

WEEK SIX

Multispecies Knots of Ethical Time

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Death narratives, nurturance, and transitive crossings within species and between species open pathways into entanglements of life of earth. This paper engages with time in both sequential and synchronous modes, investigating interfaces where time, species, and nourishment become densely knotted up in ethics of gift, motion, death, life, and desire. The further aim is to consider the dynamic ripples generated by anthropogenic mass death in multispecies knots of ethical time, and to gesture toward a practice of writing as witness.

Introduction

Within the ecology of life, death is a necessary partner. Margulis and Sagan (2000) tell us that while accidental death has always been a contingent factor for life, many bacteria can survive more or less forever as copies are made again and again through cell division. In contrast, “programmed death,” in which cells age and die as part of the life of the individual, came into the world with reproduction (156–7). The link between sex and death is apparently coded into our DNA. Species as well as individuals have life expectancies, and extinction, too, is a functional part of the evolutionary process (May et al. 1995). And while animals and plants have a more tenuous life when compared with bacteria, theirs (ours) is also a more complex one. Organisms die, but new non-copy organisms are brought into being (Margulis and Sagan 2000, 91). Life, therefore, is an extension of itself into new generations and new species (144). And from an ecological point of view, death is a return. The body returns to bacteria, and bacteria return the body to the living earth (91). Margulis and Sagan go on to define life as it works productively with time: life is always “preserving the past, making a difference between past and present; life binds time, expanding complexity and creating new problems for itself” (86). Life in this broader context is “a network of cross-kingdom alliances” (191).

My aim in this paper is to engage with James Hatley’s work on the murder of ethical time, and bring it into the biosocial context of the anthropogenic mass extinction event now in process. I will address aerocide—the mass murder of individuals that constitutes a sustained attack on the future of the group, and thus an attack on ethical time.

I am drawing on previous work in which I have discussed “double death”: the process that is driving the great unmaking of life in this era known as the Anthropocene. The notion of double death contrasts with the ecological and evolutionary contexts in which death is immanent in and necessary to life. Double death breaks up the partnership between life and death, setting up an “amplification of death, so that the balance between life and death is overrun” (Rose 2006, 75). Similarly, contemporary man-made mass extinctions are an amplification of double death: the irreparable loss not only of the living but of the multiplicity of forms of life and of the capacity of evolutionary processes to regenerate life (Chrilew 2011, 149).

The extinguishing of ethical time is yet another form of double death. Drawing on Hatley’s point that analysis of the cross-overs between the generations of humans could be expanded to consider species and wider questions of life (Hatley 2000, 63), I address the gift of life as a multispecies offering at the intersection of sequential and synchronous time. I add flesh to the relatively abstracted analysis of kinds of time and patterns that connect through examples drawn from the life worlds of Australian flying foxes (*Pteropus* species) and their co-evolved myrtaceous flora. Connections between generations of living beings, and relationships among currently living beings, offer the basis for an account of the life-giving and life-affirming qualities of ethical time. We are then in a position to consider ecological aenocide, or the multispecies “murder of ethical time” (219).

Knots of Embodied Time

In this time when so much is being lost on earth, we are well attuned to the importance of diversity: cultural diversity, biodiversity, linguistic diversity, and habitat diversity, to name a few. We are perhaps less accustomed to thinking of temporal diversity, but numerous scholars today are analyzing heterogeneity in the context of time: the generations of living things, ecological time, synchronicities, intervals, patterns, and rhythms, all of which are quite legitimately understood as forms of time (Adam 1998). Indeed, Salleh (1997, 137) argues from an ecofeminist viewpoint that complex time concepts are necessary to understanding ecological processes. In attending to the world of “nature,” she makes a case for a concept of enduring time—a time of continuity between past and future. In place of the abstracted, disembedded, disembodied absolute time posited by Newton, scholarship that emphasises diversity and complexity focuses on the embodied and embedded qualities of time.

My research with Aboriginal people of the Victoria River region of the Northern Territory of Australia has led me to consider time from a perspective that is complementary to contemporary approaches to

diversity (Rose 2000 and Rose 2005), and in this paper I continue a path of analysis that started in my ethnographic research and now takes me into wider contexts of anthropogenic extinction. I will consider two main patterns of time that are integral to the wider ecologies of “patterns that connect” (to use Gregory Bateson’s term), and thus are integral to life on earth: sequence and synchrony.

Recognition of these two main patterns can never be entirely abstract; for Aboriginal people, recognition starts with events in country. Because these patterns, and their intersections, are so foundational to life on earth, Aboriginal people articulate social groups and many other relationships through the basic patterns of sequence, synchrony, and their intersections. An excellent example of intersecting basic patterns comes from the Arnhem Land region of North Australia, and was reported by archaeologist Rhys Jones. In response to questions about plants, Jones relates that his host Frank Gurrmanamana:

cleared off a layer of sand, [and] carefully marked out two parallel sets of small holes... One set, he said, were the vegetable foods which grew *gu-djel* (in the clay), namely roots and tubers. The other set were the vegetables *gu-man-nга* (in the jungle/vine thickets), namely fruits. These two sets were linked, a pair, one from each set, appearing together at the same time of year to be successively replaced by another pair, and so on. . . . They were likened according to Gurrmanamana to plants walking side by side through the seasons. At the end, the same pair would re-appear as the ones we had started with, and the whole process would begin once more. (Jones 1985, 198–199)

In Gurrmanamana’s explanation, the pattern of temporal synchrony demarcates those plants that appear together, and the pattern of sequence demarcates which set precedes which. The intersection of the two patterns, which was central to Gurrmanamana’s explanation, is the complex web of temporal patterns and their renewal through time.

Within Aboriginal eco-cosmologies, there are many such patterns. Patterns form across numerous scales and domains, so that the web of life can be understood as the complex interactions of sequence and synchrony, as these patterns play out across the lives of individuals, species, country, climate, and years. My focus is on one particular intersection: where generational time intersects with synchronous encounter. Both patterns of time are given substantive presence in the world through flows of material being, energy, and information. Generational time involves flows from one generation to the next. Synchrony intersects with sequential time, and involves flows among individuals, often members of different species, as they seek to sustain their individual lives. The intersection is a temporal site of embodied

interface, using the term “interface” in its everyday sense of a common boundary where two systems interact.

James Hatley works his way into the analysis of generational time with a philosophical analysis that draws on the death narrative concept. His analysis focuses on, but is not limited to, humans. A death narrative in human terms situates death and the dead within an historical community. Hatley writes: “What is important about a death narrative is that one’s own passing away becomes a gift for those who follow, as well as an address to them. Death narratives are vocative; they call to one’s survivors for some mode of response” (Hatley 2000, 212). Generational time clearly involves both death and birth, using the term “birth” loosely to designate any coming-into-being (hatching, germinating, sprouting, and so on). As Margulis and Sagan tell us in their illuminating book *What is Life?*, organisms die, but new non-copy organisms are brought into being (Margulis and Sagan 2000, 91).

The death narrative concept evokes the temporal pattern of sequence; it is accomplished through the transmission of wisdom, memory, and traditions from generation to generation. Hatley writes:

Situated in the difference between death and birth, one is addressed by the lives one inherits. These lives inspire one, literally, breathe into one one’s own possibility of existence. Yet the existence one receives in this inspiration does not belong to one’s forebears, precisely because the very terms of its inspiration is a transitive crossing-over that generates a new existence characterized in terms of a new responsibility. (2000, 61)

Death narratives are localized; they belong to those who inherit and transmit them, and they thus form bounded sequences. Any given group or population is formed through its death narrative, and thus any given group or population “can be seen as a wave of memory, insight, and expectation coursing through time, a wave that lifts up and sustains the individuals of each succeeding generation, even as those individuals make their own particular contributions to or modifications of that wave” (60–1).

Central to Hatley’s analysis is the fact that the death narrative is a gift. He uses the term “gift” in a way that is both modest and ineluctable. I will return to it in a later section; for now it is essential to understand that the narrative breathed across generations arrives unasked for and carries an obligation. “Precisely because one is not one’s forebears, one experiences one’s time as a gift, the proffering of one’s own existence from out of the bodies and lives the beings who preceded one. One in turn offers this gift to those who come after one” (61).

Sequence is not the only story, however. At any given moment, life-processes also require synchrony. Lives are nourished by others,

not only members of one's own group, but by others as well. All living things owe their lives not only to their forebears but also to all the other others that have nourished them again and again, that nourish each living creature during the duration of its life. Metabolic processes require energy to flow across species and systems; embodied time is always a multispecies project. It follows that life depends both on the sequential processes of generational time/gift and on the synchronous processes of multispecies nourishment. These processes and patterns intersect to form dense knots of embodied time.

Gifts of Life, Flying Fox Style

Australian flying foxes are members of the order Megachiroptera. The term chiroptera means "hand winged." There are two suborders: mega and micro. The two are quite different, size being only part of it. Microchiroptera navigate by echolocation (animal sonar); they are small and feed mainly on insects, but there also are blood-eating vampire bats, fish-eating bats, and others. In contrast, Megachiroptera all feed on plants. They navigate principally by sight, and many of them are large. In Australia, the largest male flying foxes weigh about one kilogram and have wingspans of up to 1.5 meters (Hall and Richards 2000, 1-3). Four main species of flying foxes make up the Australian contingent: black (*Pteropus alecto*), grey-headed (*P. poliocephalus*), little red (*P. scapulatus*), and spectacled (*P. conspicillatus*). They are arboreal, nocturnal, and nomadic. By preference they travel widely in search of pollen, seeds, and fruit, covering vast areas during an annual round as they follow flowering and fruiting trees and shrubs. With at least thirty different vocal calls, all of which are audible to humans, they are, from a human point of view, very noisy folk (Hall and Richards 2000, 64), and when they camp in the thousands, and feed in the hundreds and thousands, their presence is unmistakable.

There is no way of knowing the flying fox population figures prior to British settlement, but certainly the numbers would have been in the thousands of millions. After more than one hundred years of concerted efforts to eradicate the grey-headed and spectacled flying foxes, in particular, and after serious habitat loss and other anthropogenic impacts, both grey-headed and spectacled flying foxes are listed as threatened under the Commonwealth Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act of 1999.

Australia flying foxes and their preferred myrtaceous trees and shrubs are probably co-evolved.¹ The animals are crucial to pollination and (for some trees and shrubs) for seed dispersal, while the trees and

1. Myrtaceae is a family of plants also known as myrtles with "a wide distribution in tropical and warm-temperate regions of the world,

shrubs that benefit from the basis of the flying fox diet (Hall and Richards 2000, 82–84). There are some quite specific adaptations. For example, flying foxes have a keen sense of smell and their eyes are adjusted to night vision and to recognizing light colours. Many myrtaceous trees and shrubs produce clumps of flowers that are strongly scented and usually light in colour, and many of them produce their nectar and pollen most prolifically at night (Eby 1995, 38). That means that the trees are at their most alluring and most nutritious during the hours when flying foxes are abroad in search of food. Because the trees flower sequentially, “myrtaceous forests and woodlands provide a constant food supply throughout the year for these animals” (Hall and Richards 2000, 82).

The co-evolved relationships between flying foxes and myrtaceous flora demonstrates both sequential and synchronous temporal patterns, and the interface of embodied time knots. Once again, let us begin with stories from Aboriginal country. A story that brings all these (and more) patterns together goes like this: “when the flying foxes hang upside down over the river they are telling the Rainbow Snake to bring rain.”

In order to understand the significance of both rain and flying foxes, we need to pause to consider the interplay of wet and dry seasons in North Australia. The Victoria River region of the Northern Territory where I have undertaken years of research is a tropical monsoon savanna region in which life is dominated primarily by the alternation between wet and dry seasons, and by the needs of living things both to survive the scorching heat of the transition from dry to wet, and to survive the inundations of the wet season itself. The sequence works from the winter dry season into a time of increasing heat and aridity when the country becomes incredibly hot and dry; ephemeral water sources disappear, plants and animals become stressed for both food and water, and the overwhelming question concerns rain: when will it (ever) come to cool the earth and restart new cycles of growth? The sequence continues through the floods of the rainy season, and into the time of proliferating plant growth which itself stimulates health in all the plant-eating animals. It continues into the winds that mark a turn in the season, and back into the cooler part of the dry season, with its gradual drying out of the country and then to its increasing heat, reaching a point when the earth is too hot to walk on comfortably, the grasses are totally desiccated, and living things are in danger of perishing for lack of water.

The story of relationships between flying foxes, rivers, and rain draws on Dreaming origins and also articulates some of the main social

and . . . typically common in many of the world's biodiversity hotspots” (*Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Myrtaceae”).

categories that bind human and animal species into groups of shared flesh, but my concern is with the nonhuman side of the story. As stated, flying foxes feed by preference on the blossoms and nectar of eucalypts and melaleucas.² Victoria River people point especially to the inland bloodwood (*Corymbia terminalis*) and the magnificent tree known in vernacular English as the half bark (*C. confertiflora*). Both of these species produce large, showy, and heavily scented flowers and are thus obvious candidates for both flying fox and human attention.

In the Victoria River region eucalypts flower in succession from higher ground to lower ground, which is also to say from the drier country on the hillsides down to the river banks and channels. My pre-eminent teacher of botany, Jessie Wirrpá, divided the eucalypts into those which flower in the dry time and those which flower in the rain time. *C. terminalis* and *C. confertiflora* are among the prominent dry-time flowerers, along with several other species including *Eucalyptus pruinosa* (smoke tree) which grows out along the lower reaches of stony hills, and *E. microtheca* (coolabah) which grows around billabongs. *E. camaldulensis* (river red gum) is the outstanding example of those which flower in the rain time, and the river paperbarks flower then as well (*Melaleuca argentea* and *M. leucadendra*). Along the Victoria and other large rivers, the banks are lined with paperbarks and river red gums. They burst into flower in one final extravagant outpouring of vitality at the end of the sequence moving from dry to wet and from hill to river.

The flying foxes in this region are primarily the black ones (*P. alecto*). They arrive en masse when the eucalypts start to flower. That flowering brings them by the hundreds of thousands first to the higher and drier country where they scatter out, and finally to the riverside where they concentrate in large camps. Aboriginal people say that the flying foxes talk to their mate the Rainbow, telling it to move, to get up, to get to work, to bring the rain. Camping along the river, the noisy mobs tell that the earth is getting too hot, that everything is too dry.

This very short story of flying foxes hanging in the trees over the river calling for rain holds within it a complex pattern of the intersections between sequential and synchronous temporal patters. It is a story of time in the mode of sequence: the flowering of eucalypts in a series that starts in the higher and drier country and finishes at the riverside. It is equally a story of time in the mode of synchrony: the arrival of flying foxes who come from somewhere else to feed on the pollen and nectar. And it is a story of communication: how trees call to flying foxes, how

2. In the mid-1990s the Eucalyptus family was subdivided into Eucalypts and *Corymbia*. For the clarity of expression, I use the term Eucalypt to include the *Corymbias*, although when identifying a particular plant I use the newer terminology.

flying foxes call for rain. Most seductively, for me, it is a story of desire: of how flying foxes and trees want to live, how they attract and benefit each other, and how the patterns fit and keep on renewing themselves. It is a story of mutual gifts across species and through time.

Ethical Time

Hatley's analysis of the death narrative is set within generational time (diachronic time, in his terms) and is focused on humans. Hatley is a Levinas scholar, and his understanding of ethics is responsive to, and in dialogue with, Levinasian ethics. Thus Hatley's generational time, with its death narrative and cross-generational gifts, is to be understood as an ethics: "one lives in the accusative, one is already obligated and involved. If any 'we' is to be articulated, it can only come about through a recognition of the weight of this accusation" (2000, 219). The emphasis on the accusative points to the fact that, for Levinas, to be alive is always to be obliged and involved. Levinas's thought, as is by now well-known, aims to reverse the western philosophical tradition by grounding ontology in ethics rather than layering ethics over a pre-established metaphysical foundation (Wyschogrod 2000, viii). "The proximity of the other is the face's meaning," Levinas writes, and he discusses the nakedness before which one is (I am) always responsible (Levinas 1989, 82–83). There has been debate about exactly how concretely Levinas intended the term "face" to be understood (Waldenfels 2002), and whether he intended his concept of the face to include animals. There is evidence that he did not intend to include animals (Atterton 2004). At the same time, the significance of Levinas's philosophy is too great to be left in a zone of humans-only (see Edelglass, Hatley, and Diehm 2012). If we understand all living creatures to be in connection, in relationship, in systems of mutual interdependence, then surely these relationships must be analysed in terms of ethics. And if we understand genealogical time to be ethical, then there seems to be no reason to bar nonhumans from ethical relations among themselves.³

The particular point in Hatley's work that I will pursue links sequence, death, birth, and generations. His analysis goes to show that generational gifts constitute the genos. This is to say that the group (or race, or species) is the result of "an on-going series of ethical relationships" (2000, 60). Groups and gifts come together in an ethics of time. In this way, "time is articulated as a differentiation across which and by means of which responsibilities are born" (61). One's kind only comes in the aftermath of generation, of one's being-born (219). That

3. Rhizomes may not fit so neatly into concepts of generational time, but the fact of their non-identical continuities means that they, too, experience sequential time.

condition of being-borned, of always coming after death, means that in generational time one's orientation toward the future is both toward death and toward others. As one has been addressed, so one also addresses the future—a time beyond one's own death. "In this manner," Hatley writes, "one's death is given a future, although a future that is thought of in terms of the survival of one's responsibility rather than the survival of one's discrete existence" (62).

