

## Beyond belonging? The landscape and belonging in colonial and contemporary imaginings of the Blue Mountains

### Introduction: Mountain blues

I've never been romanced by the Blue Mountains, though I lived there for the first eighteen years of my life. I've never felt the lure of their wildness and quietness, or their promise of adventure and escape. I couldn't write poetry about these mountains. And I certainly couldn't write a convincing tourist brochure. For me it was always about *escaping from* rather than *escaping to* the mountains. In the past I'd call the mountains 'home', but I'd always say it with an awkward reluctance. It was always a kind of denial. Intimacy, belonging, attachment – all of the heavy cargo that the word 'home' is meant to carry – never had any meaning for me growing up there. Then again, living in of the middle of the Blue Mountains in a place called Springwood - a place more residential than 'mountainous,' more sleepy than 'wild'- I've never really felt connected with the romantic images so often associated with the upper-mountains, places like Leura and Katoomba. The bush where I lived certainly wasn't anything beautiful or impressive. If you blinked, you'd probably miss it.

So after reading writers like Mark Treddinick, an Australian place-based essayist who writes personally and lyrically about the 'impressive' upper-blue Blue Mountains landscapes from his home in Katoomba, I was more than a little skeptical.<sup>1</sup> I was especially skeptical about his criteria that we should write about a place we belong to. Maybe I was jealous: home actually meant something to him. But there was something missing here, and something missing in the writings of so many other place-based essayists – writers like Barry Lopez, Anne Dillard, and Aldo Leopold.<sup>2</sup> In all their attempts to 'grow intimate' with places – to essentially express their sense of 'belonging' to a place - none of them seemed capable of apprehending them critically. Indeed, after

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Treddinick, 'Belonging to Here: an introduction', in *A place on Earth: An anthology of nature writing from Australia and North America* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2003)

<sup>2</sup> See Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (London: Cape, 1975) and *Teaching a Stone to Talk* (London: Harper & Row, 1982); Aldo Leopold, *A Sand Country Almanac* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968); Barry Lopez, *Arctic Dreams: Imagination and Desire in a Northern Landscape* (New York: Scribner, 1986).

reading so many place-based essays in this vein, it took me a long time before I even considered writing about a place like the Blue Mountains. Not belonging to the place, I didn't feel I had the credentials.

Then I read historian Martin Thomas' book *The Artificial Horizon: Imagining the Blue Mountains*. While a finely-researched, thoughtful, and more importantly *critical* post-colonial work on the ways in which the Blue Mountains have been imagined in popular myth and story, I was still disappointed to read that Thomas had also been drawn to the mountains and "settled in Katoomba, making the place a home."<sup>3</sup> I became convinced – and remain convinced even now – that our personal engagement with a place deeply affects the way we write about it. From his writing, it is easy to feel Thomas' profound connection to the mountains and its stories. His approach shows. In *The Artificial Horizon* Thomas sets out not to "expose and deconstruct the myth" but rather to "attempt an analysis that acknowledges its power and potency."<sup>4</sup> I certainly couldn't see myself attempting an analysis of that sort. It requires openness, a willingness to embrace the stories and the myths of the mountains if only to understand them. That's impossible for someone like me who has always considered the myths – at least the white Australian myths of exploration and Romanticism associated with the Blue Mountains – profoundly uninteresting and unpersuasive. So from the outset of this project I decided I was going to write something different, in tone but also in content.

Starting with early explorers and travelers accounts of journeys through the Blue Mountains, then delving into more recent local histories, guide books, poems, a film, and more recent personal accounts of wanderings in the mountains the Blue Mountains, I read the sources on the Blue Mountains. I read them not for the myths and collective stories they told about Blue Mountains, but rather for evidence of the ways in which notions of belonging and attachment to the land have played out in relation to the Blue Mountains over time, an area that has been significantly overlooked by historians. Realising early on that I wouldn't be able to cover the entire history of the Blue Mountains, I narrowed my focus to the Blue Mountains in the early colonial imagination and the Blue Mountains today, post-1980. This narrowing of focus was partly an attempt

