

Collision.
Lantana at Gloaming:
Invasive Plants in the Anthropocene

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Abstract

This paper explores a collaborative humanities and science response to the invasive weed lantana. It explores how the weed has been represented in the arts, via a film and an artwork. The lantana is a much-maligned weed. However, the two authors reflect on the lantana through the arts as well as through government papers and reports to establish its place in the Anthropocene's loss of biodiversity and species extinction. What kind of lantana story emerges from art, science and government documents? The authors investigate whether this process presents new narratorial possibilities for writing the non-human during the sixth extinction.

Keywords

Human-nature relations

Local lantana

Plant sustainability

Visual cultures

Narrative



Introduction

Lantana camara L., collected in the warmer parts of the Americas, was first described and named scientifically by Carl Linnaeus in 1753 in his second volume of *Species Plantarum*.¹ He noted it differed from other species in having opposite leaves, unarmed stems, and flowers in compact umbels. Now well established in Australia, lantana is considered a weed of national significance, and a threat to biodiversity. The first herbarium specimen collections of lantana are dated 1861.² Over the last 160 years, the movement of lantana seeds in water, or relocation due to becoming attached to machinery has contributed to the spread of lantana.³ Many Australians try to eradicate the lantana as a weed, however much of its clearing has caused erosion. In addition, lantana has cultural significance in Australia due to its representation in the arts. This adds to its value as a specific and singular plant and reminds us of the importance of plant life as intrinsic to all ecologies. We argue here that lantana should also be given a metaphorical asylum in Australia, as a welcome refugee, and can in fact be cultivated and controlled in ways that do not cause damage to native species.

In the lead up to the writing of this paper, the Director of the Herbarium Dr Shelley James, and Critical Plant Studies author Dr Prudence Gibson, worked together in early 2019 to develop a short video about the value of the specimens in the Herbarium. Herbaria are repositories of plant specimens – they embody an aesthetic of taxonomy and plant representation, with a potential for story-telling well beyond the physical. Sydney’s Royal Botanic Gardens Herbarium is Australia’s oldest scientific institution featuring 8,900 species, preserving 1.4 million specimens, and botanical illustrations that provide valuable historic scientific and cultural information. It plays a central role in the evolution of plant studies and appropriate artistic representations of plants.

After working together on the short video, Gibson and James consequently decided to analyse the conundrum of re-presenting or expressing the plant in a contemporary way, that matches the liveliness of the vegetal world, without falling into mimicry. This paper responds to their shared fondness for the Australian invasive weed, the lantana. In particular, it attends to the way a film and an art performance have represented the lantana, for human audiences, and what that might mean for the plant itself.

Evental Aesthetics

Traditionally, art has represented the plant world using the familiar static aesthetic of botanical art. Such aesthetic concepts are important as they shape the way we see and think about plants. An example is found in artworks by Australian illustrator Olive Pink (1884-1975) whose works reflect early Australian perceptions of how plants should be represented, that is, in a conventional, flattened and illustrative form. More recent representations of nature, during an epoch of rising extinctions in Australia,⁴ have helped change perceptions of plant life.⁵ These new developments in art and literature tend to do a better job of vivifying the dynamism of vegetal qualities. Now that we know that plants can learn associatively and communicate in a distributed way we are changing the way we understand plants, and consequently, that we are changing the way we represent plants.⁶ Many artworks now tend to present plants in a way that suggests their independence and hidden stories. We have chosen to represent the lantana.

Lantana

The lantana can be described as hardy, resilient and unruly. As Sydney-siders, our experience of lantana is that it grows along the harbour foreshore and explodes with clashing colours upon flowering. The attraction of the lantana, which also appears along our southern Sydney freeway verges and beside the coastal walking tracks, is that it is garish and prickly, unkempt and disorderly.

The facts are that the lantana weed is undoubtedly a pest, a hazard to other vegetation and ecosystems. Yet its capacity to thrive is impressive. It prospers in neglected corners of school playgrounds, along shady side passages and across abandoned building lots. Its sweet posies of coloured petals belie its dense and smothering branches and its coarse leaves that are both furry and spiky. Its ability to grow quickly and its capacity to helpfully obscure unsightly neighbours, has meant that home-owners have tolerated, even applauded, the lantana as convenient greenery for many decades.

