

The Road Knows Everywhen (& Deev Knows Everyone)

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Abstract

'The Road Knows' is a live theatre performance-in-development, which appropriates the urban technological infrastructure of bus travel as a place for 'sitting on Country'. The bus is a moving, 'glass case' theatre and the City is co-writer, character, and artistic collaborator. The voice of the City is articulated through their vocabulary of place names, which are arranged into specific sequences by the bus route. I use these phrases to activate portals, to exit the Anglosphere. These portals can reframe time and space, enabling stories and characters from many times and places to enter the journey through the City. The Everywhen can provide more stable, safe and secure possibilities for the voice of the Land to enter into the placemaking, which is otherwise, drowned out by the colonial narrative. Sequences of placenames, organised by travel and land use, anywhere in Australia provide accessible portals into the Everywhen.

Keywords

Place-making, non-human agents, technological infrastructures, site-specific art, place-based storytelling, temporal intersections, cultural memory, live performance, public transport.

Introduction

'The Road Knows' appropriates the urban technological infrastructure of bus travel as a place for 'sitting on Country'. At first glance, the movement of the bus enables Country to be faintly perceived as terrain in a vast physical space, despite its being obscured and distorted by structures, foreign words, engineered surfaces, and synthetic materials. Because the bus is a 'glass case' theatre, and not the traditional 'black box', the City is essentially co-writer, character, and artistic collaborator. The voice of the city is articulated through their vocabulary of place names, which are arranged into specific sequences by the bus route. I use these phrases to activate portals, to exit the Anglosphere. These portals can reframe time and space, enabling characters (human and other-than human) from many times and places to enter the journey through the City. Through these portals, Country may enter the journey, in their own right, as more than merely the geology and geography, which is immediately visible to passengers. Country enters the bus as an articulate stakeholder in the present and the future.



The Road Knows

'The Road Knows' is a live theatre performance, which is designed to be performed on a bus. 'The Road Knows' presents the adventures of two gatekeepers from the Land of the Dead, on Brisbane City's 199 bus route. One gatekeeper was a spy for the Indian sepoys in the Vellore Uprising of 1806. Their life intersected with the world of Thomas Brisbane. The other gatekeeper is an ancient Persian character, who has met everyone who has entered the land of the Dead since Adam and Eve, including all those mentioned on street signs along the bus route. English language is not privileged in the Land of the Dead, so their storytelling can draw upon any language and any moment in time.

Metro Arts hosted a studio-based creative development of 'The Road Knows' in October 2023. For the purpose of that creative development process, the story was outlined as follows:

To better serve the increasingly multicultural city, the bus fleet is to be fitted out with some new technology. The 'BUS STOPPING' signal is being replaced by a new 'EXIT' sign. This sign points to exits from the Anglosphere, to affirm and provide access to the wonderful contributions of the many cultures who are resident and visiting the city. The technicians fitting the new device are gatekeepers of Ereshkigal, Queen of an ancient 'Land of the Dead'. As the audience watches the installation and testing of the new technology, they discover that they are witnessing Ereshkigal in a fierce struggle with her famous sister, the Goddess Ishtar.





Exit to 'Die Vogelhochzeit': 'The Marriage of the Birds'

City as Co-writer

The city speaks through street signs. Street signs are encountered in the order and prominence determined by the bus route. Some names appear highly visible (e.g., Brisbane and Adelaide). Others are fleeting and hidden. Some names combine in predetermined narratives. For example, the streets of the Orleigh Estate subdivision point to the military career in India of a former resident of West End. These streets point beyond this man and his family to the Rajputs and the Jaats who celebrated their culture as they repelled the British incursions and sieges, and who then created the protected wetlands which are now a bird sanctuary. They may also direct us onwards to Bengalis, Kannadigas, Moghuls and Gujeratis, who in turn lead us further from the Anglocentric narrative in space, time and culture.

Many of the streets of the 199 bus route point to an interface between ancient land and urban landscape. The city is a colonial imposition on the landscape. These introduced names on the land can direct us to encounters between English-speaking people and people whose narratives are forged outside of the Anglosphere. Each place name, and each localised combination of place names acts as a portal to many other places, times and narratives.

