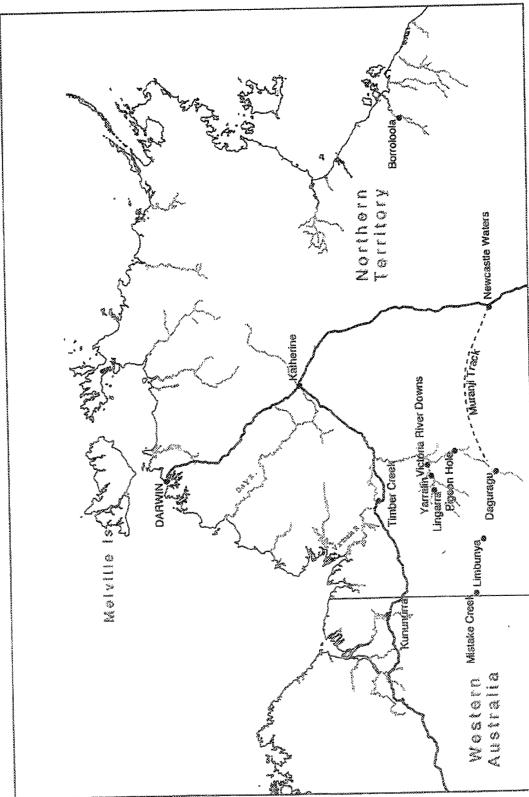


WEEK FOUR

RECUPERATION



Historians must also consider how the past has become the present and how the present relates to the past. Nations rest on such historical consciousness – on a chain of connection between ‘them’ and ‘us’ – and so we need histories that create a sense of moral engagement with the past in the present. (Attwood & Foster 2003: 26)

Hobbles Danaiyari spoke of efforts to conceal and contain the histories of colonisation as they affected Indigenous people: ‘Captain Cook bin coverem up me gotta big swag.’ He spoke out of the knowledge that much has been silenced, that history is contested, and that knowledge has been and will continue to be manipulated. His intention was to promote the kind of moral engagement Attwood & Foster call for in the succinct statement of purpose just quoted.

The past is contested territory, and so memory, ethics, and narratives are also contested. Some politicians, for example, exhort us to accept an account of history that enables us to feel ‘comfortable and relaxed’ (John Howard, quoted in Attwood & Foster 2003: 13). Remembrance, it would seem, should focus on that which causes no discomfort. By default, amnesia should surround that which causes discomfort. My Aboriginal teachers in the Victoria River District would have understood this exhortation as further evidence of both epistemological chaos and the colonising practice of concealment – of covering people with a big swag.

In this chapter I take up Atwood & Foster's challenge to explore the basis of a moral engagement with the past in the present. Three main themes draw my attention: ethics and history, practices that entice us to abandon our moral presence, and the project of recuperation.

The Weight of History

Ann Curthoys (2003: 186) links Australia's contestation over history to similar debates in countries such as Japan, Germany and the United States. She reminds us that our debate is about more than the suppression or partial representation of certain strands of history: 'It is a debate about the moral basis of Australian society.' Among the issues at stake is a perception of White Australian innocence (p. 187). The argument seems to be that if settler Australians' conquest of the continent meant death, dispossession, perhaps genocide for Indigenous people, then an aura of guilt must hang over White Australian people, and the nation must rethink its moral basis.

Along with many other scholars, I have encountered and published various forms of evidence concerning death, dispossession, and actions that could reasonably be termed genocide (see Curthoys & Docker 2001 and other essays in the same volume). I have not, however, aimed to produce a tour guide for guilt trips. My purpose is more challenging. In linking knowledge of the violence of the past with an ethics that demarcates a path towards decolonisation, I work with the distinction proposed by the great 20th-century philosopher of ethics, Emmanuel Levinas. James Hatley, in his excellent analysis of 'testimony and history', discusses Levinas's distinction that guilt 'is the burden I or the other may carry for our specific actions or comportment', while responsibility 'is the burden upon me of the other's vulnerability to suffering' (Hatley 2000: 104). The distinction to be made is that between one's own actions (concerning which one may have cause for guilt), and the human condition of living with and for others.

To lift even a corner of the 'big swag' is to move into a realm of ethics and moral challenge. I reject concepts of collective guilt and descendants' guilt, but there are quandaries nevertheless. The immediacy of quandary was articulated beautifully by Miloš Vasić, one of the founders of the Yugoslavian independent weekly *Vreme*.

His situation was acutely uncomfortable: having been a member of the minority opposition to Milosovich's policies and practices, he could absolve himself from personal guilt. And yet he said that he felt ashamed 'as a human being' – not as a Serb but as a human being. He went on to say that 'history sometimes hangs over us in terrible ways' (reported in Paris 2000: 454, 462).

A moral engagement between past and present must acknowledge violence, and having done so, must acknowledge the moral burden of that knowledge. Levinas defines violence as acting as if one were alone; it denies relationship, denies responsibility, and thus effectively denies others. The physical manifestations of violence create pain, destruction, and catastrophe. Discursive practices equally can cause pain and may be a first condition for catastrophic destruction. 'Totality cannot stand aloneness', Hatley (2000: 81) writes, concisely summing up Levinas's thought on violence.

Bernhard Casper (1988: 104) connects the ethical thought of Levinas with that of Rosenzweig and Buber. He writes that these scholars, Levinas pre-eminently, have articulated a new sense of ethics that brings two millennia of dedication to the absolute into the here and now of the contemporary western world, connecting our ethics to our lives as they unfold within relationships of responsibility.

The radical turn that Levinas articulates for us is an intersubjectivity in which each of us is always, already, responsible for others. Self is not a substance but a relation', Levinas writes (1996: 20). There is no self without other. Life with others is inherently entangled in responsibility. Levinas thus claims the primacy of ethics as an inherent and inalienable aspect of the human condition. He teaches an ethic of human connectivity: 'consciousness and even subjectivity follow from, are legitimated by, the ethical summons which proceeds from the intersubjective encounter. Subjectivity arrives, so to speak, in the form of a responsibility towards an other ...' (Newton 1995: 12).

This ethic of connection, of mutually implicated humans whose primary duty is to respond to the calls of others, particularly those who are vulnerable, does not demand a suppression or denial of one's own self. Rather to the contrary, the argument is that one finds one's own self in responding to others, and so both self and other become entangled in ethical relationships, or, if responsibility is abjured in favour of violence, in abuse of ethics. The self includes one's capacity for moral knowledge and action: 'I become a moral

agent and not a power instrument, when I understand that my existence is entangled with other lives and is, therefore, responsible' (Kaplan 2000: 71).

In one sense one is always situated as a moral agent: 'self is a relation not a substance.' What this means for how one goes about acting in relation is not, however, straightforward or easy. Bauman states the condition plainly: '[the] self finds itself alone in the face of moral dilemmas without good (let alone obvious) choices, [with] unresolved moral conflicts and the excruciating difficulty of being moral' (1993: 249). In spite of the severity of the challenge, Bauman, along with others, contends that moral responsibility is one of the most important forms of action we can take in a world in which our humanity is under assault.

It may be easier to define what is immoral than to prescribe what is moral. Levinas takes it as given that murder and the infliction of pain are immoral. In the domains of our everyday lives, he states that relational closure marks immorality. As discussed in the introduction: 'For an ethical sensibility – confirming itself in the inhumanity of our time, against this inhumanity – the justification of the neighbor's pain is certainly the source of all immorality' (Levinas 1988: 163; see also Hatley 2000: 97).

Our Australian context presses us to consider not only the justification of others' pain, but the denial of it as well. It follows that part of our moral burden is an injunction to hold the memory of violence within our texts. To write as if the suffering of those who were harmed never mattered would be to perpetuate violence in the present. A moral engagement of the past in the present thus resists closure, whether that closure aims to decree that the violence in the past (or even in the present) is finished, or whether it claims more specifically to outlaw or ridicule historians and others who seek to remember violence. Each of these two powerful forms of closure – time and monologue – is embedded in mainstream contemporary practice surrounding the relationships between past and present. I will briefly examine each of them, analysing ways in which they deflect responsibility for others. My argument is that these forms of closure alienate us from our own moral capacities and thus work to produce immorality as Levinas defines it. They diminish us as human beings even as they may promise the illusion of a 'comfortable' life.

Past and Present

An examination of practices of discontinuity and continuity in Whitefella cultural constructions of time indicates the links between closure and the deflection of responsibility. The hypothesis that there is a link between time concepts and violence is, on the one hand, self-evident. If there were no links, there would be no controversy over the meaning and punctuation of history. On the other hand, the links go deeper than a struggle for who gets the last word concerning the European conquest of Australia. A seemingly commonsensical orientation towards the future, in a society built upon destruction, enables regimes of violence to continue their work while claiming the moral ground of making a better future.

Punctuation and intertemporality are two lenses for examining western time-constructs. How are moments of time differentiated from each other, and what are the relationships between different moments? As there is far more to be said about time than can be conveniently packed into one chapter, I restrict myself here to the western conventional moments labelled past, present, and future, and take up a more nuanced analysis in chapter 3.

Two core features of early medieval Christian Europe's cultural construction of time – disjunction and irreversibility – are the core properties of modern punctuation and intertemporality (Gurevich 1985: 111). In that period the life of Christ was held to be the major ontological disjunction for Christians, as the western calendar still indicates. With the concept of disjunction it was possible to break up the history of the world into epochs, each of which was differentiated not just by duration by also by inner value – from the promise made, to the promise fulfilled, to the final re-creation of Heaven on Earth (Gurevich 1985; Baudrillard 1994; Cohn 1993).

The second core feature is the concept of irreversible sequence within a teleological frame. Zoroaster (c.3500 BP) is credited with introducing to the world the idea that through conflict the world is moving towards a conflict-free state (Cohn 1993: 220). These concepts were incorporated into Christianity, and gave to western history a teleological and apocalyptic structure and content (Gurevich 1985: 143). The final goal for both individuals and the world was the achievement of eternal life in a post-historical new heaven and new earth (Cohn 1993: 218).

The stretching of time between two key moments of ontological

significance (life of Christ, return of Christ) had the effect of ‘shrinking’ the present to a moment of transition in which the future became the past. According to Gurevich (1985: 112), ‘past and future were of greater significance and value than the present, which was fleeting’; he quotes Augustine’s view that history unfolded itself ‘in the shadow of the future’.

With the secularisation of western culture under the Enlightenment, many Christian concepts, values, and root metaphors were taken across from religious thought to socio-cultural thought, or absorbed into vague notions such as ‘spirit’. Indeed, Boer & Conrad (2003) pursue an analysis initiated by Certeau to argue that Christian discourse not only ‘dissipated into society at large’ but also that Christian theology transformed itself into the secular academic disciplines that took shape after the Enlightenment. Thus even the more modest claim that Christian discourse transformed itself into secular discourse gives us good ground for examining the continuities across religious and secular time concepts.

The core features of disjunction and irreversible sequence continue to be constitutive of both modernist philosophies of history and everyday time-constructs. Rather than postulating major disjunctions brought about through eruptions of the divine into human history, modernity has privileged a paradigm of progress within which human agency is the driving force. Walter Benjamin gives us the most succinctly perceptive assessment of the links between progress and violence. His ninth thesis on the philosophy of history deploys the now famous image of the Angel of History who ‘sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage’. The Angel is caught in the storm of violence, and that ‘storm is what we call progress’ (1969: 257–58). Where the Angel of History sees one ongoing catastrophe, and where scholars such as Benjamin see an ongoing sequence of catastrophes, apologists for progress would focus on a bright and beautiful future.

Within the paradigm of progress, history is a process of conflict and change such that the present emerges from, and is differentiated from, the past, and such that the future will emerge from, and will be differentiated from, the present. It puts a positive value on change, and posits that history, or society, is moving towards the resolution of conflict and contradiction. There is thus held to be an ‘end’ in the sense of a goal: a future point towards which our lives are directed.

This secular paradigm of violence and redemption expresses the kind of thought and behaviour that Hobbes and others characterised as ‘the wild’. Much of that assessment derives from the apparent disregard that progress-oriented people have for the damage they do in the present. This paradigm has been subject to analysis by key thinkers throughout the 20th century and recently has been linked with Al Qaeda (Gray 2003). It is perhaps best known in social practice through the analysis of the revolutionary applications of Marx’s philosophy of history. Whether it was Hegel developing the dialectic of ‘spirit’ fulfilling itself in history, or Marx developing a dialectical materialism, we see a disrespect for human or other suffering. Present distress can be claimed to be leading towards, and thus to be justified by, a more perfect future. In a brilliantly argued essay, Glowacka (2000: 39) reminds us of Hegel’s slaughter-bench model of history. Hatley (2000: 33) expands this pungent point, saying that Hegel felt justified in arguing ‘that the suffering of those who are “immolated upon [history’s] altar” is secondary to the larger work of spirit in history’.

In our post-Hegelian, post-Marxist period, the progressive paradigm of history continues to excuse any number of troubling actions and thoughts. Bauman (1993: 225) contends (drawing on Lyotard) that emancipation, the grand idea of the Enlightenment, draws its power ‘from the shackles it wants to fracture, the wounds it wants to heal’. He connects the ideal of emancipation with future-oriented thought that discounts present suffering, and concludes that ‘future bliss [is] served as the cover-up for the repulsiveness of the present’.

