

Unstable relations: Indigenous people and environmentalism in contemporary Australia

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BOOK REVIEW

Unstable relations: Indigenous people and environmentalism in contemporary Australia, edited by Eve Vincent and Timothy Neale, 2016, UWA Publishing, Crawley, WA, xiv + 383 pp., A\$39.99 (paperback), ISBN 9781742588780 (paperback)

In the fields with which we are most familiar (archaeology and heritage studies), agitations for Indigenous land rights and the emergence of an interest in environmentalism are often traced, together, to the 1960s and 1970s, which are described in the associated literature as decades characterised by ‘crises’. In that same literature, both Indigenous land rights and environmental activism are highlighted as being incredibly influential to the development of key policies and practices of heritage management, in Australia and internationally. Seldom have the relations between the two been critically and explicitly examined, however. Instead, they are bound together by the assumption that they share mutual agendas, and thereby coincide on a range of political, social, economic and environmental issues. As academics engaged in this area of research we were therefore keen to read *Unstable Relations: Indigenous People and Environmentalism in Contemporary Australia*; the analytical attention posed by the book did not disappoint.

Unstable Relations brings together 13 wide-ranging and in-depth studies of complex ‘green–black’ relations in a suite of contemporary (though largely rural) Australian contexts (an introduction, eight research chapters, three interview-based chapters and an epilogue). With contributions written by established and early career academics as well as interviews with activists, the collection explores these relations from the perspectives of anthropology, economics, environmental science, political science and the environmental humanities. The ultimate aim of the editors is to start up ‘different kinds of conversations *about* indigeneity and environmentalism, and *with* Indigenous people and environmentalists’, conversations that ‘take account of the proximities and governmentalities that condition the lives of many in contemporary Australia’ (19; emphasis in original). This ambition has resulted in an expansive and engaging set of topics from across Australia that eschew otherwise dominant Northern perspectives.

Given the breadth of the collection, there is scope here to touch upon only a selection of the stronger chapters (Chapters 2, 4 and 7). Leaving aside the volume’s excellent introduction to the history of Indigenous–environmentalist relations, our review focuses first on one of the volume’s initial chapters, Timothy Neale’s contribution (Chapter 2). Neale uses the striking example of the Queensland *Wild Rivers Act 2005* as a mechanism through which to illustrate the mosaic of positions taken up in relation to economic and development agendas, environmental concerns and Indigenous rights by the various stakeholder groups that cross-cut Indigenous–environmentalist community boundaries. What is so critical about this contribution is its revelation regarding the remarkable climate of misinformation surrounding the Act, and the ‘relative absence of explanations for the *existence* of misinformation’ (34; emphasis added) that Neale touches upon. Indeed, we were struck by how a seemingly global contemporary politics of false or misleading information—as a divisive strategy—could be traced down to the fragile level of community politics in Cape York.

In Chapter 4, Richard Martin and David Trigger introduce insightful historical conjunctions in their exploration of the complex and changing knowledge systems in the Gulf Country. They do so by providing reflective comparisons between two separate field visits to Pungalina (close to the border between Queensland and the Northern Territory) in 1980

(by Trigger) and 2012 (by both authors). Central to the changes between the two field trips has been the introduction of non-Aboriginal caretakers into an area that is today considered a nature 'sanctuary' and biodiverse 'refuge', whose aspirations often stand at odds with Aboriginal peoples and their desire to negotiate access to bush foods and connections to country (which includes connections to introduced species). In their reflections, the authors interrogate, with engaging personal inflection, what it means to 'be intimate with land and water, the sea and sky' (99), noting in particular the changing relations between questions of ownership, ecology and economy.

In a critical narration of her expeditions with Aunty Jean Mob to Rockholes in and around Yumbarra Conservation Park (South Australia), Eve Vincent (Chapter 7) creatively urges environmentalists to reimagine Aboriginal peoples as active agents rather than fall back on assumptions about a 'pan-Aboriginal' environmental imperative. The chapter is compelling for the rich 'data-mining' that Vincent performs on her experiences, drawing forth penetrative observations about the diversity of positions adopted by 'Aboriginal greenies' in the active pursuit of a culturally specific environmentalism, and using otherwise mundane 'green-black' encounters to strike up these critical conversations. The chapter is a refreshing thick-description of the micro-politics of often prosaic encounters; it is both subtly challenging yet simultaneously offers a comprehensive 'way in' to considerations of the nuances of green-black politics that arise through deliberate proximity.

The final section of the volume brings together a collection of three interviews with Monica Morgan (a Yorta Yorta activist), Dave Sweeney (conservationist and activist) and Anthony Esposito (environmental activist). This section provides an important twist in the editors' aim to instigate different conversations about 'green-black' relations by refocusing debate on the practical politics of some key activist campaigns. The interviews tackle those sticky and enduring contestations that arise in the construction of 'green-black' relationships. They are a veritable 'state-of-the-art' of experiences in generating or aggravating divisiveness, ways to identify and meet needs, coming to a level of shared understanding through methods of collaboration, conflict resolution, and managing expectations, to name just a few. The interviewees' involvement in a range of high-profile cases, such as the uranium mining controversy at Kakadu National Park (Chapter 11), ensures that these issues spring from a reservoir of experiences that have often tested the limits of a 'green-black' ability, and ethic, to act.

Overall, the book achieves its aims of debating the concepts of Indigeneity and environmentalism in a range of Australian case studies where the two are constantly reshaped in dynamic interplay with each other. For us, this is strong testament to the breadth of socio-political contexts that scaffold the volume's framework: a reflection on the effects of environmentally destructive buffalo in Arnhem Land's Indigenously Protected Areas (Chapter 3); the agriculture/conservation dualism that has constrained debates about water management in the Darling-Murray river catchment and led to the marginalisation of Indigenous voices (Chapter 5); a critical engagement with notions of 'wilderness' that rearticulates the relationships between Aboriginal people and 'self-willed land' (Chapter 6); reflections on one of the most successful green-Indigenous alliances in the contemporary extractive economy, in Walmadany, or James Price Point (Chapter 8); and a proposed ontological shift in thinking about the impact of neoliberal governance and policy agendas on environmental management and Indigenous affairs in the Northern Territory and Tasmania (Chapter 9).

We recommend *Unstable Relations* for its accessibility, and for assembling a collection of engaging contributions that will be particularly useful to postgraduate students, scholars and activists interested in Indigenous-environmentalist relations. While the volume is somewhat limited in its orientation to contemporary Australia, there is every reason to believe that

its diverse contributions and rich scholarly discussions will nonetheless speak clearly and directly to researchers based in other settler-colonial contexts.


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