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<sup>3</sup> Martin Thomas, *The artificial horizon: Imagining the Blue Mountains* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2004), p.15.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Thomas, *The artificial horizon: Imagining the Blue Mountains*, p.16

to keep the project manageable, partly an attempt to bypass the overworked themes of the rise of mass tourism in the Blue Mountains and development of the national myth of the first explorers, both of which happened somewhere in the middle.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the initial magnetism of the Blue Mountains to early explorers, the ongoing enchantment they held for those in the mid-nineteenth-century reading them with more romantic eyes, and their continuing hold on our imaginations today, it soon became clear that the mountains were constructed in the past and continued to be constructed in many ways today as *beyond* human attachment and belonging. For early explorers and travelers the Blue Mountains were certainly grand but on the whole, the landscape itself never encouraged much personal engagement or human intimacy. Indeed, the whole tourist experience of the mountains that we are so familiar with today relies on a purely superficial engagement with the landscape: you go there for a brief affair, not a lifelong commitment. It seems curious then – and somewhat anachronistic - for essayists like Treddinick to write about an organic sense of belonging to the Blue Mountains landscape. I'm not discounting the possibility that Treddinick feels a connection to the mountain landscape. But what I will argue is that his attempts to express a sense of belonging are better understood as part of a *genre* of place-based literature of belonging than as an ongoing response to the Blue Mountains landscape itself. Finally, I'll argue that there needs to be space in this genre of place-based essays to accommodate writings from people who don't belong to a particular place, and writings about places that don't necessarily inspire intense feelings of belonging and attachment.

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<sup>5</sup> Julia Horne is one historian who has written extensively about the emergence of tourism in the Blue Mountains in studies such as *The Pursuit of Wonder: How Australia's landscape was explored, nature discovered, and tourism unleashed* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2005) and 'Traveling through the romantic landscapes of the Blue Mountains,' *Australian Cultural History*, No.10, 1991, pp.84-98. Indeed her work falls into a larger body of work on the cultural history of tourism and travel that has recently emerged: see John I. Richardson, *A history of Australian travel and tourism* (Melbourne : Hospitality Press, 1999) and Richard White, *On Holidays: a history of getting away in Australia* (Melbourne: Pluto Press, 2005). Other recent work that documents, explores, and challenges the Blue Mountains explorer myth and romantic myths of the Blue Mountains includes: Chris Cunningham, *Blue Mountains Rediscovered: beyond the myths of early exploration* (Sydney: Kangaroo Press, 1996) and Ruth Longdin, and Elida Meadows, "Catalina: Wild Heart of Katoomba", *Public History Review*, 1998, pp.103-116.

**This landscape “seems as if it was never intended for human beings to inhabit”:  
the Blue Mountains landscape in the colonial imagination**

Questions of belonging and attachment were far from the minds of early nineteenth-century explorers and travelers to the Blue Mountains. The mountains occupied an uneasy place in the early colonial imagination. Initially they served as an insurmountable challenge to early colonial explorers. Hopeful of productive land for farming and agriculture beyond the mountains, early colonials viewed the mountains as an inconvenient barrier to this promised new land. In 1789, Watkin Tench wrote an account of William Dawes' failed attempt to cross the Blue Mountains, observing that the 'Carmarthen Mountains' had "a most dreary, barren appearance that can well be imagined, nothing to be seen but ridge beyond ridge of mountains covered with trees...without a single visible interval of plain or cultivatable land."<sup>6</sup> Knowing that there was sure to be productive land beyond these unproductive mountains would have added to the bitterness. That these mountains were going to be judged on their utility, not for their romantic or sublime qualities, was clear from Tench's first descriptions of them.

Early descriptions tended to emphasise the intensely *physical* experience of the mountains. Francis Barrallier, who undertook an official exploration into the mountains by order of Governor Phillip King in 1802, described the expedition in the mountains as a "laborious" one. Barrallier had a keen sense of danger of climbing these precarious mountains: he "was obliged to walk on the slopes of the steep mountains at the risk of falling from the precipices into the water", and the "dangers were evident without the slightest appearance of success."<sup>7</sup> He made several comments about "interesting scenery" from "great height," but the sense of hopelessness comes through clearly at the end: crossing part of these mountains would be an "utter impossibility."<sup>8</sup> In Blaxland's journal of the first crossing, similar comments are made about the intensely physical experience of crossing the mountains. But beyond a few descriptions of the 'perpendicular cliffs' and the relentless ascending and descending that the journey involved, Blaxland does not dwell too much on the difficulties of crossing the mountains.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> G.A. Wood, "Explorations under Governor Phillip", *JRAHS*, vol. 12, no.1, p.16

<sup>7</sup> Francis Barrallier, *Journal of the expedition into the interior of NSW 1802* (Melbourne: Martin Walsh Publishing, 1975), p.31.

