

Black Mountain Symposium 2018 Background Paper No. 21

Quick guide to creative/artistic material about Black Mountain

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Abstract. Black Mountain has inspired creative works from writers and artists since the Limestone Plains were selected as the site for the national capital. This background paper presents a brief overview of selected creative and artistic works inspired by Black Mountain since the early 1900s. From the paintings commissioned to portray the landscape of the future capital, the imposing form of Black Mountain and the hills rising from the plains was also featured by artists from the 1920s to the 1940s. The bulk of the mountain lent a sense of place and local identity to the site of the emergent capital. Writers have also been inspired by the mountain and its scenic backdrop. Black Mountain has been the subject of verse and described as the setting or backdrop to fiction in works by local and national authors. Its flora and fauna have inspired a book for children and artworks in various visual media since the 1980s, including drawings, ceramics, photography and textiles. Composers and local musical ensembles have also drawn inspiration from the mountain. While most of these creative responses have been produced locally, several of these writers, artists, photographers and musicians who lived or worked in Canberra have established national and international reputations. Black Mountain and its striking vistas have become a recognisable feature that evokes the ‘Bush Capital’ and the ‘city in the landscape’, expressing the natural and aesthetic values of its setting and the individual creator’s responses to this place.

More recently, Black Mountain and the telecommunications tower have been employed to convey ideas about a ‘modern’ Canberra, and stylised images of the tower feature prominently in popular culture. Despite the initial controversy over the tower’s construction, it now holds great appeal as an icon of the city as reflected in diverse contemporary media such as film, souvenirs and pop art.

1. Introduction

Artistic and creative responses to Black Mountain evoke a broad range of meanings. This background paper introduces a range of visual, literary, textile and musical responses to Black Mountain from the early twentieth century to the current day. Creative responses have focussed on the mountain as a part of the hills surrounding Canberra, a key feature in the ‘amphitheatre’ of the city, as a natural feature within its landscape, or on the plant and animal life it supports. Literary responses also engage similar themes, with the addition of a strong satirical tone in the 1970s during the height of the controversy over the construction of the Telstra Tower. References to Black Mountain in poetry and fiction also describe place, offering a distinctly local character to writing that engages with everyday issues beyond the ‘Canberra’ of the news. The panoramic scenic backdrop of Black Mountain and its rich ecology have also inspired photographers, botanical artists and ceramic art, discussed briefly in Purdie¹.

2. Painting and drawing

Early depictions of the site of Canberra, including Black Mountain, represent Federation era ideas about landscape and national identity. The selection of the site for capital was influenced by an emerging sense of identity, which found one form of expression through images of the Australian landscape. The site for the future capital was to ‘occupy a commanding position, with extensive views, and embracing distinctive features which will lend themselves to the evolution of a design

¹ RW Purdie (2018) Black Mountain educational, recreational and creative activities. Black Mountain Symposium 2018 Background Paper No. 17, Friends of Black Mountain, Canberra.

worthy of the object'.² In recommending the site for the Federal capital, surveyor Charles Scrivener praised the Canberra site, admiring the 'amphitheatre of hills with an outlook towards the north and north-west, well sheltered from westerly winds'. To further promote the region proposed for the new capital, a competition was established to paint the Federal Capital site. The instructions for the artists underline the link between landscape and national identity. The paintings were to be of a 'panoramic nature, with midday effect preferred to some evening or scenic effects', with topographical accuracy. The winning painting by W. Lister Lister³ and that awarded second place by Penleigh Boyd⁴, both simply titled 'The Federal Capital Site 1913', depict 'grand sun-drenched golden vistas' scattered with stately eucalypts, with the timbered bulk of Black Mountain appearing to the right.⁵ Both paintings were acquired by the Commonwealth and are in the collection of Parliament House.

Other early images depict Black Mountain's presence as an imposing natural feature within the panorama of the hills. Charles Coulter's cycloramas, prepared for the Federal Capital design competition in 1911, depict 360-degree views of the city site landscape from what are now City Hill and Capital Hill convey the 'amphitheatre' of the location's setting.⁶ Other early images also feature Black Mountain as a backdrop to activity on the plains below. A sketch described as 'Federal Camp at Canberra, mess tent, Federal members' quarters and official tent, Black Mountain' by William Johnson in 1909 depicts a series of tents set among eucalypts at the base of the mountain. Johnson was one of the Parliamentary members in favour of the Canberra site for the capital. The overall impression is of the dominating quality of the mountain in contrast to the diminutive tented camp and a building, perhaps Action Homestead, in the foreground.⁷ As Ken Taylor has observed, the 'hills define[d] the city's setting' from the beginning.⁸

The work of later artists featured the bulk of the mountain in quite different ways. Several images of the mountain painted or drawn between the 1910s and 1940s shift attention from the mountain as part of the hills and ridges surrounding Canberra, focusing instead on the shape and density of the mountain itself, emphasising its presence and effect within the landscape.