In carrying these ideas over into the lives of nonhumans, I am not arguing that humans and other animals are all identical. The differences between different groups of animals, plants, and other beings is self-evident, and even more importantly, is necessary. My question is how we may encounter ethics in the world of multispecies differences and connectivities, which is to say—in the world of ecological death, gifts, and flows. Let us again consider flying foxes and their co-evolved myrtaceous mutualists. Every night across Australia millions of flying foxes set forth in search of food. They travel up to fifty kilometers per night getting food, usually returning to the home camp; over the year, most of them move from camp to camp, travelling distances of up to a thousand kilometers. They are readily able to know when trees start to bloom hundreds of kilometers away from where they are camping, and to fly off to find the nectar; humans do not know how they do this (Eby 1995, 24). They are the primary pollinators for numerous species, including rainforest species for whom they are also seed dispersers. Indeed, many of the Eucalypts require outbreeding, and thus are reliant on flying fox pollination (Hall and Richards 2000, 79). Because of their capacity to travel widely and opportunistically, they are superbly adapted to the patchy distribution of Australian flora, and to the boom and bust pulses of El Niño influenced abundance.

A growing body of research is showing that mutualism complements competition and is utterly fundamental to life on earth (Margulis and Sagan 2000; Thompson 2005).⁴ Trees put out their delectable and beckoning flowers, and flying foxes sense this great call; they leave their home camp and come racing to the blossoming trees. Their responses include their long tongues that are well adapted to sucking up nectar, and their body fur that picks up thousands of grains of pollen and distributes over 70% of it intact every night (Hall and Richards 2000, 79). They carry Eucalyptus futures on their furry little faces, and across the patchy and increasingly fragmented landscapes of contemporary Australia, the renewal of woodland and forest life hinges on this

4. The type of mutualism that has evolved between flying foxes and their Myrtaceous and Proteaceous mutualists involves the partners as "free-living" mutualists with "sustained, intimate interactions between individuals of the respective species" (Thompson 2005).

relational exchange. Forest futures are borne on fur and tongue, and on the wings that beat through the night carrying the animal to the tree, and carrying the tree's possibilities along to other trees.

In these relational exchanges, we discern not "face" but "interface." If we were to hold ourselves open to the experience of nonhuman groups, we would see multispecies gifts in this system of sequence, synchrony, connectivity, and mutual benefit. We would see that every creature has a multispecies history—it came into being through its own forebears and through others. Each individual is both itself in the present, and the history of its forebears and mutualists. In the presence of myrtaceous trees we would see flying foxes; in the presence of flying foxes we would see dry sclerophyll woodlands and rainforests. We would see histories and futures—embodied knots of multispecies time.

Within this wider world of multispecies knots, ethics may be understood as an interface—a site of encounter and nourishment. Thus the encounter between the flower of the tree and the tongue-and-fur of the flying fox forms an interface where the desire for one's own life is shaped to the desire that others have for their own lives (Matthews n.d.). The trees' desire for pollination meets the flying foxes' desire for food, and in that multi-species knot of ethical time, sequential and synchronous temporal patterns nurture the flows that sustain the present and work for the future.

I have used the term "gift" to refer to the flows of being, energy, and information across the time-knot interfaces. This usage contrasts with the prevailing views of Derrida and Levinas who focussed on the idea that the gift is "infinite" in the sense of being outside of systems of exchange and reciprocity; it can never be repaid (see Smith 2005 for an excellent discussion). An ecological engagement with flow calls for a gift concept inflected toward responsibility. From an ecological point of view, the idea of not returning energy is extremely problematic. The nature of time and life in non-equilibrium systems is that energy is channelled into renewal, or, into order emerging against entropy. Entropy follows from the Second Law of Thermodynamics and tells us about dissipation: everything moves toward disorder. The partner word is negentropy, which is what life does. Life—the "biological order on earth" (Harries-Jones 1995, 107)—draws order out of disorder, organization out of disorganization, and thus can be thought of as a localized reversal of time's arrow. The gift is the way life evades entropy.

In situating the gift within ecological flow, we return to the precarious partnership between life and death. Being-born means that one is always already indebted to those who came before, those who nourished, those whose lives make one's own life possible, as Hatley explains. Hatley embeds the gift concept within the wider understanding that there is no autonomous right to have been brought

into existence (2012). The condition of being-borned is a gift, and every interface that nourishes and promotes life is another gift. It is also, of course, a condition of need, the need to be nurtured. At the same time, the ethics of the gift is that one is always responsible to others. Thus, while the gift is not about repayment or return, the ethics of gift situates living beings as always entangled with and responsible to and for others—both nourishing and being nourished. This is the entanglement that brings “all living entities into relationships that make responsibility the very articulation of the real” (*ibid*). As Hatley puts it in the context of the death narrative (above), “one experiences one’s time as a gift . . . [and] in turn offers this gift to those who come after one” (2000, 61). The way of life, then, is to continue to “draw order out of disorder,” which is to say: to keep the gift moving.

Aenocide

Ethical time is sustained through multispecies knots, where each interface is a site of flow, a place of mutuality and gift. Hatley’s analysis of generations, the priority of being-borned, and the future of one’s death lead us to a place from which it becomes possible to articulate some of the enormity of man-made mass-death. In Hatley’s analysis, the term *aenocide* indicates that the termination of a group (genos, species) is an attack upon time. Generational time is the time of aeons, and ethical time is the flow of death narratives across generations. *Aenocide* is therefore “the murdering of ethical time through the annihilation of all the following generations” (2000, 219). In considering the murder of ethical time in contexts outside the human, it becomes clear that to murder the ethical time of one group is to imperil the time of other groups, and that in fact there is no knowing where the destruction will stop.

Hatley considers the implications of what is being perpetrated against time in the Third Reich, and his analysis is chilling for the ways in which it sheds light upon our own time in relation to nonhuman *aenocides*. “The Nazis wished nothing less than to treat time as if it were a resource, a field of possibilities standing before one over which one had utter control” (62). In that “vision of time no room is left for the ongoing generation and generations of responsibility. Human temporality itself would collapse into a ‘final solution,’ an apocalyptic moment in which the ongoing bearing and birthing of differentiation and heterogeneity . . . would simply end” (62). Hatley sees this project as expressing “the reprehensible capacity” to turn the lives of others, past and future, “into a sort of narcissistic mirror. One eliminates all the strangers, all the disruptions of one’s own vision, so that one’s history only articulates one’s own concerns, one’s own needs. . . . All the other times are resources for one’s own” (63).

The ecological import of Hatley's devastating analysis of ethnic narcissism leads us to our own species-narcissism. We encounter a clear and insightful description of the disastrous thinking underlying the human-centric desire to turn all species and all times into resources for humans, to discount the costs to others, and to make decisions about who lives and who dies without regard to our shared life on earth. To return to the study of flying foxes and blossoming trees, scientific analysis of flying foxes and their relationships with their preferred species have led to the understanding that flying foxes are a keystone species. As long-range pollinators and seed dispersers, their activities are essential to the health of native ecosystems. Indeed, as climate change forces species to adapt rapidly, flying foxes are becoming increasingly important in maintaining gene flow and thus facilitating adaptation (Booth et al. 2008, 4–5). Even as climate change is increasing the need for flying foxes, the creatures themselves are in decline. The greatest amount of scientific research concerns the grey-headed flying fox of eastern Australia (*P. poliocephalus*). In the decade 1979–1989 their numbers dropped by one third, and the base line for that figure showed that their numbers already were down by millions from the pre-1788 estimates (Booth et al. 2008, 10). At the same time, the destruction of Australian woodlands, forests, and rainforests since 1788 has been a botanical holocaust in which up to 95% of some native forests have been lost (Eby 1995, 31), with terrible consequences for both the plants and the animals.

As the sequence of blossoms fails because the diversity and distribution of trees simply is not there, flying foxes experience starvation and mass death (Martin and McIlwee 2002, 105). This is exacerbated because habitat clearance also has the effect of increasing distances between food sources to the point where flying foxes can no longer make it from one area to the next. Populations that become hemmed in are effectively trapped and completely dependent on local foods (Conder 1994, 50), leading to mass starvation. And as the populations of flying foxes are in rapid decline, some forests are no longer being pollinated by flying foxes; functional extinction has begun (Booth et al. 2008, 5). Functional extinction precedes actual extinction; it is a loss of connectivity and mutuality, the beginning of a vortex the dynamics of which are ever more difficult to reverse. Lose the flying foxes, and there is no way of knowing just how far the unravelling of life systems will go.

The lives of flying foxes are found in the trees; the lives of eucalypts are found in soil and rain; the life of a rainforest is found as well in the lives of numerous creatures including cassowaries and others, and it permeates the air we all breathe.... There is no way to determine where connectivity and responsibility stop. In flourishing life systems they do not stop. The world of life is a world of connectivity; where ethical

time entangles us all, death doubles back to claim us too. Multispecies aerocide opens an entropic vortex into which we are pushing life, and into which we too are being drawn.

Against this vortex, what does one have to offer? Writing is an act of witness; it is an effort not only to testify to the lives of others but to do so in ways that bring into our ken the entanglements that hold the lives of all of us within the skein of life. If we wonder, as many of us often do, if there is any point in telling stories that awaken ethical sensibility in this time when so much is happening so rapidly and seemingly so unstoppably, there is a countervailing dread: if no stories are told, if all the violence goes unremarked, then we are thrust into the world of the doubly violated. Silence, however comfortable it seems at times, is a failure to acknowledge the gravity of violence. It has the potential to add to the victimization of those who suffer by appearing to say that the victim is one whose suffering does not matter (Hatley 2000, 3). And if suffering does not matter, then it is difficult to assert that anything matters.

Life is not only about suffering, of course, and my focus has been on the exuberant joy of ethical time. Flying foxes and their co-evolved blossoms express life's glorious desire, the call and response, the encounter, and the great patterns of life, death, sustenance and renewal that intersect across species and generations to form flows of life-giving life. If we choose silence in response to the unmaking of all this exuberance, we ourselves become deader than dead, for without an ethical sensibility we lose our capacity to be responsive to the dynamic exuberance of life. Along with all the multispecies double death, we also start to degrade the future of our own lives and deaths.⁵

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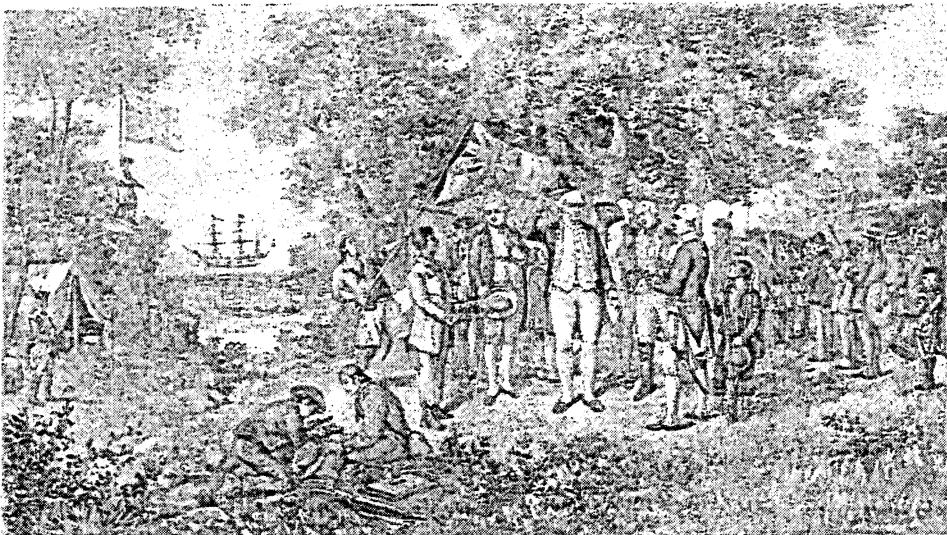
Decolonising Relationships with Nature

Val Plumwood¹

Colonisation, Eurocentrism and Anthropocentrism

This article begins with a general outline of the logical structure of colonial and centrist relationships, which is then used to cast light on several issues pertaining to the decolonisation of nature in an Australian context.

At this post-colonial remove, many of us are accustomed to the idea of colonial relationships between peoples as oppressive, damaging and limiting for the colonised. Colonial centres, which in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were typically drawn from European and North American powers, thought of themselves



CAPTAIN COOK PROCLAIMING NEW SOUTH WALES A BRITISH POSSESSION, BOTANY BAY, 1770.

as superior, bringing 'civilisation' as an unalloyed benefit to the backward races and regions of the world. Usually, however, the colonial system plundered the wealth and lands of the colonised, whose peoples were either annihilated or left severely damaged - socially, culturally and politically. Colonisers made use of and often accentuated divisions between privileged and non-privileged groups in colonised

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societies, and for the benefit of the centre created boundaries which divided colonised groups from one another and from their lands in ways that guaranteed a legacy of conflict and violence even long after the colonial power departed. The eurocentric colonial system was one of hegemony: a system of power relations in which the interests of the dominant party are disguised as universal and mutual, but in which the coloniser actually prospers at the expense of the colonised. The analysis I give below of the colonising conceptual structure that justifies all this (often in the name of bringing reason or enlightenment) is extracted from some of the leading thinkers who have analysed and opposed eurocentric systems of hegemony. It is also drawn from my own experience of both sides of the colonisation relationship, as a member of a colonising culture (with respect to Australian indigenous people and the Australian land) which has also been in some respects a colonised one (with respect both to 'the mother country' and to the contemporary context of global US hegemony). It is a significant but often insufficiently remarked feature of such centric relationships that many of us experience them from both sides, as it were, and that they can mislead, distort and impoverish both the colonised and the centre, not just the obvious losers.

In this process of eurocentric colonisation, it is usually now acknowledged, the lands of the colonised and the nonhuman populations that inhabit those lands were often plundered and damaged, as an indirect effect of the plundering of the peoples who own or belong to them. What we are less accustomed to acknowledge is that the concept of colonisation can be applied directly to non-human nature itself, and that the relationship between humans, or certain groups of them, and the more-than-human world might be aptly characterised as one of colonisation. This is one of the things an analysis of the structure of colonisation can help to demonstrate. Analysing this structure can cast much light on our current failures and blindspots in relationships with nature, since we are much more able to see oppression in the past or in contexts where it is not our group who is cast as the oppressor. For it is a feature of colonising and centric thought systems which disguise the oppressiveness of centric relationships that the coloniser, whose mentality is largely formed within them, is blind to their oppressive and deeply problematic sides. An analysis of the general structure of centric relationships can therefore help us to transfer insights from particular cases where we are colonised to cases where we are instead the colonisers, and thus to transcend the colonising perspective and its systematic conceptual traps. In the case of nature, it can help us understand why our relationships with nature are currently failing. To fill this out in concrete detail, I look in sections 4-8 at two contemporary examples of a nature-colonising system in practice: first, the way the conceptual framework of colonisation has helped create the mistreatment by Australian colonising culture of the land to which it has supposedly brought progress and reason, and second, the way the naming of the land can both reflect and reinforce colonial relationships and also give us powerful opportunities to subvert them.

Although now largely thought of as the nonhuman sphere in contrast with the truly or ideally human (identified with reason), the sphere of 'nature' has in the

past been taken to include less ideal or more primitive forms of the human, including women and supposedly 'backward' or 'primitive' people taken to exemplify an earlier and more animal stage of human development. Their supposed deficit in rationality invites rational conquest and re-ordering by those taken to best exemplify reason, namely elite white males of European descent and culture. 'Nature' then encompasses the underside of rationalist dualisms which oppose reason to nature, mind to body, emotional female to rational male, human to animal, and so on: progress is the progressive overcoming or control of this 'barbarian' non-human or semi-human sphere by the rational sphere of European culture and 'modernity'. In this sense, a culture of rational colonisation in relation to those aspects of the world, whether human or nonhuman, that are counted as 'nature' is part of the general cultural inheritance of the west, underpinning the specific conceptual ideology of European colonisation and the bioformation of the neo-Europe.²

An encompassing and underlying rationalist ideology applying both to humans and to nonhumans is thus brought into play in the specific processes of European colonisation, which has been applied not only to indigenous peoples but to their land, frequently seen or portrayed in colonial justifications as unused, underused, or as empty, an area of rational deficit. The ideology of colonisation therefore involves a form of anthropocentrism that underlies and justifies the colonisation of nonhuman nature through the imposition of the colonisers' land forms in just the same way that eurocentrism underlies and justifies modern forms of European colonisation, which understood indigenous cultures as 'primitive', less rational and closer to children, animals and to nature. The resulting eurocentric form of anthropocentrism draws on and parallels eurocentric imperialism in its logical structure; it tends to see the human sphere as beyond or outside the sphere of 'nature', construes ethics as confined to the human (allowing the nonhuman sphere to be treated instrumentally), treats nonhuman difference as inferiority, and understands both nonhuman agency and value in hegemonic terms that background, deny and subordinate it to a hyperbolised human agency.³

The colonisation of nature through the conception of nature and animals as inferior 'Others' to the human thus relies on a range of conceptual strategies, which are employed also within the human sphere to support supremacism of nation, gender and race. The construction of non-humans as Others involves both distorted ways of seeing sameness (continuity or commonality) with the colonised other and distorted ways of seeing their difference or independence. The usual distortions of continuity or sameness construct the ethical field in terms of moral dualism, involving a major boundary or gulf between the One and the Other which cannot be bridged or crossed, for example that between an elite, morally considerable group and an out-group defined as 'mere resources' for the first group, which need not or cannot

² On bioformation, see A. W. Crosby (1986), *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

³ V. Plumwood (1993), *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, Routledge, London, and Plumwood (1996) "Anthropocentrism and Androcentrism: Parallels and Politics," *Ethics and Environment* Vol. 1, no. 2 (Fall 1996), pp. 119-52.

be considered in similar ethical terms. In the west especially, this gulf is usually established by constructing non-humans as lacking in the department western rationalist culture has valued above all else and identified with the human - that of mind, rationality, or spirit - or as a lack of what is often seen as the outward expression of mind - language and communication. The excluded group is conceived instead in the reductionist terms established by mind / body or reason / nature dualism, as mere bodies, and thus as servants, slaves, tools, or instruments for human needs and projects.