The challenge for an artistic collaboration with the City is to build a story, which matches the speed at which the city delivers their narrative, through bus stops and vehicular traffic. The city's narrative can move quickly and may not dwell on any particular portal. This project has identified many of these portals to the Everywhen and has begun to dramatically piece them together.

The portals identified in 'The Road Knows' encounter the vocabulary presented by the City as an interface brokered by the English language. These portals can serve as 'Exits' from English-controlled narratives. The exits lead the audience to narratives born in languages and cultures other-than-English. For example, a sub-division which refers to an English soldier 'exits' to his postings and battlefields in India, where Indian poets, dancers, magicians and scribes have generated their own version of events with this soldier's regiment. Such places and cultures offer their own vantage point of events,

including how they have been shaped by time, how the present engages with versions of history, how this engagement shapes their possible futures, and how the future looks back on culture.

One of the phrases in the vocabulary of this City, which appears near the centre of the 199 bus route is 'The Judith Wright Centre'. The legacy of Judith Wright has been central in our collaboration with the City as co-writer. As mentioned above, the City provides input around the progression of the story, through the sequence of street names encountered along the route. The City has also considerable input into attributing importance to this narrative, due to the speed of the journey and the time available to passengers with each name. However, the overall framework for the creative drama is generated in the phrase 'Judith Wright'.

Judith Wright's legacy shapes the Everywhen of 'The Road Knows'. Her writings about First Nations people straddle ancient, contemporary, and aspirational possibilities. Her writings also engaged with Persian poetry, Babylonian characters, Biblical metaphor, fertility, birds, conservation for future generations, and personal and cultural change and memory. The legacy of Judith Wright, embedded in the language of the City, and in the physical bus route provides an energy source around which the galaxies of a temporally expansive narrative can orbit.

Many of the other prominent entities and identities named along the bus route could serve the same purpose of providing a focal point for storytelling. We have not tried to tell a story a 'about' Judith Wright. We have chosen to consult Judith Wright's legacy in order to collaborate with the City in the creative process. The title 'The Road Knows' is inspired by the Judith Wright poem 'Sanctuary'.

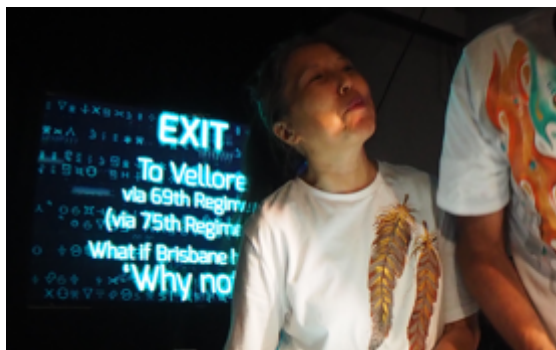
*Only the road ahead is true.
It knows where it is going: We go too.
Sanctuary, the sign said. Sanctuary
...
Only the road has meaning here.*





Everywhen Characters

In order to access a world in which English was not the privileged language, we chose characters from the 'Land of the Dead', inspired by the world of Ishtar's sister, Ereshkigal. Two characters provide two contrasting mechanisms for accessing the Everywhen. Deev, the ancient, has access to hindsight and memory. Deev has welcomed everyone since Adam and Eve into the Land of the Dead. Deev encounters humanity in relationship with each other in the afterlife.

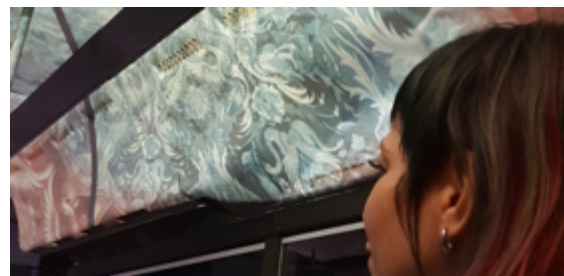


Would it had been different if he had said "Why not?"

Jeevani is a more contemporary character. During their life on Earth, Jeevani's world intersected with the world of Thomas Brisbane, whose name is highly visible on the 199 bus route. Jeevani's world in India was at war with the world of Thomas Brisbane. The personal and contemporary lives of the fictional Jeevani and the historical Thomas Brisbane can be efficiently developed through space and time because the sweep of time becomes highly portable thanks to military mythmaking and the intergenerational formation of place-based identity and culture.