Sydney artist Eirene Mort included a sketch of Black Mountain in the series she produced during several stays in Canberra with relatives in the early 1920s.⁹ Her drawings centred on aspects of rural life and skills that gradually were being superseded by the progress of the capital. Mort depicts the mountain as a massive bulk rising in the distance of the image. The sheep quietly grazing in the foreground evoke an 'agrarian landscape of a nostalgic decline, as if to set it against the coming city'.¹⁰ She collected her sketches of the Canberra region for an exhibition she hoped to hold at the opening of Parliament in 1927, although her plans were not realised.¹¹

Just a few years later, in 1931, Grace Cossington Smith, created a strikingly different vision of landscape centred on Black Mountain.¹² Cossington Smith had been invited to Canberra to instruct the wife of the Governor-General, and from her base in Yarralumla she painted several scenes of Canberra. She was strongly influenced by idea of landscape as spiritual and revelled in colour as an

² H McMahon, Minister for Home Affairs, instruction to Charles Scrivener in 1908, cited in Ken Taylor, *Canberra: City in a Landscape* (Halstead Press, 2006), p. 31.

³ W Lister Lister, 'federal Capital Site 1913', Australian Parliament House, Historic Memorials Collection: <https://nga.gov.au/exhibition/CAPITAL/Default.cfm?IRN=215530&BioArtistIRN=25493&mystartrow=25&realstartrow=25&MnuID=SRCH&ViewID=>, accessed August 2018.

⁴ Penleigh Boyd, 'Federal Capital Site 1913', Australian Parliament House, Historical Memorials Collection: <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-135214794/view>, accessed August 2018.

⁵ Miriam Kelly, *Capital and Country: The Federation Years 1900-1913* (Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 2013), p. 14.

⁶ *Canberra's Federal Capital Design Competition 1910-1912 in Snapshots* (Canberra, 2013), pp. 3-4, 7.

⁷ National Library of Australia, Bib ID: 904786.

⁸ Taylor, *City in the Landscape*, p. 154.

⁹ <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-134824355/view>, accessed August 2018.

¹⁰ Brown, *Canberra*, 90

¹¹ Eirene Mort, *Old Canberra: A Sketchbook of the 1920s*, with an introduction and notes on the sketches by Pat Wardle (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 1987).

¹² <https://nga.gov.au/Exhibition/cossingtonsmith/Detail.cfm?IRN=133763&ViewID=2>, accessed August 2018.

expressive medium to convey deeper truths about landscape forms.¹³ Her ‘remarkable landscape’ depiction of Black Mountain portrays the mountain as a dark bulk, tilted on an angle, beneath the bold blue brushstrokes of the sky and the ground stretching in front of the mountain. The sense of energy and movement is amplified by the tilting telegraph poles in the foreground. She portrays an ‘iconic rural landscape’ in a manner that challenges ideas of landscape as a national symbol prevalent at the time.¹⁴

A second modernist image of Black Mountain was painted by Roland Wakelin, a friend of Cossington Smith, in 1944.¹⁵ This painting dates to the latter part of Wakelin’s career, when he had shifted from use of colour as the chief medium of expression to greater tonal qualities, such as the use of grey and brown tones in his painting. His ‘Black Mountain’ has romantic overtones. The scale of the densely treed mountain occupies the middle of the image, with what may be the sandstone quarry catching the light to the right (eastern side). The diminutive figure of a man approaches the mountain on a path, the pastoral scene illuminated by the light shifting beneath the clouds. The tree cover is dark, perhaps an allusion to the mountain’s name. The dark tones and size of the mountain suggest it dominated the surrounding landscape. Once again, the landscape is portrayed as rural, with little, apart from the quarry, to suggest the expanding city nearby.

In 1987 artist Stephanie Radok used Black Mountain tower as a point of perspective to observe and draw the panoramic mountain landscape. The resulting sketches, prints and linocuts were exhibited in her *Black Mountain Project* at the opening of the Contemporary Art Space in Canberra in July 1987, and a further 60 drawings were displayed in the downstairs space in the tower at the same time.¹⁶ Radok drew upon early descriptions and images of the mountains around Canberra, such as those represented in the cycloramas of Charles Coulter in 1911, for inspiration. She used tower viewing galleries as a base from which to observe and reflect the changing light and appearance of the mountains around Canberra. Sitting on the gallery for hours in the March afternoons, she described the ‘hills glowing with pink light that vibrates through the air’. She produced 150 drawings over two months, after which selected works were transferred into prints and linocuts. Her works represent the shape of mountains and the tonal qualities of shifting light in contemporary abstract form.

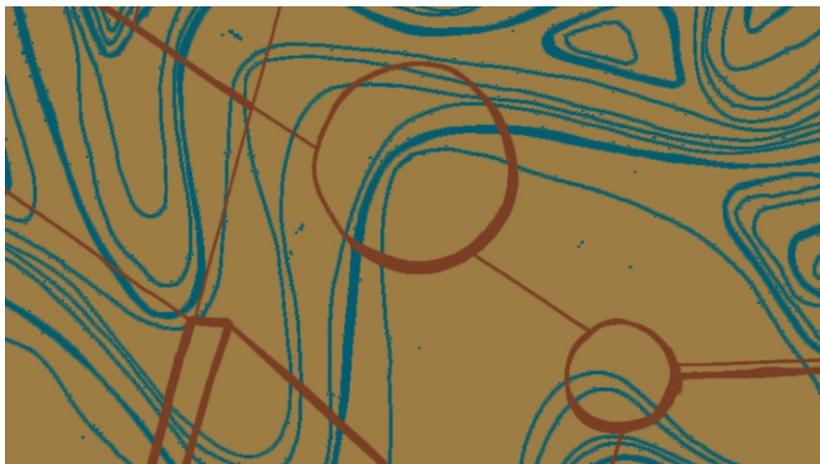


Fig. 1. Georgia Mokak, *Black Mountain*, 2017.

