.jbaphoto.com.au/forestlogging.html
- _____. "Forest Protest and Activism." *John Austin Online*, 2016. Web. Accessed 8 June 2016. www.jbaphoto.com.au/forestprotest.html
- _____. *Peta Sargison and Debbie Ludlam*. *NLA Trove*, 1999. Web. Accessed 8 June 2016. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-137020066/view>
- "Australia's Bioregions (IBRA)." *Australian Government, Department of Environment*, 2012. Web. Accessed 8 June 2016. www.environment.gov.au/land/nrs/science/ibra
- Barbatsis, Gretchen. "Reception Theory." *Handbook of Visual Communication: Theory, Methods, and Media*. Eds Ken Smith, Sandra Moriarty, Gretchen Barbatsis & Keith Kenney. New York: Routledge, 2011. 271–294. Print.
- Beard, John. *Standing on Felled Karri Tree, Western Australia*. Circa. 1965–1984, *SLWA Online Catalogue*. Web. Accessed 8 June 2016. http://purl.slwa.wa.gov.au/slwa_b4173080_1
- _____. *Lookout on the Gloucester Tree, Pemberton, Western Australia*. Circa. 1965–1984, *NLA Trove*. Web. Accessed 8 June 2016. <http://trove.nla.gov.au/version/211677922>
- _____. *Tall Forest of Karri*. Circa. 1965–1984, *NLA Trove*. Web. Accessed 8 June 2016. trove.nla.gov.au/work/192944480?q=john+beard+karri&c=picture&versionId=211212415
- _____. *Plant Life of Western Australia*. Kenthurst, NSW: Kangaroo Press, 1990. Print.
- Boland, D.J., Brooker, M.I.H., Chippendale, G.M., Hall, N., Hyland, B.P.M., Johnston, R.D., Kleinig, D.A., McDonald, M.W., and J.D. Turner. *Forest Trees of Australia*. Collingwood, VIC: CSIRO Publishing, 2006. Print.
- Campbell, James Archibald. "A Naturalist in Western Australia." *The Australasian*, 5 Apr. 1890: 692. *NLA Trove*. Web. Accessed 8 June 2016. trove.nla.gov.au/
- _____. *Karri Forest, Western Australia*. 1890–1920, *NLA Trove*. Web. Accessed 8 June 2016. nla.gov.au/nla.obj-147133725/view
- _____. *Karri Tree*. 1890–1920, *NLA Trove*. Web. Accessed 8 June 2016. trove.nla.gov.au/version/29886277
- _____. *Karri Tree, 264 Feet in Height, Western Australia*. 1890–1920, *NLA Trove*. Web. Accessed 8 June 2016. trove.nla.gov.au/version/29846589
- _____. *In the Karri Forest*. 1890–1920, *NLA Trove*. Web. Accessed 8 June 2016. trove.nla.gov.au/version/34086000
- _____. *Nest of the Grey-breasted Robin, a Karri Giant*. 1890–1920, *NLA Trove*. Web. Accessed 8 June 2016. trove.nla.gov.au/version/34234230
- _____. *Nests and Eggs of Australian Birds*. Sheffield, UK: Pawson & Brailsford, 1901. Print.

- _____. "History of a Jarrah Board." *The Australasian*, 14 May 1921: 868. *NLA Trove*. Web. Accessed 8 June 2016. trove.nla.gov.au
- Crawford, Patricia and Ian Crawford. *Contested Country: A History of the Northcliffe Area, Western Australia*. Crawley, WA: University of Western Australia Press, 2003. Print.
- Desjardins, Joseph. *Environmental Ethics: An Introduction to Environmental Philosophy*. Boston: Wadsworth, 2013. Print.
- Ednie-Brown, John. *The Forests of Western Australia and Their Development, with Plan and Illustrations*. Perth, WA: Perth Printing Works, 1899. Print.
- Ennis, Helen. *Intersections: Photography, History and the National Library of Australia*. Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2004. Print.
- _____. *Photography and Australia*. London: Reaktion Books, 2007. Print.
- Ewers, John. *Men Against the Earth*. Melbourne: Georgian House, 1946. Print.
- _____. "The Trout Comes to Western Australia." *Walkabout* 13 (1946): 35–7. Print.
- _____. *Early Morning at the Swimming Pool Seen from Among the Karri*. 1948, *NLA Trove*. Web. Accessed 8 June 2016. trove.nla.gov.au/work/192056877?q&versionId=209922681
- _____. *Karri Logs in the Forest, Pemberton, 1950s*. Circa 1950, *SLWA Online Catalogue*. Web. Accessed 8 June 2016. purl.slwa.wa.gov.au/slwa_b2908293_001
- _____. *Tractor Hauling Karri Log, Pemberton, W.A., 1950s*. Circa 1950, *SLWA Online Catalogue*. Web. Accessed 8 June 2016. purl.slwa.wa.gov.au/slwa_b2908293_002
- Gascoigne, John. *The Enlightenment and the Origins of European Australia*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002. Print.
- Giblett, Rod and Juha Tolonen. *Photography and Landscape*. Bristol, UK: Intellect Press, 2012. Print.
- Gruen, Lori. *Ethics and Animals: An Introduction*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Print.
- Hall, Matthew. "Plant Autonomy and Human-Plant Ethics." *Environmental Ethics* 31.2 (2009): 169–181. Print.
- Hallam, Sylvia. *Fire and Hearth: A Study of Aboriginal Usage and European Usurpation in South-Western Australia*. Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1975. Print.
- Heyd, Thomas. "Plant Ethics and Botanic Gardens." *PAN: Philosophy Activism Nature* 9 (2012): 37–47. Print.
- Hopper, Stephen. "Southwestern Australia, Cinderella of the World's Temperate Floristic Regions." *Curtis's Botanical Magazine* 21.2 (2004): 132–80. Print.
- Hurley, Frank. *The Morning After the First Battle of Passchendaele*. 1917, *NLA Trove*. Web. Accessed 8 June 2016. nla.gov.au/nla.pic-an24574133
- _____. *Giant Karri Trees in the Diamond Tree Forest*. Circa. 1940–50, *NLA Trove*. Web. Accessed 8 June 2016. trove.nla.gov.au/version/40098416
- _____. *Karri Forest, Pemberton [Western Australia 2]*. Circa 1940–50, *NLA Trove*. Web. Accessed 8 June 2016. nla.gov.au/nla.obj-157591036/view
- _____. *Karri Forest, Pemberton [Western Australia, 3]*. Circa 1940–50, *NLA Trove*. Web. Accessed 8 June 2016. nla.gov.au/nla.obj-157592476/view
- _____. *Western Australia: A Camera Study*. Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1953. Print.
- Hutton, Drew and Libby Connors. *History of the Australian Environmental Movement*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999. Print.
- Jupp, James. *The English in Australia*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004. Print.
- Karri Falling*. 1900–1910, *NLA Trove*. Web. Accessed 8 June 2016. trove.nla.gov.au/work/14515140?q=karri&c=picture