Lantana camara, we also know, is native to South America. In 2006, the NSW Environment Heritage Scientific Committee identified lantana in its key Threatened Species Conservation Act. There have been management plans for lantana since the 2004 Declared Plant Policy and in 2008-9 there was a National Strategic Plan to minimise impact, prevent spread, and raise

community awareness.⁷ Management expenses, costs to the grazing industry in excess of \$104 million and, worst of all, the loss of ecosystems and high numbers of native plants and animals already on rare or threatened lists under federal legislation, are evidence of the need to control lantana.⁸ The result is the establishment of landscape gardening containment lines by state and national environment staff, efforts at the reduction of invasive spread by councils and park rangers and ongoing surveillance of where new growth is occurring.

Another result is that, in recent years, suburban gardeners have started to spurn the lantana. There is a suburban scorn for its liveliness, its capacity to grow easily, and its haze of butterfly species, who are attracted to its colourful flowers. There are some of us, however, who mourn the lantana whilst also respecting that it must be controlled (not eradicated). The lantana holds strong memories – it was once a place to play hide-and-seek; the source of a wooze-inducing lemony smell; somewhere to climb inside and view the street without being seen. Both authors have strong childhood memories of this plant.

There are more facts we do know about the lantana. Through the years, the species has been split and published as several subspecies, varieties and forms, confusing taxonomists as to its identity both naturally and due to human intervention, within the genus *Lantana*.⁹ The fruits of lantana are a purple-black and fleshy, attractive to birds, their main dispersing agent. Control, let alone eradication (which is not the preference of these authors), is difficult as mature strands are largely resistant to herbicides, and mechanical removal methods such as fire and cutting are soon followed by popped-up seedlings.¹⁰

Lantana is easily recognized by its white, cream or yellow to orange, pink, purple and red flower heads consisting of 20-40 flowers. Recent whole genome analyses are revealing that lantana introduced into Australia are more similar to South and Central American lantana species, whereas introductions from Hawaii with the same name are likely from North America and the Caribbean.¹¹ The lantana, then, is a stranger, an outsider, new to the Australian land and its inhabitants. An immigrant. The authors are aware of the cultural complexities of “controlling” an introduced species. It is not difficult to find connections between Australian legislation to control or eradicate invasive plants and the Australian government policies around asylum seekers.

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Lantana, the Film

The woman's body was entangled in the wooded undergrowth of our lantana branches. Flesh of its legs was warm against our thicket of scratchy branches. Black stockings were torn and we scratched the cheeks and hands. We tugged at its hair as it landed, pulling out a tuft of chestnut waves. It fell into our ravine from the road. A drop of around fifteen metres, hitting its head on a jutting rockface halfway down. It was the Sydney sandstone rock that killed it, not us. But we became its resting place. Our limbs held it aloft, above the wet and dark earth. The human head was flung back, one arm raised as if reaching for the stars or something left behind. We cradled the body as it cooled and stiffened.

This death scene above, written by the authors, is inferred from the 2001 Australian film *Lantana*, directed by Ray Lawrence and starring Anthony LaPaglia, Kerry Armstrong and Geoffrey Rush.¹² In the film, the woody, thicket-like vegetation, now perceived as a menace to agriculture, to grazing animals and to bird life, bears witness to an accidental death. The lantana vegetation motif sits at the heart of the film's story of grief, passion, marriage and the full gamut of human betrayals. Thinking about the lantana's point of view, from within this film, is an enactment of new philosophical constructs of vegetal life and thinking – as active and agented, with its own vegetal conatus. We propose that the lantana might as easily be understood as the main protagonist on the stage, rather than the humans, as we conventionally assume. By our imagining what the lantana saw, from within the film, we are adopting a kind of entanglement, blurring the lines between film viewing, academia and creative writing. We do this as an attempt to empathise with the lives of plants, as Bird Rose says, “becoming entangled within life rather than gazing upon it as if from some putative ‘outside’”¹³

The disciplinary constructs of aesthetics and botany have tended to give human attributes to nonhumans, including plants. Enlightenment biologist Linnaeus repeatedly referred to the reproductive parts of plants as “husbands, wives and bridal beds.”¹⁴ We use human language to engage with and describe nonhuman beings, using lexicons that may not be most appropriate to the longer vegetal time scales and cunning vegetal movement that differs from human life. How can we attend to these histories of anthropomorphism, without slipping back into humanistic accounts?