That ‘repulsiveness’ includes the loss of one’s moral presence in a world of ethical encounter. The vision of a future which will transcend the past, a future in which current contradictions and current suffering will be left behind enables us to understand ourselves in an imaginary state of future achievement. It thus enables us to turn our backs on current social facts of pain, damage, destruction and despair which exist in the present, but which we will only acknowledge as our past. It is not necessary to our time-constructs that we shall be indifferent to others, but for Marxist revolutionaries as much as for the people engaged in ‘New World’ conquest, suffering was justified by reference to the future. Following Levinas’s assessment that immorality is constituted in the justification of others’ suffering, it is clear that

future orientation has been a major tool in deflecting us from moral responsibility.

These time concepts support a peculiarly dizzy detachment of agency in human affairs. The past is always already discontinuous with the present. The discontinuity that marks what we choose to call the past is reflexive: the past is not necessarily that which has already happened, but equally a label to be applied to that which we wish to finish and forget, or from which we wish to differentiate ourselves and thus to absolve ourselves from responsibility.

In future orientation we hasten on our way to fulfilment. Resolution in any large or permanent sense, however, is framed as a forever imminent tomorrow. It always lies just ahead of us, and thus there is a sense in which we will never achieve the resolution we may believe to be our future state precisely because it is always already posited as a future state. It is becoming increasingly clear pragmatically that resolution is unachievable because the damage we do on our way to the future is already destroying the future we hope to inhabit. And yet we keep doing more of the same, not least because of the sense of hope we attach to the future.

Our lives are thus suspended in a web of time concepts that hold us always about to be that which we would believe we truly are. The qualitative differentiation of past and future means that the present is discontinuous with both. In this disjunctive moment, it can appear that our responsibilities can be understood to be most properly directed towards the future rather than towards the people and places of this moment because the present is always already becoming the past which is in the process of being transcended.

The present becomes a place in which we are estranged from the actual conditions of our lives, where agency is alienated, responsibility cast elsewhere, and morality subjected to a double deflection as it aims towards a future which will, in due course, become the past. The ‘now’ becomes a site of such alienation that it hardly bears thinking about, and that is my point. We are suspended in a bereft and hapless moment. The headlong rush towards the future may be an attempt to escape accountability, but even for those who seek responsibility, the most plausible action often appears to be to look to the future and thus to act towards a moment that our time-constructs enable us to think may yet be remediable.

The very justification made possible by orientation towards the

future enables another attitude, that of complacency. Arendt (1969: 47) notes the amoral quality of complacency in her summarising statement that ‘we need only march into the future, which we can't help doing anyhow, in order to find a better world’. Whether idealistic or complacent, the idea of disjunction can be deployed to evade responsibility. The logic is to declare the present disjunctive with the past, and then to declare that the present is about to be transcended and that we will soon live in a period that is disjunctive with our ‘now’.

This benighted ‘now’ in which we actually live our lives is circumscribed and rendered largely irrelevant through progress ideology. What is most demeaning for us is that it displaces ethics, as if, in a secular mimicry of Messianism, the mere passage of time will somehow alleviate us of present responsibilities and will restore our true moral capacity to us in that illusory unblemished future.

The project that Atwood & Foster call for – creating a sense of moral engagement with the past in the present – is thus a much larger task than it might initially appear. It involves rejecting a paradigm of future social perfection or some form of redemption, and revaluing the present as the real site of action in the world.

‘Us’ and ‘Them’

A further challenge to closure builds on the violence of totalising monologue. Whose past and whose present are implicated in the moral work of engaging the past in the present? Monologue is another primary form of closure. Critical theory of recent decades has shown western thought and action to be dominated by a matrix of hierarchical oppositions which provided powerful conceptual tools for the reproduction of violence. In this matrix the world is formed around dualities: man/woman, culture/nature, mind/body, active/passive, civilisation/savagery, and so on in the most familiar and oppressive fashion. In fact, however, these dualities are more properly described as a series of singularities because the pole labelled ‘other’ (woman, Nature, savage, etc.) is effectively an absence. This point is articulated extensively by feminist theoreticians. Luce Irigaray (1985), for example, shows that the defining feature of woman under dualistic thought is that she is not man.

Ecofeminists extend the analysis to include ‘Nature’, and show

that the same structure of domination controls women, Nature, and

all other living beings and systems that are held to be ‘other’ (Warren 1990; Salleh 1992). Val Plumwood (1994: 74) speaks directly to the centrality of this structure: ‘the story of the control of the chaotic and deficient realm of “Nature” by mastering and ordering “reason” has been the master story of Western culture.’ Within that ‘chaotic and deficient realm’ were all those others who were classed outside the ‘Us’ that is the hero of the story.

Stripped of much cultural elaboration, this structure of self/other articulates power such that ‘self’ is constituted as the pole of activity and presence, while ‘other’ is the pole of passivity and absence. Presence is a manifestation both of being and of power, while absence may be a gap awaiting transfiguration by the active/present pole, or an enabling background; in either case, without power and presence of its own (Plumwood 1997).

A crucial feature of the system is that others never get to talk back on their own terms. Communication is all one way as the pole of power refuses to receive the feedback that would cause it to change itself, or to open itself to dialogue. Power lies in the ability not to hear what is being said, nor to experience the consequences of one’s actions, but rather to go one’s own self-centric and insulated way. Plumwood (2002: 27) notes two key moves in sustaining hierarchical dualism and the illusion of autonomy – dependency and denial. The pole of power depends on the subordinated other, and simultaneously denies this dependence.

The image of bi-polarity thus masks what is, in effect, a singular pole of self. The self sets itself within a hall of mirrors; it mistakes its reflection for the world, sees its own reflections endlessly, talks endlessly to itself, and, not surprisingly, finds continual verification of itself and its worldview. This is monologue masquerading as conversation, masturbation posing as productive interaction; it is a narcissism so profound that it purports to provide a universal knowledge when in fact its violent erasures are universalising its own singular and powerful isolation. It promotes a nihilism that stifles the knowledge of connection, disables dialogue, and mains the possibilities whereby ‘self’ might be captured by ‘other’. Levinas equates these totalising monological narratives with war.

This is not to say that monologue itself lacks debate and conflict, but more deeply that it is self-totalising in only including what it can accommodate within its own narrative, and by insisting that others,

if they appear at all, appear as they are construed by that monological narrative. Indeed some monological narratives are so broad as to be able to encompass everything, but only within the terms of the narrative. Elizabeth Povinelli’s (2002) brilliant new study of Australian multiculturalism gives a much more complex face to public monocultural discourse than I am able to present here. She focuses on the ‘cunning of recognition’, examining the impossible necessity for Aboriginal people in certain contexts to be able to produce for the nation an identity that the nation defines as authentic (see also Merlan 1998). This is one of many ways in which monological narrative scoops up others on its own terms and within its own self-understanding (see chapter 3).

The dismantling of the warlike theory of ‘self’ is a necessary step in moving towards decolonisation. The consequence of unmaking narcissistic singularity is that we embrace noisy and unruly processes capable of finding dialogue with other people and with the world itself. In doing so we shake our capacity for connection loose from the bondage of monologue. As Povinelli (2002) analyses in depth, plurality poses seriously disjunctive moments for individuals, and for states. Plurality is an ethical direction but by no means is it a paradox-free or conflict-free zone.

The ethical alternative to monologue is dialogue. And this dialogue is not the Platonic or Socratic dialogue, which Arendt (1970: 10) describes as a ‘silent dialogue between me and myself’. It is specifically a form of dialogue that requires difference. It seeks relationships across otherness without seeking to erase difference. Emil Fackenheim (1994: 129) draws on the work of Franz Rosenzweig to articulate two main precepts for structuring the ground for ethical dialogue. The first is that dialogue begins where one is, and thus is always situated; the second is that dialogue is open, and thus that the outcome is not known in advance. Fackenheim developed this paradigm of dialogue in this era after the *Shoah*, asking, as have other philosophers, whether any dialogue can again take place between those who have been radically harmed and those who harmed them. Because he develops a form of dialogue that can work across chasms of radical harm, his paradigm is especially appropriate for our settler societies.

Our situatedness as settlers is clear. In Australia, settler-descendants are situated in damaged places; we bear the burden of the violence

lent history of conquest, and oscillate between hope and despair. Aboriginal people are also situated in damaged places, have borne the brunt of social violence, and are similarly urged to link their hopes to practices that are linked to destruction. These are harsh situations, and as I have argued elsewhere, ethical dialogue requires that we acknowledge and understand our particular and harshly situated presence (Rose & Ford 1995, Rose 1999).

From a situated perspective, what lies between us are these terrible histories: the invasions, the dominations, the deaths and exclusions. Violence, both legal and extra-legal, wars, disposessions, extinctions and invisibilities lie between us. Silence, the big swag, also lies between us. Before we lose heart, however, we must also consider that violence is not the whole story. What lies between us, or between some of us some of the time, is love, respect, sympathy, and the determination to act together. The possibility of dialogue, and its accomplishment in many contexts, rests in the fact that our situatedness is neither wholly violent nor wholly non-violent. Entanglements give us grounds for action.

The concept of openness may sound obvious, but it is equally challenging. Openness is risky because one does not know the outcome. To be open is to hold one's self available to others: one takes risks and becomes vulnerable. But this is also a fertile stance: one's own ground can become destabilised. In open dialogue one holds one's self available to be surprised, to be challenged, and to be changed.

Openness also challenges us because it contains a contradictory set of injunctions. On the one hand openness is unlimited, since one always wants to try to understand others, and to listen with an open mind. On the other hand, openness has limits: an ethical position does not remain open to assiting violence or to sustaining the silences that oppress. Openness, in brief, is both unlimited in its even-handedness and at the same time is counterbalanced by commitment to the decolonising process.

The connection between temporality, monologue, and ethics can be demonstrated vividly through consideration of past violence and continuing pain. We live our lives in the present, as our bodies tell us even when our minds are cast into the future. Along with other scholars, I see a doubled violence: the practices that hurt others, and the sustained indifference to the hurt of others that is a key index of

power. Elaine Scarry (1985) works with an analysis of torture to develop the point that pain is amplified through denial. My point is that monologue constitutes an equally pain-amplifying denial. In Australia, the injuries of colonisation stand as concrete evidence of a violence which monological settler ideology denies or trivialises. Moreover, the articulation of injury comes to be represented in some public discourse as itself an act of aggression: as if Aboriginal people sought explicitly to destroy White Australians' comfortable attitude towards history. Aboriginal people's injuries testify to an ongoing war. Their existence calls forth rejection and denial, both of which are injurious in their own right. Inescapably, denial reinforces past harm and sustains present injuries.

Monological history derives from a singularity and must seek to protect that singularity. The results are themselves catastrophic; Hatley is eloquent:

Only humans can conspire to repress, to destroy the future of human [groups]. In doing so, humans show the reprehensible capacity to turn their history, their remembrance of time across the aeons, the generations, 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. One writes the past and the future as a mode of colonisation. All the other times are resources for one's own. (Hatley 2000: 63)

A consequence for the human person who finds herself or himself situated near the pole of power is that in assenting to a monological history and abandoning one's own moral agency, one explicitly or implicitly becomes an instrument of the violence that excludes, denies, suppresses, abandons or destroys. Monological history, ideologically driven to protect power, is written as if the victims of power never mattered (Hatley 2000: 204). Prime Minister John Howard's idea that monological history could leave us feeling comfortable is as violent as it is appalling. It attacks our moral presence in the world.

Recuperative Work

Hannah Arendt used the term 'dark times' to refer to periods when the construction of law-like generalities and theoretical models is cut loose from human knowledge (Luban 1983). Her work is pertinent

to our time now for three reasons. First, our postmodern condition is one of failed master narratives; we no longer desire the great stories that once may have made sense of the world for us because we have been required to understand the violence they conceal. Second, we are entering a period of deep uncertainty, in which many unthinkable things have happened, are undoubtedly happening right now, and will continue to happen. Arguably, current levels of risk and terror exceed our capacity to plan rationally in order to avoid or manage them. The third reason concerns my specific focus on decolonisation. The process of colonising modern settler societies is a new phenomenon; we have no models from the past to guide us. It is equally a dialogical project; we cannot theorise in advance just how it will happen and still be committed to openness. We have to work it out step by step dialogically with and among each other. If it happens at all, it will unfold in real time, and will be shaped by the Indigenous, 'old' settler, and recent migrant peoples who share the here and the now of our homelands.

As stated, the beauty of Arendt's work for me is that she insists on affirming the possibility of moral action by proposing that what sustains our understandings in dark times is the web of stories we are able to weave out of our historically grounded experience. My recuperative project is based on the premise, articulated so elegantly by Arendt (1970: ix), that even in dark times there will be some illumination. Recuperative histories and ethnographies are not aimed towards dialectical opposition or overcoming; rather they trawl the past and the present, searching out the hidden histories and the local possibilities that illuminate alternatives to our embeddedness in violence.

I use the term 'recuperation' in preference to more familiar terms such as 'recovery' or 'restoration' because in contemporary usage it seems to communicate the humility of the project. Central to my argument is the proposition that there is no former time/space of wholeness to which we might return or which we might resurrect for ourselves (chapter 10). Nor is there a posited future wholeness which may yet save us. Rather, the work of recuperation seeks glimpses of illumination, and aims towards engagement and disclosure. The method works as an alternative both to methods of closure or suspicion and to methods of proposed salvation.

Recuperative work is oppositional in several major senses of opposition and encounter. I will examine time and monologue in a

recuperative mode, and will then contextualise the analysis through analysis of time and the dead, the position of witness, and the existential question of hope and intent.