Dualism: Exaggerating Differences, Denying Commonality

Centric and reductionist modes of conceiving nature as Other continue to thrive. Like the conceptual forms that characterise the treatment of human colonies, the forms I outline below are the precursors of many forms of injustice in our relations with non-humans, preventing the conception of nonhuman others in ethical terms, distorting our distributive relationships with them, and legitimating insensitive commodity and instrumental approaches. My sketch of the chief structural features of hegemonic centrism draws on features of such centrism suggested by feminists Simone de Beauvoir, Nancy Hartsock, Marilyn Frye, and critics of eurocentrism such as Edward Said and Albert Memmi.⁴ Strategies of subverting these colonisation models are especially appropriate, if we are attracted to thinking of our earth others as other nations 'caught with ourselves in the net of life and time,' as Henry Beston writes so powerfully.⁵ Human-centredness is inflected by its social context, and the model I shall outline is drawn from critiques of appropriative colonisation developed especially by Edward Said, as a model for the reductionist scientific and capitalist appropriation of nature. I illustrate the structure with examples drawn from counter-centric theorists and from the colonisation of indigenous peoples, especially the case of Australian Aboriginal people, whose oppression combines elements of ethnocentrism and eurocentrism.

Radical exclusion: We meet here first hyper-separation, an emphatic form of separation that involves much more than just recognising difference. Hyper-separation means defining the dominant identity emphatically against or in opposition to the subordinated identity, by exclusion of their real or supposed qualities. The function of hyper-separation is to mark out the Other for separate and inferior treatment. Just as 'macho' identities emphatically deny continuity with women and try to minimise qualities thought of as appropriate for or shared with women, while colonisers exaggerate differences between themselves and the colonised, so human supremacists treat nature as radically Other. From an

⁴ S. de Beauvoir (1965), *The Second Sex* (1949), Foursquare Books, London / New York; N. Hartsock (1990), "Foucault on Power: A Theory for Women?" in L. Nicholson (ed.), *Feminism/Postmodernism*, Routledge, New York; M. Frye (1983), *The Politics of Reality*, Crossing Press, New York; A. Memmi (1965), *The Coloniser and the Colonised*, Orion Press, New York; and Edward Said (1979), *Orientalism*, Vintage, New York.

⁵ H. Beston (1928), *The Outermost House*, Ballantine, New York.

anthropocentric standpoint, nature is a hyper-separate lower order lacking any real continuity with the human. This approach stresses heavily those features which make humans different from nature and animals, rather than those they share with them, as constitutive of a truly human identity. Anthropocentric culture often endorses a view of the human as outside of and apart from a plastic, passive and 'dead' nature, lacking its own agency and meaning. A strong ethical discontinuity is felt at the human species boundary, and an anthropocentric culture will tend to adopt concepts of what makes a good human being, which reinforce this discontinuity by devaluing those qualities of human selves and human cultures it associates with nature and animality. Thus it associates with nature inferiorised social groups and their characteristic activities; women are historically linked to 'nature' as reproductive bodies, and through their supposedly greater emotionality; indigenous people are seen as a primitive, 'earlier stage' of humanity. At the same time, dominant groups associate themselves with the overcoming or mastery of nature, both internal and external. For all those classed as nature, as Other, identification and sympathy are blocked by these structures of Othering.

Homogenisation/stereotyping: The Other is not an individual but a member of a class stereotyped as interchangeable, replaceable, all alike, homogeneous. Thus essential female and 'racial' nature is uniform and unalterable.⁶ The colonised are stereotyped as 'all the same' in their deficiency, and their social, cultural, religious and personal diversity is discounted. Their nature is essentially simple and knowable (unless they are devious and deceptive), not outrunning the homogenising stereotype. The Other is stereotyped as the homogeneous and complementary polarity to the One. Homogenisation is a major feature of pejorative slang, for example in talk of 'slits', 'gooks', and 'boongs' in the case of racist discourse, and in similar terms for women.

The famous presidential remark, "You've seen one redwood, you've seen them all," invokes a parallel homogenisation of nature. An anthropocentric culture rarely sees nature and animals as individual centres of striving or needs, doing their best in their conditions of life. Instead nature is conceived in terms of interchangeable and replaceable units ('resources') rather than as infinitely diverse and always in excess of knowledge and classification. Anthropocentric culture conceives nature and animals as all alike in their lack of consciousness, which is assumed to be exclusive to the human. Once they are viewed as machines or automata, minds are closed to the range and diversity of their mindlike qualities. Human-supremacist models promote insensitivity to the marvelous diversity of nature, since they attend to differences in nature only if they are likely to contribute in some obvious way to human interests, conceived as separate from nature. Homogenisation leads to a serious underestimation of the complexity and irreplaceability of nature. These two features of human/nature dualism, radical exclusion and homogenisation, work together to produce in anthropocentric culture a polarised understanding in which

⁶ N. L. Stepan (1993), "Race and Gender: The Role of Analogy in Science," in S. Harding (ed.), *The Racial Economy of Science*, Indiana University Press, Indianapolis, pp. 359-76.

the human and non-human spheres correspond to two quite different substances or orders of being in the world.

Polarisation: Typically, supremacist classifications use Radical Exclusion combined with Homogenisation to construct a polarised field. A highly diverse field in which there may be many forms of continuity is reconstructed in terms of polarised and internally homogenised 'superior' and 'inferior' racialised, genderised or 'naturalised' classes of 'Us' versus 'Them'. In postcolonial liberation movements, much effort is put into countering this polarisation: thus the women's movement disrupts this structure (known as sex-role stereotyping) to reveal that men can be emotional, bake cakes and do childcare, that women can be rational, scientific and selfish. In the ecological case, these two features of human/nature dualism, radical exclusion and homogenisation, work together to produce in anthropocentric culture a polarised understanding in which overlap and continuity between the human and non-human spheres is denied. Human nature and identity are treated as hyperseparated from or 'outside' nature, and are assumed to exist in a hyperseparate sphere of 'culture'. Ecological identity is assumed to be a contingent aspect of human life and human cultural formation. On the other side, nature is only truly nature if it is pure, uncontaminated by human influence, as untouched wilderness. Such an account of nature prevents us recognising nature's importance and agency in our lives. In this form 'nature,' instead of constituting the ground of our being, has only a tenuous and elusive hold on existence and can never be known by human beings. Nature and culture represent two quite different orders of being, with nature (especially as pure nature) representing the inferior and inessential one. The human sphere of 'culture' is supposedly an order of ethics and justice, which applies not to the nonhuman sphere but only within the sphere of culture. Thus human/nature dualism reconstructs in highly polarised terms a field where it is essential to recognise overlap and continuity to understand our own nature as ecological, nature-dependent beings and to relate more ethically and less arrogantly to the more-than-human world.

Denial, backgrounding: The polarised structure itself is often thought of as characterising dualism, but dualism is usually symptomatic of a wider hegemonic centrism, and involves a further important dynamic of colonising interaction in the features set out below. This is a dynamic of denial, backgrounding, assimilation and reduction which frames and justifies the processes of colonisation and appropriation applied to the radically separated and subordinated party in the logic of the One and the Other.

Once the Other is marked in these ways as part of a radically separate and inferior group, there is a strong motivation to represent them as inessential. Thus the Centre's dependency on the Other cannot be acknowledged, since to acknowledge dependence on an Other who is seen as unworthy would threaten the One's sense of superiority and apartness. In an androcentric context, the contribution of women to any collective undertaking is denied, treated as inessential or as not

worth noticing. This feature enables exploitation of the denied class via expropriation of what they help to produce, but carries the usual problems and contradictions of denial. Denial is often accomplished via a perceptual politics of what is worth noticing, of what can be acknowledged, foregrounded and rewarded as 'achievement' and what is relegated to the background. Women's traditional tasks in house labour and childraising are treated as inessential, as the background services that make 'real' work and achievement possible, rather than as achievement or as work themselves. Similarly, the colonised are denied as the unconsidered background to 'civilisation,' the Other whose prior ownership of the land and whose dispossession and murder is never spoken or admitted. Their trace in the land is denied, and they are represented as inessential as their land, and their labour embodied in it is taken over as 'nature' or as 'wilderness.'⁷ Australian Aboriginal people, for example, were not seen as ecological agents, and their land was taken over as unoccupied, 'terra nullius' (no-one's land), while the heroic agency of white pioneers in 'discovering', clearing and transforming the land was strongly stressed.

According to this colonising logic, nature too is represented as inessential and massively denied as the unconsidered background to technological society. Since anthropocentric culture sees non-human nature as a basically inessential constituent of the universe, nature's needs are systematically omitted from account and consideration in decision-making. Dependency on nature is denied, systematically, so that nature's order, resistance and survival requirements are not perceived as imposing a limit on human goals or enterprises. For example, crucial biospheric and other services provided by nature and the limits they might impose on human projects are not considered in accounting or decision-making. We only pay attention to them after disaster occurs, and then only to 'fix things up' for a while. Where we cannot quite forget how dependent on nature we really are, dependency appears as a source of anxiety and threat, or as a further technological problem to be overcome. Accounts of human agency that background nature's 'work' as a collaborative co-agency feed hyperbolised concepts of human autonomy and independence from nature.

Assimilation, incorporation: In androcentric culture, the woman is defined in relation to the man as lack, sometimes crudely as in Aristotle's account of reproduction, sometimes more subtly. His features are set up as culturally universal, she is then the exception, negation or lack of the virtue of the One. Her difference, thus represented as lack, represented as deficiency rather than diversity, becomes the basis of hierarchy and exclusion. The Other's deficiency invites the One to control, contain, and otherwise govern (through superior knowledge and accomodating power) the Other. The colonised too is judged not as an independent being or culture but as an illegitimate and refractory 'foil' to the coloniser, as negativity, devalued as an absence of the coloniser's chief qualities, usually represented in the west as

⁷ V. Plumwood (1998), "Wilderness Skepticism and Wilderness Dualism," in J. B. Callicott and M. Nelson (eds), *The Great Wilderness Debate*, University of Georgia Press, Athens, GA, pp. 652-90.

civilisation and reason.⁸ Differences are judged as deficiencies, grounds of inferiority. The order which the colonised possesses is represented as disorder or unreason. The colonised and their 'disorderly' space is available for use, without limit, and the assimilating project of the coloniser is to remake the colonised and their space in the image of the coloniser's own self-space, their own culture or land, which is represented as the paradigm of reason, beauty and order. The speech, voice, projects and religion of the colonised are acknowledged and recognised as valuable only to the extent that they are assimilated to that of the coloniser.

Similarly, rather than according nature the dignity of an independent other or presence, anthropocentric culture treats nature as Other, as merely a refractory foil to the human. Defined in relation to the human or as an absence of the human, nature has a conceptual status that leaves it entirely dependent for its meaning on the 'primary' human term. Thus nature and animals are judged as 'lack' in relation to the human-coloniser, as negativity, devalued as an absence of qualities said to be essential for the human, such as rationality. We consider non-human animals inferior because they lack, we think, human capacities for abstract thought, but we do not consider those positive capacities many animals have that we lack, remarkable navigational capacities, for example. Differences are judged as grounds of inferiority, not as welcome and intriguing signs of diversity. The intricate order of nature is perceived as disorder, as unreason, to be replaced where possible by human order in development, an assimilating project of colonisation. Where the preservation of any order there might be in nature is not perceived as representing a limit, nature is seen as available for use without restriction.

Instrumentalism: Denial and assimilation facilitate instrumentalisation, whereby the colonised Other is reduced to a means to the coloniser's ends, their blood and treasure made available to the coloniser and used as a means to increase central power. The coloniser, as the origin and source of 'civilised values,' denies the Other's agency, social organisation and independent ends, and subsumes them under his own. The Other is not the agent of their own cultural meanings, but receives these from the home culture through the knowledgeable manipulations of the One. The extent to which indigenous people were ecological agents who actively managed the land, for example, is denied, and they are presented as largely passive in the face of nature. In the coloniser's history, their agency in the form of active resistance might also be effaced. Since the Other is conceived in terms of inferiority and their own agency and creation of value is denied, it is appropriate that the coloniser impose his own value, agency and meaning, and that the colonised be made to serve the coloniser as a means to his ends (for example, as servants). The colonised, so conceived, cannot present any moral or prudential limit to appropriation.

In anthropocentric culture, nature's agency and independence of ends are denied, subsumed in or remade to coincide with human interests, which are thought

⁸ In addition to Memmi and Said, see also B. Parry (1995), "Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse," in B. Ashcroft *et al.* (eds), *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, Routledge, London, pp. 36-44.

to be the source of all value in the world. Mechanistic worldviews especially deny nature any form of agency of its own. Since the non-human sphere is thought to have no agency of its own and to be empty of purpose, it is thought appropriate that the human coloniser impose his own purposes. Human-centred ethics views nature as possessing meaning and value only when it is made to serve the human/coloniser as a means to his or her ends. Thus we get the split characteristic of modernity in which ethical considerations apply to the human sphere but not to the non-human sphere. Since nature itself is thought to be outside the ethical sphere and to impose no moral limits on human action, we can deal with nature as an instrumental sphere, provided we do not injure other humans in doing so. Instrumental outlooks distort our sensitivity to and knowledge of nature, blocking humility, wonder and openness in approaching the more-than-human, and producing narrow modes of understanding and classification that reduce nature to raw materials for human projects.

Countering Centric Structure

The injustice of colonisation does not take place in a conceptual vacuum, but is closely linked to these de-sensitising and Othering frameworks for identifying self and other. The centric structure imposes a form of rationality, a framework for beliefs, which naturalises and justifies a certain sort of self-centredness, self-imposition and dispossession, licensed by eurocentric and ethnocentric colonisation frameworks as well as anthropocentric frameworks. The centric structure accomplishes this by promoting insensitivity to the Other's needs, agency and prior claims as well as a belief in the coloniser's apartness, superiority and right to conquer or master the Other. This promotion of insensitivity is in a sense its function. Thus it provides a highly distorted framework for perception of the Other, and the project of mastery it gives rise to involves dangerous forms of denial, perceptions and beliefs, which can put the centric perceiver out of touch with reality about the Other. Think, for example, of what the eurocentric framework led Australian colonisers to believe about Aboriginal people: that they had a single culture and language, no religion, that they were ecologically passive 'nomads' with no deep relationship to any specific areas of land, and so on. Frameworks of centrism do not provide a basis for sensitive, sympathetic or reliable understanding and observation of either the Other or of the self. Centrism is (it would be nice to say 'was') a framework of moral and cultural blindness.

To counter the first dynamic of 'Us-Them' polarisation it is necessary to acknowledge and reclaim continuity and overlap between the polarised groups, as well as internal diversity within them. But countering the second dynamic of denial, assimilation and instrumentalisation requires recognition of the Other's difference, independence and agency. Thus a double movement or gesture of affirming kinship and also affirming the Other's difference, as an independent presence to be engaged with on their own terms, is required. To counter the Othering definition of nature I have outlined, we need a de-polarising reconception of nonhuman nature, which

recognises the denied space of our hybridity, continuity and kinship, and is also able to recognise, in suitable contexts, the difference of the nonhuman in a non-hierarchical way. Such a nature would be no mere resource or periphery to our centre, but another and prior centre of power and need, whose satisfaction can and must impose limits on our own conception of ourselves, and on our own actions and needs. The nature we would recognise in a non-reductive model is no mere human absence or conceptually dependent Other, no mere pre-condition for our own star-stuff of achievement, but is an active collaborative presence capable of agency and other mindlike qualities. Such a biospheric other is not a background part of our field of action or subjectivity, not a mere precondition for human action, not a refractory foil to self. Rather biospheric others can be other subjects, potentially ethical subjects, and other actors in the world, ones to which we owe a debt of gratitude, generosity and recognition as prior and enabling presences.

The reconception of nature in the agential terms that deliver it from construction as background is perhaps the most important aspect of moving to an alternative ethical framework, for backgrounding is perhaps the most hazardous and distorting effect of Othering from a human prudential point of view. When the other's agency is treated as background or denied, we give the other less credit than is due to it, we can come to take for granted what it provides for us, to pay attention only when something goes wrong, and to starve it of resources. This is a problem for prudence as well as for justice, for where we are in fact dependent on this other, we can gain an illusory sense of our own ontological and ecological independence, and it is just such a sense that seems to pervade the dominant culture's contemporary disastrous misperceptions of its economic and ecological relationships.

To counter the features of backgrounding and denial, ecological thinkers and green activists try to puncture the contemporary illusion of human disembeddedness and self-enclosure, raising people's consciousness of how much they depend on nature, and of how anthropocentric culture's denial of this dependency on nature is expressed in local, regional or global problems. There are many ways to do this. Through local education, activists can stress the importance and value of nature in practical daily life, enabling people to keep track of the way they use and impinge on nature. They can create understandings of the fragility of ecological systems and relationships. Those prepared for long-term struggles can work to change systems of distribution, accounting, perception, and planning so that these systems reduce remoteness, make our dependency relationships more transparent in our daily lives, and allow for nature's needs and limits. Bringing about such systematic changes is what political action for ecological sustainability is all about.

Countering a hegemonic dualism presents many traps for young players. A common temptation among those who mistake a hegemonic dualism for a simple value hierarchy is to attempt a reversal of value which neglects to challenge the hegemonic construction of the concepts concerned. For example, we may decide that traditional devaluations of nature should give way to strong positive evaluations of nature as a way of fixing the environmental problem, but fail to notice the polarised meaning commonly given to 'nature'. Dualistic concepts of nature insist that 'true'

nature must be entirely free of human influence, ruling out any overlap between nature and culture. This reversal, which suggests that only 'pure' nature (perhaps in the form of 'wilderness') has value or needs to be recognised and respected, leaves us without adequate ways to recognise and track the agency of the more-than-human sphere in our daily lives, since this rarely appears in a pure or unmixed form. Yet this is one of the most important things we need to do to counter the widespread and very damaging illusion that modern urban life has 'overcome' the need for nature or is disconnected from nature.

