

Self and City in the Scarp

Lion's Lookout & Bickley Reservoir Trails

September 2021

Amidst the roar of semi-trailers and the buzz of construction machinery, you crawl southwards on the highway through perpetual roadworks. It is a warm, clear day in late September. The mid-morning glare envelops the traffic, seeming to emanate more brightly from the dry yellow sands that line the bitumen. To the east, the escarpment eventually becomes visible as roadworks give way to roadside sclerophyll vegetation. You turn off the highway and are now headlong towards the hills, leaving the densest traffic behind, climbing steadily at an angle. There is a right-hand turn into the carpark at the trailhead, but instead you turn early, leading you onto a winding road back down the slope. The smell of the air changes, from car fumes and pungent shrub blossoms to the waft of animal bodies and hay cooking in the sun. You pull into a shallow driveway, pea-gravel crunching beneath the car's tyres, and make a swift three-point turn. As you speed up the slope to make up for lost time, the car in front of you seems to be struggling along at 40 kmph. At the top, you make a difficult right-hand-turn back onto the correct path. Eventually, at the trailhead carpark, a seemingly well-maintained lawn is bordered by a gravel footpath that invites a sweeping view of the city on the coastal plain.



To view the city from the hills is to first see it from a position of detachment. The sudden demarcation of space through elevation seems to separate the lived-experience of transport, construction, economy, consumption, and commercialism on the coastal plain from a pseudo-omniscient viewpoint that invites a 'surveyors gaze'. From the scarp, you feel as though you are apart from the city, thus able to see the city as a whole. From this perspective, the elements of the skyline – remnant native vegetation, the skyscrapers of the central business district, the industrial sprawl at the base of the hills, the international airport, contiguous residential suburbs, smoke/dust haze – constitute an opaque outline of the city's character. On reflection, other details are filled-in through the drive to the trailhead, via roadworks as a city not yet complete, distance as a city ever-expanding, traffic as a city on a manager's schedule, as stressed, as aggressive. Thus, to walk trails in the scarp that feature views of the city is to have an experience of both being of the city (as a dweller within it) and being estranged from it. Furthermore, having this experience ultimately involves an entwinement of the self and the landscape, where the self is simultaneously drawn between escape and confinement; stability and transformation; past, present, and future.

Heading south on a vehicle track, the trail edges the ridge surrounded by low bushland and the occasional eucalypt. Broad views of the coastal plain are overlain by heat shimmers and cloudless blue sky. You are made aware of the season through the flowering of shrubs, with specks of white/yellow/red visible at a distance against the greenery of leaves and the orange-red of ferritic gravel. In addition to being constituted as part of the city through occupying a viewpoint above it, you are configured within time(s) operating at different scales and within different structures. 1) The escape of magma; formation of igneous rock; drifting of tectonic plates; deposition and erosion; climate change; ecological succession; human colonisation; and the Anthropocene. And now, here you walk, looking at the topography of the city. 2) Winter, through to spring, through to summer; makuru through to djilba and kambarang; mating season; nesting season; seeds to dead blossoms; flying insects and crawling insects; ants in motion. And now, here you walk, taking photos of flowers lest they fail to appear next year. 3) A baby in Subiaco, a child in Morley, a twenty-something in Victoria Park, a thirty-something in the suburbs; new roads, new shopping centres, Perth Convention Centre, Elizabeth Quay, Perth Busport, Optus Stadium, Matagarup Bridge. And now, here you walk, today.