Time

Recuperative work takes an ethical stance in opposition to the temporal and monological practices that cause suffering and damage and that exclude or deny the reality of that suffering and damage. Breaking up the linearity of past → present → future, recuperative work imagines all accessible time as rich with possibility. Time work impels one immediately into moral responsibility. As Benjamin tells us in his sixth thesis, the past makes urgent moral claims on us (1969: 255). So too does the present, and so, we increasingly understand, does the future (in particular, see chapters 10 and 11).

There are alternatives to linear time. Like many scholars today, I want to consider the time of the generations of living things, including ecological time, synchronicities, intervals, patterns, and rhythms, all of which are quite legitimately understood as forms of time (Adam 1994). Similarly, ecofeminists such as Ariel Salleh (1997: 137) argue 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 my work I have sought to understand more deeply Aboriginal concepts of time (Rose 1999, and chapters 3, 8 and 9).

As Salleh's analysis suggests, analysis of relationships across moments of time and across kinds of time is significant. Concepts of heterogeneous time demand the understanding that different kinds of time are coeval, that is, coexisting (Fabian 1983). Dipesh Chakrabarty uses the beautiful metaphor of time-knots. In his analysis of subaltern histories he proposes that 'the writing of history must implicitly assume a plurality of times existing together, a discontinuity of the present with itself' (Chakrabarty 1997: 28–29). In contrast to modernity's privileging of linear sequence in which the past is overcome and consigned to the past, time knots are the entanglements of real life in time: we do not move through 'homogeneous empty time' (Benjamin's phrase, 1969: 261), filling the fleeting 'now' with our homogeneous presence. Rather, the entanglements to which Chakrabarty directs our attention draw us into complex

and co-mingled times. Our understanding is enhanced, Chakrabarty contends, through engagements with plurality, and we learn more about ‘the disjoined nature of our own times’ (1997: 27). Along with time’s heterogeneity, there is also the question of the quality of relationship between life and death as they are situated in time. I take up this issue in chapter 10 from the perspective of my understanding of Aboriginal time concepts; here I want to lay the groundwork for thinking about time across generations from a western perspective.

In another article (Rose 2003) I have discussed some of the issues that arise for me in thinking about how Aboriginal people’s narratives of the past configure life and death. Western culture persistently imagines the relationship between life and death as a battle. In this battle the grave will always claim at least a temporary victory, as death is inevitable, but numerous cultural practices seek to redeem life. The conceptionalisation of death as sacrifice is foundational not only to theology, but also to society and nation (for example, see Inglis 1998; Muecke 1999). Paul’s triumphal assertion to the Corinthians that through the resurrection ‘Death is swallowed up in victory’ (1 Corinthians 15:54) sets out the matrix of the war with death. In the contemporary world, historians are deeply implicated here, as Curthoys and Docker (1999: 6–7) note in their analysis of 19th-century history’s desire ‘to defeat time and death’. History, they contend, is a continuing act of defiance.

My Aboriginal teachers know the pain and grief that death entails for both the living and the dying. They do not give the grave victory, and in part this is because life is not at war with death. Stephen Muecke (1999: 34) ventures a generalisation with which I would agree: Aboriginal philosophies ‘are all about keeping things alive *in their place*’. Aboriginal stories are living traditions. As long as they are told, life has the last word. As often as they are erased – in texts, in the courts, in public discourse – the sting of death walks the land.

The dead

The sting of death has been massively amplified, and perhaps given qualitatively different valence, under conditions of modern ‘man-made mass death’ (Wyschogrod 1985). Hatley (and others) contend that mass death is an attack on death itself. Hatley’s specific focus is

on genocide and the corresponding process of aerocide. Aerocide refers to cross-generational deaths, and directs attention to the fact that genocide curtails all the future generations. The claim is that in killing the future, mass death also kills death as we experience it in a non-mass death manner. The argument is that one’s death belongs not only to one’s self but to others as well: to those who mourn, to those who remember, to those who incorporate the death into a community of memory. Aerocide obliterates those who mourn; it obliterates the community of memory. In this way it can be thought to obliterate death (Hatley 2000: 24).

These propositions take on a further urgency in thinking about relationships across numerous generations. Hatley argues that generations are connected through transmission of wisdom, memory, and traditions. Younger generations receive what is offered and take on the work of the previous generations in its complexity. ‘Because each generation dies, the next generation takes up with the lives of the preceding generation in a spirit of commemoration and reverence, as well as criticism and shame’ (Hatley 2000: 60). The relationship across life into death, and death into life (through memory, transmitted wisdom and other cross-overs) is a gift, in Hatley’s analysis:

Precisely because one is not one’s forebearers, [sic] one experiences one’s time as a gift, the proffering of one’s own existence from out of the bodies and lives of the beings who preceded one. One in turn offers this gift to those who come after one. Time is in this offering the articulation of a generosity beyond primordiality. (Hatley 2000: 61)

Aerocide can thus be said to kill death because it kills the possibility of connectivities across generations. It can also, in this way, be thought to kill time. ‘The moral burden of the past in the present includes the work of sustaining the heterogeneous gifts of time. No one foresaw or expressed the implications of the ramifying effects of mass death more eloquently than Walter Benjamin (1969: 255) in his sixth thesis: ‘*even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins.’ Recuperative work thus seeks to tug on whatever may remain of life’s gifts, pulling them from the annihilation of the multiple deaths and enabling them to be rethreaded into the fabric of decolonisation.

Monologue

Recuperative work breaks up monologue; the purpose is not to replace one monologue with another, but rather to reveal a rich diversity of events and people. One result is utilitarian. This work allows us to expand our repertoire of possibilities by enlarging our thinking. Just as heterogeneous time can be understood as rich with possibility, so heteroglossic narratives are richly complex and diverse. Here we enter domains of moral responsibility in relation to truth, public memory and the dead.

If the totalising structure of monologue is resisted there is discursive space for conflicting arguments. Does this mean that everything is relative? Povinelli (2002) provides a complex analysis of limits. In contrast, I take an approach that, while logically problematic, is ethically required. The parameters of my approach – problematic and necessary – are well known to philosophers. Povinelli (2002: 8) explains the issue as the gap or contradiction between ‘the seemingly unconditional nature of ethical and moral obligations and its relation to the enlightenment obligation to public reason (critical rational discourse)’.

Pursuing my ethical necessity, I note that FC DeCoste (2000) identifies the problem with extreme relativism in relation to radical harm: that historical ‘truth’ would always simply be a matter of opinion. Clearly this extreme position is not adequate. Wyschogrod (1998: xi, 1) articulates the proposition that truthfulness is about matching an account of an event with the event or pattern; the proposition is commonsensical, and as she says, is at the same time mundane. While homology may be mundane from an historical view, it is not mundane from an ethical view. In developing moral engagements with the past in the present, truth is absolutely necessary. There must be some degree of certainty about events in the past – certainty about what happened, although there may be different interpretations of why things happened. As Hatley (2000: 110) tells us: ‘If nothing can ever be unproblematically characterized as having actually occurred, then no moral judgement about what occurs could ever matter.’ Facts matter because they enable us to exercise our moral capacity. The creation of confusion incapacitates us.

Another moral domain concerns public remembrance and the dead. As numerous scholars have suggested, the dead are a powerful part of community (for example, Tausig 2001; Margalit 2002).

Michael Ignatieff (1997) reminds us that there is nothing inherently ethical in this relationship. The dead are mobilised in community interests, and the politics of terror mobilise the dead just as surely as ethics for decolonisation. Muecke (1997: 227) contends that death ‘is at the heart of the formation of the nation ... States can be set up as political entities, but they only become nations through the magical or spiritual agency of death ... A people recognises itself as a people, that is as a culture, through the symbolic treatment of its dead.’ Monological definitions of the dead are thus central to monological narratives of nationhood. National histories that commemorate some deaths, but not others, rework monologue, as Tom Griffiths explains with elegance in a recent essay. Griffiths (2003: 138) takes up the issue of white silence, contending that ‘the great Australian silence was often “white noise”: it sometimes consisted of an obscuring and overlapping din of history making.’ The white noise of history-making concerns the dead in extremely immediate ways. Griffiths notes the paucity of public memorials to Aboriginal people who died defending family and country, and he links debates over war memorials to the ‘Us’ and ‘Them’ exclusions of past and contemporary cultural life. Here is his discussion of responses to Ken Inglis’s proposal that Indigenous-settler conflict should be included in the Australian War Memorial:

Inglis’s proposal came out of his lifelong study of the settlers’ culture of commemoration and in a book steeped in intelligent sympathy for the rituals of war. It wasn’t a war, wrote his critics. And even if it was a war, then it wasn’t an officially declared war and both sides didn’t wear uniforms. And even if it still rated somehow as a real war, then Aborigines were the other side, and they were the losers, and victors don’t put up monuments to the losers. Aborigines are not Us. Here speaks the real politics of separation in Australia today. (Griffiths 2003: 147)

There is, I believe, another distinction to be made: there are the dead who are members of community (and thus those whose deaths matter), and then there are the dead who are outside the community and thus whose deaths matter to the extent that they can be excluded. The first is social and commemorative, the second harks back to the relationship between violence and progress. If progress emerges from violence, and if conquest is not complete, then deaths that are treated as if they do not matter actually still do matter. They

mark progress. Nicholas Thomas (1997: 28) contends that settler societies seek simultaneously to exterminate and exhibit Indigenous people. Arguably, Aboriginal deaths are necessary to Australian nation-making even as the dead are dishonoured through denial and through chilling debates about how much blood has been shed and whose bloodshed counts.

Dialogue works counter to monological separatism; it requires a ‘we’ who share a time and space of attentiveness, and who bring our moral capabilities into the encounter. It seems we must also bring the dead into the dialogue. It is not yet possible to know, dialogically, what they may say to us.

Witness

To listen with attentiveness is to take a first step in witnessing. Thus to break out of monologue and into a ground of encounter across difference and harm is suddenly to encounter one’s self as witness. In his study *Suffering Witness*, Hatley (2000: 3) defines witness as ‘a mode of responding to the other’s plight that exceeds an epistemological determination and becomes an ethical involvement. One must not only utter a truth about the ... [person] but also remain true to her or him.’

The demands of witnessing are demands of memory. Pockenheim, among many scholars, asserts that memory work is a refusal to participate in violence. If the purpose of violence was to extinguish certain people, knowledges, and perspectives, then memory continues to resist that violence. Thus the moral burden of the past in the present includes this refusal to succumb to the world of violence and amnesia; witnessing promotes remembrance and works against death and against the comfort of monologue.

The past has a moral claim on us, and so do the people in the present whose memories and actions we witness. The claim is often phrased in terms of the dead, but it is often put to us by the living. I do not here deny the direct claims of the dead. Who, for example, can look at a recent photo of mass graves being exhumed and not find one’s self morally claimed by the eye sockets that still seem to search out some connection with the living? In our everyday lives in Australia and other settler societies, however, we are more likely to encounter such claims as they are mediated by the living.

Moral claims are thrust upon one, and then a response is due.

Throughout his study Hatley discusses the problematics of the witness’s moral response, and while I do not want to play down the ambiguities of the situation, I also want to draw attention to the dia- logical potential at work here. To be claimed is to be called into con- nection; to respond is to start to actualise that connection. Muecke (1997: 184–85) contends that connections lead to commitment. Connection, in his view, is a new way of reasoning, a way that leads into engagement and purpose. I am saying that decolonisation depends on this process: the moral claim, the response, the recogni- tion of connection, the commitment.

Intention and Hope

Recuperative work takes its intention from the demonstrated fact that violence and damage are not the only things we are capable of. Many of us really do seek to find ways to generate a moral presence for ourselves. Such a presence is founded in the ‘now’ of our lives, engages with our moral relationships with the past, acknowledges our vio- lence, and works dialogically towards alternatives. Accordingly, this work demands that we consider an ethics of intention.

The ethics I am developing around decolonisation acknowledge the claims of others (thus far I have only dealt with human others), and to acknowledge the existence of such claims is itself a provoca- tion. Response to claim is itself a call – of refusal of violence, of fur- ther claims of responsibility. And so the question must be asked: does it matter if anyone is listening?

Avishai Margalit (2002: 155), for example, argues that people witness as an act of hope, or perhaps of faith, ‘that in another place or another time there exists, or will exist, a moral community that will listen to their testimony’. I am absolutely certain that this form of faith informed the decision of Hobbles Danaiyari and other North Australian historians to share their stories with westerners (discussed in Rose 2003). Indeed, they were quite explicit in assert- ing their belief that there were others, including White people, who would hear the stories in their moral context and would find ways to make a moral response. For myself, I understood my position as scribe to be a moral claim on my own life, and this book continues my exploration of that claim.

But what if one had no faith that there were others who would

listen? Would it still be important to witness? Margalit leaves this question open, seeming to conclude that there must be some level of faith in order to warrant witnessing. Other scholars of memory and witnessing contend that one must proceed as if there were hope, whether one can be sure of that or not. Glowacka, for example, works with Fackenheim's (1978) study of hope and suggests that one must continue *as if* there were hope because to do so is still to refuse violence, and to work towards some sort of mending of the assault on humanity brought about by man-made mass death (Glowacka 2000: 39).

Still others are even more stern, claiming that there is always a moral duty to remember and witness. From this perspective, even if one were certain that there was no reason to hope, there would still be reason existentially to define one's self as one who refuses violence. It seems to me as well that as long as there is one person who refuses violence, then there could be some grounds for hope, but that is not really the point. Levinas is the best representative of this most extreme position. He contends that memory and witnessing attest not only to the past and to harm but to the good in the present moment. One is commanded to goodness even if it is futile. In his wisdom, Levinas contends that there is no nuanced philosophical argument for this position. It is given in the nature of ethics: the claim is always there (discussed in Hattley 2000: 99).