Polarised concepts of wilderness as the realm of an idealised, pure nature remain popular in the environment movement where they are often employed for protective purposes, for example to keep market uses of land at bay. The concept of wilderness has nonetheless been an important part of the colonial project, and attempts by neo-European conservation movements to press it into service as a means to resist the continuing colonisation of nature must take account of its double face. For on the one hand, it represents an attempt to recognise that nature has been colonised and to give it a domain of its own, while on the other it continues and extends the colorising refusal to recognise the prior presence and agency of indigenous people in the land. If we understand wilderness in the traditional way, as designating areas that are purely the province of nature, to call Australia or parts of it wilderness is to imply that no human influence has shaped its development, that it is purely other, having no element of human culture. The idea that the Australian continent, or substantial parts of it, are pure nature, is insensitive to the claims of indigenous peoples and denies their record as ecological agents who have left their mark upon the land. Indigenous people have rightly objected that such a strategy colludes with the colonial concept of Australia as terra nullius and with the colonial representation of Aboriginal people as merely animal and as 'parasites on nature.'⁹ To recognise that both nature and indigenous peoples have been colonised, we need to rethink, relocate and redefine our protective concepts for nature within a larger anticolonial critique.

Attempts by the green movement to redefine the concept of wilderness so as to meet these objections have often involved minimal rethinking and have not really allayed this important class of objections to the conventional wilderness framework and terminology. Thus wilderness is often defined, for example, as land which is in or is capable of being restored to its pre-settlement condition. But this strategy is just a conceptual shuffle: it continues to assume implicitly that the pre-settlement condition of the land was 'the pure state of nature,' since if the land was not wilderness before settlement, how could restoring it to its pre-settlement condition make it wilderness? This sort of formula seeks to evade rather than come to terms with the reality that the pre-settlement condition of the land was rarely pure nature but was a mix of nature and culture and included a substantial human presence and ecological agency. Restorative definitions of wilderness that attempt to harness the colonial mystique along the lines so strongly developed in the USA

⁹ M. Langton (1996), "What do we mean by Wilderness? Wilderness and terra nullius in Australian Art," *The Sydney Papers* 8, 1 (Dec.), pp. 10-12.

collaborate with discredited colonial narratives of past purity.¹⁰ Alternative approaches to wilderness that might avoid this collaboration could be performative rather than descriptive, future rather than past oriented, so that the designation of such areas as, say, 'biodiversity reserve' would represent a management and ethical stance in which nonhumans come first, rather than making a descriptive and historical claim to purity.¹¹ An alternative protective concept could aim to identify healthy communities of biodiversity in structural terms and specify standards for keeping them healthy, thus providing a basis for deciding what is overuse without appealing to colonial narratives of the past purity of nature.¹²

The framework of colonisation I have outlined, while forming a basis for the appropriation and commodification of land, has many disabling and undesirable implications for deeper land relationships. In the present context of crisis in our relationships with nature, colonial and centric relationships of the sort I have outlined are especially dangerous because they are monological rather than dialogical. Humans are seen as the only rational species, the only real subjectivities and actors in the world, and nature is a background substratum which is acted upon, in ways we do not usually need to pay careful attention to after we have taken what we want of it. This is the rationality of monologue, termed monological because it recognises the Other only in one-way terms, in a mode where the Others must always hear and adapt to the One, and never the other way around. Monological relationships block mutual adaptation and its corollaries: negotiation, accommodation, communication and attention to the Other's needs, limits and agency. The colonising task is to make the land accommodate to us rather than we to it, leading to the rejection of communicative and negotiated ecological relationships of mutual adaptation in favour of one-way relationships of self-imposition. Thus the eurocentric colonisation of nature insists the land be adapted to European models. The general cultural consequences of colonising relationships with nature then lead to failures of ecological identity and ecological rationality; they include the disabling of communicative and mutually adaptive modes of relationship, and the reduction of land to something to be experienced instrumentally as resource rather than as ancestral force. For this reason alone we must abandon the centric paradigm that has governed western civilisation for so long and move towards a framework that encourages listening to the other and encountering the land in the active rather than the passive voice.

¹⁰ W. Cronon (1993), *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists and the Ecology of New England*, Hill and Wang, New York, and Cronon (1995), "The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," in W. Cronon (ed.), *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*, Norton and co., New York pp. 69-90; M. D. Spence (1999), *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks*, Oxford, New York.

¹¹ This is argued further in V. Plumwood (2002), *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*, Routledge, London. On the notion of 'biodiversity reserve,' see also B. J. Preston and C. Stannard (1994), "The Re-creation of Wilderness: The Case for an Australian Ecological Reserve System," in W. Barton (ed.), *Wilderness of the Future*, Envirobook, Sydney, pp. 127-47.

¹² See Preston and Stannard (1994), and B. Mackey (1999), "Regional Forest Agreements: Business as Usual in the Southern Regions?", *NPA Journal*, Vol. 43, 6 (Dec.) pp. 10-12.

Disabling Land Relationships: An empty, silent Land

Colonising frameworks can occupy both a general background role as 'deep structures' regarding nature in general that are rarely put up for conscious examination, and a more local and specific political role in subordinating colonised places to the places of the centre, or 'home'. For specific recently colonised countries such as Australia we must add to the background level of western colonising consciousness further attitudes and practices more specifically associated with neo-European and Australian colonial origin.¹³ Thus we can have colonising frameworks operating at several levels, reflecting both the persistence of the sort of colonial framework that treats the homeland/colony relationship as one of centre to periphery, and also of the kind of anthropocentric conceptual framework that treats the human homeland of rationality as the centre and nature in general as an absence of mind or silent emptiness.¹⁴

Those relating newly colonised lands to the European homeland have been especially influential in the land culture of the Neo-Europe, both because in such contexts there are no alternative prior and gentler traditions of land relationships to draw upon and because private property is strongly emphasised in the context of colonisation.¹⁵ In Australia, colonising frameworks have shaped a history of interaction with a land conceived as silent and empty, speaking neither on its own account nor that of any owner, and lie behind the continent's (mis)conception as terra nullius. The result, in Australia over the two hundred years of colonisation, has been damage to the land on an unprecedented scale, damage which is reflected in soil loss, desertification, salination and extinction rates that are among the worst in the world. Almost half Australia's indigenous species are threatened or vulnerable; land degradation over areas used as rangeland (three quarters of the continent) has reached a point where thirteen per cent is degraded beyond probable recovery, and over half is in an earlier stage of the same process.¹⁶ These figures may be taken as a testament to the way colonial frameworks and relationships damage a fragile and vulnerable land, for example by imposing eurocentric agricultural regimes inappropriate to the new land, as well as through the introduction of feral predators and competitors from Europe, such as the fox and the rabbit.

The imposition of eurocentric agricultural models assuming a quiet, benign and malleable nature suitable for high intensity tillage or grazing has too often been a disaster for the land. The failure to understand and respect the difference of Australian flora and fauna and the need to create agriculture was expressed traditionally in widespread and often indiscriminate destruction of indigenous ecosystems and very high land clearance rates. The continued clearance of woodland

¹³ For an historical account of this development, see Plumwood (1993).

¹⁴ On the great Australian silence, see W. E. H. Stanner (1979), *White Man Got No Dreaming*, ANU Press, Canberra.

¹⁵ See W. J. Lines (1991), *Taming the Great South Land*, University of Georgia Press, Athens, GA.

¹⁶ *The Australian State of the Environment Report 1996*, and D. B. Rose (1996), *Nourishing Terrains*, Australian Heritage Commission, Canberra, p. 79.

and arid zone vegetation in Australia at the present time has no similar excuse now that there is clear evidence of its long-term consequences in salination, desertification and extinction. Australians keep to these colonising traditions in continuing to destroy indigenous vegetation in order to create a standardised 'open' agricultural landscape. Bird care groups have pointed out that the continuation of such clearance is likely to result in the extinction of as many as a third of indigenous bird species.¹⁷ Modern Australians are among the most mobile and urbanised populations in the world, rarely encountering the land and conceiving it as largely inessential to their everyday identity. For many, it exists primarily in instrumental terms, as a resource that can be drawn on to support the economy and for an affluent global urban lifestyle in which the land is irrelevant to identity. Yet this background resource role as adjunct to and enabler of 'the Australian way of life' systematically inflicts catastrophes on the land in the name of economic development.

Damage to the land is traceable not just to ignorance or to the contemporary dominance of 'the economy', but also to the way colonising eurocentric paradigms have imagined the colonised land as inferior, as silent and empty. Traditional devaluing attitudes associated with colonisation encouraged nostalgia for the European homeland, leading to views of the new country as inferior to, or as an extension of, the old, to be experienced and judged primarily in relation to the old, or as to be re-made in the image of the old, rather than as an independent presence to be engaged with on its own terms. This practice corresponds especially to the dynamic of assimilation we discussed earlier, in which the Other is seen to have worth or virtue just to the extent that it can be seen as an extension of or as similar to the centre or One. When British settlers first arrived in Australia they encountered a highly unfamiliar fauna and flora: for them, both the birds and the land were silent. Since no birds sang for them in the new land, they set about forming acclimatisation societies to introduce real songbirds to these supposedly barren shores. They were apparently unable to hear superb and now well-loved indigenous songsters like the Grey Shrike Thrush, Mountain Thrush, Lyrebird, Magpie, and Butcher Bird, to name just a few, as well as the lively songs of countless smaller birds like the Yellow-Throated Scrub Wren and the numerous honeyeaters in what can now be experienced as one of the world's most impressive and unique avian communities.

Although an element in what we must construe as the deafness of the settlers was the strangeness and unfamiliarity of the colony, another major part of it was the colonial mindset and eurocentric conceptual framework that considered Australia as a deficient, empty land, a mere absence of the positive qualities of the homeland, the place at the centre. It is not just that the settlers were ignorant and had not yet 'learnt their land', but rather that the colonial framework sets up powerful barriers to doing so. In the colonising framework, the other is not a positively-other-than entity in its own right but an absence of the self, home or centre, something of no value or beauty of its own except to the extent that it can be brought to reflect or bear the likeness of home as standard, be assimilated or made to share in the Same.

¹⁷ 'Birds Australia' Newsletter, April 2001.

Thus the colonised land in its original state had to be - could only be - improved by the introduction of the fauna of home, including the, fox and the rabbit. To the extent that colonising conceptual frameworks that treat the other as silent and empty structure experience rather simply comprehending or explaining experience, they can have much the same kind of filtering effect as colonial deafness to indigenous birds in blocking the learning of the land.

Frameworks of colonisation, of both the local and background variety, breed insensitivity to the land, blocking imaginative and dialogical encounter with the more-than-human-world and treating it as an inessential constituent of identity. Both distortions of difference like assimilation and distortions of continuity such as hyper-separation play a role here. The radical separation of human and nonhuman and the reduction of the nonhuman that is part of western thought means that the more-than-human world is consigned to object status and is unable to occupy the role of narrative subject. The colonising framework's exclusion of the more-than-human from subject status and from intentionality marginalises not only nature as subject and agent but also context, particularity, place and narrative as factors in human thought and life, whereas these features often have a central structural place in indigenous land relationships and environmental philosophies. The recognition of earth others as fellow agents and narrative subjects is crucial for all ethical, collaborative, communicative and mutualistic projects involving them as well as for place sensitivity. Recent ethical theorists have emphasised the importance of narrative for constituting the moral identity of actors and actions;¹⁸ rich description of the non-human sphere is crucial to liberating the moral imagination that "activates our capacity for thinking of possible narratives and act descriptions."¹⁹ Such narratives can help us configure nature as a realm of others who are independent centres of value and need that demand from us various kinds of response, especially ethical responses of attention, consideration and concern. Features of the colonising framework such as radical exclusion, in denying intentionality and subject status to the more-than-human world, not only deny and background nature as agent but also deny the agency of place and context, abstracting from places as agents and restricting agency to the human. The sensitivity to and recognition of agency, centrality and specificity of place in indigenous life could hardly form a greater contrast.

In backgrounding particularity, place and narrative as factors in human thought and life, colonising frameworks make places into mere passive instruments or neutral surfaces for the inscription of human projects. The marginality of land for identity in modernist culture contrasts sharply with its centrality for indigenous culture the colonising framework seeks to dismiss. For indigenous philosopher Bill Neidjie, obligations concerning the land are at the centre of social, moral and religious life. The natural world is not, as in our case, the unconsidered background to human life it is in the foreground. This centrality is articulated in Bill Neidjie's words: "Our

¹⁸ See Warren (1990).

¹⁹ S. Benhabib (1992), *Situating the Self*, Routledge, New York, p. 129.

story is in the land / it is written in those sacred places."²⁰ If environmental thought and questions of relationship to the natural world are on the margins, at best, in modernist culture, they are surely at the heart of indigenous philosophy and spirituality, where nonhuman life forms take their place as narrative subjects in a speaking, participating land, full of narratives and mythic voices.²¹

Sensitivity to the land requires a deep acquaintance with a place, or perhaps a group of places. It also requires an ability to relate dialogically to the more-than-human world, a crucial source of narratives and narrative subjects defining the distinctiveness of place. The mobility of modernity combines with the ethical and perceptual framework of colonisation to disempower both place and the more-than-human sphere as major constituents of identity and meaning. This loss in turn selects, stores and experientially supports the hegemony of the universalising and minimising conceptual frameworks that are so important a part of modern rationalist inheritance of western philosophy. Western moderns mostly do not relate dialogically to the nonhuman sphere and have come to believe that the land is dumb, that culture and meaning is, as Thoreau put it, "exclusively an interaction of man on man,"²² thus strengthening both placelessness and what David Abram calls the project of human self-enclosure.²³ There are several different kinds of reasons why many of us now lack sensitivity to place and land. One reason is that mobile modern urban life-ways do not allow the necessary depth of familiarity, but another more basic reason is that our perceptions are screened through a colonising conceptual sieve that eliminates certain communicative possibilities and dialogical encounters with the more-than-human world. Such an analysis suggests that our problem lies not in silence but in a certain kind of deafness.



The colonising politics of place names: renaming as decolonisation

A colonial dynamic of seeing Australian land and nature as silent and empty appears clearly, I shall argue, in the Australian culture's response to the naming of the continent. However, if colonising frameworks and relationships are clearly expressed in the naming of the land, as I shall demonstrate below, then renaming could become a decolonisation project aimed at reconciling the culture of the colonisers with the land and with indigenous people and culture.

The colonisation project, as Doris Pilkington reminds us, began with names. As Captain Fremantle takes possession of the land employing the myth of consent from the native inhabitants, he names it after himself – Fremantle. The idea that the place might already have a name does not seem to have occurred to Fremantle – certainly he does not ask the natives how they name it. Surely this is the first etiquette practice

²⁰ B. Neidje (1989), *Story about Feeling*, Magabala Books, Wyndham, p. 47.

²¹ See Rose (1996) and C. H. and R. M. Berndt (1989), *The Speaking Land: Myth and Story in Aboriginal Australia*, Penguin, Ringwood (Vic.).

²² H. D. Thoreau (1992), "Walking" (1862) in *Walden and Other Writings*, ed. Brooks Atkinson, the Modern Library, New York, p. 655.

²³ D. Abram (1996), *The Spell of the Sensuous*, Pantheon, New York.

for any decolonising project; to ask the natives how they name it. We should not necessarily expect them to tell us. Suppose however that we get the answer that we can name it as we see fit (unlikely), then we should still entertain the hypothesis that the place has a name of its own we should seek to discover, rather than being ours to stick an arbitrary and casual label on it. To ask to know that name is to seek the spirit of a place, to ask for revelation, to seek a knowledge of the other that at length discloses its name to those who give it loving, compassionate and generous attention.

Not only do many Australian place names express colonising worldviews and naming practices, but these naming practices tend to be both anthropocentric and eurocentric, registering a monological or non-interactive relationship with a land conceived as passive and silent. What is often expressed in place names is the dynamic of assimilation in that the land is defined in terms of colonial relationships, that exhibit eurocentrism and nostalgia for the European homeland. Such naming practices refuse to relate to the land on its own terms, denying it the role of narrative subject in the stories that stand behind its name. Instead of treating the land dialogically as a presence in its own right, colonising namings speak only of the human, or of what is of use to the human as resource, and of certain kinds of humans at that. The outcome is a reduction and impoverishment of Australian land culture which parallels the extinction and impoverishment of its biodiversity. However, through decolonisation strategies, there are possibilities for opening this land culture to change and enrichment, for us to create places in our culture for the empty, silent land to begin to speak in many tongues and to reveal some of its many names.

The significance of names and of naming is often underestimated in the modern west. Different cultures have different bases for ownership of the land: these differences can be so radical that they amount to different paradigms of land relationship, which are incomprehensible to those from a different framework. In some cultures it is the paradigm of expenditure, or mixing in, of human labour that validates the claim to own the land. As we have seen above, this formula - which corresponds to John Locke's criteria for forming property from land conceived as 'wilderness' by adding human labour - validates capitalist and colonial models of appropriation and ownership. It creates a one-way, monological form of relationship in which nature's agency and independence is discounted and the land is conceived as an adjunct to, or raw resource for, human projects. An alternative paradigm of ownership and belonging is communicative, relying on narrative methods for naming and interpreting the land through telling its story in ways that show a deep and loving acquaintance with it and a history of dialogical interaction. In terms of this second paradigm, non-indigenous Australians have a long way to go in achieving ownership and belonging and Aboriginal narrative patterns of naming can help to show us possibilities for a richer dialogical relationship.