¹³ Denise Mimmocchi, ‘Unveiling nature: landscape in the ‘epoch of the Spiritual’, in *O’Keeffe, Preston, Cossington Smith: Making Modernism*, ed. by Lesley Harding and Denise Mimmocchi (Art Gallery of New South Wales and Heide Museum of Modern Art, 2016), pp. 43-63.

¹⁴ Ann Stephen, ‘Grace Cossington Smith Black Mountain c. 1931’, in *Making Modernism*, p. 66. Stephen describes the mountain as ‘bare and treeless’, although it is more likely that this appearance is due to the dark grey paint the artist used and not the actual degree of vegetation covering the mountain at the time.

¹⁵ <https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/explore/collection/work/3168/>, accessed August 2018.

¹⁶ Stephanie Radok, *The Black Mountain Tower Project* (Deakin: S. Radok, 1987).

The continuing Aboriginal connections to Black Mountain are strikingly represented in a design by artist Georgia Mokak that blends the topography of the mountain and the campus of the Australian National University on its slopes with the lines of the university's roads. Georgia's design was selected as the Australian National University's design for Reconciliation Week in 2017. She describes her response to the work as 'acknowledging this space and its continuing culture regardless of the inevitable gentrification'. She chose to 'interweave lines from the topographical maps, the bush and lines from some of the identifiable structures around the ANU campus to encourage further learning and deeper engagement with this space and its relationship to the surrounding area.' Georgia states that the design is a visual acknowledgement of continuing relationship with the place rather than a verbal one: 'No matter how many layers of concrete, excavated land, or stories of building there are, you will always be on Ngunnawal and Ngambri Country.'¹⁷ Significantly, the design also suggests the impression of past generations and their journeys and use of the mountain overlaid with those of the present.

Black Mountain continues to be a popular feature in works by contemporary Canberra artists. Susan Trudinger portrays Black Mountain in her vibrant, fun and colourful scene of the Balloon Festival held in March each year.¹⁸ With the National Arboretum in the foreground, the mountain provides a backdrop and recognisable setting for the activity. This work is an example of contemporary art that emphasises the lightness, open space, and visual appeal of the mountains and the activities centred around the lake and the city's national institutions. Another local artist, Martin Paull, depicts Black Mountain in bold strokes of colour, accentuating the moving clouds and shifting light as it passes across the treed slopes. The play of light and colour on the mountain are also characteristic of Micky Allen's *Black Mountain Suite*, discussed below.

3. Literature

Black Mountain has provided inspiration for generations of local and national writers. Manning Clark's celebrated roof-top study in Forrest afforded panoramic views towards both Black Mountain and Mt Ainslie. Poet Alec Hope once remarked on the view: 'I see books being written here'. He was right; this was the space in which Clark wrote his six volume of *A History of Australia*.¹⁹ The novelist Christina Stead, when she was staying in University House, reportedly took delight in the view of the tower from her window, and was comforted by it at night.²⁰ Black Mountain has been the subject of poetry and children's literature, and described as the setting for fiction and in verse. The emphasis and tone of this literature varies widely. A strong theme of the poetry, especially of the 1970s, is a growing environmental awareness. Another strand alongside this is a satirical and critical turn directed towards the telecommunications tower. The following is a very brief introduction to a necessarily small selection of works written about Black Mountain and how it has featured to represent a sense of place, natural, urban and local.

3.1 Poetry

Canberrans feel strongly about their 'urban forest'. Ideas of the 'bush capital' have contributed, since the 1960s, to a creative awareness and engagement with environmental issues through poetry. Most noted of these figures is Judith Wright, noted for writing with sensitivity about the Australian bush and its conservation. In the opening lines of her 'Brief notes on Canberra' she admires its landscape setting as a 'tawny basin in the ring of hills [holding] nothing but the sunlight's gaze,/a blue-blank opaline mirage', and the spaciousness of the plains surrounded by mountains as an 'arena,

¹⁷ Personal communication with Georgia Mokak, August 2018, and announcement of the award at <http://www.anu.edu.au/news/all-news/student-behind-the-reconciliation-week-graphics-off-to-venice-biennale-for-a-month>, accessed August 2018.

¹⁸ <https://bluethumb.com.au/susan-trudinger/Artwork/black-mountain-and-balloons>, accessed August 2018.

¹⁹ Milton Cameron, *Experiments in Modern Living: Scientists' Houses in Canberra 1950–1970* (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2012), p. 22.

²⁰ Ann Moyal, *Clear Across Australia: A History of Telecommunications* (Melbourne: Thomas Nelson, 1984), p. 289.

amphitheatre, gallery.’²¹ Her allusion to an amphitheatre and how it conveys an impression of an expansive panorama echoes the responses of the earlier generations of people who beheld the plains in the early twentieth century. Wright strongly opposed to the plan for a telecommunications tower on Black Mountain. She was one of the witnesses called by the Citizens Committee to Save Black Mountain to give evidence in their legal challenge to its construction. Resisting the notion that the mountain provided an ‘impressive podium’ for a man-made structure, she imagined this intrusion upon the natural line of the mountain as a threat to all the hills surrounding Canberra and beyond. In a verse written about Black Mountain she describes the terrified near hills warning the more distant ones about what had befallen Black Mountain, urging them to keep their distance:

*At night the near hills
flash to far ones
Danger danger.
Don't come down here,
Danger danger.
Stay up there or
they'll kill you.*²²