<sup>8</sup> Barrallier, p.35.

<sup>9</sup> Gregory Blaxland, "A journal of a tour of discovery Across the Blue Mountains, New South Wales, in the Year 1813," in Joanna Armour Richards, ed., *Blaxland - Lawson - Wentworth, 1813* (Hobart : Blubber Head Press, 1979)

Interestingly, Blaxland's account of crossing, written in the detached third-person, is devoid of any of the bravado, or the exaggeration that you might expect from one of the first explorers to penetrate the mountains. If anything, the ending is anti-climatic: "they had effectually accomplished the Object of their journey and that all the difficulties were surmounted which had hitherto prevented the interior of the country from being explored and the country from being extended."<sup>10</sup> Blaxland, it seems, was more interested in documenting than dressing-up the whole experience of the first crossing. For anyone who has been brought up on a staple diet of early exploration myth, it's hard to read this without feeling its *strangeness*. It's one of those cases where history surprises you: hard to understand that at the time those men saw themselves as completing a task more than undertaking a grand adventure for all.<sup>11</sup>

But how did they see the landscape itself? A striking feature of the accounts of early explorers and travelers accounts is the profound lack of interest in the minute details of the landscape. There was nothing beautiful or noteworthy about being close to nature for these explorers and travelers, it seems. These colonials weren't interested in getting down-to-earth. Perhaps being down-to-earth would have reminded them of their very smallness - and they weren't after that. Only when they stood on the edge of a large cliff or mountain top looking out at the land below – the equivalent experience of standing at a modern day-lookout – did these explorers and travelers pause to take in the beauty of the landscape around them. Governor Macquarie, for example, on his tour over the mountains in 1815, stopped at a cliff-top and paused to soak up the beauty of the landscape, the wide-open space before him:

It is impossible to behold this grand scene without a feeling of admiration and surprise, whilst the solitude and silence which reign in a space of such extent and beauty seems designed by nature for the occupancy and comfort of man, create a degree of melancholy in the mind which may be more easily imagined than described.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Blaxland, p.168.

<sup>11</sup> This expression comes from the title of Peter Stanbury's work: *The Blue Mountains : grand adventure for all* (Sydney : Macleay Museum, Second Back Row Press, 1988)

<sup>12</sup> Macquarie, Governor Lachlan, "Tour over the Western or Blue Mountains, 1815," in Mackaness, *Fourteen Journeys over the Blue Mountains of New South Wales 1831-1841* (Sydney: Horowitz, 1965), p.70.

The superlatives come thick and fast in his description of his tour of the mountains: the landscape is “immense”, “stupendous”, and “grand”. It is “particularly beautiful” when it is *grand*. By looking out over the vast expanses of the landscape, Governor Macquarie could take imaginative possession of the land. He could confirm his arrogant belief in man’s superiority over the landscape. He could look at the landscape from god-like perspective, not an intimate human one. Even though he writes that the landscape was designed for ‘man’, this is more an assertion of man’s divine right to the place (and write to take advantage of it) than an assertion of man’s capacity to belong here.

In many ways, Macquarie’s focus on the grand, romantic aspects of the landscape was new. Earlier explorers all had specific objectives in mind on their journeys through the mountains— for Blaxland, Wentworth and Lawson it was penetrating the mountains and reaching the interior, for Assistant Surveyor Evans it was confirming the discoveries of Blaxland, Wentworth, and Lawson, and for William Cox it was all about judging the viability of making a road through the mountain.<sup>13</sup> Stopping to pause and reflect on the beauty of the mountains was not high on the agenda. Macquarie, though, had vaguer objectives in mind: his journey was undertaken with the purpose of “appreciating the Importance of the Tract of Country laying Westward of them.”<sup>14</sup> Given that so much of the tourist experience today is about personally visiting and experiencing places deemed important, Macquarie could be considered the first tourist on the Blue Mountains. When Barron Field, Judge and amateur poet, later journeyed through the Mountains in 1822, his travels also reflected elements of the modern tourist experience of the mountains. He was aware of the masses of sandstone, the natural rock, all of which proved “in the past insurmountable barriers, which caused the failure of so many enterprises to seek a passage through the Blue Mountains.”<sup>15</sup> He went to experience the crossing for himself but he could not avoid feeling a sense of indebtedness to the early explorers who had found a passage through the mountains against all the odds. Already by 1822, the cultural significance of the mountains, and their hold on the imagination, was establishing itself.