We can see these different paradigms at work in the naming of the Murray River. The difference between dirt and country, between a muddy irrigation channel and a rich, winding river, includes the difference between being conceived on the one hand as a mute medium for another's projects, (perhaps as a transparent

intermediary between the owner and the investment agent), and on the other as an ancestral force, speaker and giver of myth. In the latter a river such as the Murray can be a narrative subject and agent in a story of its own making, in which its course is created by and follows the struggles of its characteristic being, a great Murray cod. The river's name draws on this narrative. This gives the river's name a solid foundation in evolutionary time: river and fish are made by and for each other. Conceived in the other way as a mute medium though, the river's name can be arrived at by processes that are quite arbitrary and human-centred, having nothing at all to do with the river itself or its characteristics. Its naming can be made to serve the purposes of flattery or influence, by having it bear the name of some august colonial figure, for example. Just so did Charles Sturt on 23rd January 1830 name Australia's major river, then as now a profoundly Aboriginal place, in honour of Sir George Murray, Britain's Secretary of State for the Colonies.

I made a close acquaintance with the first paradigm of naming growing up on a small NSW farm whose front gate bore the hand-lettered name "Wyeera". The name, my father told me, meant "to dig the soil". He said it was an Aboriginal word, but it was very conveniently detached in his mind from specific tribal languages and locations.²⁴ If the name of our place did have this meaning, it seems likely that the nature of the digging designated by "wyeera" was very different from the digging we practiced. Digging, and the hard work that went with it, was a venerated activity on our land, a piece of low fertility Sydney sandstone my father had to strip of its trees to make our farm. Digging was my father's most characteristic exertion, his most memorable pose leaning on his spade, throwing fat white wicheatty grubs to swooping kookaburras. Nobody, least of all the people like us who did the hard clearing work, questioned how far these European regimes and values of cultivation were appropriate for the new land and soils, or how they destroyed the indigenous economy or the forests we felled to make it possible. In our pioneering mythology, it was cultivation (interpreted as digging) and the exemplary hard work of altering the land to fit the eurocentric formula of cultivation and production, that supposedly made us European settlers superior to other races and species.

However, it is not just the romantic call of another culture that makes me think now that digging and sweating to force the land into the ideal Lockean form of the European farm is not the best basis for land relationship. The kind of narrative basis for ownership typical of many indigenous cultures seems to me now to have much more to offer. A communicative paradigm - the reflexive relationship that Deborah Bird Rose describes in her classic study of the Yarralin of the Victoria River Downs region and their land relationship, *Dingo Makes Us Human* - makes good sense for non-indigenous Australia too in the context of the ecological failure of eurocentric farming models in the Australian context.²⁵

As we have seen, a narrative project of sensitivity to place requires discarding the mechanistic, reductionist and human-centred conceptual frameworks that strip

²⁴ In those days many non-indigenous people supposed there was just one Aboriginal language and tribe.

²⁵ D. B. Rose (1992), *Dingo Makes Us Human*, Cambridge UP, Cambridge.

intentionality, and thereby narrative subjecthood, from the land and from non-humans generally. Human self-enclosure, which denies subject positioning to all but the human, vastly contracts the range of subjects and possible narratives that give meaning and richness to place. Human-centredness reduces the land to a passive and neutral surface for the inscription of human projects. Capitalist versions of human-centredness reduce the agency and value of the land to a mere potentiality for aiding or realising these projects, eg profit-making. These are monological modes of relating that reduce the land to an instrumentalised Other on which projects are imposed, rather than an interactive and dialogical relationship that recognises agency in the land. Monological modes of relating are dysfunctional, especially in the context of the current environmental crisis. They allow no space for two-way adaptation to the Other, or for negotiation, attentiveness or sensitivity.

These contrasting paradigms are reflected in our respective cultures' naming practices. The way we name places reflects our land-related spirituality and the depth of our relationship to the land and its narratives. Western philosophy's theories of naming the land illustrate this. Logical positivist philosophers treated names as purely conventional, neutral markers without cultural content, mere pointers or numbered labels. They could not have been more wrong. Names are only conferred in individualistic and therefore arbitrary ways where there is no recognition of the importance of community, in whose absence there is no such thing as meaning. Conventionalism reflects the concept of the land as neutral, passive and silent and, as such, it is an index of the shallowness of relationships to place. A completely instrumental approach may require only a number as a name because this could represent the shortest distance between two points — that of the namer and his purpose — and would require the least possible investment of attention and effort in understanding the Other. Naming workers are often required to follow positivist practice. A friend who had worked on creating and registering street names told me of the arbitrary lists they used to select from; lists compiled from dictionary words, first names and surnames. These official namers never saw the places they were naming and knew nothing of their histories, but followed conventionalistic rules like "a short name for a short street".

There is an important politics embedded in names and naming. Colonising modes of naming the land are often blatantly incorporative as well as being monological. To illustrate what I mean consider Frederick Turner's account of Columbus' naming of the New World:

To each bit of land he saw he brought the mental map of Europe with which he had sailed. Anciently [...] place names arose like rocks or trees out of the contours and colors of the lands themselves ... as a group took up residence in an area, that area would be dotted with names commemorating events that took place in it ... where one tribal group supplanted another, it too would respond to the land, its shapes, moods, and to tribal experiences had there. Now came these newest arrivals, but the first names by which they designated the islands were in no way appropriate to the islands themselves. Instead, the Admiral scattered the nomenclature of Christianity over these lands, firing his familiar names like cannon balls against

the unresisting New World [...] One group was called Los Santos because the Christ-bearer sailed past them on All Saints' Day [...] An armoured Adam in this naked garden, he established dominion by naming.²⁶

Several things emerge from this account. First, Columbus' naming was an act of power over the land and those who inhabited it; an act of incorporating the named places into what is thought of as an empire. Second, Turner contrasts dialogical indigenous modes of naming with colonial monological modes that are not a response to the character of the land and are "in no way appropriate" to the lands themselves. Columbus' naming does not record any of the land's features or any real encounter with the land, but merely registers its conquest and incorporation into the empire. Beyond this incorporative meaning, these names invoke no depth of knowledge or narrative, being little more than mnemonic devices holding place for a neutral marker, like the logical positivist labels. It seems to me that far too many Australian namings are in the Columbian tradition, with a difference being that the names of Christian saints were replaced by those of the bigwigs of the British Colonial Office, many of whom never visited the places that were named after them. Seen in this light the names of many of Australia's capital cities – such as Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide and Hobart – are but empty reminders of largely forgotten power plays.²⁷ Such naming practices overlay the land, conceived as neutral, with a grid of bureaucratic or political power that registers obeisance to the empire, or commemorates those in the surveyors' office in 1903.²⁸ The names of those cities and many of the suburbs within them sadly locate us in terms of a grid of colonial power that is now largely meaningless to most of us.

Assimilation, colonial nostalgia and feral names

Another group of names exhibits the colonial dynamic in a different way from those commemorating major figures of colonial power. These are the names that refer back to the places of a European homeland, usually bearing no resemblance at all to the new place 'named after' them. (*To each bit of land he saw he brought the mental map of Europe with which he had sailed*). It is now hard to connect Perth, the commercial capital of a state largely driven by industrial mining, with the small town on the upper reaches of the River Tay in Scotland. Ipswich, Camden and Penrith are places in Britain; these names have no relevance to the places on which they were imposed in Australia.

²⁶ F. Turner (1986) *Beyond Geography*, Rutgers UP, New Brunswick, p.131.

²⁷ Of course power namings do tend to become conventionalised, empty and irrelevant very quickly, which is another good reason for avoiding them. An exception might be highly rationalised and systematised power namings, like those of Canberra suburbs commemorating Prime Ministers.

²⁸ The bushwalking community has long contested these colonial power names, and has worked at its own renaming – on their maps names like Mt. Cloudmaker replace names like Mt. Renwick commemorating the survey office.

For the purpose of introducing the biota of the homeland into the colonies, settler societies formed 'acclimatisation societies'. Perhaps we can regard the 'acclimatised' place names as being the equivalent of the feral fauna that the colonists tried (sometimes with unfortunate success) to introduce in their efforts to assimilate the new land to the old; hence we might refer to such place names as feral names. Feral names, like feral biota, register the colonial dynamic of periphery and centre: the assimilation and devaluation of Australian landscapes and biota in comparison to those of 'home'. Feral names like Perth and Ipswich are pointedly assimilationist in their references to home, their longing inscription of the landscape of Britain and occasionally Europe on the new 'featureless' land. They invoke no shared narratives and provide no evidence of affection for, attention to, or even interaction with the land.

A third category of names we should now problematise are blatantly monological colonial namings that take no notice of the land when it is nearly impossible to ignore it. (*One group was called Los Santos because the Christ-bearer sailed past them on All Saints' Day.*) The contrast between the empty egoism or passe nostalgia of these monological colonial namings and the rich dialogical practice of Aboriginal narrative namings impressed itself on me strongly in a recent bushwalk in the "Mt. Brockman" area of "Arnhem Land". In this region you encounter fully the Kakadu region's extraordinary qualities of beauty, power and prescience. The massif we know as "Mt. Brockman" is part of an extravagantly eroded sandstone plateau weathered to immense, fantastic ruins that bring to mind enigmatic artefacts from some titanic civilisation of the past. In the place where my party camped on Baraolba Creek, on the second day of our walk, an inchoate sphinx face and a perfect sarcophagus, both the size of battleships, topped the great towers of the domed red cliffs to the south. Everywhere, strangely humanoid figures of shrouded gods and finely balanced sandstone heads gazed out over country formed by a thousand million years of play between the sandstone and the hyperactive tropical atmosphere. Yet namings like "Mount Brockman" take no notice at all of this extraordinary place, or of its power and agency.²⁹ The puzzling, pointless and eurocentric naming of this great outlier of the escarpment, marked by remarkable and ancient Aboriginal places and rock art galleries, commemorates a European 'discoverer' finding the place notable only for the accident of it being on the path of a member of the colonial aristocracy who was travelling by. Such monological namings treat the place itself as a vacuum of mind and meaning, to be filled through the power plays of those in favour with the current political equivalent of the old Colonial Office.

In what I call deep naming, names connect with a narrative, as they so often do in Aboriginal patterns of naming; a narrative that gives depth, meaning and a voice to the land and its non-human inhabitants. Walking in the upper stretches of Baraolba Creek during Yegge (the early dry season) I encountered the *kunbak*, a small waterplant whose fine green fronds represent the hair of the Yawk Yawk sisters.³⁰

²⁹ There is no single equivalent Aboriginal name for the area we know as "Mt Brockman".

³⁰ See N. Nganjmirra (1997), "Kunjinkwu Spirit," in N. McLeod (ed.), *Gundjiehmi: Creation Stories from Western Arnhem Land*, Melbourne University Press (Mienungah), p. 172.

The Yawk Yawks live in the slowly moving water along the edges of this little stream that drains a huge area of the stone country. In the narratives of the Kunwinkju people of the western part of Kakadu, these sisters are little spirit mermaids with fish tails instead of legs. They dwell in the holes beneath the banks and come out to sing and play where the pandanus plants grow. From underneath the water they watch women swimming, ever on the lookout for one ready to become their mother, to birth them as human. For a balanda³¹ woman like myself, the Yawk Yawks offer welcome sisterly and binitj travelling companions in the landscape, enticing westerners across the high wall we have tried to build between the human and non-human worlds. Many binitj namings invoke narratives like those of the Yawk Yawks. These striking stories function both to impress their meanings cunningly and irresistibly into the memory, and to bind together botanical, experiential, practical and philosophical knowledge. They build community identity and spiritual practice in a rich and satisfying integration of what we in the west usually treat as opposites – ie, life and theory. Binitj stories and namings envelop a journey in their land in a web of narrative, so that one travels through a speaking land encountered deeply in dialogical mode, as a communicative partner.

Decolonising the naming relationship

The deeply colonised and colonising naming practices I have discussed above still figure too prominently on the Australian map, and neither they nor their underlying narratives of eurocentrism and of colonial power are in any way challenged by formal and superficial decolonisation exercises like recent efforts to move from our monarchical political model to that of a republic. Since, in my view, it is a much more important decolonising project to work on these cultural modes of naming than to tinker with the way a head of state is appointed, I am tempted to call the project of cultural change suggested here 'deep republicanism'. It is precisely such cultural practices we have to take on if we Australians are ever truly to belong culturally to this land and develop a mode of exchange that attends to, and respects, the uniqueness and power of place as well as recognising its prior naming and occupation by Aboriginal people. A renaming project of this kind must recognise the double-sidedness of the Australian colonial relationship, in which non-indigenous Australians were historically positioned both as colonisers of indigenous Australians and as colonised themselves (in relation to the British).

An empty and highly conventionalised naming practice is both a symptom and a partial cause of an empty relationship to the land. If we want a meaningful relationship with the land that expresses a healthier pattern than the colonial one, we have to look to naming it in meaningful terms that acknowledge its agency and narrative depth. So I want to propose the renaming project as a project of cultural convergence, cross-fertilisation, reconciliation and decolonisation. It might be helpful

³¹ Some Aboriginal people of Arnhem Land use the terms *binitj* for Aboriginal people and *balanda* for non-indigenous people.

to start the cultural decolonisation project from locations and issues that offer the possibility of generating some common culture through involvement and engagement of both indigenous and non-indigenous communities. This might create some possibilities for developing shared spiritual meaning and ritual observance, not just an individual search for privatised spiritual meaning. A shared renaming project might enable indigenous and non-indigenous communities to come together to rework their relationship to each other and to the land. So I am proposing that we start a joint renaming project that is part of remythologising the land and which prioritises for replacement the categories of names I have discussed above and others that are particularly disrespectful of indigenous people. At the very top of the list might be those names that commemorate and honor the makers of massacres against indigenous people, like the name for the major highway that runs right through the middle of Perth—the Stirling Highway. We might better call it the Jack Davis Highway, to honor the great Aboriginal poet and activist; another kind of hero who surely better deserves our commendation. In terms of encounter with the land, though, such a renaming would seem to remain monological. Where nature is dominant over culture, as in Kakadu, we could hope that a dialogical naming practice might engage to a high degree with the land, but where culture is highly dominant over nature, as in the city, it might be reasonable to begin with naming practices that draw more on human cultural engagements and elements. Even so, these urbanised namings could be much more adventurous, witty and less colonial than the ‘neutral marker’ suburban place names we often have now, and they could connect with real or imaginary narratives of events which have occurred there or people worth remembering. For example, it might be worth renaming Germaine Greer’s birthplace after her, (ie, Greer instead of Mentone).

Of course, it can be objected that names honoring the Colonial Office are now a genuine part of our history, a story that might be lost if they were eliminated. They are a part of history, it’s true, but not everyone’s history, and not for all time. We don’t have to passively remain in the mindset that created them. We can take charge of how our land is named and make it relevant to today. I do not suggest that colonial names should be just thrown away and forgotten; they may have something important to tell us about where we have come from. But that is not necessarily who we are now, and I believe we need alternatives that do not force us to honor slayers of Aboriginal people and others responsible for other atrocities. If we are a dynamic and evolving society, we should be able to democratise, de-bureaucratise and put up for community cultural engagement, elaboration and contest our processes of naming. This will be a long-term process, but one that we should get started on now. To allow for cultural difference, I think we should aim for the formal possibility of multiple namings, and also for namings that are worked through communities as part of a democratic cultural process in which a broad range of groups can participate.³²

³² Local councils, schools and community groups might set up literary contests to generate names and narratives, for example.

It might surprise some to hear that in my view we should also reconsider the many Aboriginal place names that appear on our maps. Mostly these names were imposed on places by non-indigenous namers, and are treated by the dominant non-indigenous population in logical positivist style as neutral markers. What is most important now is that non-indigenous communities should make an effort to understand their historical and narrative significance. Where these names correctly acknowledge Aboriginal presence, commemorate tribal land, or have other appropriate meanings, then non-indigenous communities should learn about them, in co-operation with the relevant indigenous communities. However, many of these namings reflect the larger cultural practice in which features of Aboriginal culture are appropriated by settler culture in order to create the air of a distinctive national identity, a colonising practice that often leads to inappropriate or paradoxical use of Aboriginal words and symbols. To overseas visitors these names are part of what makes Australia interesting; they mark out our unique Australianness. But where we use them shamelessly for this purpose, without understanding or respect, we should think of them as stolen names. We must develop a critique of this practice if Aboriginal place names are to take their place as a precious cultural heritage that should be treated with respect.

In summary, recovering a popular naming practice that decolonises the mind and generates meaningful, dialogical names is part of recovering a meaningful relationship to the land. We need to construct new naming practices to replace, or at least provide alternatives for, the problem categories of power names, feral names, and monological names, and we need to rethink our relationship to stolen names. In this decolonising project indigenous patterns, models and practices have much to teach non-indigenous culture, but we need an active, dynamic practice of naming and narrativising that can also incorporate elements from non-indigenous Australian cultures, not a slavish imitation or colonising assimilation or incorporation of indigenous naming and narrative³³. Such a dynamic outcome could only be possible if we can make the project of renaming the land one of cultural co-operation and convergence between indigenous and non-indigenous communities.

³³ For a wonderful example of such cultural convergence in the field of narrative, see C. San Roque (2000), "The Sugarman Cycle," *PAN* (1) 2000, pp. 42-64.



'Playmates were rare, so the bush became my playschool and supplied most of my friends, adventures and conversations ... my wonderland included delightful, sandy wildflower country interspersed with bold, mysterious rock formations which I could explore at will ... my mother's striking common names for them—grandfather's whiskers, spiderflower, bottlebrush, belrose—were supplanted later by colder scientific terms whose abstract distance could never break that bond of our early familiarity.'