Another way by which 'The Road Knows' roams freely through time and space, is by pinning the narrative to the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands and birdlife. The word 'Ramsar' is currently active in Brisbane, in relation to urban planning around the Bay. Deev, the ancient character in 'The Road Knows', is drawn from the original people of Ramsar in the Persian province of Mazandaran. Some portals identified in the narrative lead to

'Ramsar' sites around the world. The Ramsar Convention provides continuity between the past, present and future. Water resources enable fortified cities and villages. These in turn attract wealth, excess and environmental degradation, etc. They become hunting grounds, military targets and tourist destinations. Migratory birdlife in changing ecosystems provides an intriguing motif for exploring temporal intersections. They make contact with 'The Road Knows' in their freedom of movement outside of the Anglosphere, in the competition between Ereshkigal and Ishtar, and in the costumes, cuisines and cultures of human beings. For Jeevani, the great flashpoint in their life on earth centred on the mass production of a leather feather. In the Land of the Dead, the inhabitants are clothed in feathers.



Buses as venues for art

This project is exploring the use of buses as theatres for performance and visual arts. The walls of these theatres are panes of glass. Presenting theatre in a glass case, which is moving through a large space (the city) is different from 'black-box' approach to theatre-making. In a black box, the audience are prevented from seeing out and the outside is prevented from capriciously speaking in.

The theatre moves through the city. The city is both co-writer and character. The glass walls of the theatre, assert that the location of the art is essential to the meaning of the art. The mobility of the bus activates a storyteller, who exists at a super-human scale. The mobility of the bus establishes tangible connections between place names, which are often inaccessible from a stationary or pedestrian vantage point. The vocabulary of the city activates stories which can roam freely through generations and centuries, crossing oceans, singing songs and reciting poetry in any language.





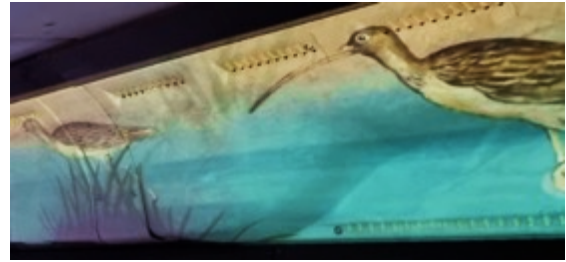
As President of the Persia Society, Lord Lamington wanted to celebrate the 1000th Anniversary of Ferdowsi's classic Persian poem, 'Shahnameh' (which means the Epic of Kings). Shahnameh is an acclaimed poetic narrative of early Persian Dynasties (and it features the Deevs).

Conclusion

This project is conceived by a bus driver as a gift to commuters, who travel the same route hundreds of times a year. Repeated, curious encounters with the same vocabulary of place in the Everywhen enables the City to become more open and expansive about their story, as well as supporting commuters to find belonging through their own definitions of where they 'fit' in the life of the City. In turn, the Everywhen can provide more stable, safe and secure possibilities for the voice of the Land to enter into the placemaking, which is otherwise, drowned out by the colonial narrative. This project is also an offering to people who travel anywhere in Australia, where sequences of placenames, defined by everyday language and land-use, provide such accessible portals into the Everywhen. The portals extend an invitation to all people who share the same vocabulary of place to participate in placemaking through storytelling, no matter what language they are drawing upon.



Lachlan Macquarie passed through the wetlands of Mazandaran (the land of the Deevs and Ramsar) on one of his missions as an Officer in the Army of the British East India Company.



Postscript for ISEA conference

The 2023 creative development of *The Road Knows*, supported by Metro Arts, has included artists drawing upon artistic, linguistic, and cultural heritage from Yuggerabul Country as well as China, France, Germany, India, Ukraine and Iran.

Collaborators

Brisbane City – Co-writer
 Pauline Calme – Improvisation coach
 Lafe Charlton – First Nations Consultant
 David Fittell - Photography
 Piyali Ghosh – Visual artist
 Leila Honari – Visual artist and Animator
 Nasim Khosravi – Director
 Tony Kmita – Set design and construction.
 Freddy Komp – Director of Technical Design
 Katie Manning – Set construction
 Anna Yen – Performing artist.
 Metro Arts

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