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<sup>13</sup> See: William Cox, “Journal kept by Mr W. Cox in Making a Road across the Blue Mountains from Emu Plains to a New Country Discovered by Mr Evans to the Westward, 1814,” in Mackaness, *Fourteen Journeys*, pp.33-63 and George William Evans, “Assistant Surveyor Evan’s Journal 1813-14’ in Mackaness, *Fourteen Journeys*, pp.17-32.

<sup>14</sup> Macquarie, p. 65.

<sup>15</sup> Barron Field, “Journal of Excursion across Blue Mountains in New South Wales, 1822,” in Mackaness, *Fourteen Journeys*, pp.123-24.

By the 1820s a definite shift had occurred: the mountains were no longer a place where you had to get your hands dirty, so travelers were free to observe the more romantic aspects of the mountains. Also, the agricultural and economic potential of the interior had been well and truly established: there was more time now to observe and appreciate the less fertile, less productive land of the Blue Mountains. When Renè Primevère Lesson, a naturalist, undertook a journey to Bathurst through the mountains in 1824 he found:

From the summit on the high ridge there is a sublime view; the eye travels over the crests of the ridges and rests on desolate heights, that appear on the horizon, as though wrapped in a thin bluish veil...a most imposing and picturesque scene.<sup>16</sup>

To put it simply: the mountains became romantic and sublime. As historian Julia Horne reminds us, there was a transformative element to the sublime in the eighteenth and nineteenth century: a “state of being that arose from contemplating sublime scenery in which the onlooker was lifted out of ordinariness into a state of inspiration.”<sup>17</sup> Given this, she argues, it would not have been “fanciful” for people like Macquarie to believe that the colony of New South Wales could be transformed from an ordinary, “desolate landscape of convictism” to something nobler and more inspired with such scenery to ‘contemplate’.<sup>18</sup> Horne seems to be making a big suggestion here: that for observers like Macquarie a contemplation of the romantic and the sublime had an element of national self-fashioning.

I’m not so convinced. Not everyone was so warm about these mountains. For many nineteenth-century travelers to the Blue Mountains, the sublime and romantic landscape of the mountains was profoundly disquieting and unsettling. For Elizabeth Hawkins, a traveler to the Blue Mountains in 1822, this was certainly the case. Hawkins, who was writing to her sister Ann back home in England about the journey, commented that the “precipices would make you shudder.”<sup>19</sup> Her descriptions focus on the ‘desolation,’ the

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<sup>16</sup> Renè Primevère Lesson, “Journey across the Blue Mountains, 1824,” in Mackaness, *Fourteen Journeys*, p. 152.

<sup>17</sup> Horne, p.225.

<sup>18</sup> Horne, p.210.

<sup>19</sup> Mrs Elizabeth Hawkins, “Journey from Sydney to Bathurst in 1822,” in Mackaness, *Fourteen Journeys*, p.108.

barrenness of the landscape. The mountains are romantic, but they are 'empty'.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps Hawkins, like many other observers, used terms like 'romantic' and 'sublime' unthinkingly, not having the linguistic tools available to describe them any other way. Or perhaps her account reveals something more fundamental: that sublime landscapes are just as forbidding as they are awe-inspiring. Louisa Meredith, a later explorer, who traveled to the Mountains in 1839, had a similar experience: the landscape was "grand in the extreme...but it was a most dreary, desolate grandeur."<sup>21</sup> If that wasn't enough, she followed with this:

Trees without foliage, hills and valleys alike destitute of verdure, chasms and ravines yawning beside us, without a thread of water in the arid stony depths, made up such a world of desolation that the contemplation of it became absolutely oppressive.<sup>22</sup>

Hardly the inspirational, ennobling experience Horne describes – but nonetheless the experience was still an intense and memorable one for these nineteenth century travelers.