Canadian environmental humanities academic Catriona Sandilands addresses this question by rethinking the etymology of the word “vegetate” – by saying it suggests a “thinking response to plantiness.”¹⁵ There is a concept in Australian contemporary vernacular that to vegetate, to veg out, means to be lazy or to do nothing, to lie inactively on the couch watching TV and grazing on junk food. Sandilands points out human linguistic associations of vegetal life with dormancy, immobility and inertness. It might be valuable here to think about “re-vegetating” a given space. This could refer to planting a garden or weeding/pruning a wild habitat, re-designing a nature park that has been abandoned or allowed to become overgrown with weeds. Perhaps we could take Sandilands’ work with the etymology of ‘vegetate’ and extend it to a re-vegetative writing, via a form of expression that is still confined by humanness but is an attempt to celebrate the complexities of plant life and to better understand the lantana’s experiences of the world we share.

In the film *Lantana*, it is through the foliage of the *Lantana camara* that several scenes are shot. Nik, who is innocently involved in the woman’s death, throws the dead woman’s shoe into the lantana scrub, in a panic. Another neighbour hides in the lantana to avoid being seen. A view of the houses is seen over the lantana. Nik and Paula’s children play in the thicket, despite being forbidden to do so. The idea of the lantana acting as witness to the action (via its constancy as imagery) is a fascinating narrative device – it is the silent, watchful witness. Eco theorist Deborah Bird Rose refers to the notion of a witness, as a necessary human to nonhuman dialogue which is the slow work of ethics.¹⁶ Here, the slow and critical work of ethics refers to paying better attention to the lantana, even though it is considered a pest and a weed.

Now, in light of recent research where plants have been proven to have sensory and communicative and learning capabilities, becoming more observant of and attentive to lantana makes even greater sense.¹⁷ We can see lantana differently and yearn to hear its story, its distributed, plural, first person tale. Critical Plants theorist Michael Marder reminds us that viewing plants and representing them is a “framing of an object by a subject and...a faithful recreation of a pre-given reality of a work of art.”¹⁸ Therein lies the problem for Marder. Representation relies upon a human seeing and re-creating a nonhuman. Whereas, a true attempt at “writing the plant” relies upon a collapse of that pre-given reality and an effort to create a more appropriate plant-respecting textual rendition.

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Narrative

Memories of childhood games and outdoor activities often include the sickly-sweet scent of the outside lantana leaves with their spiky serrated edges. There are the cross-hatching formations of the undergrowth woody branches that are like that of a bird's nest. There are the birds mimicking vegetal life and the reverse. Matthew Hall explains that plants "generate the conditions of their own flourishing."¹⁹ By this he develops the concept that the environmental conditions of any given plant, their capacity to grow towards the sun, stretch their roots towards water sources and rich areas of minerals are generative. This has been historically explained as reflexive, the responsive conditioning of plants, a mere causal reaction to circumstances, but new developments suggest plants have the capacity to communicate and decision-make which has philosophical repercussions.²⁰ He is drawing attention to the apparent agency of plants to respond not just to conditions, but to changing and multiple-choice conditions. By agency, we are here referring to the Critical Plant Studies notion of agency as the performative capacities of plants, their cognitive abilities and the continuous activity of plant life, irrespective of humans.²¹ Our elaboration of this concept is to participate in the flourishing. We can't "think the plant" but we can "story the plant" in a more obvious way than before. How to best write in response to plants is a key concern of phytographia, which refers to *writing the plant or writing alongside the plant.*²²

The Art

In Australia, the extant texts surrounding the lantana bush are mostly government reports, action plans, and the environmental policies preventing the spread of the aggressive lantana. These texts, however, have limited narrative potential and even less pathos. Ecologists and environmentalists who are fundamentally committed to protecting ecosystems where the lantana is choking native plants, poisoning some bird life (though the sparrows seem to love lantana) and pushing small mammals out of their habitats, are most likely not interested in the voice of the lantana. They just want it all gone. For those particular anti-lantana humans, there is only one acceptable narrative – the story of eradication. But there are other stories.