PHOTOGRAPH: NATIONAL LIBRARY OF AUSTRALIA, HAROLD CAZNEAUX COLLECTION

DURING THE GRIM, TOYLESS DAYS I SPENT MANY HAPPY HOURS EN OLD WONDER BOOK. Its frayed red a trumpeting African elephant, the wonder book was copia which spilled from its tattered black-and-whit lously varied and amazing creatures of the planet. edition, innocent of any ideas of extinction, except fo The book presented a view of the forest world through the indigenous peoples and animals displaying what their primitive vitality. The exotic, half-conquered world was presented as wide and bountiful, half-clothed with deep, lush forests where strange and marvellous creatures made their homes. The forest world was imagined as inexhaustibly virgin and still largely unknown, a place of mystery, danger, surprise, and self-dwarfing age and grandeur. Wonder, and anticipation for a world of wonder that would one day belong to you, was what the old book evoked. **F** I grew up on an Australian farm whose hand-lettered name "Wyeera", but with my back to indigenous others—the Aboriginal people—that th name, my father told me, meant "to dig the earth". Aboriginal word, but it was very conveniently detach speakers or locations. Digging was a venerated activ hard work. These were the main qualities that supp from—and made us superior to—other races and sp my father's most characteristic exertion, his most m on his spade, throwing fat white witchetty grubs to A 'Digger' he was, too, when I first saw him, hom rough stranger in uniform and lop-sided felt hat. N little people like us who did the hard clearing work to question how far these European regimes and va

DURING THE GRIM, TOYLESS DAYS OF WORLD WAR II, I SPENT MANY HAPPY HOURS ENGROSSED IN AN OLD WONDER BOOK. Its frayed red cover embossed with a trumpeting African elephant, the wonder book was a childhood cornucopia which spilled from its tattered black-and-white pages the marvelously varied and amazing creatures of the planet. This was a pre-war edition, innocent of any ideas of extinction, except for skeletal dinosaurs. The book presented a view of the forest world through European eyes, with the indigenous peoples and animals displaying what the colonisers saw as their primitive vitality. The exotic, half-conquered world was presented as wide and bountiful, half-clothed with deep, lush forests where strange and marvellous creatures made their homes. The forest world was imagined as inexhaustibly virgin and still largely unknown, a place of mystery, danger, surprise, and self-dwarfing age and grandeur. Wonder, and anticipation for a world of wonder that would one day belong to you, was what the old book evoked. ¶ I grew up on an Australian farm whose front gate bore the hand-lettered name "Wyeera", but with my back turned to the unspoken indigenous others—the Aboriginal people—that this name evoked. The name, my father told me, meant "to dig the earth". He said it was an Aboriginal word, but it was very conveniently detached from specific tribal speakers or locations. Digging was a venerated activity on our land, as was hard work. These were the main qualities that supposedly distinguished us from—and made us superior to—other races and species. ¶ Digging was my father's most characteristic exertion, his most memorable pose leaning on his spade, throwing fat white witchetty grubs to swooping kookaburras. A 'Digger' he was, too, when I first saw him, home on leave, a grinning, rough stranger in uniform and lop-sided felt hat. Nobody, least of all the little people like us who did the hard clearing work, found an opportunity to question how far these European regimes and values of cultivation were

appropriate for the new land and soils, or how they destroyed the indigenous economy or the forests we felled to make it all possible. We had to clear to keep the lease. The smoke of burning trees and stumps drifts through my childhood memories. ¶ Despite this, the surrounding forest that pressed in close by the house was an overwhelming presence. The forest world I found there was rich enough to confirm in immediate, daily experience the old wonder book's promise of adventure and revelation in an enchanted realm. Majestic Sydney blue gums and smooth, salmon-trunked angophoras surrounded the clearing made on the sandstone for

our little mixed farm, which was plucked free of trees by my father's sweat just as the chickens we raised and sold on our little roadside stall were plucked free of feathers by my mother's night-time labours. Her weary work left me an unusual degree of freedom to enter this beckoning forest. I became a forest wanderer almost as soon as I could walk, venturing far enough unreproved to gain familiarity with the forest fringing our clearing and some of its more arresting

FOREST LOVER, LIVE FOREVER! A PHILOSOPHY OF THE FORESTS

By Val Plumwood

inhabitants. These included snakes, goannas, and a rich variety of ferocious bull-ants. ¶ Taught by my mother at home, I was formally registered, like so many bush children of the time, in Correspondence School. Playmates were rare, so the bush became my play-school and supplied most of my friends, adventures and conversations. Some of these were drawn from my bedtime diet of sassy African animal tales in *Uncle Remus*. Others were inspired by my favourite fictional character, the fearless and philosophical Alice. My wonderland included delightful, sandy wildflower country interspersed with bold, mysterious rock formations which I could explore at will, with no one to ridicule or restrain excesses of conversational familiarity with the other inhabitants. My mother's striking common names for them—grandfather's whiskers, spiderflower, bottlebrush, belrose—were supplanted later by colder scientific terms whose abstract distance could never break that bond of our early familiarity. ¶



Yet there was a fault in my Eden—the immediate sensory world was devalued in favour of a distant and abstract ideal. So despite the wildflower glory, I was puzzled whether my daily landscape conformed to a 'proper' concept of beauty. It didn't look at all like the pictures my aunties had on their walls—the classic mountains, parks and formal gardens—of the distant place that I still heard spoken of as 'home'. Australians of those times complained often about the endless grey bush and its inexhaustible dullness and monotony, still looking to a half-remembered Europe for visions of beauty. My third generation parents had gone part-way towards breaking with these colonial values. I was taught to enjoy and admire the bush, and not to destroy the wildflowers or harm the creatures. Yet some unconscious baggage from my colonial culture seemed to remain an obstacle to full and public affirmation of the native forest surrounding me as beautiful and valuable. I realised much later on that this colonial dynamic has been and still is a factor in our relentless drive to clear and replace the Australian bush.

Yet back then, the sensuous richness of the forest world around me was immediate, overwhelming, undeniable. In summer, the forest unfolded its ecstasy of creamy, honey-scented myrtle blossom—dwarf apple, bloodwood and kunzea—to delight the nose and drive the beetles wild. The nectar-filled banksia candles were there for the honeyeaters each autumn, burning orange brilliant as the sun of foretold winter sunsets. From August onwards, white tick bush, pink boronias and waxflowers, red grevilleas and the well-timed Christmas bells feasted the eye, each with its retinue of birds and insects thirsting for a piece of the action. This was a reproduction-centred world—the work, it seemed, of an imagination of great fertility entirely uninhibited by any taboos about cross-species sex.

It was not only powerfully erotic but also an elaborately narrative world which unfolded its stories each year around me. I seemed to live in the midst of a vast, enigmatic play which combined aspects of tragedy, mime, circus, and opera in daily dramatic events in which participants communicated by gesture and song. You could catch slapstick honeyeater chases and lizard wrestling matches, ringing bird operatic performances, and earthy, slice-of-life family dramas. The performance was endlessly engaging, despite the indecipherable plot. Throughout the year, the forest was the stage for a dazzling, complex extravaganza of carefully-timed connections, disappearances and subtly-foreshadowed reappearances. Quick prey starred opposite quicker predator; patient, supportive nectar-bearer opposite vivacious nectar-gatherer. All were backed up by an avian and insect cast of millions. Its ceaseless change displayed an intricate and mysterious regularity and order, but always seemed to outrun anticipation and regularly produced the unexpected. Its innumerable mortalities made up an intensely alive and somehow immortal whole—what could ever diminish its ancient power?

Even after a bushfire swept through our forest, disclosing unguessed-at neighbours like the lively frilled-lizard the fireman held up for us children to gasp at, the forest seemed inexhaustible. Soon the blackened trunks were in leaf again, and the forest still brought forth those August gems, the wax-lip orchids I liked to gather as a special treat for my birthday flower. Don't pick too many, my wise mother warned, or you'll lose them. But I did, and the numbers in my favourite patch on the ridge declined, until one year they appeared no more. I never saw them there again, and I could never pass the spot without regretting their lost purple beauty. I was about six, I think, when

I first took to heart the lesson that I and my kind could wound the forest world, and that loss could be permanent.

That was the beginning for me of two things—the first, a long love affair with the colour purple, in all its divine manifestations. It was also the first glimpse—a speck entering the edge of my field of vision—of a grief that has since loomed large over the landscape of life. That speck has expanded to a knowledge of global forest destruction and species extinction: that the magical and apparently invincible world of the forest is in fact fragile and vulnerable, that its loss could be imminent and irreversible; that the great, intricate, unfathomable forest of childhood—the apparently immortal traveller across vast ages of planetary time—is being eliminated over much of the earth and could be largely driven from the planet in my lifetime.

The transition from the forested world of my childhood to a world in which deforestation is increasingly normal has been a motivating undercurrent for both grief and activism throughout my life, and for others in my generation. My lifespan has witnessed one of the greatest periods of rapid biological degradation the world has known as the forest world is pushed to the margins and forests remaining in the path of development have been degraded or swept away. It is a grief that so many of the species that the wonder book showed me no longer find a free place to roam the earth. It is a grief that from other wonder books now spill lists of endangered species which will not survive without unaccustomed levels of human support. Their fate epitomised by the elephant which graced my old book's cover. It is a call to action that the survival of vast numbers of species is tied to the survival of the forest world. It is a call that has determined the course of my life. Both the forests and those species now depend upon our care and our will to fight for them.

FIGHTING FOR THE FORESTS

WITHOUT THAT CARE—AS I DISCOVERED IN YOUTHFUL TRAVELS IN THE deforested landscapes of North Africa and the Middle East—once rich and highly productive forests could give way to impoverished, degraded and eroded ecosystems. In the better case, as in Europe, they were replaced by the simplified and humanly productive landscapes of cultivation, hedgerow and wood lot. At their best, these could be fruitful and beautiful, but still they lacked the richness of revelation I had met in the 'original forest' surrounding our family farm. I then knew little about the degradation of Australian forests. But returned from my travels, I saw these forests with fresh eyes, and knew then with certainty that they were beautiful and precious. I set about remodelling myself in the forest world, and learning the names and stories anew.

Soon after my return to Australia in 1968, the tremendous advance of postwar development that threatened the destruction of the forest world first began to be publicised. As I began to explore Australian forests and understand what was planned for them, I felt a strong call to work for the forests. I believed that the horror of what was happening—the very thought of losing the forest world—was so great that people would only have to be made aware of it to recognise its enormity. They would lie down in front of bulldozers and trucks and write letters and books and organise and pestle politicians until it was all stopped.

In that spirit of outrage—a sentiment I fully expected every other informed person to share—I undertook my early activist work on behalf of

forests, publicising the clearing rates and the parousing and writing critiques of plans for an ambitious massive areas of NSW tableland forests for exotic pinning in the Federal arena against the program's funded in a joint book with (my late husband) Richard *The Forests*, which was first published in 1973. I also wrote on world rainforest destruction which appeared before

The main target of *The Fight for the Forests* was to 'rational' depletion and conquest of the forests. Rich simplified and assimilated into what the foresters imagined of cellulose. Forests became regimented lines of introducing units, conceived entirely in terms of industry. This blinkered world view lay behind the new, intensive forests—the forestry equivalent of factory farming. It donned the legitimising robes and mortar-board of forestry science. This plan for the Australian forests—designed on a massive scale and affecting a huge area of mountain forest—was extensively promoted in the late 1960s and early 1970s by State forest bureaucracies who naively identified the interests of the forest industries with the public interest. In only slightly different guises, it continues to this day.

The foresters called it 'intensive forestry' and it included integration of the new industry of woodchipping with the establishment of pine plantations. The book's challenge was on several levels. The first—very much on the level of our opponents' terrain—was to the forest economics involved, to the forestry profession and its professional standards, to its claims to be ecologically virtuous, and to its relationship with the forest industries that it supposedly regulated. The second—somewhat more in the background—was a detailed theoretical challenge to simplifying and 'reductive' philosophical framework of rationalism which just

The book was the first major critique of Australian forestry edition sold out in a few weeks. Environmentalism was a popular movement, and its opposition to the tree-huggers as yet not well developed. A few individuals, such as and organisations were active, and they provided support. However, the book was received with hostility by the forestry profession. Special editions of forestry journals with vitriolic reviews, denunciations and derogatory comments about forestry thinking were not refuted and

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PHOTO

The People's Forest

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FOR THE FORESTS

CARE—AS I DISCOVERED IN YOUTHFUL TRAVELS IN THE LANDSCAPES OF North Africa and the Middle East—once rich forests could give way to impoverished, degraded and the better case, as in Europe, they were replaced by the highly productive landscapes of cultivation, hedgerow and so on, these could be fruitful and beautiful, but still they reveal the revelation I had met in the 'original forest' surrounding where I knew little about the degradation of Australian forests. In my travels, I saw these forests with fresh eyes, and knew that they were beautiful and precious. I set about reimagining the forest world, and learning the names and stories anew. On my return to Australia in 1968, the tremendous advance of environmentalism that threatened the destruction of the forest world first became clear. As I began to explore Australian forests and understand them, I felt a strong call to work for the forests. The horror of what was happening—the very thought of losing so much that people would only have to be made aware of its enormity. They would lie down in front of bulldozers and letters and books and organise and pester politicians and media. An outrage—a sentiment I fully expected every other share—I undertook my early activist work on behalf of

forests, publicising the clearing rates and the parlous state of forests, exposing and writing critiques of plans for an ambitious program to bulldoze massive areas of NSW tableland forests for exotic pine plantations, and lobbying in the Federal arena against the program's funding. This work culminated in a joint book with (my late husband) Richard Routley, *The Fight for the Forests*, which was first published in 1973. I also wrote a number of papers on world rainforest destruction which appeared between 1978 and 1982.

The main target of *The Fight for the Forests* was to confront and expose the 'rational' depletion and conquest of the forests. Rich natural systems were simplified and assimilated into what the foresters imagined as a 'standing reserve' of cellulose. Forests became regimented lines of interchangeable wood-producing units, conceived entirely in terms of industrial needs and demands. This blinkered world view lay behind the new, intense and all-pervasive use of the forests—the forestry equivalent of factory farming. To justify the unjustifiable, it donned the legitimising robes and mortar-board of forestry science. This plan for the Australian forests—designed on a massive scale and affecting a huge area of mountain forest—was extensively promoted in the late 1960s and early 1970s by State forest bureaucracies who naively identified the interests of the forest industries with the public interest. In only slightly different guises, it continues to this day.

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The book was the first major critique of Australian forestry. The first edition sold out in a few weeks. Environmentalism was in its early stages as a popular movement, and its opposition to the treatment of the forests was as yet not well developed. A few individuals, such as Milo Dunphy in NSW, and organisations were active, and they provided encouragement and support. However, the book was received with extreme hostility by the forestry profession. Special editions of forestry journals appeared, complete with vitriolic reviews, denunciations and derogatory verse. Although I later came to see the book's concerns as too limited, I still feel that its main arguments about forestry thinking were not refuted and remain relevant.

Machinery was set in motion to prevent the Australian National University, which had published the book in several small-run editions, from

meeting the continuing demand for it, and to block our research access to essential information held in the ANU's forestry department library. We had expected criticism, but it was still a shock to discover how many foresters put allegiance to the industry and to their fellow professionals ahead of allegiance to the forests and to the public. It was perhaps even more of a shock to find how many university decision-makers thought the forests—rich in opportunities for intellectual as well as ecological inquiry—could be neatly pigeonholed as the sole territory of the foresters, a professional group largely captured by these narrow thought patterns and by the demands of industry.

I wondered how we would survive the storm. But greater trauma lay ahead. Over the next few years it gradually became clear that—however destructive its practices and threadbare its justifications—the thrust of intensive forestry would not easily be stopped. Some projects would be wound back. Our work did, I think, help get a reprieve for much of the tableland forest in NSW earmarked for pines. Others were given a facelift, but the major wood-chipping projects proceeded unhindered.

All of us early green crusaders who thought it would be easy to stem these developments—and the kind of thinking which later was called economic rationalism—were bound for disillusionment. A vast amount of public concern was generated, and some victories were won, but we were pushing against a weight much greater and more systemic than most of us knew then.

As the optimism and radicalism of those early years of the movement waned, it was becoming clearer in almost every area of environmental struggle that the major social changes required to maintain the environmental quality of the planet would be very hard to achieve. I began to see that our dominant economic, political, and philosophical systems are not equal to coping with the problems that we generate, especially those threatening the forests and planetary eco systems. I see this judgement increasingly confirmed, especially by the rise and rise of market fundamentalism in the First World of rich nations.

My journey was a difficult one—from youthful expectation of a world shaped by fairness and justice to the knowledge of a real world of entrenched injustice. In those enviable early times of innocence, I had thought change would flow from sufficient information and that the best argument would win. The terrible world of injustice was one of wounds and running sores, landscapes of burnt forests, charred and shattered bones, and the bodies of tortured children. Eventually, anger gives way to grief, and grief to an often disabling sadness that environmental activists can mistake for 'burn out'. I can point to the exact spot where, travelling the road through a newly-denuded landscape, distant forested mountains came into view and I was finally overwhelmed by the relentlessness of the deforestation process. I



Snake Hunt on the Murray.

118 Tiger Snakes in 2 Hours.

A couple of hours work killing 118 tiger snakes around the Bunyip sawmill in the Barmah forest on the Murray River. Hundreds more were caught then burnt several weeks earlier when the travelling photographer didn't turn up. We are still learning that nature is an active presence, rather than mere background to the 'top-billing' drama of our own species.

PHOTOGRAPH: NATIONAL LIBRARY OF AUSTRALIA, COURTESY OF GEOFF CORRY.

realised that, despite the efforts of many devoted people, the forest world was still being driven back to the edges of our 'normal' world.

Sadness and despair paralysed my work on the issue for long periods. In the end, however, the project redefined itself. It re-emerged, broader and deeper, as the search for an answer to a different kind of question—what were the origins of our bent for destruction, our hostility or indifference to the fate of the forests, and the concept of 'rationality' that drives it? I turned my energies to the task of discovering—through an interrogation of western philosophy—the roots of the destructiveness and denial that I saw around me.