The intensity of feeling that these travelers experienced on their journeys to the Blue Mountains meant that they often expressed contradictory ideas and attitudes about the landscape. Because of the intensity of the experience, it was possible for observers to be simultaneously *engrossed by* and *alienated from* the landscape. Elizabeth Hawkins found any sort of intimacy with this landscape impossible: the landscape "seems as if it were never intended for human beings to inhabit."<sup>23</sup> Yet the landscape engaged her senses and imagination with such intensity that she often found it difficult to describe. In one instance, she became apologetic: "I feel I am out of my power to give it [the landscape] a proper description."<sup>24</sup> Indeed, for Hawkins, the experiencing of crossing the mountains was a self-consciously imaginative one: the whole purpose of her letter was to help her sister (and the audience back at home) imagine these mountains. Given that the focus is on the imaginative experience – and faithfully communicating this to those at home – Hawkins showed an acute awareness of the pitfalls of representation. Sophia Stranger, who crossed the mountains in 1841, partly because of the difference

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<sup>20</sup> Hawkins, p.110-112.

<sup>21</sup> Mrs. Louisa Ann Meredith, "A Lady's Journey to Bathurst in 1839," in Mackaness, *Fourteen Journeys*, p.246.

<sup>22</sup> Meredith, p.246.

<sup>23</sup> Hawkins, p.106.

<sup>24</sup> Hawkins, p.110.

and foreignness of the landscape, but also partly because of the intense feelings these mountains inspired, was also aware of the inadequacies her language to represent the beauty of this landscape. Early on in her journey she commented that “no language of mine can describe the beauty” and later one part of her journey is “romantic beyond description.”<sup>25</sup>

So in the space of fifty years, the colonial experience of the Blue Mountains had shifted from a physical one to a more physical-imaginative one. Travelers began to look at the mountains for their sublime and romantic qualities, and in doing so they expressed profoundly contradictory feelings and attitudes about the landscape – romantic but desolate, sublime but oppressive. Certainly, they were not interested in an intimate connection with the mountains. The whole landscape seemed beyond that. Unlike the gentle, green hills of Bathurst which you reached once you crossed the mountains - the more beautiful *English* landscape – these rocky, irregular mountains didn’t seem like they could be possessed in anything but the imagination. So the experience of them became an imaginative one.

Perhaps the reason why this mountain landscape was beyond belonging in the colonial imagination had to do with the fact that it couldn’t be tamed.<sup>26</sup> So much of the story of possessing and belonging to the land in Australian history has involved taming and exploiting the land. These wild, irregular mountains, though – they couldn’t be subdued or exploited for their agricultural potential. In fact their wildness has been part of their enduring appeal. So rather than bringing them closer to nature, in the early colonial context of the Blue Mountains, explorers and travelers used descriptions of the ‘sublime’ as a way of expressing their awe and distance from it. The Blue Mountains, then, occupy a more idiosyncratic place in the history of our relationship to the land than one would imagine at first. They are at the heart of our national story and the early myths of

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<sup>25</sup> Mrs Sophia Stranger, “A Journey from Sydney Over the Blue Mountains to Bathurst Forty Years ago,” Written 15<sup>th</sup> July 1841, published 1882, in Mackenness, *Fourteen Journeys*, p.259, 261.

<sup>26</sup> Interestingly, it’s the road and the explorers that become part of the national myth of the Blue Mountains, not the idiosyncratic landscape of the Blue Mountains itself. In national imaginings of the Blue Mountains the road represents “progress” and “civilization” and belongs to the national story. See for example T. Stuart Gurr and Gwen Harrowsmith, *Blue Mountains story* (Sydney : Shakespeare Head Press, 1949) and Spriggs, P.W., *Our Blue Mountains yesterdays* (Leura: P.W. Spriggs, 1962).

exploration, yet they were *crossed* and not *possessed*. They roused the imagination, but not the heart. For these early travelers, they weren't 'home' and nor did it ever seem like this landscape ever would be.