Dorothy Green, another Canberran poet and literary scholar known for her environmental awareness, composed a longer sombre and satirical piece that imagines the construction of the tower as a ‘murderous’ intrusion upon the summit. In ‘Mount Majura to Black Mountain. Te saluto morituum’ Green adopts the classical motif of a valedictory address to someone who is about to die (‘Te saluto morituum’ which translates as ‘I salute you who will die’) to express grief and loss for the imagined death of the summit once it has been crowned by the tower. The verse appeared in the *Canberra Times* on 24 March 1973, amidst the ferment after the release of the Environment Impact Statement for the tower, and the formation of the Citizen’s Committee to Save Black Mountain, which mounted a legal challenge to it being constructed.²³

The verse opens with an imagined serenade from Mount Majura in praise of the unity of the hills surrounding Canberra. Black Mountain is addressed as the ‘Dark hill that is the centre of our peace’, crowned with ‘golden fire’ by the setting sun. The mountain is set into the landscape, nurturing a thriving ecology: ‘Soft to the water leans your curving shoulder,/Sheltering each season’s secret generation/of flower and creature.’ The construction of the tower and the consequent break in the integrity of the mountain is likened to destruction, resulting in the summit being adorned with a ‘fool’s cap’. The ‘megalomaniac tower’ is ridiculed as a statement of ‘the great image of authority’, that requires ‘a huge concrete hat/upon a mountain top to show its power’. This is a reference to the Post Office who designed and built the tower, against strong opposition, which was destined to become, ‘an everlasting and most melancholy/Monument – to envy, greed and folly.’ This verse lament echoes the tenor of opposition to the tower at the time; Green adds her voice to calls for Black Mountain’s summit to remain free of built structures and to retain the scenic grandeur of the hills surrounding the city.

Criticism of the proposed telecommunications tower, and of the process through which it was imposed — as many thought at the time — upon Canberra, features prominently in satirical verse published in the *Canberra Times* from the late 1960s into the 1970s, especially during the height of the tower controversy. The satirical bent pokes fun at the self-aggrandisement of government agencies and the expense of the project. Representative of this strand of verse is ‘Tower economy’ by Joan Lynravn, who was secretary and research assistant to Professor Keith Hancock in the School of History at the Australian National University, and part of the intellectual and environmental circle that led the legal challenge against the tower.

²¹ Judith Wright, ‘Brief notes on Canberra. I. City and Mirage’, in *Collected Poems* (Sydney, Fourth Estate, 1994; 2016 edition), p. 326.

²² Republished in *Canberra Times*, 14 May 2012.

²³ Julie Hotchin (2018) Black Mountain as a place of protest: tower, gondola and highway. Black Mountain Symposium 2018 Background Paper No. 20. Friends of Black Mountain, Canberra.

*The PMG has two designs
For his Black Mountain Tower,
Towards steel or concrete he inclines
For boosting TV power.*

*It might be far more apt if he,
With postage up once more,
used cardboard for economy
And old stamps for décor.²⁴*

Underlying the satire, however, is a sense of loss, of being witness to the pace of change as the city expanded and familiar natural landscapes, especially those that once formed ‘Greater Black Mountain’, were fragmented and built upon.²⁵ Two verses out of many illustrate this sentiment. ‘The Birds’ by Ruth Molloy is a meditation on renewal and regeneration after the division of the mountain’s lower slopes from the lake by the construction of the Molonglo Arterial (Parkes Way) in the mid-1970s.²⁶ The speaker mourns the loss of the ‘wild birds/of the Lake/underneath the/brow/of Black Mountain’s arc’ where she had learned to ‘show my grief/at man’s invasion/of their world/with his divisive/partitioning/of what they knew/ and I went no more ...’. After time, however, the speaker hears a currawong calling in the grounds of the university, enticing her to the Lake, where ‘the wild birds/are calling!’.

Joan Lynravn’s ‘The Man Who Hated Trees’, published in the *Canberra Times* on 25 July 1979, has a darker tone of simmering anger and frustration at what she regards as the gradual destruction of Black Mountain by planning decisions in the period immediately prior to it being declared a nature reserve. The verse is a fable about one Fred Bloggs ‘a town planner and road engineer’ who was ‘frightened of trees’. Fred, according to the tale, admired his ‘network of roads, some of concrete, some tar’ which ‘soon covered the landscape both near and afar/While scarcely a small shrub remained/In the once garden city.’ Black Mountain, ‘almost “undisturbed” bush’, was the last to be targeted by the planners’ roads, but escaped that fate by its declaration as a reserve. She likens the reserve declaration to “Fred Blogg’s Waterloo”, a victory for nature over the encroaching city. Lynravn captures the tension of the competing claims to Black Mountain which conservationists, led by the National Parks Association, campaigned to preserve as native forest, and the National Capital Development Commission, responsible for roads and planning in Canberra, who wanted to preserve its slopes for future roads.²⁷ Behind the wry humour Lynravn expresses deep appreciation for the natural environment and the preservation of what remained of the former expanse of native woodland on Greater Black Mountain.

Poetry written in the context of the controversy over the tower formed part of a distinctly local poetic expression in the 1970s. It was shaped by local poets and writers whose works touched on distinctly Canberran themes — suburbia, the ironies of political and bureaucratic life, their relationship to the city, and the dimensions of its natural setting — landscape, wildlife, light and the shifting seasons.²⁸ Black Mountain appears less frequently in verse after the tower controversy, and tends to be referenced as a mountain backdrop to the city, in relation to the lake or as a feature that lends a recognisable sense of place.