The stronger statements of moral response and possible futility take us away from hope and towards an existential ethics of claim. I think this is a good thing. A few years ago I was working with the idea of an ethics of hope, and I offered a short paper on the subject at a symposium at Pitzer College in Claremont California. One of the Native American participants, Robert John, took me up on my use of the concept of hope, and we spent quite a few hours discussing it. In his view 'hope is wishy washy'. He contended that if you really care that something may happen, then you offer your intention. You put your will into it. You do what you can to make it happen. From his intention- and action-oriented perspective, I had to agree that hope does seem banal, and I started thinking about an ethics of connection rather than hope (Rose 1999).

A complementary perspective on hope is put forward by Paul Ricoeur (1995), although he argues for hope whereas I would now argue against it. In Ricoeur's view, hope is connected to concepts of

time that look towards future redemption. History directed towards a vision of a better future is a history of hope (1995: 204–205). I would contend, in contrast, that the evidence for alternatives exists in the present, and that intention towards alternatives does not have to rely on hope. From this perspective, hope could be seen to be implicated in time-concepts that deflect us from our moral presence in the here and now, and thus engage us in violence. This violence consists in ignoring the diversity of life in the present moment in favour of an imagined life in a future moment.

The recuperative project seeks to demarcate a path towards decolonisation, and we can be grateful that here in Australia one does not have to consider in a practical way what one would do if there were no one with whom to share the path and put their footprints alongside ours. Our decolonising work leads us directly into claim, connection, and commitment.

Judas Work: Four Modes of Sorrow

Deborah Bird Rose

Centre for Research on Social Inclusion, Macquarie University NSW 2109,
Sydney, Australia; deborah.rose@mq.edu.au

In this essay I examine four modes of thinking about the betrayals involved in the planned mass deaths of animals, specifically the wild donkeys of North Australia. I consider the wild, but in contrast to the positive valence this concept has acquired in environmental literature, I work with a set of negative connotations that I encountered in conversations with Aboriginal people in North Australia. I explore the wild as a form of narcissism, to use Hatley's terminology, and I engage with animal mass deaths as an outcome of processes of disconnection and catastrophe. My analysis examines how the colonising wild is the tearing apart of the fabric of life and death on earth.

[In trying to destroy other groups] humans show the reprehensible capacity to turn their history, their remembrance of time across the aeons, the generations, into a sort of narcissistic mirror. One eliminates all the strangers, all the disruptions to one's own vision, so that history only articulates one's own concerns, one's own needs. One writes the past and the future as a mode of colonization.

—James Hatley, *Suffering Witness*

Introduction

I cannot claim to have a special rapport with donkeys. Where they live in outback Australia the flies breed up to an intolerable extent. In donkey country flies seek out every skerrick of bare skin; they dive into eyes, ears, and mouth. One waits impatiently for nightfall so as to be able to speak and breathe in a relaxed way. Of course, by dark one is so sick and tired of it all that sleep is all one really wants. But donkeys are sociable creatures. Many nights I've groaned in my swag when I heard them start up their conversation, knowing that they could go on for hours in their snuffling, chortling, rasping, gasping voices. And yet, donkeys are disarmingly sweet creatures too. A herd of wild donkeys may not have the elegance of wild horses or the exotic charisma of wild camels, but they lift the spirits just by looking so effortlessly free. And even if they had no charm, I still wouldn't want to see them hunted to extinction in the bush.

In this essay I examine four modes of thinking about the betrayals involved in the planned mass deaths of animals, specifically the wild donkeys of

North Australia. To think about the “more-than-(but including)-human world,” to quote Patrick Curry’s embellishment of David Abram’s inspired phrase,¹ is to invite consideration of wilderness and the wild, as many scholars in recent years have persuasively argued. Positive connotations of the “wild” speak to connections between humans and earth-others, and thus do important cultural work.² Attracted though I am to such discourse, my own thought keeps returning to the view put by some of my Australian Aboriginal teachers for whom “the wild” had a set of negative connotations. The wild they spoke of is a place and process of disconnection and catastrophe. Monological self sees itself surrounded by resources that promote the self. Anything else is an obstacle, and obstacles are to be transformed into use or eradicated.



I lived with Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory communities of Yarralin and Lingara for many years. Out in the savannah country of North Australia the grasslands are golden for most of the year, only coming green in response to the short but often extreme rains of the wet season. The sky is large and blue, the soil is red like old blood, and transient life is held between these vivid presences. Living things are subtle in their colouring or fleet in their passing—the quiet agile wallabies, the parched or greening grass, the dusky, hazy eucalyptus trees with white bark and smoky leaves, their vivid flowers that come and go in a flash.

Yarralin and Lingara had been excised from large cattle properties, and among the many things that people taught me, I learned that White settlers had come into this country with their cattle and horses about 120 years ago, establishing broad acres cattle properties. They killed, and later effectively enslaved, the Aboriginal people whose homelands they were occupying.³ Since the 1960s decolonizing legislation has been enacted to un-make many of the colonizing relations of power, and yet still today colonization, that relentlessly monological narcissism Hatley describes, remains alive and well.

On one of the many trips I made with my teachers between Yarralin and Lingara, we stopped to film some of the most serious erosion in our region. We looked at bare soil that was washing away down the gullies, at gullies that were cutting into the land, at dead trees, scald areas, and sickly cattle. I asked one of my teachers, Daly Pulkara, what he called this country, and he looked at it deeply and said in a heavy voice: “It’s the wild. It’s just the wild.”

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1. Patrick Curry, “Nature Post-Nature,” *New Formations* 26 (Spring 2008), 51–64, 59.
 2. David Abram’s website gives excellent insight into positive connotations of the wild: www.wildeethics.org
 3. Discussed in much greater detail in Deborah Rose, *Hidden Histories: Black Stories from Victoria River Downs, Humbert River, and Wave Hill stations, North Australia* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1991).

I had read about the detrimental effects of cattle on country: how their hooves hammer soils that previously had only known padded feet, how their grazing differs from that of native herbivores, how they trample waterholes and batter pathways down to the rivers.⁴ I imagined that the wild was caused by cattle. Not so, according to Daly and other teachers. Not so at all. It's the humans who brought them here and are failing to take proper care who are the problem. In the course of many conversations, Aboriginal people were explaining that settlers saw the world in terms of themselves and their cattle. They didn't think about anything else, not even the ecosystems that would have to thrive if they and their cattle were going to thrive. As another teacher, Riley Young, asked, "what's wrong with whitefellas, they crazy or what?" I came to understand that the wild, in Daly's terms, is a form of wilfulness gone crazy. It is easy to see the wild as a set of processes that are happening outside the human; in scientific terms the wild is a failure of functionality, an escalation of entropy, a landscape problem to be fixed. I will propose, in contrast that, the wild is the convergence of multiple monological betrayals. Had Daly known the words that James Hatley uses, I am sure he would have seen the connections: that the wild was the end result of whitefellas remaking the country, as well as the past and future, in their own narcissistic image. The "wild" is not a metaphor; it is a glimpse, a sudden flinch-making demonstration, that self without other is no self at all, in fact, is a bare gully where life washes away or bleeds out, where betrayal replaces connectivity, and less and less care remains.

Jennies and Jacks

The story I focus on begins in the Victoria River District of the north-west section of the Territory and the adjacent Kimberley region of Western Australia. Donkeys were brought into the Victoria River District in the early years of the Twentieth century as beasts of burden. Loads of supplies were brought to the district by boat and unloaded at the Timber Creek jetty on the Victoria River. From there the loads were taken inland by donkey teams. In the 1930s, motorised transport began to replace donkeys, and they were let loose to join others that had gone feral over the years. Since being set free they have multiplied at an enormous rate. Donkeys survive well in the bush; they are versatile foragers and can tolerate extreme conditions. Like camels, they can reduce their evaporative water loss, and unlike cattle they can continue to eat when deprived of water. They are thus superbly able to live in the arid and semi-arid zones.⁵

Wild donkeys and wild horses have since the 1950s been classed as pests. The main "problem" posed by donkeys and other ferals and is that they com-

4. Eric Rolls, *A Million Wild Acres* (Melbourne: Penguin Books, 1984 [1981]).

5. Farmnote 121/2000: Feral donkey (Western Australia), Agriculture, Western Australia, (reviewed 2007), <http://www.agric.wa.gov.au/content/pw/vp/fer/f12100.pdf>

pete with cattle for grass.⁶ Funding for eradication reflects the primary production benefits: 20% of the funding is from the pastoral industry, and the majority is from the Agriculture Protection Board.⁷ From the 1950s on, the government has undertaken periodic efforts to eradicate or at least control ferals. The main method has been large-scale shoot-outs. Initially shooters travelled cross-country searching out and destroying donkeys. Some of the donkeys that have been killed have been used for pet meat, but for the most part there is inadequate economic incentive to make any use at all of the corpses.⁸ Environmental historian Darrell Lewis does report one unexpected and bizarre benefit: in the extremely dry year of 1965 starving cattle were eating the stomach contents of donkeys that had previously been shot.⁹

Shooting from the ground is difficult in many areas because of the terrain, and in 1978 a more efficient program of eradication was initiated using broad-scale shooting from helicopters. In addition to government-sponsored killings, donkeys and other ferals (along with dingoes) are fair game for shooters because they are classed as pests. People pay to go on “safari” and shoot donkeys, goats, dingoes, and other creatures. This practice is called “cull hunting.”¹⁰ In contrast to the face-to-face safari method that results in websites dedicated to photos of men with their trophy donkeys, wide-scale eradication increasingly depended on the use of helicopters, thus continuing the shoot-outs at a remove, and with no follow-up to make use of the corpses and very little visual documentation.

Defenders of the method are insistent that killing animals from helicopters constitutes a “humane cull”; in this context “humane” tends to mean avoiding unnecessary stress and suffering. According to the model code of practice for wild horse control, “There is a growing expectation that animal suffering associated with pest management be minimized. This should occur regardless of the status given to a particular pest species or the extent of damage or impact created by that pest.”¹¹

6. Farmnote 121/2000.

7. “Kimberley Collars Judas Donkeys,” *Savanna Links* 9 (1999). http://savanna.ntu.edu.au/publications/savanna_links9/judas_donkeys.html

8. Farmnote 121/2000.

9. Darrell Lewis, *Slower Than the Eye Can See: Environmental Change in Northern Australia’s Cattle Lands* (Darwin: Tropical Savannas CRC, 2002), 84.

10. Hunting in Australia with Hunt Australia Safaris, <http://www.huntaust.com.au/photos/cullhunting1.html>

11. Trudy Sharp and Glen Saunders, “Model Code of Practice for the Humane Control of Feral Horses,” <http://www.deh.gov.au/biodiversity/invasive/publications/humane-control/cop-feral-horses.pdf>

Rather obviously, the term “humane,” when translated into policy, does not query the nature of suffering, or the wider contexts of killing, or the empathy that is aroused in some people in the face of all this killing. Like many “weasel words,” it has the capacity to authorise that which it purports to refuse.

Estimates of feral population numbers vary enormously, and this seems to reflect the boom and bust demographics brought on by attempts at annihilation. It seems clear, however, that for decades eradication programs had little or no long-term success. In spite of the fact that tens of thousands of donkeys and wild horses were shot, donkey numbers remained over the 100,000 mark in Victoria River district as of 2001.¹² One report has it that in the East Kimberley the population was reduced by 87% between 1980 and 1988; a later report indicates that by the late 1990s the donkey population in the Kimberley ran to several millions.¹³

In 1994 authorities in the Kimberley started using the “Judas collar” technique for donkey eradication, and it was adopted in parts of the Victoria River district in 2000. This technique requires that a young female be fitted with a collar carrying a radio transmitter and then let loose. The animal rejoins its herd, and subsequently the shooters come in by helicopter and kill all but the Judas beast. The surviving donkey goes in search of another group, and in another month or so the shooters again arrive and kill all but the one. The benefit is strictly utilitarian, and the beneficiaries are the pastoralists. Donkey control aimed toward eradication is said to achieve “reduced grazing pressure,” with the further result of enabling “the pastoral business to use greater areas of country.”¹⁴

1. Countrymen

We are brothers and sisters of the world. Doesn't matter if you're bird, snake, fish, kangaroo: One Red Blood.

—David Gulpilil

Country is the Aboriginal Australian term for homeland: a country is large enough to support a group of people, small enough to be intimately known in every detail, and home to the living things whose lives come and go in that place. The origins of country are in creation. The Australian continent is criss-crossed with the tracks of the creator beings, called Dreamings in Aboriginal

12. Lewis, 84.

13. Farmnote 121/2000; Tim Low, *Feral Futures: The Untold Story of Australia's Exotic Invaders* (Melbourne: Penguin Books, 1999), 197–98.

14. Andrew Johnson, quoted in “Kimberley collars,” 1999. It is only fair to note that Judas collars are fitted to other feral animals including pigs and goats. The reports tend to be glowing. According to Boyd-Law of NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (now part of DEC), “In one trial around Warra and Guy Fawkes River national parks we removed 14 pigs in two hours. And these are pigs that would have been nearly impossible to find by any other means” (“Judas pig trials”). It is worth remembering that in this context “removed” means “killed.” See “Judas pig trials in national parks show promise,” media release 12 November 2003, http://www.nationalparks.nsw.gov.au/npws.nsf/Content/media_131103_feral_pigs

English. Dreamings travelled, and as they went they were performing rituals, distributing plants and marking the zones of animal and plant distributions, making the landforms and water, and making the relationships between one country and another, one species and another. The result is not that everything is connected to everything else: quite the contrary, the living world is made up of differentiation, pattern and connection. Everything is connected to some things and not to others, but everything is connected and nothing is left stranded.