Through the transitional perspective from highway to the first section of the trail, the scarp goes from an object that hems in the coastal plain – a thing that confines space and limits

visibility – to a place from which visibility and space arises. Here, visibility is not only constituted through the observation of opaque topographical elements, but through more intimate encounters with textures, smells and sounds. At a T-junction, you ascend steeply to reach a stand of Wandoo with a sparse understorey dominated by cycads. Further onwards, a small, forested area with a canopy of Jarrah, Allocasuarina and Banksia. There is shade, weathered cracks in rock, the chirping of birds, the rustling of leaves in the wind, petals of red, white, and yellow, globular heads of Acacias and sticky sundews and trigger plants amongst red-brown pebbles and dull green moss. The forest, as small as it is, suggests escape from the confinement of self on the coastal plain – the forest is a place where the self is no longer constituted through visibility as either separated or part of the city, but is now embodied as a walker. Thus, for a moment, the affect of the trail changes, going from a fetishization of the city as an object to be gazed upon to a child-like preoccupation with a de-centred, temporally displaced forest floor.

The trail descends out of the forest, again opening to views of the coastal plain. Relations between self and the city are re-affirmed as you notice litter in the bushland. A ball of aluminium foil shines in the unfiltered light. There are signs of old fires – Xanthorrhoea stumps split and charred in their centres, with fibres overlapping one another. Flakes of quartz, probably hundreds-of-thousands (if not millions) of years old, lay in the tracks of vehicles that have not only imprinted their presence on the land recently, but also served to establish the trail in the first stages of ‘modern’ development in the area. The tension between stable geological processes of the non-human and the myriad will of human agents is the overarching affect of space in the scarp, ultimately giving rise to tension between self and the world. If this trail is a place, where selves are entwined with landscape and meaning arises through the relations between dwellers and the dwelled, what is there to be understood by transformation of the land via vehicle tracks, empty beer bottles, empty cans of energy drink and remnants of campfires? 1) There are gazes here to both see transformation and live transformation. 2) Being constituted as estranged from the city seems to precede being constituted as confined within it (for some people). 3) Through inviting subjects to see themselves as estranged from the city, there is only ever a sense of an eternal present.

To walk in the scarp for a few hours is not only an embodied act of relation between the self, the spatial and the temporal, but is an act of compromise. In walking, you seek an affectivity

of escape, but given the limits of day-walking, the closest you come is a sense of being momentarily hidden. You might ascend to a minor summit, seeing the city from afar, and the experience of distance/estrangement situates you within the landscape as a gaze(r) not seen. This affect may be what motivates people to drink and dump litter when presented with such views of the city. But this feeling of hiddenness changes in the valleys. You cross a wooden bridge over a stream. Following the watercourse, you find yourself encircled by vegetation and the potential to be viewed from a vantage point on ridges above, positioning you as something small and obscure – another texture on the forest floor. As you walk, you see ants amongst the pea-gravel, trying to scale the sides of severely eroded crevasses underfoot – and so you too take your place as something miniscule, until you again ascend to a position of detachment. For a while, feeling hidden, unnoticed, and enclosed by the non-human is a substitute for landscape as something remote, isolated, and expansive. However, in the peri-urban space, this never lasts for long, effaced by the sounds of children at a camp only a few hundred metres away.



You turn away from the valley and the ascent becomes drastically steeper and more physically taxing as rough-barked Jarrah and Banksia spring up around you, eventually transitioning to the white bodies of Wandoo at a plateau. There is a crossroads, hinting at a network of paths providing both access to unseen spaces and a milieu to become lost in. Again, there are views of the city, hiding you within distance. You descend to another watercourse, obscured by dense undergrowth, finding yourself in partial shade, hiding you within shadow. Upslope to your left is a stand of Allocasuarina, with their needles and cones inhibiting development of an understorey, exposing the trees' smooth grey trunks. Sheoaks seem to open spaces beneath their canopies, inviting quiet occupation. Dropped needles and moss are a woven contrast, softly textured underfoot, to the crunch of ferritic gravel and solidity of exposed granite. On the path, there are puddles tinged with green algae. You ascend again, turning to look behind you at the city skyline for the last time on this trail. In feeling hidden, whether by distance or encirclement or shadow, you exercise your presence in the landscape via the possibility of being unseen/what cannot be envisioned. If configurations of self are emergent elements of landscape, then the skyline of Perth also resonates with what cannot be envisioned: a hidden sense of future.