- Karri Forest*. 1900–1909, *NLA Trove*. Web. Accessed 8 June 2016. trove.nla.gov.au/work/14515236?q=karri+forest+hrrc+1900+1909&c=picture&sort=holdings+desc&_=1459412269856&versionId=171966906
- “Karri Forest Explorer.” *Department of Parks and Wildlife*, 2013. Web. Accessed 8 June 2016. parks.dpaw.wa.gov.au/sites/default/files/downloads/parks/20120463karriforestexplorer_web.pdf
- Koechlin, Florianne. “The Dignity of Plants.” *Plant Signaling & Behavior* 4.1 (2009): 78–79. doi: 10.4161/psb.4.1.7315. Print.
- McEvey, Allan. “Archibald James Campbell (1853–1929).” *Australian Dictionary of Biography*. 2016. Web. Accessed 8 June 2016. adb.anu.edu.au/biography/campbell-archibald-james-5483
- Jones, Philip. *Images of the Interior: Seven Central Australian Photographers*. Kent Town, SA: Wakefield Press, 2011. Print.
- Lindenmayer, David, and Mark Burgman. *Practical Conservation Biology*. Clayton, VIC: CSIRO Publishing, 2005. Print.
- Marder, Michael. “Is It Ethical to Eat Plants?” *parallax* 19.1 (2013): 29–37. Print.
- Pike, A.F. “Hurley, James Francis (Frank) (1885–1962).” *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, 2016. Web. Accessed 8 June 2016. adb.anu.edu.au/biography/hurley-james-francis-frank-6774
- Poignant, Axel. *Axeman Cutting the Top of the Tree in the Karri Forest, Pemberton, Western Australia, 1934*. 1934, *NLA Trove*. Web. Accessed 8 June 2016. nla.gov.au/nla.obj-147829760/view
- _____. *The Cut Top of the Tree Falls in the Karri Forest, Pemberton, Western Australia, ca. 1934*. 1934, *NLA Trove*. Web. Accessed 8 June 2016. nla.gov.au/nla.obj-147829865/view
- _____. *Logging in the Karri Forest, Pemberton, Western Australia, September 1935*. 1935, *NLA Trove*. Web. Accessed 8 June 2016. nla.gov.au/nla.obj-147825658/view
- _____. *Australian Swagman. 1953–1954, NGA Federation Australian Art and Society 1901 to 2001*. Web. Accessed 8 June 2016. nga.gov.au/federation/Detail.cfm?WorkID=34603
- Pouteau, Sylvie. “Beyond ‘Second Animals’: Making Sense of Plant Ethics.” *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 27.1 (2014): 1–25. Print.
- Sassoon, Joanna. “Poignant, Harald Emil Axel (1906–1986).” *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, 2016, Web. Accessed 8 June 2016. adb.anu.edu.au/biography/poignant-harald-emil-axel-15467
- Seddon, George. *Landprints: Reflections on Place and Landscape*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997. Print.
- Swiss Confederation. *The Dignity of Living Beings with Regard to Plants: Moral Consideration of Plants for Their Own Sake*. Trans. Jackie Leach Scully. Bern: Federal Ethics on Non-Human Biotechnology ECNH, 2008. Print.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the Department of English and Cultural Studies at the University of Western Australia as well as the *JEASA*’s two anonymous referees who provided constructive feedback that improved the content of this article.

John Charles Ryan is Honorary Research Fellow in the School of Humanities at the University of Western Australia. From 2012 to 2015, he was Postdoctoral Research Fellow in

the School of Communications and Arts at Edith Cowan University. His teaching and research cross between the Environmental and Digital Humanities. He is the author, co-author, editor or co-editor of ten scholarly books, including the Bloomsbury title *Digital Arts: An Introduction to New Media* (2014, with Cat Hope) and *The Language of Plants: Science, Philosophy, Literature* (2017, University of Minnesota Press, with Monica Gagliano and Patrícia Vieira).

Email: john.c.ryan@uwa.edu.au