As they travelled, Dreamings shifted their shape from animal to human and back to animal again, becoming ancestral to life on Earth. Multi-species kin groups are the result of creation, and the term Dreaming applies to the ancestors of these groups. The kangaroo people and the kangaroo animals, for example, have become a series of families (clans) located along Dreaming tracks, all of whom are all descended from the kangaroo Dreaming ancestors. Most animals and many plants have their Dreaming ancestors, and their cross-species kin. Family members take care of each other, watch out for each others' interests, defend each other against outsiders, and generally seek to sustain both their connections with other families and the internal integrity of their own family. Within these country-based multi-species families, there is a moral proposition that is not so much a rule as a statement of how life works: a country and its living beings take care of their own. Care of country is a matter of both self-interest and interest for others. An understanding of connectivity promotes long-term purposefulness in life and long term commitments to country's varied life in all its life-and-death diversity.

This Dreaming or totemic way of being in the world is a form of animism, defined in a new and excellent study by Graham Harvey as the recognition "that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship with others."¹⁵ Amongst Aboriginal Australians, the major context for relationships is country, and those who are in relationships of responsibility vis-a-vis each other are called countrymen (the term refers to women as well as men, and to animals and plants as well as humans). Ethics of love and care within this context do not, of course, exclude animals, and they do not exclude death. In a world of hunting and gathering, death and continuity are core aspects of the integrity of life and are always present in people's lives and minds. Ethical relationships do not hinge on killing or not killing. They hinge on taking responsibility for one's actions, and considering ramifications in both short and long terms. Responsibilities are complexly situated in time and place; most of all, they are up close—face-to-face in both life and death.

Animals that are not native to Australia can readily be imagined to pose ethical questions just by being there. There are no Dreaming stories, no tracks

15. Graham Harvey, *Animism: Respecting the Living World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), xi.

or sites for the new animals. Are they countrymen? If they are countrymen, how does that happen, and what are the ethics of the relationship? If they are not countrymen, is there an ethical relationship? What about shooting them out? Do their lives matter, and if so, why?

There are two major studies of Aboriginal people's views on feral animals, both conducted in Central Australia: R. Nugent carried out a survey of Aboriginal attitudes to feral animals in 1988, and in 1995 Bruce Rose undertook a survey of land management issues that included investigation of people's views on feral animals and programs for their elimination. A more recent study, carried out in Kakadu National Park in North Australia in 2004, found similar views on eradication programs. My own research in the northern savannas is bracketed by the Central Australian and Kakadu studies both spatially and temporally. It is marked by exactly the same views.

The Central Australian studies are the most comprehensive, and while I cannot report on them in full detail, I will focus on the key issues that they address. For a start, the interviewees did not have a category of "feral" in their thinking. Bruce Rose explained:

The distinction between native animals and feral animals is difficult for Aboriginal people to accept. Most people said that so called feral animals belong to the country now that they have been introduced and have grown up and reproduced there. . . . The fact that these animals have come more recently to the lands does not necessarily mean that they should be managed differently from other species. It is generally held that they all have a right to live on the country now.¹⁶

The Whitefella perception that ferals are out-of-place was for the most part not matched by Aboriginal people. Rather, most of the people interviewed by both Nugent and Rose asserted that animals such as donkeys, camels, pussycats, and rabbits "belong" to the country. In Rose's words, "the worth of an animal lies in its ability to live and flourish in the environment, not in its claim to being an original component of the fauna" (B. Rose, 104).

Most of the interviewees opposed eradication programs altogether. While there was a diversity of views about whether donkeys, camels, and others were harmful or harmless to country, there was a profound underlying logic that Bruce Rose summarised particularly well:

killing some animals to look after others involves value judgements which are not necessarily part of the Aboriginal world view. . . . Ethics and value judgements which support playing favourites with some species over others do not fit easily into the Aboriginal world view (B. Rose, 91, 92).

People's antipathy toward playing favourites was expressed vigorously in relation to National Parks. Conservation Commission officers have a role that can

16. Bruce Rose, *Land Management Issues: Attitudes and Perceptions Amongst Aboriginal People of Central Australia* (Alice Springs: Central Land Council, 1995).

readily be assumed to be oriented toward conserving life, and so people took them up on it. Nugent reported these statements:

Why do Conservation mob only love birds and plants and not these animals? [ferals]" "If white fellas don't want these animals then why don't they *all* move out?" "If they want to move all these animals out they might as well move out with them", "Rangers have their own tucker and horses have theirs, tell them rangers that these animals just eat their own grass—not from refrigerator—they just use their own country.¹⁷

One of the main issues was partnership. Many of the respondents referred to Christian stories to explain that donkeys had been partners with humans in the past, and that partnership should continue to be respected. One explanation was that the donkey carried Jesus. A similar argument was put in relation to camels: people spoke of the three camels that came to be with Jesus (B. Rose, 111). Some of my teachers added the point that the marks on donkeys' backs show the shape of a cross, thereby confirming their place in sacred history. These positions may also reflect an idea that a good way to influence Whitefellas might be to appeal to their sacred stories.

Along with sacred stories, people spoke of the animals' work in everyday life. One vigorous interviewee in the Victoria River district explained, "Kardiya [Whitefella] station manager, they worry about it, they don't like donkey, [but] they used to cart rations before, early days, but this time that donkey been work before when I was a little boy, carting all the loads from Timber Creek. I am talking different ways [in contrast to station managers], you can't shoot all those different animals." In this line of thinking, donkeys have helped humans in the past and it is not right to turn around and kill them. B. Rose concluded that in this part of the savanna country "feral animals are seen as now belonging to the land. They have worked for people in the past but now they are in a sort of retirement and can stay living quietly on their country" (B. Rose, 123).

Another issue concerns origins and belonging. Nugent and Rose both asked whether the fact that donkeys and other ferals came from elsewhere had a bearing on people's views on how they fit into country and whether they should be removed. Some interviewees implicitly addressed the fact that even though the animals are new to the country and are not part of Dreaming creation, they are still part of a wider creation. According to one of the people Nugent interviewed: "Even though white-fellas brought em in, they was all created" (Nugent, 5). The point was articulated theologically by another person: "God made all the animals so they fit in together okay" (B. Rose, 110). In my research this issue arose not only with respect to cattle, horses, donkeys, and other introduced animals, but with respect to Whitefellas as well. At the heart of stories that reach out beyond Australia, my teachers, like many other

17. R. Nugent, *Aboriginal Attitudes to Feral Animals and Land Degradation* (Alice Springs: Report to the Central Land Council, 1988), 13.

Aboriginal people, respected the diversity of life, and at the same time sought underlying or universal foundations for the connectivity they understood to be always part of life. Australian Aboriginal actor, dancer, and philosopher David Gulpilil gave a beautifully succinct statement on the universality of kinship when he asserted that we are (all) brothers and sisters of the world.

To be created is one thing, to belong is another; Some people suggested that country itself expresses who belongs or fits and who does not. The fact that the animals did settle in and breed up was taken as proof that they fit in the country (B. Rose, 112). As one interviewee explained: "Yeah but they belong to this land now, we can't push them out any of them. Camel, donkey, kangaroo, emu they belong to this country." Similarly, Nugent reports people saying: "they were born on this country and they belong to this ground" (Nugent, 13).

Rose raised with people the issue of feral herbivores competing with cattle for grass, and received incredulous responses, as if herbivores would do anything but be herbivorous. One particularly vigorous respondent spoke to the issue of rabbits as competitors for grass:

they want to get rid of it because it's not from Australia. That's a stupid idea. Australian people eat them. Does that mean they should get rid of the bullock too. They have got bigger mouths than rabbits, they can eat more food. You should get rid of them too. If they kill all the bullock where would people get all their meat? (B. Rose, 116)

Another of the key issues was that people did not want to see animals killed "for nothing."¹⁸ There was near universal abhorrence of the practice of shooting animals and leaving them to rot in country. Two issues stand out: what kind of killing, and where it will take place. Interviewees were adamant in saying that if the animals were going to be killed wastefully, the "government" should take them away and do it somewhere else. This is not so much a desire to avoid the issue as it is a statement of responsibility to country. People have little control over the programs initiated by "government" but where they have control over their own lands, they do not want those wasteful programs implemented in country where they bear the responsibility for life and death. I have had the experience of going to visit a sacred site in a remote location and encountering one dead animal after another, animals shot because they were "pests," their

18. Nugent, 7, 17. Richard Nelson discusses Native Americans' objections to the use of radio collars, and reports that: "Killing an animal for food is one thing; capturing, manipulation, and releasing it is another. As I understand it, these intrusions violate a creature's inherent right to live with dignity. Both Koyukon and Inupiaq people objected most strenuously the use of radio collars, and some said they would try to kill such an animal so it wouldn't have to go on living that way." See Richard Nelson, "Searching for the Lost Arrow: Physical and Spiritual Ecology in the Hunter's World," in *The Biophilia Hypothesis*, ed. Stephen Kellert and Edward Wilson (Washington D.C.: Island Press, 1993), 201–28, 217.

decaying bodies left willy nilly around the country, including the sacred site. I do not wish to write more about it.

The Kakadu study undertaken by Cathy Robinson and colleagues elicited similar, and in some ways even stronger, views. Donkeys were not a threat in that area, but wild horses were, and the comments people made about horses were very close to those expressed in Central Australia in earlier decades. People were concerned that the animals not be wasted, and that animals that had been in partnership with humans should be respected for their former relationships.

Elders in the Kakadu region said that horses “carry history” of the recent past. People were emotionally attached to individual animals and herds, and more generally people said: horses were “carrying our grandfather on his back,” and were “used to travel around the country.” They explained that horses:

look after the place while we are away;” they “keep stories alive,” and “watch country.” A central concern expressed was that if a herd connected to a given area is eliminated, the history and care of this location may be threatened and “special places on country could die.” . . . There was also concern that not only is widespread culling of horses disrespectful but also stories associated with these animals could be lost as a result.¹⁹

These interviewees bring to the fore the agency of animals and country. Animals too are taking care of country, and when humans are not there the country is not abandoned because the animals are there. These domesticated animals have a history of partnership that not only calls for reciprocity today, but that has situated them in country and in history as bearers of stories and as caretakers.

Rather than playing favourites, indigenous ethics embrace these partnership animals as countrymen. Indigenous ethics are not arguing for a basic right to life, or for a basic prevention of suffering (humane culling). Far more provocatively, their positions are founded in relational ethics that involve reciprocity and belonging, mutual care, shared care of country, mutual holding of stories and memory.

Understood within a frame of country and responsibility, mass killings betray kinship, connectivity, country, responsibility, history, and the agency of non-human others—animals that have learned to live there, country that has accepted them.

19. Catherine Robinson, Dermot Smyth and Peter Whitehead, “Bush Tucker, Bush Pets, and Bush Threats: Cooperative Management of Feral Animals in Australia’s Kakadu National Park” *Conservation Biology* 19, no. 5 (October 2005) 1385–91, 1388–89.

2. Moral Friends

My reason for saying that no man is devoid of a heart sensitive to the suffering of others is this. Suppose a man were all of a sudden, to see a young child on the verge of falling into a well. He would certainly be moved to compassion, not because he wanted to get in the good graces of the parents, nor because he wished to win the praise of his fellow villagers or friends, nor yet because he disliked the cry of the child.

—Mencius

Professor Lee of the National Central University, Taiwan, is one of the outstanding proponents of the New Confucian moral philosophy. His major article in English “The Reappraisal of the Foundations of Bioethics: A Confucian Perspective,” lays the foundations for resolving some of the problems of universalism and relativism that beset Enlightenment and postmodern thought. In doing so he also lays out a wonderfully challenging foundation for continuities between humans and the rest of the living earth.²⁰

Lee draws on the Confucian concept of the ‘moral mind’, writing that ‘the moral mind is an expression of our unbearable concern with others’ suffering’.²¹ Lee intends the moral mind to respond to all suffering, not just human, and in a more recent essay he considers the moral mind in relation to future generations.²² He takes the argument back to Mencius (fourth century BCE) and the example of a person seeing a young child about to fall into a well and responding with concern and compassion.

There are several key points in Lee’s analysis. The first is the expression of the universal: “this original unbearable consciousness of another’s suffering.” The second is that this consciousness expresses itself in relation to actions and events: it particularises itself in context.²³ The third key point takes up the position articulated by Engelhardt concerning moral friends and moral strangers. Engelhardt defines moral friends as those who share enough cultural information to be able to understand each other’s moral positions without difficulty. In contrast, moral strangers are those with whom moral positions must be negotiated.²⁴ Lee argues to the contrary that from a Confucian perspective all humans are moral friends in the first instance because all share this foundational moral mind which empathetically responds to the suffering of

20. Shui-Chuen Lee, “The Reappraisal of the Foundations of Bioethics: A Confucian Perspective,” in *Cross-Cultural Perspectives on the (Im)Possibility of Global Bioethics*, ed. Julia Tao Lai Po-Wah (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2002), 179–93.