²⁴ ‘Tower economy’, by Joan Lynravn, *Canberra Times*, 2 October 1971, p. 13.

²⁵ Mark Butz (2018) The Canberry Ranges, Black Hill, Black Mountain, ‘the Golden Hill’ and beyond. Black Mountain Symposium 2018 Background Paper No. 19. Friends of Black Mountain, Canberra.

²⁶ *Canberra Times*, 11 March 1978, p. 11.

²⁷ Butz, ‘The Canberry Ranges’.

²⁸ Nicholas Brown, *A History of Canberra* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 209-10.



Fig. 2. Telstra Tower. Photo: Angus Thompson (Wikimedia Commons).

The verse of Sergio Mouat, a refugee from Chile, speaks of the generative qualities he discovered after settling in Canberra. ‘Inspired by the beauty of the landscape and the tranquillity of Canberra’ he started to photograph local places and respond to them in verse, leading to an exhibition titled *Canberra, Where the Wattle Blooms* held in the Legislative Assembly in April 2003.²⁹ It later toured to Chile, Peru and returned to Canberra this time in Woden. Mouat’s collection includes pieces about the city’s and region’s built and natural features, including Black Mountain. The piece alludes to the origins of the name, its ‘dense foliage bereft of sun’ making it appear dark. The tower ‘seems to hang from the sky’ and on its slopes are the Botanic gardens ‘where sing birds that care for this sacred place, an altar to the Aborigines.’³⁰ This is a rare instance in which Aboriginal connections to Black Mountain are acknowledged as a layer of the many meanings of this place.

In other works reference to Black Mountain conveys a recognisably local mood and setting. Michael Clarke describes a ‘winter-smear’d October day’ in which the mountain appears as a backdrop to his musings on the movement of people and traffic in the rain.³¹ The expansive vista taking in the lake and the water jet to ‘the tall spire on the black summit’ serves as a point of orientation in Frankie Seymour’s ‘The City of Illusions’.³² While in ‘Prelude’ by SK Kelen, the elongated, exposed form of the tower acts to accentuate the rawness of the winter wind as it whips through the Brindabellas and across the city’s hills, so that ‘Black Mountain Tower hums and rings/like a syringe singing to the city’.³³ The metaphor of the tower as a syringe shows the enduring pull of this imagery, which has been used to refer to the tower’s design since it was first revealed in November 1970.³⁴ As if to shrug off the heated debates about the merits of the tower’s design and location, local poet Paul Hetherington’s poem ‘Gesture’ is a whimsical reflection on the function and form of the spire:

²⁹ Sergio Mouat, *Canberra: Where the Wattle Blooms. A Collection of Poems and Photographs*. Translated from Spanish by Marisa Cano (self published by Sergio Mouat, 2004).

³⁰ Mouat, *Where the Wattle Blooms*, p. 28.

³¹ Michael Clarke, ‘Canberra in October’ in *The Poetry of Canberra*, ed. by Philip Mackenzie (Canberra: Polonius, 1990), p. 19.

³² Frankie Seymour, ‘The City of Illusions’ in *Poetry of Canberra*, pp. 30-31.

³³ SK Kelen, ‘Prelude’ in *Goddess of Mercy* (Blackheath: Brandl & Schlesinger, 2002); see also <https://www.poetrylibrary.edu.au/poets/kelen-s-k/prelude-0764004>, accessed August 2018.

³⁴ Hotchin, *Place of Protest*, p. 4.

*The tower becomes
an insouciant gesture,*

*A robotic scout
for a future city,*

*Or the letter 'I'
in wild silence.*

'Gesture' accompanies a striking image by Jen Webb of the elongated spire (the 'I' rising above the treetops in *Watching the World: Impressions of Canberra* in which Hetherington's poems respond to photography of Canberra by Webb.³⁵ Originally produced as a collaborative piece for the 2013 centenary exhibition *Imagine Canberra*, the book aims to engage with the 'everyday and unexpected aspects of Canberra, while also including new perspectives' on the city's better known landmarks. Its explicit focus is on Canberra a lived city, 'the place we call home'.³⁶ The tower on Black Mountain, here as in other media, represents the 'ordinary parts of town', one of the features not reported on the news. The tower has come to represent the lived experience of local residents in the city in contrast to the 'Canberra' of government.

3.2 Fiction

The beautifully written and illustrated children's book *My Little World* introduces the plant, insect and animal life of the dry woodland forest of Black Mountain to a young audience.³⁷ The author, Julia Cooke, was inspired as a child by the details of bush insects and other tiny creatures that inhabit the forest, and which are difficult to see. Written in verse, her story relates the curiosity of a young child exploring the forest with her grandparents, and the plants and insect life they discover along the way. Originally written as an English assignment when the author was a student at Narrabundah College, *My Little World* reveals the author's curiosity and deep appreciation of the wonder of nature and how to introduce to it to others. The illustrations by Marjorie Crosby-Fairall are richly detailed and attractive. They are also scientifically accurate, depicting the species likely to be encountered on a walk on Black Mountain in October. The book includes a list of plant, insect and animal species described and illustrated within its covers. *My Little World* was launched by Ian Fraser at the Australian National Botanic Gardens on 9 April 2011.³⁸ The author's curiosity with the ecology of Black Mountain led her to pursue science as a career, and she is now a plant ecologist and Lecturer in Ecology at the Open University in Milton Keynes, United Kingdom.³⁹ *My Little World* is an excellent example of the creative educational engagement with the plant and animal life on Black Mountain in the tradition promoted in the 1960s by Nancy Burbidge.