### **The Blue Mountains in contemporary Australian imagination**

Recently I made a journey to the Blue Mountains. Not to visit my parents, who still live there, or even old friends (I deliberately neglected to tell them I was going up there.) Instead of going back as someone who had lived there -- someone with a past and memories and ideas about the place -- I decided to go back under a different identity. I decided that for the first time I was going to visit the Blue Mountains as a 'tourist'. I was aware of the artificiality of the experience I was trying to create; after all it's impossible to completely erase your memories and preconceptions of a place. There wasn't much I took away from the whole experience. I got out at Echo Point and thought more of the cold than the mythical three sisters or so-called impressive landscape. There wasn't enough time or the opportunity for a bush walk: sadly I wasn't going to get down-to-earth on this trip. And walking through Leura the only decent attractions were the second-hand bookstore and the English Lolly-shop. But traveling back through Katoomba, and stopping off at *The Edge* cinema, I did get a small taste of the Blue Mountains tourist experience. In this giant cinema, the film *The Edge* tells the story of the Blue Mountains. *The Edge* is played around five times a day for visitors, and beyond the feeling of being a true visitor to this place that the film gives you, it's also a film that reveals a lot about the way in which the Blue Mountains has been imagined in the late twentieth century.<sup>27</sup>

The blurb promises you "the ultimate Blue Mountains wilderness experience," from this film. And from the opening panoramic high-shots of the landscape, the film plunges you into the deep wilderness of the mountains. Indeed for the majority of the film, the focus is on the untouched wilderness, those parts of the mountains where it is difficult to imagine humans exploring, let alone inhabiting. The film is a celebration of this "ancient" landscape, but it also evokes the danger and adventure so often associated with it. Some of the most disorienting shots are of a rock-climber making his way up an imposing precipice and two female abseilers moving through canyons which the narrator of the film, Hugh Weaving, kindly reminds us have taken many lives in the past. Part of

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<sup>27</sup> John Weiley, *The Edge Movie*, 1996.

the point, I'm sure, is that we are meant to be unsettled by these sharp, vertiginous camera angles and all the talk of the danger lurking in this landscape. After all, this is a film about the untouched environment: it wants to write human beings out of the landscape. The final shot, in fact, is of a human figure fading out and only the image of landscape remaining. Its message is clear and simplistic: this is a pristine natural environment, never intended for human beings, and its survival is threatened by the continued presence of human beings there. As the narrator emphasizes, "Nearly five thousand species are now near extinction".

The hypocrisy of a film like *The Edge* is just as arresting as the filmic experience. While nobody would dispute the central message of this film - that the Blue Mountains is a precious, ancient landscape that must be preserved - it's difficult to reconcile the message with what the film actually does, which is market the whole wilderness 'experience' for visitors and the public. When it comes down to it, this film is really designed for the consumption of tourists, those who come to the Blue Mountains to take advantage of the place. Even as we watch and listen to its message of environmental sacredness, we are *consuming* the landscape. This is, then, a film riddled with contradictions. Not surprisingly, in a film that focuses so intently on the untouched 'wilderness' of the mountains- a wilderness unintended for human interaction and belonging - *The Edge* completely ignores the residents and inhabitants of the Blue Mountains. The townships are also absent. The sole focus, like the accounts of many early colonial explorers, is the 'wild' landscape. And again, the 'wildness' of the landscape is used to illustrate the point that it is not fit for humans, beyond human belonging.

Around the same time this film was produced, novelist David Foster was writing about his experience of Blue Mountains 'wilderness.' His musings, titled 'A Walk in the Southern Blue Mountains,' appear alongside early nineteenth century travelers accounts in a recent collection of personal accounts of Blue Mountains crossings edited by Michael Duffy. It is interesting that in his book of personal accounts, Duffy skips so suddenly from nineteenth century accounts from travelers like Barron Field and Sophia Stranger to Foster's account. In many ways, there are striking resemblances between nineteenth century accounts and David Foster's late twentieth century meditation on being in the 'wilderness'. For one, both the early colonial accounts and David Foster's

account come from white perspectives. Both cover the extremes of Blue Mountains experience. And both articulate a sense that it is impossible for white man to 'belong' here. Foster relates his personal experience of the mountains to the general experience, and suggests that white man's inability to belong to the 'wilderness' stems from the difficulty a white person has relating to the eucalyptus. For Foster, there is "nowhere a white man can feel more alone" than in the Blue Mountains 'Wilderness' (his capital).<sup>28</sup>