21. Lee, “Reappraisal,” 186.

22. Shui-Chuen Lee, “Biotechnology and Responsibility to Future Generations: A Confucian Perspective,” in *Genomics in Asia: A Clash of Bioethical Interests?*, ed. Margaret Sleeboom (London: Kegan Paul, 2004), 145–58.

23. Lee, “Reappraisal,” 186, 187

24. Tristram Engelhardt, Jr, *The Foundation of Bioethics*, 2nd edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

others.²⁵ He thus resolves the discomfort between Enlightenment universals and postmodern relativism in this interestingly Confucian way: the universal foundation of our being is that as humans we are possessed of a “moral mind” and are always already alert to the sufferings of others. The relativistic dimension is that as individuals we make our own responses to the moral issues we confront, and as members of social and cultural groups we do so in ways that are appropriate to our situatedness in history and culture.

The foundation of Lee’s argument is Mencius’s account of the compassion that arises in the face of potential harm, in this case the child on the edge of a well; this is compassion that has no utilitarian necessity and that seems to arise unbidden. Mencius does not suggest that the child calls out for help. As I understand the story, the emphasis is not on how a person is called into ethics, but rather on how a person’s existing humaneness spills out into action. Mencius insists that the response to peril or possible suffering is in-built. His exact analogy is with a fire that just starts or a spring that just bubbles up out of the ground.²⁶ In short, Mencius’s person is always already continuous with the world; the humaneness that bubbles up is actually part of the living world. Mencius’s teaching is designed to help people develop their capacities, but there is no doubt that the capacities exist already within people, and thus are there to be worked with.

Lee does not intend his work to be limited to humans.²⁷ Confucian scholars of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries considered this question at length. Wang Yang-ming (1472-1529) writes (in *Inquiry on the Great Learning*): “the great man regards Heaven and Earth and the myriad things as one body. He regards the world as one family and the country as one person.”²⁸ In this passage, Wang discusses first the case with respect to another human, then with birds and animals, then with plants, then with tiles and stones. Empathetic response to the whole of Heaven and Earth, he asserts, is in-built in humans because all parts of the world are also part each of the other.

If all parts of the living world participate in the continuities of life, then it is reasonable to imagine that that which bubbles up in humans as empathy or compassion also bubbles up in other life forms in a manner consistent with their own species-being. One does not need any special insight into donkey sociality to understand that the Judas collar is effective because donkey sociality exists. The eradication technique thus betrays the donkey’s own sociality as well as assaulting the basis of empathy between humans and donkeys.

25. Lee, “Reappraisal,” 190.

26. *Mencius*, trans. D.C. Law (London: Penguin Classics, 1970), [2A6], 82–83.

27. Personal communication.

28. See Weiming Tu, “Beyond the Enlightenment Mentality,” in *Confucianism and Ecology: The Interrelation of Heaven, Earth, and Humans*, ed. Mary Tucker and John Berthrong (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Centre for the Study of World Religions, 1998), 3–21, 18.

The mass shootings of donkeys and other ferals amply attest to the point made about genocide: that mass death “denotes a doubled action: one murders in the flesh what one has already rendered in one’s thought as morally inconsiderable.”²⁹ Zygmunt Bauman reminds us again and again that while we know a lot about prejudice in relation to violence, “we know little about how to stave off the threat of murder which masquerades as the routine and unemotional function of an orderly society.”³⁰ Humane culling draws on the rhetoric of order (animals in their rightful place), purity (only natives or domesticated animals), and techno-efficiency. The action that Aboriginal people find most wasteful and abhorrent—mass shootings from helicopters—is from the humane cull point of view most efficient and therefore most effective. It thus positions mass killings as “creative destruction, conceived as a *healing surgical operation*,” undertaken in the interest of better economies or environments (Baumann, 11). The surgical operation is a technology in the sado-dispassionate mode that Val Plumwood discusses in relation to science: it promotes the suppression or eradication of empathy.³¹

Understood within the context of moral friends, Judas work is a betrayal of donkeys in their capacity for sociality, of humans in their capacity for empathy, and of life itself. It betrays the bubbling up of life into empathy, and thus betrays the moral mind of the living earth.

3. Narratives and gifts

Nothing confirms our identity with other mortals and our mutual dependence as powerfully as death does. Death visits us with grief and pain, but it also highlights our connection with all other[s] . . . and the power we have to continue life in others.

—Alfred Killilea

“Humane culling” breaks up the dynamic synergies between life and death and in that process desecrates both. I will focus on two types of narrative—biological and polyvocal. Lynn Margulis and Dorian Sagan, in their book *What is Life?*—also address the question “what is death?” In animals, including humans, death is programmed into the being at the cellular level: cells age and die as part of the life of the individual.³² The difference between the parts that die

29. Hatley, *Suffering Witness: The Quandary of Responsibility after the Irreparable* (Albanry: State University of New York Press, 2000), 55.

30. Zygmunt Bauman, “The Holocaust’s Life as a Ghost,” in *The Ghost of the Holocaust: Writings on Art, Politics, Law and Education*, ed. F.C. Decoste and B. Schwartz (Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press, 2000), 3–15, 10.

31. Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Erisis of Reason* (London: Routledge, 2002), 22.

32. Lynn Margulis and Dorian Sagan, *What Is Life?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000 [1995]), 156.

and the parts that do not die is the difference between the body (that dies) and the sex cells (germ plasm) that survive across the generations. There is indeed a kind of generosity here that is embedded in the nature and capacity of cells: death is the price we all pay for the ancient fact that cells cannot simultaneously live forever and maintain mobility. In animals, most cells are immobile, and divide, and die, but a few hold on to their mobility and, while not dividing, seem to live forever by physically moving across the generations. For animals, Margulis and Sagan tell us, “life is an extension of being into the next generation, the next species” (Margulis and Sagan, 144).

Similarly, James Hatley’s superb analysis of witnessing shows that the significance of death is located in the “death narrative”—a cross-generational gift. According to Hatley, the death narrative in human terms situates death and the dead within an historical community. He 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, 212).

Hatley enlarges the death narrative concept beyond language to include gestures that cross from one generation to the next. He describes these gestures as polyvocative. They are “overburdened with meanings that cannot be disentangled from their having been given to oneself by others, meanings that exceed being rendered unambiguously in one’s own voice” (Hatley, 219). He also suggests that such gestures could be thought of as crossing over from species to species (Hatley, 63). This cross-generational and cross-species concept of death as gift situates death in dialogue with life and thus situates it as a participant in a dialogue of time and difference. It suggests an ethics of death such that one’s death is for one’s community and for the future, as well as in, of, and for one’s self.

I have explored the cross-species dimensions of the death narrative and have suggested that Australian Aboriginal people bring an ecological perspective to the dialogue. Rather than “death narratives” emerging solely from inter-human engagements, my Aboriginal teachers would insist on the participation of other species, and of the larger entity known as country. In their context, the flourishing of life in country is the narrative of the whole ecosystem that preceded them—an ecosystem that included and was enhanced by their ancestors. So flourishing country is an ancestral death narrative, but equally, one would have to say, it is the narrative of all the living things that contributed to the life of the country. The ecological narrative embeds death in processes through which death is twisted back into life.³³

My claim that Judas work is a desecration of death rests on both biological and polyvocal narratives. When death is twisted back into life, death works for continuity. Thus when donkeys settle in and breed up in country their

33. Deborah Rose, *Reports from a Wild Country: Ethics for Decolonisation* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2004), Chapter 9.

deaths become gifts to new generations of donkeys. Under mass eradication programs, the donkey's deaths are being twisted into more deaths and more deaths. No longer a gift across donkey generations, the Judas collar enables a massive amplification of death work.

Those who design and implement eradication programs would probably not ask questions about donkey's death narratives; they are concerned with utility, not gifts. But a kind of answer, stated explicitly by Andrew Johnson of AGWEST, shows us the precise connection between narcissism and the anthropocentric twisting of death narratives. He says that the Judas donkey is assisting people: "Other donkeys then found with the Judas donkey are humanely culled, leaving the Judas donkey so that it can help locate and pinpoint other donkeys in the area."³⁴

"Playing favourites with species" turns on human narcissism, as Johnson's statement indicates. He claims the donkey's action to be complicit in the human project of eradication ("it can help locate and pinpoint other donkeys"). It thus replaces a multitude of creatures working out their own unique life projects with a narcissistic and mono-centric project toward which all effort is directed. The Judas, we should never forget, may be the last one to die, but whether she is killed or dies of old age, or a broken heart, there will be no future generations of donkeys to whom her death is a gift.

Within an understanding of death narratives and gifts, Judas work betrays death twice over. First, mass animal deaths pervert the purpose of death, twisting them into amplified and amplifying processes that work against life. And second, the human appropriation of death steals the gifts of cross-generational life, and perverts the diversity of life to a narcissistic illusion of control.

4. Being-for-others

Finite selves, being self-realizing systems, maintain themselves through continuous exchange....[The self is] a being propelled by desire for others... To follow the promptings of its own conatus then is not to seek to overcome others, but rather to reach out to them.

—Freya Mathews

My heart goes out to the little jenny who is knocked out with a tranquiliser gun and fitted with a Judas collar. The cumbersome device carries a VHF radio transmitter so that she can be located wherever she goes. She will be left to recover and to find her companions, and from then on the men with guns, helicopters, radios, and GPS equipment will follow her. With them comes death. Time and again she finds mates only to see them mown down. Time and again she is left lonely and bewildered.

34. "Kimberley collars," 1999.

Judas work twists the jenny's being in the world away from her own companions and brings her into the domain of human deathwork. Her life and her death are appropriated by the killers. When she dies there will be no one for whom it will be a gift, not even, at this point, the humans who took all her life and death from her. If she dies at the end of the project her death will be superfluous. If she dies in advance of completion, her death will be a nuisance.

Recently some new and disturbing reports started coming from the outback. Jennies learn that where they go, death follows. And so eventually they stop looking for others. They isolate themselves, avoiding others, seeking out the places where others will not find them. Earth's moral mind continues to bubble in the jenny. Her social nature longs for others, but now she must abjure others if they are to continue to live. Judas work poses for her a double-bind: either turn away from others in order to show her care for them, or join them and see them die. In refusing the call of her own social nature, she may come to seem "wild" in yet another dimension of this complex term. She becomes the creature without fellow creatures, the creature for whom being-with-others has lost its purchase. The jenny's options are devastating, and like a prism in the sun her choice continues to show the moral putrefaction of Judas work. Into the jenny's life an ontological split has been thrust: her capacity to be *for* others has been put at odds with her desire to be *with* others; in order to be *for* she must be *apart*. She embodies the bubbling spring of empathy, and she holds alive the moral mind of earth in a place where narcissistic madness is running wild.

No one foresaw or expressed the implications of the ramifying effects of mass death more eloquently than Walter Benjamin in his sixth thesis on history: "*even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins."³⁵ Retrospectively, as Holocaust scholars have shown, neither the dead nor even death, itself is safe. In the context of animal mass deaths we learn that neither life nor death, nor connectivity nor kinship, nor earth's own empathy, nor a living creature's sweet desire to flourish with others is safe. Not safe at all when the wild monological will goes out to remake the world.³⁶

35. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. H. Arendt, trans. H. Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 255.

36. My reflections on the wild have been sharpened through a number of deep conversations with David Abram. I thank him most sincerely for exploring with me a few facets of this wonderfully complex and challenging concept.

Kofi Debacker Bird

4. Ecological Existentialism

of how we are driving ourselves and our world into an ever-expanding death space.

"Existentialism" is a term with diverse connotations, a "much used, much disputed term."³ I use it in a general way to indicate the key proposition that there is no predetermined essence of humanity, no ultimate goal toward which we are heading, and that we experience what appear to be astonishingly open ways of being and becoming human. My use of the term is clearly situated within the intellectual history that asks what humanity is and can be. The humanistic existential philosophers ascribed a terrible loneliness to humanity's freedom, a condition that arises because, in their view, we humans are effectively alone in the universe. The modern Western sense of human loneliness was perhaps kick-started with Copernicus, and was massively enhanced by scientific research that expanded the timeline of Earth and the universe. One effect of these expansions of time and decentering of Earth as the focus of the universe was to shrink the apparent significance of humanity. Jonas quotes Pascal, a Christian thinker of the seventeenth century: "Cast into the infinite immensity of spaces of which I am ignorant, and which know me not, I am frightened." In Jonas's view, it is the "know me not" part of the statement, the sense of cosmic indifference, that accelerates human loneliness.⁴ Similarly, Soloveitchik, a twentieth-century Jewish thinker, offers a beautifully articulate expression of human loneliness in relation to time. He likens "man" to "a hitchhiker suddenly invited to get into a swiftly traveling vehicle which emerged from nowhere and from which he will be dropped into the abyss of timelessness while the vehicle will rush on into parts unknown, continually taking on new passengers and dropping off old ones."⁵

Existentialism, never unified, and never given definitive boundaries, arises with the absence or death of God. With no god, and with a culture of dualistic thinking that separates humanity from all else on Earth, and with the loss of certainty and destiny that inheres in mechanistic worldviews, existential thought struggled with dread in the face of cosmic isolation. I modify the term "existentialism" with the term "ecological." Against existential loneliness, I propose that our condition as a co-evolving species of life on Earth, our kinship in the great family of life on Earth, situates us in time and

We are brothers and sisters of the world. Doesn't matter if you're bird, snake, fish, kangaroo: One Red Blood.—David Gulpilil, *Gulpilil: One Red Blood*, 2007

~~E~~cological existentialism responds to the two big shifts in WestERN thought that define our current moment: the shift into uncertainty and the shift into connectivity. I will take a whirlwind tour through these shifts, with Lev Shestov, Ilya Prigogine, and Val Plumwood as guides. The focus is in response to Soulé's idea that people save what they love; the purpose is to ask: What is this "people" he's talking about?