I also put increasing energy into a second project, to 'walk the talk'. I decided that I would try for something else in that small area where one sometimes has a little freedom to create different relationships—the sphere of personal life. I had found during my travels that I still felt most comfortable, happy and alive when I was in the forest. A merely occasional or weekend immersion was not enough. I needed to live in the forest, and to try—in the tranquillity of my own forest land—to keep a piece of the enchanted forest alive. In a sense, I was bound to do it. Environmental philosophy, my chosen area of inquiry, suggests that ideals can only be judged properly if one also confronts fully the perplexities of trying to live them out.

Thus it was that my two projects assembled themselves around my life at Plumwood Mountain, a wonderful piece of cool temperate plumwood (*Eucryphia sp.*) forest on the eastern edge of the southern tableland of NSW. Luckily for me, the projects have mostly supported and enriched one another. Although forests still fall, the joy of living in the forest world helps to balance out the sadness generated by trying to defend them.

DIGGING FOR THE PHILOSOPHICAL ROOTS

TRYING TO UNDERSTAND WHAT DRIVES OUR GLOBAL SYSTEM TO CREATE A deforested world and then define this as 'normality' is one of the most urgent intellectual problems of our time. We seem indifferent to the forest's marvels, to its peril and our own. Seeking the cultural sources which denied the preciousness of the forest and which encouraged rapacious deforestation, I was drawn towards environmental philosophy in the early 1970s, when the subject-area was still hardly recognised. It was not that traditional western philosophy had overlooked nature—in a sense, an 'oppositional' or antagonistic treatment of nature was at its heart. But its characteristic assumptions placed nature so far in the background that a philosophical study of our human relationship with nature could not even begin. For new and ecologically troubled times, we had to create a form of philosophy that redrew the boundaries of awareness and concern and brought up for more conscious questioning these characteristic assumptions about nature.

I began my own contribution to the development of this new field in 1975 by challenging the contemporary philosophical idea that only human life and human works were intrinsically valuable. Nature's value was thought to be of a different kind from humans, who were seen as valuable in and for themselves. Nature could have only an instrumental or resource value, one derived entirely from its usefulness to humans. This idea contained what I saw as the thoroughly human-centred implication that humans were 'lords of creation'. Humans did not need to recognise any value, life or purpose in the world other than their own or those generated by their wants. In an economic system impatient to maximise a crudely estimated, human-centred value, millions of years of forest evolution counted for nothing.

Looking for an account of the origins of this arrogance, I found a widespread view that the problem was one of 'modernity', marked by the rise of secular humanism, science and technology. The trouble—according to thinkers like Morris Berman—began in the Enlightenment from about the 1600s when the world became disenchanted with the arrival of science. This was a simple answer and required the minimum in historical excavation, but I found it unsatisfying. If our newly godless world was the problem, the solution would seem to be a return to pre-Enlightenment religious morals and frameworks. I was sympathetic to the idea that it had all started much further back.

I am no archaeologist, but as I dug into ancient philosophy, I found etched deep into western culture the patterns of thought which treat nature as disorderly, alien and inessential in contrast to the humanised urban sphere of reason. Ancient Greek thought places the concept of rational 'civilisation'—associated with the beginning of urban life—in opposition to the supposedly irrational and chaotic primitive world represented by the primeval forest.

Nature, the body and the biological 'world of changes' were associated with women and other lower groups such as slaves, in contrast to a strongly separate, higher realm of ideas and 'spirit' associated with men. I began to understand why I had had to fight to get the education that boys took for granted, and why my society treated women as it did.

These ancient views of nature as irrational and 'lower' bear on forests as well as women, and especially on the destruction of the forests of Greece, Mesopotamia, and the old Mediterranean states. For the Greeks, the forest appears as what is left behind by civilisation, the dangerous shadow place on the other side of the boundary of order, the haunt of 'the wild man', of barbarians and beasts. The resulting concept of 'rationality' and civic order is defined in opposition to the forest and its deity, Dionysius, the abandoned god who comes from afar to unleash chaos and unbind form and social order. The forest, the barbarian and the woman all become symbols of the disorder and unreason which must be transcended or swept away for rational, civilised life to prevail. So, as Chateaubriand remarked, everywhere forests have preceded the conquest of civilisation, and everywhere deserts have followed it.

I have never been drawn to conventional religions involving a single transcendent God. The idea of one source of creation, meaning or purpose has always seemed much too singular and centralised. For me, creativity, meanings and spiritual presences have always been multiple, widely distributed and able to be discerned in the world, not located above or beyond it. So it was not hard for me to accept what my study of ancient philosophy suggested, that western religion, too, was implicated in the 'reduction' of nature. Within Christian ideals of salvation, the 'unimportant' earthly world of nature and material life was subordinated to the celestial world of eternal life beyond the earth. Reverence for earthly origins, places and non-human others was eliminated in dominant forms of religious life. The world became a temporary place of sojournment, not a home, a dwelling. If we are just passing through, we don't need to be careful of the temporary trappings of life that this 'vale of tears' represents.

Religion and science are often contrasted as if one presented the answer to the faults of the other. But a little more work showed me that science was just as much of a problem. In fact, it was basically the same problem. It replaces Greek and Roman ideas of nature as a potentially disruptive, pre-

rational power with a mechanistic and reductionist homogeneous, lawlike sphere empty of mind and purpose. Its 'work' background to our own masterful consciousness as Christian ideals of salvation had subordinated the 'world of nature and material life to the immaterial celestial realm of the divine'. So under the guise of objectivity, modern science, status, does not supersede but rather inherits and updates the rationality and humanity. In its fantasy of scientific human mission becomes that of remoulding nature to the dictates of scientific reason and to achieve on earth salvation as freedom from death and bodily limitation. Now humans must hope to achieve salvation on earth rather than in heaven, and do so by the conquest of nature.

This new project of salvation involved both the technological-industrial conquest of nature and also the geographical conquest of empire. This in turn fed the pretensions of western science to be the universal or supreme body of knowledge in the world. The idea of rational conquest of nature is not just an abstract past concept but a powerful present ideology whose products have touched all our lives, shaped our individual and 'coloniser' identities and played a crucial role in the biological and racial history of this continent. The project of conquest of nature goes hand in hand with the idea that it is empty, a *terra nullius* open to the reception of our purposes. The same distorted concept of 'progress' justified colonial invasion, a 'superior' rational races brought light to the darkness of non-western peoples who were conceived as natural 'primitives'. Later, after WWII, this same endeavour was more subtle, less explicitly racist, as progress was the economic and technocratic ideals of 'development'.

I concluded that we could avoid the old, fruitless religion versus science. Neither religion nor science had the problem. The problem was the distortion of their complicity with the project of human mastery and rationality.

I began to locate my own life conflicts in a larger context of global forces, and to understand better the minds of forestry and its role in global deforestation. The reason for this is an accidental arrangement of passive matter denies agency and power. The forest becomes a largely rational plants and animals that we rational beings can rearrange without check or limit to meet our biotic needs whatever does not serve those demands can simply be removed.

Modern scientific forestry has been more than the human supremacist ideology—and to its associated nature—than perhaps any other discipline with the exception of economics. Forests must serve in order to survive. Even the

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rational power with a mechanistic and reductionist view of nature as a homogeneous, lawlike sphere empty of mind and purpose. It is a 'clock-work' background to our own masterful consciousness and endeavour. Just as Christian ideals of salvation had subordinated the 'unimportant' earthly world of nature and material life to the immaterial celestial world beyond the earth, so in the science of the Enlightenment this was transformed into the idea of subordinating nature to the realm of scientific law and reason. Science began to rival and replace religion as the dominant belief system. So under the guise of objectivity, modern science, now with religious status, does not supersede but rather inherits and updates ancient ideals of rationality and humanity. In its fantasy of scientific mastery, the defining human mission becomes that of remoulding nature in obedience to the dictates of scientific reason and to achieve on earth—rather than in heaven—salvation as freedom from death and bodily limitation. Now humans must hope to achieve salvation on earth rather than in heaven, and do so by the conquest of nature.

This new project of salvation involved both the technological-industrial conquest of nature and also the geographical conquest of empire. This in turn fed the pretensions of western science to be the universal or supreme body of knowledge in the world. The idea of rational conquest of nature is not just an abstract past concept but a powerful present ideology whose products have touched all our lives, shaped our individual and 'coloniser' identities and played a crucial role in the biological and racial history of this continent. The project of conquest of nature goes hand in hand with the idea that it is empty, a *terra nullius* open to the reception of our purposes. The same distorted concept of 'progress' justified colonial invasion, as 'superior' rational races brought light to the darkness of non-western peoples who were conceived as nature 'primitives'. Later, after WWII, this same endeavour was more subtle, less explicitly racist, as progress was rephrased in terms of the economic and technocratic ideals of 'development'.

I concluded that we could avoid the old, fruitless argument about religion versus science. Neither religion nor science themselves were the problem. The problem was the distortion of their dominant forms by complicity with the project of human mastery and rational supremacy.

I began to locate my own life conflicts in a larger framework of historical forces, and to understand better the mindset of modern 'scientific' forestry and its role in global deforestation. The reductive idea of nature as an accidental arrangement of passive matter denies the forest's uniqueness, agency and power. The forest becomes a largely replaceable assemblage of plants and animals that we rational beings can know completely and rearrange without check or limit to meet our burgeoning demands. And whatever does not serve those demands can simply be swept away.

Modern scientific forestry has been more thoroughly given over to this human supremacist ideology—and to its associated project of replacement of nature—than perhaps any other discipline with the exception of agriculture. Forests must serve in order to survive. Even the richest and most complex

forests are imagined as cellulose reservoirs, which can be replaced without loss by more convenient, manipulable and 'productive' vegetative forms. The forestry discipline and profession, as handmaiden to tree harvesting industries, has ruthlessly promoted projects of replacement, under the banner of forests as 'renewable resources'. This has been the case even where there is ample evidence that great risks and species losses are involved in replacing the original forests, as in the tropical rainforests.

In Australia, the dominant form of scientific forestry has been strongly shaped by this distorted rationalistic view. Yet here, it is especially inappropriate, given our old, fragile soils and the marginal nature of our forests. Mainstream forestry professes objectivity but resists environmental concern. Any environmental mitigation of forestry practices achieved in Australia has almost always been imposed on an uncompromising profession, and industry, as the result of sustained community activism and protest. The discipline is oriented to maximising a single variable—timber—from the many that the forest is built upon. This occurs even where it goes against what is known about sustainable rotation periods and other forest cycles. It has promoted the replacement of indigenous forests—long tested by evolution and time, adapted to their precise location—with rationally-contrived but largely unproved collections of useful exotics, or by dense stands of young trees providing cellulose on extremely short rotations. 'Supertrees' are chosen on narrow criteria—how much do they grow? How quickly? Using their models, there is no loss when a biologically rich forest is destroyed and replaced by a poorer but more narrowly 'productive' one. This becomes self-fulfilling as forests which are increasingly simplified or reduced to tree farms lose their richness and ability to support values other than wood or cellulose production.

A DIFFERENT KNOWING

THERE ARE RISKS AND CONSOLATION TO BE FOUND IN UNDERSTANDING one's puny personal struggles in terms of a larger historical and philosophical picture. The long view takes away some of the personal pain and incomprehension, but it can also resign us to the play of historical forces. It can teach us how ambitious an effective challenge must be, but can also overwhelm us by the magnitude of needed change, even as ancient forests are pressed to the last extremity. For me, the long view has added to, rather than subtracted from, the sense of urgency. It has brought me to see our present time, with the imminent passing of the forests and the environment movement's counter challenge to deforestation, as a cusp, one of those crucial historical turning points where a potential to change direction seems to be thrown up. I fear though that these new possibilities will be stillborn unless our society can find ways to empower its more self-critical elements, and give a smaller role to those that would plough on heedless of terrible and irreversible consequences for the people and the land.

These depleted, reductionist and self-centred ways of thinking about the forest stop many of us from encountering the forest world in its fullness. They erase other stories of place and presence along with the range and diversity of mind, agency and purpose found in nature and animals. There can be



*The forestry profession, as handmaiden to tree harvesting industries, has ruthlessly promoted the replacement or manipulation of Australia's native forests, under the banner of forests as 'renewable resources'. Shown here is blackbutt (*Eucalyptus pilularis*), subject to forestry 'thinning' trials, Blackall Range, near Gympie, Queensland.* PHOTOGRAPH: CSIRO TREE SEED CENTRE.

no real activity, no mystery, no value, no history, no power of life here, nothing significant beyond ourselves. We are powerful, but empty and alone.

It is important that we establish less arrogant forms of knowledge of the forest. We can all contribute to this challenge at the personal level by seeking out and honouring experiences of other ways of encountering it. A crucial part of the challenge to mechanistic views of nature can be made at the level of our own individual experience.

Adherents of scientific reductionism oppose a reverential concept of the forest as sacred. They decry that view as being primitive superstitions, or animistic. Instead they adopt a utilitarian approach. Certainly, the forest can provide powerful experiences of the sacred and the spiritual. But a different knowledge relationship with the forest is not a matter of opting for religion in opposition to science, for fantasy rather than rationality, or for non-use rather than utility. The sense of nature as a subject rather than object must inform our working lives as well as our leisure time. We can draw on philosophy to help us reconceive nature as an active presence and the forest

community as a field of intentionally rich, intricately connected and communicative others. This is a field not of passivity and disorder but of complex order and meaning. If we can aim to change rather than discard science, we can draw on it to supply biological and ecological narratives that support our reconception of the forest. Could we not re-orient a science of the forests to broader, wiser ideals—of awe and humility before nature, of care for and engagement with what is studied, of the search for what Freya Mathews has identified as “the possibility of the world's response”, as itself giving meaning to human life?

One of the best ways to counter mechanistic reductionism may be through the kind of sensibility Donna Haraway has called for, which discerns nature as an active presence in our lives. This involves a sense of sympathetic openness and attentiveness to the forest world and its inhabitants. Where this openness allows a return to the ‘beginner's mind’, it can mean a rediscovery of childhood capacities to experience wonder in the encounter with other presences and other lives—so like our own, but so very strangely ‘other’.

As Sandra Harding suggests, western science must also begin to recognise the contribution of the indigenous and other non-western bodies of knowledge it drew on these to create the supposedly universal knowledge framework it has set up as the badge of its superiority. These indigenous knowledges can be an inspiration for alternative ways of seeing and knowing. Once the forest becomes for us fully a domain of other beings with needs and ends of their own, we can cease to see ourselves as external masters of a world that was made for our use and benefit alone.

A world in which we cannot meet any other presence or hear any story other than our own is a sadly impoverished one, progressively emptied of meaning. Reductive frameworks that enable us to turn our back on other presences in the forest also facilitate greater exploitation. It is easier to cut, to kill, if you devalue, ignore or reduce what you kill. But there is a risky side to this as well as an apparently clever side, maximising our benefit. The world is full of examples of cultures which have overreached themselves, which have denied or eliminated the forest presence, and which have not survived their ecological disasters. We must develop a culture that is sensitive to the forests if we want them—and us—to survive.

THE WISDOM TONIC IN THE ENCHANTED FOREST

IT HAS BEEN MY LIFE'S LATER STRUGGLE TO TRY TO RECONCILE MY LOVE OF philosophy with my love of the forest. Given the traditions of philosophy I have inherited, this has not been an easy task.

My efforts at reconciliation have centred around my home in the forest at Plumwood Mountain. Here I built a house of local stone in a small, pre-existing clearing. The forest surrounded me, seized my sense of self and held it hostage. Almost every word I write now has the thought of the forest behind it, as the ultimate progenitor and meaning of my speech. My little house is crammed with books on philosophy, books that mostly try to cut the forest down to the size of human concepts. They say, many of them, that philosophy is more important than forests. Some of the newer and bolder ones have even tried to dismiss nature as illusory, a construction of the human species, no less! But as soon as I step outside my door I know that

this is nonsense and that the forest is a far better philosopher than any bookshelves. I know this with certainty and with receive its daily dose of wisdom tonic.

At Plumwood Mountain, the enchanted forest is a source of passionate and mysterious dramas, but I am no longer young just to take in the wonder and vigour of the forest and be filled by it. Now I aspire to decipher a little more of the discern the complex connections ordering the myriad of species—many of which are lucky to be known—especially from indigenous communities—intimate cultural knowledge of the land handed down from one generation to the next. In western, urbanised, high-density cities, we often lack this. In its absence, one of the ways we weave individual stories into larger wholes is through what is called ‘living in place’ and ‘storied residence’. Through engagement with a place, we can discern how its many stories weave a web of subtle connections.

To record the forest as a place of beauty, you need a camera or a sketchbook. To record the forest as a place of reality, philosophical gear—at a minimum, this will include a sense that here, indeed, is a very big story.

The first playful presence of the forest you are likely to notice is of the forest path, which invites and promises, giving hints of adventures with elusive and potential presences. In November, with forest orchids in bloom, the forest entices you on, into a rainforest gully, a cool green space in the noon shade. You are drawn to a spot in the head of the gully, immersed in tree ferns, which offers beneath its canopy a lookout perch of concealment and tranquillity somewhere. To you, sitting quietly there, the forest reveals a story. The path comes hopping a swamp wallaby (single mothers are always single mothers). Her joey, probably close behind, a quarter-size replica reproducing every glance, every movement.

As the wallabies near your hiding place, the mother looks around the air. She looks nervously round, over towards you. She sees that there is no human around, she can smell it. But she sees you, shortly reassured that the human threat is past, she turns away. Now she diverges from your path, for she has her eye on the base of the great fallen eucalypt which is your hideout. From the stump, she turns from its top, and holding out her front paws, extended by the waiting joey, pulls her up and out together down the other side and disappear noiselessly into the forest beyond. The forest has made a momentous and bold decision, one that should structure your knowledge relations—the forest paths are not yours, for your use only. Paths. Others too have design, they have forethought, and they care intensely for those near to them, just as much as it is yours. A ‘forest-friendly’ ethical solution.