A few things stand out here: again the Blue Mountains is constructed as a 'wilderness', not as the 'bush' or 'mountains'. It's an ancient, wild, primordial landscape in Foster's imagining. It's not a landscape that is easy to belong to, especially for a white man. Though despite this, Foster suggests that, paradoxically, we humans need it. As he eloquently puts it, it's our "reset button."<sup>29</sup> Here Foster reveals one of the major contradictions in contemporary imaginings of the Blue Mountains. On the one hand, the Blue Mountains are constructed as a wild and a threatened landscape, on the brink of environmental destruction, a place not fit for humans. Yet on the other hand, we humans need them. Even guide books from the early nineties reflect this contradiction, frequently referring to landscape as a "fragile' wilderness" even as they encourage tourism and exploration.<sup>30</sup> We are witnessing the destruction and awakening to the fragility of the natural world; but upon realization of our neglect and abuse of the natural world, we only want to get closer to it, to reengage with the natural world. So the modern-day image of the Blue Mountains 'wilderness' as a vast *peopleless* place is a problematic one. Certainly, it reveals contemporary anxieties over the wild landscape and the natural world. But it is ultimately an incoherent vision: a purely environmental conception of the Blue Mountains landscape is too difficult to sustain.

So the environmental movement - the impulse to protect an 'untamed wilderness' - has had profound, ambiguous effects on the way the mountains have been fashioned in the contemporary imagination. This is clearly evident in *The Edge* and also, to a lesser degree, in Foster's writing. But it's not just the environmental movement which has

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<sup>28</sup> David Foster, 'A walk in the Southern Blue Mountains', in Michael Duffy, ed., *Crossing the Blue Mountains : journeys through two centuries, from naturalist Charles Darwin to novelist David Foster* (Sydney: Duffy & Snellgrove, 1997), p.192.

<sup>29</sup> Foster, p.194.

<sup>30</sup> Lincoln Hall and Barbara Scanlan *The Blue Mountains guide book* (Blackheath: Gondwana Publishing, c1991), p.1.

problematized the relationship between white Australians and the Blue Mountains landscape. The indigenous land rights movement, and indeed the growing recognition of Aboriginal history, has also problematized white Australians' relationship to the landscape and made it difficult for white Australians to articulate a sense of belonging to the Blue Mountains. At the same time the Department of Environment and Planning were issuing reports on the "development pressures and environmental problems" facing the Blue Mountains in the 1980s,<sup>31</sup> local Blue Mountains historians were beginning to produce works on the Aboriginal history and heritage of the area. Far from constructing the Blue Mountains as a *peopleless* landscape, these works evoked the mountains as a "place long-peopled." Eugene Stockton, in his collection *Blue Mountains Dreaming*, takes us on a "journey of discovery" into the spirits of the place.<sup>32</sup> Each of the papers in this collection deals with a specific part of the Aboriginal experience and history of the Blue Mountains – from Aboriginal art, to Aboriginal ecology, to Katoomba's fringe dwellers. Jim Smith, a local historian, also explores the myriad Aboriginal myths of the Blue Mountains.<sup>33</sup> With such histories being produced - and the silences they filled in the Australian imagination of the Blue Mountains - it became increasingly difficult for white Australians to articulate a clear sense of belonging to the landscape.

Yet they still did. At the same time film-makers and writers like David Foster were conveying a sense of the Blue Mountains as a vast, peopleless wilderness, at the same time local historians were problematizing white relationships to the landscape by acknowledging the long history of Aboriginal occupation, a number of historians, local writers and poets were arguing that we need understand the landscape of the Blue Mountains, and belong to it. In the preface to *A history of the Blue Labyrinth: the Blue Mountains National Park*, written in 1992, Tom Williams argues that despite the fact that the "featurelessness [of the landscape] make it hard to know, it is still possible to belong here."<sup>34</sup> The history book, in fact, is offered as a manual for anyone who wants to know the place intimately and belong here. Williams even refers to the "modern tragedy that

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<sup>31</sup> Croft & Associates Pty. Limited in association with Meredith Walker, *Blue Mountains heritage study : final report* (Sydney: Dept. of Environment & Planning and the Blue Mountains City Council, 1985, p.1.