Black Mountain appears less prominently as a setting in fiction. Occasionally the mountain features in a manner that adds depth to the narrative setting. In the children's story *The Bunyip of Haig Park*, the bunyip Alexander, one of only three said to be remaining on Canberra, was forced to flee the city by 'unrelenting pollution.' It wasn't known where exactly he went, but he was thought to be hiding on Black Mountain.⁴⁰ This may be an allusion to the legend about the cave on Black Mountain, imagined as a hide out for bush rangers.⁴¹

Local author of crime fiction, Dorothy Johnston, employs the Telstra Tower as the scene of crime in her detective novel *The White Tower*.⁴² According to the blurb, the body of a young man is discovered

³⁵ Paul Hetherington and Jen Webb, *Watching the World: Impressions of Canberra* (Canberra: Blemish Books, 2013).

³⁶ Paul Hetherington, cited at: <https://www.canberra.edu.au/about-uc/media/monitor/2015/july/canberra-captured-in-new-uc-book>, accessed August 2018.

³⁷ Julia Cooke, *My Little World*. Illustrated by Marjorie Crosby-Fairall (Scholastic: Godford, 2011).

³⁸ <https://anbg.gov.au/gardens/about/media/11-04-1-MyLittleWorld-book-launch.pdf>

³⁹ <https://juliacooke.net/>

⁴⁰ Kathleen McConnell, *The Bunyip of Haig Park*. Illustrated by Jenny Yim (Ginninderra Press, 1997).

⁴¹ Butz, 'The Canberra Ranges'.

⁴² Dorothy Johnston, *The White Tower* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2006).

at the base of the ‘famed communications tower atop Canberra’s Black Mountain’. The image on the dust jacket cover for the 2006 edition portrays the upper part of the tower reflected in a white evening light against a moody evening background and a reflective face of the female protagonist.⁴³ Chapter Four opens with an evocative description of place. As the detective drives towards the tower on the road to the summit she is struck by the view of ‘Canberra laid out like a dream, smell of the bush, its fingerprints all over Black Mountain.’ The mountain ‘squatted’ under the tower, implying its imposing presence, especially from below, while the tower itself, ‘so tall and white, so elongated, needle-thin’ looked like a ‘stick building where stick figures went to play.’⁴⁴ Here the mountain and the tower, set slightly apart from the city, despite its encroachment, act as the setting for this murder mystery.

4. Poetry and textile art

The exhibition *Poetry and Place*, curated by Dianne Firth of the University of Canberra in 2017, explored collaboration between how artists working in different media, here poetry and visual art, responded to the experience of nature and landscape in Canberra.⁴⁵ Firth notes that Canberra is often derided for *not* being like other cities, although many have been inspired by its environment and ‘cherish its beauty, changing seasons, contact with nature and space.’ Firth invited poets to write about their experience of landscape in Canberra. She, in turn, created large-format textile artworks in response. The exhibition included fourteen of these paired works in creative dialogue.

One of these pairs reflects on the experience of Black Mountain. Subhash Jaireth’s poem ‘Ngambri (Black Mountain): Walking with Kobayashi’s Snail’ is a meditation on walking the mountain that takes inspiration from a short verse by Kobayashi Issa (1763-1828) called the ‘Snail’: ‘Oh Snail,/ Ever so slowly climb/Mt Fuji’.⁴⁶ In contrast to the majesty of Mt Fuji the author encounters Black Mountain as a ‘pimple on a flat landscape. Like a hairy wombat it squats with ease and poise.’ In his regular walk, three times a week, the author is ‘happy to skirt around the spiky tower that looks at home squirting waves of wordless sounds’ and instead to move through the ‘the palette of endless green tinged with hesitant dashes of yellow.’ The poem also reflects on the meaning of the place, juxtaposing the Aboriginal (‘Nyamudy’) term Ngambri, or breast, with the ‘Black’ of the settlers, ‘a glib euphemism for dark, dangerous, unknown and unknowable’, hinting at the darker side to Canberra’s settlement and expansion.



Fig. 3. Dianne Firth, Ngambri (Black Mountain): Walking with Kobayashi Issa’s Snail (2017), Panel 3 of 3. Photo: Art Atelier Photography.

⁴³ https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/1236459.The_White_Tower

⁴⁴ *The White Tower*, p. 20.

⁴⁵ Dianne Firth, *Poetry and Place* (Bruce: University of Canberra, 2017) and the review by Helen Musa in the *City News*, 30 August 2017: <http://citynews.com.au/2017/arts-diannes-inspiration-takes-lot-poetic-licence/>, accessed August 2018.

⁴⁶ Firth, *Poetry and Place*, p. 16.

Dianne Firth's textile response is a triptych of Black Mountain, in which the mountain is screened by thin, greyish, undulating trunks. The form of the trunks and modelling of the ranges are sparse and evoke the Japanese influence of Kobayashi's verse used as a model by Jaireth. Firth's Black Mountain expresses landscape as form. It also celebrates the woodland that covers the mountain; evoking the thin trunks of *Eucalyptus macrorhyncha* and *E. mannifera* on its western slopes.