In 2010 and then again in 2015 Australian artist Gary Warner made two consecutive videos set at the Bundanon Trust, a major art venue and

residency site just southwest of Sydney. Bundanon was the place where modernist painter Arthur Boyd lived and painted; and is now home of annual *Siteworks* exhibitions and where multiple environmental artworks and festivals take place. It is a spectacular location: it is pastoral with many wombats and kangaroos wandering around. The pasture lands are surrounded by bush and a dam leads the eye to the distant river. It is alive with bird and insect life. *Siteworks* is an important event on the Australian ecological art or environmental art calendar. The Director Deborah Ely has a sharp eye for local and international artists and offers artist residencies all year round. These residencies feed into Bundanon's culture of being at the frontline of the best enviro-art.

Warner's video was not part of *Siteworks* but an independent work. He filmed himself, gloved, hacking through the *Lantana camara* to make a clear passage through the bush, to allow a view of the spectacular and oft-painted iconic Pulpit Rock across the river (*The Lantana Project* 2010/15). This raised multiple issues, typical of the Anthropocene (the epoch of time since Industrialization in which humans have adversely impacted the earth), where human interference has meant the introduced species of lantana has become an uncontrollable species.

These environmental issues are controversial out at Bundanon, as there are two schools of thought with both plants and animals. For instance, should humans leave the over-population of wombats alone or cull them because they are decimating the ecosystems with their burrowing and overeating? Warner's approach, in his video, acts as a comment on the patriarchal dominion of invasive colonial white settlers over indigenous lands and, more generally, of invasive humans over nature. In other words, the lantana is an introduced species, much like white settlers who have likewise ruined much of the native eco-systems (plants, habitats and indigenous peoples) of Australia. The authors of this paper believe this commentary to be impossible to disagree with, but it establishes the lantana as a white colonial invader. In fact, more recent histories of Australia might compare the lantana to asylum seekers, who have arrived and established themselves and should not be vilified for this. Does the lantana have its own story of survival to tell? Can we leave space to allow that story to appear? Warner is a fierce advocate for removing invasive plant species but his video work negates the story of the lantana. Warner silences the lantana.

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There is also something ironic about a middle-aged white man in a yellow high viz uniform trying to return the environment to what it was before white colonials invaded. There is further irony in that he confronts the aggressive growth of the lantana with equally aggressive eradication. In fact, there is something in the sight of Warner hacking through the bush that is reminiscent of the early “pioneers” acting out their mastery or dominion over nature. Warner is saving the native landscape of Bundanon by aggressing the lantana. And that, of course, is another strand of lantana narrative that prevails.

The lantana that grows between the Bundanon main house and the river is truly dense. In 2017 on a scorching August day, a group of us peeled away from a Bundanon Trust *Siteworks* exhibition and tried to climb through the scrub to get to the river. We were desperate for a cold swim in air temperatures of over 40 degrees, so we pushed through the lantana and emerged at the river edge with cuts all over our arms and legs. Ravaged, we plunged into the icy water. Our cuts stung in the water. But who was defiling whom? Was the lantana the perpetrator of our skin damage? Or an innocent, in a Nietzschean sense of an unhealthy, slave morality?

As authors of this paper, our efforts are consumed by a Critical Plant Studies attempt to raise the relevance or importance of the lantana, to allow its liveliness to exhibit itself to humans. We hope to place it in a position of being of equal status to all other beings - this is, existing within a flat ontology (an equal register of being, where all things have the same moral and ethical status). We would like an invasive species to be understood as a model of survival, even if it must be controlled. Its representation in film and art, here, present the lantana as both witness to bloody death and as aggressor that must be yielded to. Yet natural, human instinct, as gardeners and government bureaucrats, is to destroy the lantana. All we hope to do in this essay, is to present a view which is that the lantana grows and moves and invades, without recourse to the human, without interest in the human. It is possible to build metaphors with colonial invaders or with asylum seekers who should be supported once they are in Australia – and these metaphors add to the multiple narrative threads. The lantana exists and flourishes, effloresces, bends and scratches, flowers, hides and observes. We cannot escape our humanness and our human tendency to anthropomorphise, but we can avoid only ever understanding plants as objects, rather than active subjects.

In summary, the plant narrative is the multi-stranded voice of plant science, the arts and the lantana, connecting with the experiential stories and metaphors of its orbit, in order to move beyond any human/plant disconnection or disavowal. Lantana exists in herbaria collections. They also choke harbour pathways and they offer their exquisite multi-coloured flowers that attract butterflies. Our human experiences of lantana, then, exist alongside the lantana's own story. These are stories *with lantana*, rather than *about lantana*.

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Notes

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