<sup>32</sup> Eugene Stockton, *Mountains dreaming : the Aboriginal heritage* (Winmalee: Three Sisters Productions, 1993)

<sup>33</sup> See Jim Smith, *Aboriginal legends of the Blue Mountains* (Wentworth Falls : J. Smith, c1992)

<sup>34</sup> Bruce Cameron, *A history of the Blue Labyrinth, Blue Mountains National Park* (Valley Heights: B. Cameron, 1992), p.vii.

people no longer belong where they live.” So ironically, his argument that we need to belong here is a response to social fragmentation and alienation, the “consumerism and suburbanism that is choking the countryside.”<sup>35</sup> Notice the use of the word ‘countryside’, a much warmer and more welcoming term than ‘wilderness.’ Williams obviously has a lot of affection for this landscape. Notice too that he shifts our focus from the big broad vistas to the intimate details and history of the land. By engaging with these intimate details, he suggests, you can truly belong.

So concerns about the destruction of the natural environment have produced profoundly ambiguous (and sometimes contradictory) responses to the Blue Mountains landscape. On the one hand, people like Foster construct the landscape as a wilderness beyond belonging; on the other hand, writers like Williams argue that we need to reengage with the natural world and belong to it. In 1998, Mark O’Connor, a poet commissioned to visit the mountains by the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service to write a ‘poetry of the mountains’, made similar claims about the “need to belong” in the mountains and the natural world. In his introduction to *Poetry of the Mountains*, he writes with a degree of hyperbole typical of a poet. The book, he says, “celebrates a love – a detailed love that values and clings to the particularities of the environment.”<sup>36</sup> Again, O’Connor suggests that we can only know and belong to the land by considering its intimate details, its “delicate, spiky, particular places.”<sup>37</sup>

A profound humility characterizes O’Connor’s writing. Unlike his colonial predecessors, this is a writer that is interested in engaging with the landscape from a human perspective, not a god-like one. His expressions of belonging are certainly more positive and respectful in their engagement with the landscape. There are, moreover, many similarities between writers like O’Connor and Williams and place-based essayists like Mark Treddinick. After all, Treddinick is attempting to ‘grow intimate’ with the land too.<sup>38</sup> While the writings of O’Connor and Williams reflect late twentieth century anxieties about the destruction of the natural world, social and environmental fragmentation, and social alienation from the natural world, writers like Treddinick, however, seem more interested in nurturing a distinct *genre* of place-based writing. After all, most of his paper is

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<sup>35</sup> Cameron, p.vii.

<sup>36</sup> Mark O’Connor, *Poetry of the mountains* (Leura,: Second Back Row Press, 1988), p.7

<sup>37</sup> O’Conner, p.7.

<sup>38</sup> Treddinick, ‘Belonging to here’.

dedicated to paying homage to North American place-based writers like Barry Lopez and questioning why the place-based essay hasn't taken off yet in Australia. So ultimately I think it's misleading for Treddinick to write about an 'organic' sense of belonging to the Blue Mountains landscape. He seems more interested in the landscape fitting the form and style of his writing than the other way around. Indeed, most of the expressions of belonging in contemporary imaginings of the Blue Mountains seem more reactionary than organic. While Treddinick is reacting to a genre of place-based literature, writers such as O'Connor are reacting to a crisis of 'belonging' in contemporary society, advocating that we humans need to belong to local, natural landscapes.

### **Conclusion: on not belonging and essay of place**

As I mentioned in an earlier part of this essay, it took me a long time before I considered writing about a place like the Blue Mountains, a place I didn't – I don't - belong to. So much of place-based writing is written out of affection for a place. So much of place-based writing is about expressing a sense of belonging, not just a sense of place. And I wasn't up to it. Ironically, though, my feelings that I didn't belong to the Blue Mountains led me to consider a whole new area of enquiry about belonging and attachment to the landscape in colonial and contemporary imaginings of the Blue Mountains. I realized that despite what place-based essayists would have us think, sense of belonging isn't an organic connection and response to the landscape. It's fluid, unstable, and historically contingent. Despite recent attempts to absorb the Blue Mountains into a literature of belonging, despite recent attempts to advocate a sense of local belonging as a response to global, fragmented world, it's clear that the landscape of Blue Mountains has been constructed in the past and continues to be constructed in many ways today as *beyond* human attachment and belonging. Considering questions of belonging raises interesting questions about colonial and contemporary relationships to the land. It raises interesting ideas about why some people belong, and why some don't. It's time we started considering these questions and ideas about other landscapes and places, not just mine.

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