Textile artist Sally Blake has created a database of fabric dyes using *Eucalyptus* species based on research conducted at the Australian National Botanic Garden from June to November 2016. Her research resulted in the creation of a *Eucalyptus* dye database in which dyes based on the leaves or bark of various eucalypt species used to colour fabric such as wool, silk or linen are recorded. The database lists each eucalypt species and provides an image of the colour achieved when the dye was based on leaves or bark, and using different mordant, or no mordant at all. The result is a remarkable kaleidoscope of earthy, warm tones. Sally also includes instructions for preparing the dyes and her observations about suitable mordants and processes for an effective result. Although not focussed on Black Mountain *per se*, Sally's research included the most common eucalypt species on the mountain alongside many others found in the Botanic Gardens.⁴⁷

5. Music

Black Mountain has inspired acoustic creativity alongside the visual arts. In 2002 local painter Micky Allen and classical cellist David Pereira met for the first time to collaborate on a work for the exhibition *Artists and Musicians – Collaborations*, for which they produced the piece *Black Mountain Suite*. In her notes on the collaboration, Micky Allen relates how they explored some ideas for the exhibition and chose Black Mountain, 'one of Canberra's landmark mountains', as the theme. They structured their day into four sessions, conceived as progressing through time of the days, which they later named Early, Sun, Storm, and Late. Micky Allen also recalled how the interaction between music and paint was 'exhilarating', stimulating both artists to create works of mutual inspiration: 'Sometimes he would lead with a sound and I would respond with strokes of paint, then I might splash in a colour, which would then suggest to him a new sound; it was like a dance.'⁴⁸ Pereira composed a four-movement piece for solo cello and Allen a 'sequence of four dynamic and moody landscapes with swift brushstrokes of pure colour.'⁴⁹ Pereira's composition was published the following years as *Black Mountain Views*. He performed the work most recently in a concert titled 'Sounding the Arboretum' at the National Arboretum as part of the Canberra International Music Festival on 13 May 2013.⁵⁰ This seems a particularly apt performance setting for a work inspired by one of Canberra's densely tree-topped hills visible from the Arboretum.

Black Mountain has also been adopted by several local music groups across a broad range of musical genres to express their identity with Canberra. The Black Mountain Brass Ensemble were active in Canberra in the early 1990s, producing at least one recording.⁵¹ The Black Mountain Band are a local four piece 'heavy metal band' who describe themselves as: 'A cold wind blowing from the heart of a desolate nation, Black Mountain are a four piece black metal band from Canberra. Pagan hymns and sounds of war.'⁵² Their boldly designed logo incorporates the summit of the mountain crowned by the telecommunications tower and the words 'Pagan Hymns'.⁵³ A completely different style of music is offered by The Black Mountain String Band who describe themselves as 'a fantastic celebration of old

⁴⁷ <https://sallyblake.com/eucalyptus-dyes-1/>, accessed August 2018. Sally's project was supported by the Australian Government through the Australia Council for the Arts and the Australian National Botanic Gardens.

⁴⁸ Micky Allen, 'Notes on Collaboration with David Pereira', <http://www.mickyallan.com/Bodies/Pereira.html>, accessed August 2018, and Purdie (2018), Black Mountain Symposium Background Paper No. 17, p. 16.

⁴⁹ Russell Smith, *Muse*, May 2003: <http://www.mickyallan.com/Bodies/Pereira.html>.

⁵⁰ Audio highlights for this concert: <http://www.cimf.org.au/2013-concert-11-sounding-the-arboretum/>, accessed August 2018.

⁵¹ Black Mountain Brass Ensemble, Item 324 AU ANUA 226-324; CD form 1991. <http://archivescollection.anu.edu.au/index.php/black-mountain-brass-ensemble>

⁵² https://www.facebook.com/pg/blackmountainblackmetal/about/?ref=page_internal

⁵³ https://www.facebook.com/pg/BlackMountainBand/posts/?ref=page_internal

time string band music: where three fiddles and voices harmonise with infectious rhythms of banjo, guitar and double bass.⁵⁴ The Black Mountain Piano Quartet came together as ‘the result of creative collaborations between the four players in various combinations. Together they express a passion to explore and share a love for the piano quartet repertoire.’ They have adopted a striking, moody evening sunset image of Black Mountain and Lake Burley Griffin on their facebook page. A promotional photograph of the ensemble shows them standing on the edge of the lake, with Black Mountain as a backdrop, in a statement of identity with the landscape. When asked why the quartet chose Black Mountain as their name Jason Li, violinist, responded that they all ‘love’ Black Mountain and it is situated in the geographic centre of where the members live. Black Mountain represents the imaginative and spatial ‘heart’ for the group.⁵⁵



Fig. 4. The Black Mountain Piano Quartet.

6. Performance Art: Stelarc, 1982

Perhaps one of the lesser known artistic activities inspired by or performed on Black Mountain was the performance art activity exhibited by the Cyprian performance artist Stelarc on 10 October 1982. In its prime during the 1960s and 1970s, artists used performance art to reinterpret art as more than objects in museums. Since the mid-20th century Stelarc (born Stelios Arcadiou) has employed technology to explore limitations and challenges to the human body. In the late 1960s, he made a suspension work in which he was hung in a harness, but in the mid-1970s he achieved his suspension works by means of fine meat hooks inserted through his body. Stelarc has suspended himself in around 25 performance pieces between 1976 and 1992 in a variety of locations — over the ocean, in warehouses, between two buildings in New York. They are explorations into determining the limits of the body in relation to forces of nature, particularly the law of gravity.