Lev Shestov was an early critic of modernity and an advocate of existential philosophy. Born in 1866 in Russia, Shestov was educated there, and stayed there until 1895, when he began to travel in western Europe, living sometimes in Russia and sometimes in Germany or Switzerland. After the revolution, he emigrated to Paris, where he wrote and taught. As his work was translated into French, he became a key figure in both religious philosophy and existential philosophy, and had particular influence on Camus' thinking.¹ Shestov's thought works in two major directions. The first is his critique of modernity, focusing on its devotion to progress, certainty, and destiny. The second is his fierce commitment to a kind of "craziness"—a wild and daring wisdom—that calls for humanity to be in connection with the world. Within all his work is a powerful moral sensibility that calls for commitment, daring, and connectedness in the midst of uncertainty.

Shestov's sense of impending disaster was prophetic. In one of his most pungent passages, he says that the West's commitment to abstractions and certainty "would poison the joy of existence and lead men, through terrible and loathsome trials, to the threshold of nothingness."² In the context of his writing and his time, this is a statement of how the West was driving itself into existential despair. Perhaps already he was seeing the path of genocide that the Nazis were opening up. Now we can read it also as an ecological statement

place. We are still creatures for whom there is no predetermined essence or destiny; we are a work-in-progress. At the same time, as creatures enmeshed within the connectivities of Earth life, there is no ultimate isolation; we are thoroughly entangled. If there is loneliness, it is of our own making, as we saw with Bobby and Youngfella. In truth our lives are interspecies projects through and through.⁶ Ecological existentialism thus proposes a kinship of becoming: no telos, no *deus ex machina* to rescue us, no clockwork to keep us ticking along; and on the other hand, the rich plenitude, with all its joys and hazards, of our entanglement in the place, time, and multi-species complexities of life on Earth.

Uncertainty: The Spectre of Mystery

For several millennia, the West has been in the grip of a deep desire for order, certainty, and predictability. The classical worldview lays out a template that has been reworked over several millennia: the whole is prior to the parts. If we think of a human being as a part of the larger whole which is prior to it, the implications are that the whole is better than the parts, since each part is only an incomplete fragment of the whole, and therefore the parts exist for the sake of the whole. As the whole precedes the parts, so the parts find the meaning of their existence by considering the whole. Order, predictability, and the possibility of comprehending it all are part of the thinking that is entailed with the proposition that the whole is prior to the parts. Shestov explains this in detail in the context of speculative philosophy:

The essence and the meaning of the very concept of "speculation"—of "mental sight"—consists in man training himself to see in himself a part of the single whole and convincing himself that the meaning of his existence, his "destiny," consists in adapting his life to the being of the whole uncomplainingly and even joyously. A machine has screws, wheels, driving belts, etc. But both the people out of whom the universe arises as well as the individual parts out of which the machine is formed have no meaning in and of themselves. The meaning of their existence lies only in that the "whole"—the machine in the first instance, the world in the latter—should function

without impediment and move forward uninterruptedly in the direction established once and for all.⁷

In Plato's time, the order of the stars was the model of orderliness, and because there is order, the possibility of complete knowledge exists. Such knowledge would be gained through the use of abstract reason. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato wrote of a site beyond the distant starry skies which is the abode of reality: "It is there that true being dwells, without colour or shape, that cannot be touched; reason alone, the soul's pilot, can behold it, and all true knowledge is knowledge thereof."⁸ He thus connects truth and true being with the abstract and immutable, with that which has no body, with an external standpoint far from Earth, and with the human faculty of reason. All of this is well outside the world of earthly materiality. The consolation of philosophy for Plato is to offer meaning that is accessible to man's reason and that transcends all that is finite and subject to change.

If the principles and rules are to be reliable, they must always be right, and in order for rules and principles always to be right, the cosmos itself must be unchanging. That which has been observed must hold true into the future as well. The correlation between past and future is known as time symmetry, and it requires immutability. Within the template of whole and part, and its correlated time symmetry, the living world of transience and flux is very much a poor relation.

Shestov's desire was to draw out the many and terrible implications of eternal and immutable "Certainty" (with a capital C):

Certainty kills God, because it denies God's own freedom to intervene in the world unpredictably;

Certainty dismisses the passionate and vivid qualities of life on earth because these qualities are mutable, sustained in flux, subject to death and fraught with uncertainty;

Certainty calls us to renounce our own selfhood, on the same grounds;

Certainty calls us to "renounce the world and that which is in the world" on the same grounds—that the world is transient, subject to death and fraught with uncertainty.⁹

The Certainty position is: "Everything that exists in the world passes away, is condemned to disappear. Is it worth the trouble to hold on to such a world?"¹⁰ He suggests that in becoming slaves of Certainty, our understanding of our real place in the real world was seriously damaged, and the actual real world of our lives and deaths lost for us its "charm and fascination."¹¹

Already, within Shestov's lifetime, Western thought was shaking its own foundations. We have reached "the end of certainty," in Ilya Prigogine's memorable phrase, and so we have reached the scientific end of millennia of thought. The methods of certainty have uncovered fundamental uncertainties in the cosmos and within Earth and life, and we are in the midst of a scientific upheaval that is more of a tsunami than a respectable little blip.

The new understanding reverses the whole-part relationship. Science is now asserting that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. This is an absolute bombshell of an idea, defused to some degree by having become a cliché, but nevertheless of profound significance. The dream of complete certainty is a major casualty, and was expressed delightfully by Frank Egler: "Ecosystems may not only be more complex than we think, they may be more complex than we can think."¹² One cannot remove one's self from the system under examination; Plato's dream of a faraway site of pure knowledge is untenable. Because one is a part of the system, and because the system is always coming into being through the actions of the parts, the whole remains outside the possibility of one's comprehension.¹³ The shift entails change from concepts of equilibrium to pervasive disequilibrium; from concepts of objectivity to intersubjectivity; from visions of deterministic prediction to an awareness of uncertainty and probability.¹⁴

With uncertainty, time symmetry is broken. It is not possible to assert that what has been observed in the past will always and necessarily hold good in the future. An impressive effect of the breaking of time symmetry is that mystery is brought back into human thought as an essential element of our lives, a part of thought rather than an enemy to be vanquished. We are not parts of the machine, but rather are participants in processes by which life is always coming into connectivity. As the whole is unknowable in its totality, so mystery becomes part of our human condition.

Ilya Prigogine's work has been with the time-dependent irreversible processes that are characteristic of life and that are far from equilibrium. Irreversible processes produce entropy, and they are well expressed through the metaphor of time's arrow. There is no way to turn back time, life leads into death, and there is no alternative. Prigogine's great scientific contribution is to show that the arrow of time is also a source of order: there is a constructive role, too, for irreversible time, since living things come into life as well as die. The same quality of irreversibility leads both to life and death, and thus life and death are mutually interactive.¹⁵ Like Shestov, Prigogine maintains (and furthermore is able to prove mathematically) that the complexity of the real world is founded in the transience and flux of life and death.

The humanist existentialism of the last century mirrored this shift, rejecting attempts to build philosophy on the basis of the idea that the meaning of being human is embedded in cosmic certainties. Without certainty, the long history of thought that drew its logical, metaphorical, and mystical power from the idea of the whole is overturned, and we are thrown back on what existential philosophy has called the Absurd. In this world of uncertainty, nothing is guaranteed. There is no future point of perfection toward which all is moving, and there is no whole that directs us.

Connectivity: The Spectre of Animals

Animals haunt the Western imagination, a haunting entailed by and sustained through our long-standing, but now crumbling, dualisms. Dualistic thought, pervading the ancient world of the West and continuing to this day, requires two intellectual moves: separation and hierarchy. The great eco-feminist philosopher Val Plumwood uses the term "hyperseparation" to describe this kind of divide.¹⁶ Hyperseparation not only says that things are different, it says that the difference is oppositional and extreme. Thus, for example, where men are taken to be rational, women must be emotional; if men are active, women must be passive; if men are hard, women must be soft. The hyperseparated dualisms link up: if humans are rational, nature must be mindless; if humans are active, nature must be passive. If humans think and speak, animals must be dumb

brutes. Mind is imagined to be over and above matter, cosmos or heaven is deemed to be over and above earth, eternity and certainty are valued over and above transience, mutability, and uncertainty, and so on. The hierarchy of superiority is also a hierarchy of control: culture over nature, mind over matter, and so on and on in the most familiar and oppressive fashion.

A major dualism is that between "culture" and "nature." Culture refers to human beings, and nature refers to all the rest of the living world that is not human. Nature/culture is a divide between humans and the rest that sets the human over and above all else. Within this binary, the separation between humans and animals is crucial, since animals are those parts of nature closest to us in face, form, and function. Questions arise: If we are like them, do we lose our sense of having a unique origin and destiny? If we are not like them, are we isolated? If we do not belong with them, with whom do we belong? To whom are we accountable? Where are the boundaries of our ethics? Where are the boundaries of life, death, thought, experience, knowledge, empathy, concern, intelligence, communication, love? Who are we when we are with them, and then again, who are we without them?

Kinship: The Spectre of Connectivity

In our new knowledge system, the world is not finished. Our human species is evolved from and always involved in world making. This does not mean that we humans are all-powerful or all-knowing. Far from it. Our power exceeds our capacity to contain its effects, and thus we are constantly confronted with our own powerlessness. Our knowledge is necessarily and forever incomplete. The world—the living Earth—is always making itself, and we are part of that process, both made by the world and part of its continuous making. In short, we are participants in its ongoing story.

Life is a process of becoming, and thus we face more questions. Does the natural world have its own desires, its own memories, goals, and sentience? The biologists Lynn Margulis and Dorion Sagan say "yes" to these questions. Life, they tell us, is "matter that chooses. Each living being . . . responds sentiently to a changing environment and tries during its life to alter itself."¹⁷ With choice, life

systems are full of unpredictability and uncertainty, and while it is not the case that absolutely anything can happen and survive, in its ongoing self-organization and self-repair, the organism, or the ecosystem, or even the whole biosphere, is working with the uncertainties of change and striving to sustain its own flourishing. We can say that life has desires, and we can talk about what these desires are: life desires complexity, life wants to join, create, experiment, do more.

Where humanistic existentialism found humanity isolated in the face of the cosmos, new understandings of life's connectivity tell us that in fact we are not alone. We are in a world of intersubjectivity—a world in which sentient subjects face each other. The Danish biologist Jesper Hoffmeyer takes the understanding of intersubjectivity to a glorious extreme. He contends that all that exists is based entirely on communication. The universe, he says, is a semiosphere. Subjectivity is necessary to life, and indeed is necessary to the whole cosmos. "Life is based entirely on semiosis, on sign operations." Hoffmeyer restores connectivity through an examination of semiotic processes that work across scales from cosmos, to Earth, to living systems, and to individuals. That we seem to work with the same basic desires as all other systems is not an anthropomorphic projection, as is often argued. Recent work, Hoffmeyer's and that of numerous others, shows that the connectivities, similarities, and parallels are real, and thus comprehensibility too is a real possibility. Hoffmeyer writes, "The living world . . . can be awe inspiring or deeply moving and, whatever else it may be, it concerns us. It is made of the same stuff as we ourselves are—it resembles us because it dreamed us up."¹⁸

But to step back a moment, the end of both dualism and atomism came together in the work of Gregory Bateson. He started his long and eventful career as an anthropologist, and moved into numerous fields as he pursued his wide-ranging intellectual questions. Bateson's fundamental assertion is that the unit of survival is not the individual or the species, but is the organism-and-its-environment. It follows from this that an organism that deteriorates its environment is committing suicide.¹⁹ In his analysis, organism and environment are influencing each other, co-evolving, becoming with each other through time. These propositions overthrow any sense of hy-

perseparation. Rather there is entanglement and interaction, a deep and abiding mutuality. This entangled quality of life on Earth depends on and supports connectivity. There are numerous ways into thinking about these matters. I offer one way: the kinship mode. It situates us here on Earth, and asserts that we are not alone in time or place: we are at home where our kind of life (Earth life) came into being, and we are members of entangled generations of Earth life, generations that succeed each other in time and place. In chapter 8, I return to these themes.

World making depends on uncertainty. The way of nature is the way of the new—the “creation of unpredictable novelty,” as Prigogine puts it.²⁰ The unpredictability of nature’s coming forth has created the complexity of life on Earth; complexity is endlessly interesting because it is never exhausted, and part of its interest for us is that it brought forth the creatures known as humans. We Westerners have named ourselves *Homo sapiens*—the thinking animal. The arrogance is evident, but it also contains a home truth: we are *a species* (certainly not *the species*) that wants to know. Our desire to know encounters the mystery inherent in the fact that knowing can never be complete, and we are hooked. Mystery and desire are terms that call to us in the language of sensuous experience, but they can also be defined technically. Mystery is an essential property of a holistic system. One cannot remove one’s self from the system under examination, and because one is a part of the system one will always encounter mystery in the encounter with the integrity of larger systems. Desire, too, can be defined technically. It is the will toward self-realization that is characteristic of all life because life itself in all its many parts and processes is self-repairing, self-changing, and self-realizing. In humans, the desire for self-realization includes a desire for knowledge. Thus desire must always bring us into encounter with mystery, and mystery, properly understood (if that is not too paradoxical) would enhance our desire by being so close.