The path leads you further on, hushing your heart to admire an orange-blossom orchid, yes, just as much as it is yours.

intentionally rich, intricately connected and complex is a field not of passivity and disorder but of engagement. If we can aim to change rather than discard what we have, to supply biological and ecological narratives that are more than stories of the forest. Could we not re-orient a science of nature towards ideals—of awe and humility before nature, of respect for what is studied, of the search for what Freya Mathewson calls “the possibility of the world’s response”, as itself part of our life?

ways to counter mechanistic reductionism may be the possibility Donna Haraway has called for, which dislodges the presence in our lives. This involves a sense of respect and attentiveness to the forest world and its openness allows a return to the ‘beginner’s mind’, a way of childhood capacities to experience wonder at the presences and other lives—so like our own, and other’s.

Suggests, western science must also begin to recognise the presence of indigenous and other non-western bodies of knowledge to create the supposedly universal knowledge of the forest as the badge of its superiority. These indigenous knowledges inspire for alternative ways of seeing and knowing, and for us fully a domain of other beings with needs that we can cease to see ourselves as external masters of a world for our use and benefit alone.

We cannot meet any other presence or hear any story in a sadly impoverished one, progressively emptied of the networks that enable us to turn our back on other beings so facilitate greater exploitation. It is easier to cut, to burn or reduce what you kill. But there is a risky side to the clever side, maximising our benefit. The world cultures which have overreached themselves, which have led the forest presence, and which have not survived. We must develop a culture that is sensitive to the forest—and us—to survive.

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‘S LATER STRUGGLE TO TRY TO RECONCILE MY LOVE OF THE FOREST. Given the traditions of philosophy it has not been an easy task.

Cultivation have centred around my home in the forest. Here I built a house of local stone in a small, prehistoric setting surrounded me, seized my sense of self and held my word. I write now has the thought of the forest as a progenitor and meaning of my speech. My little books on philosophy, books that mostly try to cut down the size of human concepts. They say, many of them, that forests are more important than forests. Some of the newer and bolder ones dismiss nature as illusory, a construction of the mind. But as soon as I step outside my door I know that

this is nonsense and that the forest is a far better philosopher than any on my bookshelves. I know this with certainty and with joy, and open myself to receive its daily dose of wisdom tonic.

At Plumwood Mountain, the enchanted forest still plays out for me its passionate and mysterious dramas, but I am no longer as content as I was when young just to take in the wonder and vigour of it all, to watch, to listen and be filled by it. Now I aspire to decipher a little of the overall plot, to discern the complex connections ordering the myriad individual life stories, hoping to be given a glimpse of their larger meanings. Some of us—especially from indigenous communities—are lucky to have a wealth of detailed, intimate cultural knowledge of the land handed down lovingly from one generation to the next. In western, urbanised, highly individualised societies, we often lack this. In its absence, one of the best ways of learning to weave individual stories into larger wholes is through what some have called ‘living in place’ and ‘storied residence’. Through long-attentive engagement with a place, we can discern how its myriad unfolding histories weave a web of subtle connections.

To record the forest as a place of beauty, you need some gear, a camera or a sketchbook. To record the forest as a place of revelation, you need some philosophical gear—at a minimum, this will include patience, openness, and a sense that here, indeed, is a very big story.

The first playful presence of the forest you are likely to encounter is that of the forest path, which invites and promises, giving at every turn alluring hints of adventures with elusive and potential presences. On a bright day in November, with forest orchids in bloom, the forest path smiles divinely and entices you on, into a rainforest gully, a cool green room of welcome afternoon shade. You are drawn to a spot in the head of a big old fallen eucalypt, immersed in tree ferns, which offers beneath its fronded roof a splendid lookout perch of concealment and tranquillity some ten feet above the path. To you, sitting quietly there, the forest reveals a stunning secret—along the path comes hopping a swamp wallaby single mother (female swamp wallabies are always single mothers). Her joey, probably a good daughter, tags close behind, a quarter-size replica reproducing exactly her mother’s every glance, every movement.

As the wallabies near your hiding place, the mother stops and sniffs the air. She looks nervously round, over towards your tree and back again. There is no human around, she can smell it. But she sees nothing alarming, and shortly, reassured that the human threat is past, she continues on her way. Now she diverges from your path, for she has her own, which lies over the base of the great fallen eucalypt which is your hide. Jumping onto the giant stump, she turns from its top, and holding out her forepaws to grasp those extended by the waiting joey, pulls her up and over the trunk. They slide together down the other side and disappear noiselessly into the dim forest beyond. The forest has made a momentous and basic philosophical disclosure, one that should structure your knowledge relationship to wallabies and paths—the forest paths are not yours, for your use alone. Others have their paths. Others too have design, they have forethought, regularity and intention, and they care intensely for those near to them. The forest is theirs too, just as much as it is yours. A ‘forest-friendly’ ethical system must allow for that.

The path leads you further on, hushing your footsteps. Pausing for a moment to admire an orange-blossom orchid, you spy a wombat coming

down the path towards you. As she comes closer, you speak softly, for you have not been seen, and fear that she will be startled by your nearness. But it is too late, she has almost reached you. At the sound of your voice she falls back in terror, and you see behind her a second smaller figure. She throws herself on top of the baby wombat and freezes. After perhaps 20 seconds of freeze-frame, they rush off together, and in moments are lost in the thick undergrowth. Can we manage to live without terrorising the world? Further on, the path shows you a mixed mob of little thornbills, scrub wrens and honeyeaters yelling passionate abuse at a snake on the ground, the most outraged making heroic sallies only inches away from the monster. As you step closer, you see that the cause of the disturbance is a detested, nest-robbing tree-snake, the superbly-patterned black and green diamond python. You watch as it climbs a small tree and delicately entwines itself among the sub-canopy, looking from beneath just like a piece of bark.

There are many narratives of love and care here, especially parental love. But you do not have to strain to discern other, darker and more poignant themes. In late dusk, that magical between time when shapes grow fuzzy and green light suffuses the world, I sit down on a fallen treefern trunk to listen to mid-summer cricket madrigals. A cricket tunes up its trilling drone, a deafening, melodious jack-hammer, right next to me. I admire the pink and green sky, pondering the meaning of the trilling. Unexpectedly, my question is immediately answered. Right at my feet a large insect lands. It is another cricket, presumably one of the opposite sex attracted by the first cricket’s love song, just as it was meant to be. My heart starts to warm—a real Romeo and Juliet story is being played out here in the dusk. But Marcus, one of the small water skinks that inhabit this spot (he is a familiar, I see him regularly basking on this treefern, hence the name) has anticipated this little romance. I watch transfixed, torn between laughter and tears, as Marcus rushes forward from his hiding place under the treefern trunk, and—seizing the radiant bride in his jaws—carries her off as a meal. There is food for thought as well as body here. Marcus knows, the crickets know, and I know, that it will not do to think of this world as a benign sphere of love, harmony and peace. Neither an idyll, nor a slaughter-house, the forest has much to teach us about our own edibility, about fate, justice and the tough-love equality and exchange of the food chain.

A good place for urban-based humans to start the recovery of narrative meaning is with forest animals, but be sure not to stop there. Apply the same open-eyed and open-hearted approach to other elements of the forest, and you’ll be rewarded with amazing revelations at all levels in the storied residence that is the forest community.

Further along the forest path, for example, is a very different kind of history, told at a much slower tempo. Here, long ago, a plumwood seedling germinated part way up the trunk of a soft treefern. Its roots grew slowly, slowly down through the fibrous treefern trunk until they reached the ground. At this point, the young tree began to grow much faster. Now it is a sizeable tree, offering its large, white full-stamened flowers generously to the nectar-feeders each autumn, but its nativity can be seen in the remains of the parent treefern still held fast in the gnarled embrace of the roots. I think we systematically underestimate the awareness, responsiveness, agency and creativity of trees. This is not only due to the influence of the reductive model, but also because as a species we are so hopelessly out of sync with the time

frames within which these trees live. These old, slow tree stories have singular healing, centring and stabilising powers for the human self, so it is a pity they are so often among the narratives whose subtlety we miss. You can work some of them out, but there is so much we'll never know. The forest is fertile ground for humility.

Right at the foundation of it all, lurking mysteriously among the roots, is the bottom story, much taken for granted and poorly studied by existing science. The forest floor is a teeming chaos of order, every inch a hurrying metropolis of squirming, jumping, saucy life—king crickets spilling out of logs, funnel-web spiders carefully repairing disrupted overnight webs, springtails leaping in profusion beneath each fallen leaf. This foundational forest bounty allows the lyrebirds—the magical musicians of these cool, moist forests—to lead sturdy lives, secure in the arthropod plenty and their reproductive specialisation, which gives the males the leisure to perfect their art. Theirs is a many-coloured quilt of birdsong, a song-cycle that arranges and stitches together the individual calls of other species within the formal boundaries of the lyrebirds' own calls and artistic conventions, displayed in superb performances whose artistic qualities are judged and rewarded by their peers and by their community. Can we presume to confine ideas of artistry to humans alone?

Some stories go (on) right over our heads, way up in the canopy. This is the place where it's all happening, the ritzy club and restaurant section of town, particularly in the tropical and subtropical rainforest. Here you will be stunned by the brilliant burst of the flame tree, or mysteriously enticed by the low bubbling call of the wompoo pigeon, fruity presence of the deep moist gullies. The tall, wet forests further south near my home offer a similar level of avian extravagance. They provide plentiful dining places just beneath the canopy for noisy birthday parties of flamboyant king parrots, whose gorgeous green-and-red matriarchs boss around the even more gorgeous red-and-green males. You may catch the flash of a beautiful rose head as patient parent gang-gangs wheel about to marshal straggling youngsters from the big mid-summer cooperative nursery groups travelling through to feed high in the sub-canopy. Gang-gang children get individual parental attention. No one is left behind, each one is cherished.

THE BIGGEST PICTURE

IN THE SAME WAY AS AN HISTORICAL NOVEL CAN VIVIDLY AND ACCURATELY BUILD a picture of a past era from the stories of many individual lives, the personal histories of individual organisms can bring to life the larger forest stories.

The canopy has much to tell, and not only in the rainforest. In certain forests, the canopy can offer special insights into the forest as a community of complex order and mutual dependence. These insights should be enough to convince anyone that the forest is not an accidental aggregate of individuals, a dissonance of unrelated sounds, or a chaos of competing atoms. The canopy can reveal forest life as embedded in a highly organised, negotiated community, an intricate tapestry of connected life threads interwoven and tied together, as in a carefully constructed narrative. If this kind of forest has long been 'living in place', it can be uniquely adapted to that place and its particular landform relationships.

In the misty southern rainforests of my present home this sense of long evolving, negotiated connections and spaces is strong. Some years, every one of the sassafras trees down to the smallest saplings decide to cover themselves in starry white flowers. Every twig is crammed, and the drifts of brown fluffy seeds along my fence lines are a foot deep. Most years, they flower only sparsely—you may not see such a mass-flowering event again in decades. How do they coordinate? The white August flowers of this strong-scented tree are followed in regular and close succession by a whole band of white-flowered trees, each taking its turn in accordance with what gives every indication of being a mysterious, coordinated program. Superb lyrebird calling is tailored to fit exactly that space in which the birds they imitate are silent, while the silent season for lyrebirds coincides exactly with the main calling time for the others. Living attentively to place, you begin to notice how it all fits together.

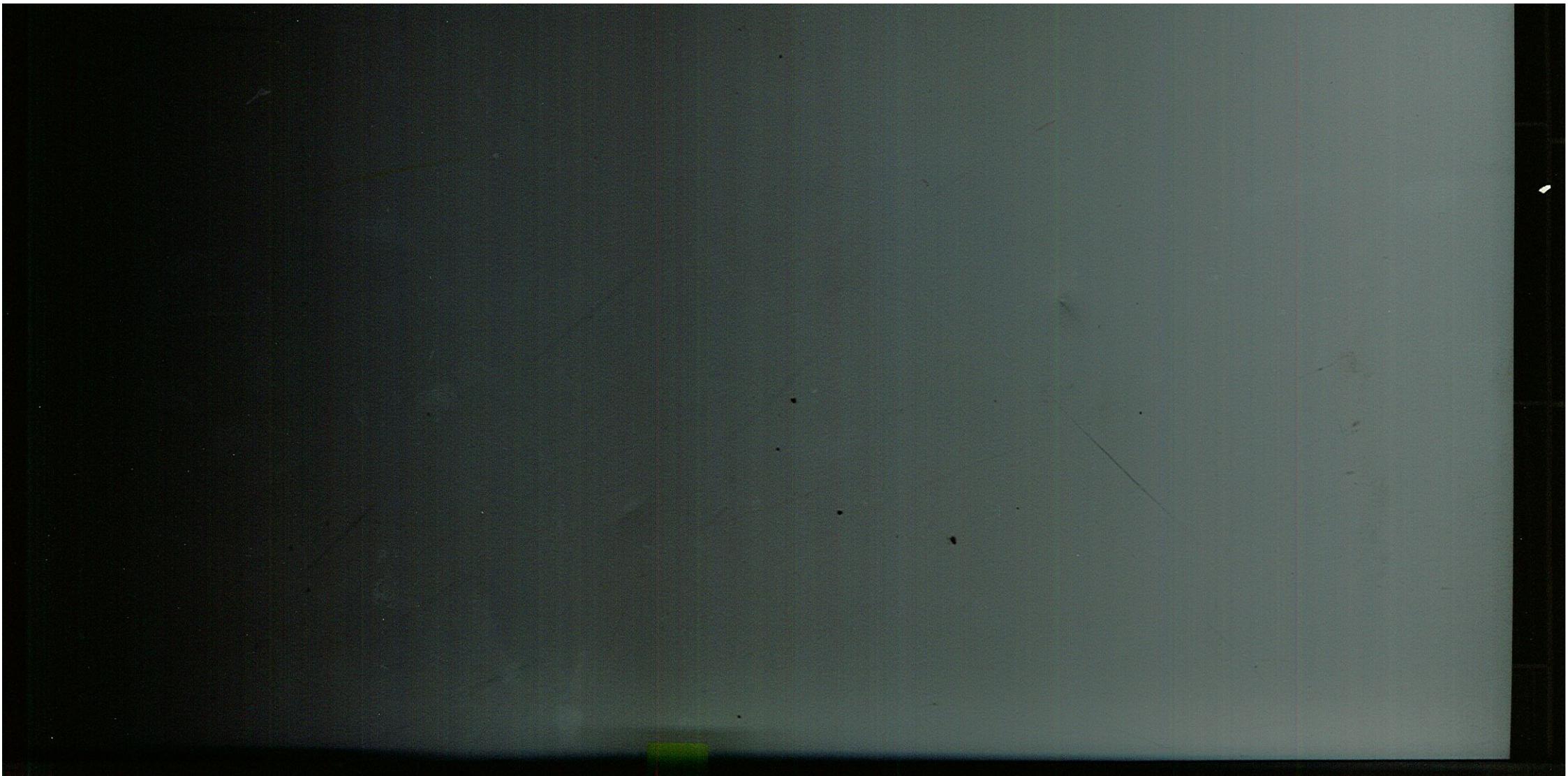
In these forests, one presence appears, unfolds, reaches a conclusion, and another immediately arises to fill the sensory space left vacant. Dusk calling is an example of this negotiation of sensory space. From spring to midsummer, the early evening time is for the great choruses of frogs. From midsummer onwards, the frogs mostly retire and dew fall brings out whole droning orchestras of mole crickets. When they, too, begin to retire in February, the tiny tinkling bells of the rain-crickets fill the pale-violet twilights until the first cold spell of autumn. Then—in the deep, chilly twilights of May—the powerful owl gives its deliberate, slow hoots. The sooty owl gives forth its shuddering ghostly cry on the still, frosty moonlit nights of June. The urgent, vibrating bass of the barking owl signals its strange and transitory presence in August. Then it is the boobook owls' duet—his baritone to her soprano—that rounds it all off with the cheerful but impassioned mating operettas of September and October, when the frogs begin the cycle once again.

To come to know all this demands a sensibility which discerns nature as an active presence, rather than a passive object. The forest is one of the best places to acquire such a sensibility. We can make spaces in our lives that invite the forest in as a partner, a fellow presence. As active presence, the forest can be as seductive as any lover, can be courted to yield up wisdom and delight, can court us in return with experiences that are intense and expansive, revelatory and joyful.

REACHING UNDERSTANDING

WE HAVE BEEN TAUGHT TO SEE NON-HUMAN PRESENCES AS SECONDARY background elements to our 'top-billing' drama, to see the movement of history as our own species' march to dominance of the earth. Humans must now learn other histories, learn to see with other eyes, learn above all the place of forests in our daily lives.

The forest has so much to give us. A world without forests is a world in which both the earth and ourselves are wounded beyond repair. If we want our species to pass through and beyond the present dangerous and paradoxical age of civilised deforestation, we must now learn how create forms of civilised life that do not leave deserts in their wake. No work is more important now than that of creating new visions of human identity and human purpose that deliver the forest from the status of cellulose reservoir. And in this work, perhaps we may also deliver ourselves, finding new roles as forest peacemakers, forest healers, forest storytellers—perhaps even as forest lovers. ■



The People's Forest

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Two axemen cut for two and a half days to fell this mountain ash (*Eucalyptus regnans*), for newsprint in 1942 on Nichols Spur, Junee, in the Derwent River valley of Tasmania. The tree germinated in 1548. Early millers had left the "venerable veteran" because it was too big. An article published in 'Australian Forestry' by A.D. Helms noted that "for miles round workers downed tools for a moment, almost in reverence to the mighty tree that was no more". Even so, a blinkered world view by both the foresters and the forest industries lay behind the simplification and conquest of the forests. Rich natural systems were imagined as little more than regimented wood-producing units.

PHOTOGRAPH: FORESTRY TASMANIA LIBRARY