The performance in Canberra took place in large eucalypts on the ‘foothills’ of Black Mountain. As performance is, by its very nature ephemeral, the photographs document this artistic performance. A photograph of the installation, ‘Prepared tree suspension event for obsolete body number six, Black Mountain’ is held by the National Gallery of Australia.⁵⁶ The image captures the artist as he is suspended from the limbs of *Eucalyptus* in the foothills of Black Mountain. The size and scale of the tree limbs overshadow the dimensions of the human body, while also providing the structure upon which it can be suspended. The trees are integral to the intent of the performance, providing the means

⁵⁴ <http://blackmountainstringband.com/>

⁵⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/TBMPQ/>. Jason Li, personal communication July 2018.

⁵⁶ Image and description at <https://artsearch.nga.gov.au/Detail.cfm?IRN=35323>, accessed August 2018.

of suspension and representing the organic unity of which the human body is part. Stelarc describes the experience of the body as:

*stretched between what it never was and what it could never become; suspended between the inward pull of gravity and the outward thrust of information, the body returns to the tree, anxious and vulnerable affirming its primal origins, amplifying its obsolescence. [. . .] The breeze is blowing over aerodynamic stretched skin, the body is attaining planetary escape velocity. The brain is bursting from its genetic confinement, hovering between gravity and fantasy, intuitively.*⁵⁷

"Prepared Tree Suspension: Event for Obsolete Body No. 6",
Black Mountain, Canberra 1982.

7. Popular culture: the tower as modernist icon

More recently, Black Mountain and the telecommunications tower have been employed to convey ideas about a 'modern' Canberra, and stylised images of the tower feature prominently in popular culture. Despite the initial controversy over the tower's construction, it now holds great appeal as an icon of the city as reflected in diverse contemporary media such as film, souvenirs and pop art. These images are diverse, including the increasing popular designs of local artist Mick Ashley. His poster design 'Wifi' depicts a group of people mesmerised by the rays emanating from Black Mountain Tower and the title 'City of the Dammed', in a play on the technological themes associated with the tower and popular images of the city.⁵⁸

The modernist structure of the tower, which at the time was praised as a 'symbol of our new technological age', has since its opening inspired images of a contemporary, even futuristic city. The tower was used as the location for the science fiction adventure *Blue World Order*, which premiered at the Canberra International Film Festival in 2016.⁵⁹ Set in a 'post-apocalyptic wasteland' the movie's promotional poster and trailer feature the tower as the centre of the action, a solid structure guarded by armed warriors who gaze into the distant orange haze. Starring Billy Zane, Jack Thompson and Bruce Spence, and filmed entirely on location in Canberra, the publicity material warns the viewer that 'you will never look at Black Mountain Tower the same again'!

From the time it opened, the Black Mountain tower was adopted across a range of visual media as an icon of Canberra. In 1981 it featured prominently in a poster advertising a rally for full employment on May Day. The tower is depicted as a moated castle, with its entrance boarded up, while a group of people in medieval dress joust, feast and dance on the grass imagined to surround the tower at the summit.⁶⁰ Another poster promoting local community radio station 2XX, dated sometime between 1981 and 2000, depicts the tower on Black Mountain next to a silhouette of Parliament House, while a witch figure sparks her wand above the mountain. The text below the image expresses the station's aims: 'and she looked down and said "Let there be a voice loud and strong. A voice for the people, by the people!"'.⁶¹ Both posters indicate how the tower quickly became associated with grassroots, local activities tinged with a mood of resistance to government. The Black Mountain Sub-Branch of the Australian Labor Party, based in Turner, adopted a logo depicting a syringe shaped tower atop the summit for the *Black Mountain News* in 1991.⁶² Once again, the satirical image seems suggestive of symbolic resistance to authority. The tower, constructed after such opposition, in turns appears to have acquired playful meanings associated with subverting bureaucracy, authority or government — themes that speak to the experience of living in Canberra.

⁵⁷ Commentary on performance from the artist's website: <http://stelarc.org/?catID=20316>, accessed August 2018.

⁵⁸ <https://mickashley.com.au/product/wifi/>, accessed August 2018.

⁵⁹ <https://ciff.com.au/event/blue-world-order/>, accessed August 2018.

⁶⁰ March for full Employment: May Day 1981, by David Morrow (Megalo Screenprint). National Library of Australia, Bib ID: 7044056.

⁶¹ Produced by Megalo Screenprint for Radio 2XX. National Library of Australia, Bib. ID: 7043995.

⁶² *Black Mountain News*, Black Mountain Sub-Branch Australian Labour Party, No. 1, July 1991. National Library of Australia, Bib ID: 698979.

8. Conclusion

From forming part of the panoramic mountain backdrop to the site for the national capital, to being at the centre of an emerging environmental consciousness in the city from the 1970s, to being identified with the elongated spire and futurist design of the telecommunications tower, Black Mountain has represented shifting ideas about the idea of the national capital and the community of local residents who inhabit it. It continues to convey ideas about the 'bush capital' alongside notions of a contemporary city. Black Mountain has inspired a diverse range of artistic and creative response in paint, drawing, textile art, literature and film. The icon of the city, Black Mountain tower over time has become identified with the local community in Canberra in contrast to the more transient community on 'the Hill'.

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