Margulis and Sagan 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.”²¹ Life in this broader context is “a network of cross-kingdom alliances” that “help keep the entire planetary surface brimming with life.”²² As we lose the connectivities that make

up the fabric of life on earth, we ourselves are less and less likely to be a sustainable species. Increasingly we seem to be one of the problems that life is confronting. Trotsky said it perfectly years and years ago in the context of war; in thinking expansively about his words we have to consider that war is not only an interhuman project but has expanded to become an interspecies project as well. You may not be interested in extinction, I would suggest in paraphrase, but extinction is interested in you.

The infatuation with certainty can be seen as a way to try to cut through the dynamics of mystery and desire; to distil clear boundaries and stability from dynamic fluctuation. Ecological existentialism enjoins us to live within the dynamics, and to pour our love into this unstable and uncertain Earth. Ethical questions within the world of connectivity start with how to appreciate the differences between humankind and others, while at the same time also understanding that we are all interdependent. How to engage in world making across species? How to work toward world making that enhances the lives of others? And how to do all this in the time of extinctions, knowing, as we must, that we are living amidst the ruination of others?

12. The Beginning Law

on what I was hearing of the funeral. I thought that Old Tim may have come to keep me away from the funeral by distracting me, and I was both grateful and annoyed.

Retrospectively, I am fascinated by his choice of stories. In counterpoint to the rituals of death and grief that surrounded us, Old Tim talked about coming into being. This was the moment when truly I began to "get it"—to understand the turning toward life that connects species and generations and brings death into dialogue. Already a few people had been telling me the history of how they came into their current life. One of the little girls who enjoyed talking to me, Aileen, had told me that she was a little lizard before she found her mother and father. Her friend Kathy also was a little lizard, and they used to play together in the bush until they found their way into their human families and became childhood friends.

Such stories constitute more-than-human genealogies that enmesh people in cross-species transformations. I came to learn that everyone had a history that told how their life came across through other species. Hobbles Danaiyarrri, another of my great teachers, was a barramundi before he became a human. His father speared the fish, his mother ate some, and the spirit became the baby who grew into a gifted analyst and storyteller. On his right temple he had a small mark where his father speared the fish. In the early days, a group of Aboriginal people had been fishing and were shot up by Whitefellas. One of the men died in the water. His spirit became a barramundi; the barramundi became Hobbles. Happily, he had a large family to carry on after him, and he expected that his life would go through death, to become new life.

Old Tim's stories on that hot, tense afternoon offered a philosophy of connectivity not through abstractions but through engagement. Words and events became a contrapuntal performance. We will want to consider this pattern of engagement, but first let us listen to the stories. Sometimes Tim used the word "spirit" to talk about the will-to-life that moves from body to body. More often he used the word "kid," meaning the life that would become a human being. On the occasion of the long, angry funeral, he told me what would happen to the dead man. This involved introducing me to a hill nearby where dead people go and where kids hang out waiting for their opportunity to return: "Dead man, he gotta go to that hill

I have discussed many of the Western scientific and philosophical accounts of connectivity, and I have proposed an ecological erotics in which life and death are connected through departures and returns. Old Tim generally did things differently; his philosophical account of connectivity was a full-blown performance.

Cross-Species Returns

When I first arrived in Yarralin in 1980, I was given a house that for that time was up-to-date: a one-room corrugated iron shed with a tap in the yard and a covered veranda. Toilets and showers were shared by several families and were not far from my little house. I was near the center of the community, and the house was empty because a much-loved and -respected old man had died just a few days earlier. Only his dog remained, a sickly, sad-eyed creature who didn't last long. The funeral rituals were finished and the house had been smoked out, but no one wanted to move in. It was still too soon for people to have left the memories behind, and the grief of losing him was too strong. I was a stranger with no memories and no grief, and so the house became mine.

About a month later there was a funeral for another man who had died recently. It was a tense affair as there was a lot of bad feeling about the circumstances of his death. People were all on edge, and the mood of the place became more tense with every truck that arrived carrying angry people from other communities. I was immensely curious, but also aware that I knew almost nothing and understood even less. I sat on the veranda feeling torn between my desire to join in and my deep sense that I should keep out of it. Along came Old Tim. He sat with me and started talking, and he talked for hours. I took notes, as he was always keen for me to do. I listened to his stories, but part of my attention remained tuned to the sounds of wailing, fighting, and more wailing. My notes are something of a fugue: Old Tim's stories are interrupted with notes

and stop there at that hill. He'll come back. Those kids come from that hill. That's where the kids come from. All these kids come from that hill. When he's dead, he goes along to that place, stops five or seven years, then gets new mother, new daddy, gets born to them." The Dingo ancestor was the originator of this Law (see chapter 7): "That kid find new father, new mother: that's the Dingo Law... The dead man looks around, thinks about his Dreaming... Makes himself into kangaroo, goanna, bird, crocodile. . . That's the Law. From that Dog".

Tim went on to tell of the role of the clever man in this process, speaking himself into the story because the work that keeps the flow of life coming was an important part of his life: "Clever man—clever man can see that kid. 'Hey,' the clever man says to the kid, and the kid says, 'Which one is my mother, which one is my daddy?' The clever man shows him. The clever man is showing him that: 'You, that's your mother.' Showing the little kid that comes from the hill."

As the wailing continued, Old Tim talked about birth and about songs to make the baby be born quickly. Childbirth is the women's domain, but sometimes if the child is not coming, extra people are called on to help, even a man if he is clever. Mary Rutungali was a midwife, and both she and Old Tim had songs and techniques. Tim explained that when a woman was trying to give birth and was "just about dead," the attending women would ask for Mary. "I'm very tired, very tired, I can't do nothing," the birthing mother would say, and Mary would work on the woman's body and sing the songs. Similarly, if Tim was called, he'd sing and work with the power he had to help this life come. Within an hour or two, he said, the baby would be born, and would be crying with life. In the days before women were shipped away to hospital to give birth, people were born onto the ground. The blood of childbirth soaked into the earth (further details are not public knowledge in this region). Another of my teachers, Riley Young, explained the importance of birth and ground: "Aboriginal people bin born onto this ground... No hospital, no needle, no medicine... Because this ground is the hospital. Even me, I bin born onto this ground... I never bin born by top of the hospital. I bin born by ground."⁷¹

Another truck, more crying, and we paused to listen. Then Tim talked about songs to make the baby grow strong. He had done that

for years too: sung songs from the Dreaming, giving the child the strength to walk. He spoke a bit about ceremonies for making boys into young men; about all the work that goes into making a human.

We sat on the veranda within earshot, but out of eyesight, of a funeral that went on and on. Old Tim was telling what would happen with this particular dead man, how this was the end of a life, but not the end of life altogether. Both philosophy and consolation were in his words. Looking back, I can see that Old Tim was offering a philosophy that brought birth and death together in creative dynamism. The philosophy was not strictly in the narrative; rather Old Tim worked with story and funeral to perform a philosophy. My notes show a pattern that took me years to come to understand, and that became most evident when we danced all night in the ceremony that makes a little boy into a young man.

Let us leave the funeral for a moment and think about dancing for life. The ceremony is called "Pantimi," and it was brought into the world by the Dreaming women who carried it out of the west. In these days, the men who are authorized to sing sit in a circle, and, using boomerangs as clapsticks, sing the songs. The women dance toward the men, moving from west to east and occasionally dancing around them. As we danced we were inscribing the ground with our feet. With each small song, we approached the circle of men. At each interval between the small songs, we withdrew, and when the song started up once more, we would again dance toward the singers. Our feet and legs produced a rhythm and our dance-call was a high-pitched vocal projection, also rhythmic. We worked the ground with our feet; we made tracks and raised dust, beating the rhythms of the dance right into the earth. Our call went out into the night to be heard not just by the Dreamings, but also by the dead and by all the living things who were not present but who would recognize the sounds of ceremony.

One of the outstanding patterns in Pantimi and other ceremonies is that of dance and non-dance. Between clusters of small songs there are large pauses. The rhythms of the song and dance are thus set within a larger oscillation of music and non-music. The non-musical interval is dominated by joking. It is not a break in the ceremony but rather a contrapuntal engagement with the musical portion of

the ceremony. One joke is topped by another, which is topped by another, and the jokes are spread out over the intervals so that the joking runs concurrently, carrying spontaneous inventive delight. Ceremony thus works with two interwoven event types. The music and dance is Dreaming Law, and is complexly patterned; there are formal rules, and it must be performed correctly. The joking is a spontaneous commentary on daily life. Each joking interval is a qualitative and purposeful withdrawal from formality. Each song is a qualitative and purposeful return to Dreaming Law. The ethnomusicologist Cath Ellis describes Aboriginal music as "iridescent." She explains this unexpected concept with reference to the phenomenon that occurs when background and foreground suddenly flip. We all experience this in its visual form, particularly with art or photos that are designed to generate a visual/mental movement between background and foreground.² A familiar example is the visual illusion of faces or vases, where the image shifts from a vase or goblet to two people facing each other.³

This flip phenomenon is also experienced aurally, as one or another pattern is heard as foreground. Ellis states that the experience has several effects. It alters the perceived flow of time by interrupting recognized patterns, and it heightens one's awareness of the whole performance.⁴ In the performance of ceremony, there are many flips. For the dancer there is the flip between the feet on the ground and the ground on the feet: Who is the dancer, and who is the danced? If we focus on motion, it is clear that both are dancer and danced, and that the significance of this mutuality is located in the flip back and forth between us.

The unpromisingly homely little term "flip" signals a deeply serious pattern that was present in ceremony and was present in Old Tim's philosophical performance of connectivity. If the funeral was the main theme, the story of birth was the counterpoint. If the stories of birth were the main theme, the cries of grief and anger were the counterpoint. But if both funeral and birth stories were main themes, what mattered was the flip back and forth between them. His masterly performance thus offered an account of death and birth, departure and return, and the mutuality of it all.

The Pattern I want to focus on here is the play of the flip: two types of events, co-present, shaping and making each other, and

participants flipping between them, foregrounding first one, then the other. Flips appear at first to be either/or: either this foreground or that foreground. But for participants, the patterns are experienced in the body and in time. One is experiencing both flow and simultaneity, and iridescence arises in the patterns of mutual co-presence. Iridescence is the point at which the either/or is experienced as both and. In thinking about life and death, we encounter just such an iridescence, a shimmer arising from Earth life. Time and multiplicity move us into flow. In terms of multiplicity, all living beings are in motion, coming or going, from place to place and from life to life. Equally, real life is situated in irreversible time. The flip is not an oscillation outside of time, but rather, as part of life, it works with the dynamics of disorder and creation. It is important to note that the philosophy of the flip runs counter to two important maxims that are current within contemporary spirituality movements. It is not possible that "we are all one" in flip philosophy. Differences must exist; there must be I and You, self and other, death and life, in order for there to be flips back and forth. Nor is it possible that "everything is connected to everything." It is the movement away that makes possible the movement toward. The unmaking and the making both matter. The flip is a pattern we have encountered around the campfire in the discussion of the death and transformation of Old Tim's father. The pattern depends on dynamics sustained within metamorphic flows of coming and going, turning and returning, birthing and dying.

The philosophy Old Tim performed had a name. He called it the Beginning Law. In what I came to appreciate as both inclusive generosity and confidence in his understanding of life, he said that all humans come into being through these processes of death and birth: "From beginning Dreaming, White man, Blackfella, Indian, any one, they're all born from that Beginning Law." His reasoning, as I understand it, was that this Law must be the same for everyone because this is how life is. Life wants to live, wants to be embodied, and keeps finding its way back into life. Life is always in a state of metamorphosis, across death into more life, crossing bodies, species, and generations. Through the juxtaposition of story and context, Old Tim affirmed metamorphosis in action, offering a philosophy of

the will-to-life in which neither birth nor death is to be exclusively foregrounded. The movement back and forth is what enables life to shimmer and flourish. And while it is a Beginning Law in the sense of having been established in the Beginning, it is also a continuing law—this is how life is, it is always beginning. According to the Beginning Law, life and death are participatory and are kept in motion through cross-species transformations and returns. Old Tim's philosophy can surely be understood as a Law of Participation not unlike that which Lévy-Bruhl struggled to articulate (see chapter 10). The clever man didn't have to struggle to articulate his philosophy, however, because he was living and performing it. Against the background of Lévy-Bruhl's efforts, we can see that participatory "law" is, actually, participatory. Old Tim's masterful performance of flip captured the mutual embeddedness of birth and death, and it brought into awareness a deep connectivity that is the continuous becoming of the living world.

Creature Language

The Beginning Law comes from the Dingo, and like other Dingo stories it calls human beings into creatureliness and connection. The stories push humans toward participation, and in doing so they suggest that humans have a propensity for isolation. One of the most curious stories that Old Tim and others told concerns dingo behavior in relation to humans. When dingoes are by themselves in the bush, people said, they walk and talk like humans, but when humans come around they revert to dog shape and language. On the face of it, the story is similar to Dreaming stories in which all the creative beings originally walked in humanlike form. They were all shape-shifters, and they all spoke languages that are now human languages. But there did come a time of stabilization, and they all settled into the shapes and sounds of the familiar world. Clever people and animals can unsettle this stability, and Dreamings can be sung and danced into revitalized action, but only dingoes seem to have the ongoing capacity for shape-shifting. Their continuing capacity indicates that these creatures differ from the others. Moreover, their difference is contextualized. Only with humans do they refuse to come face-to-

face in any form but canine. All the other creatures in the bush witness them in both forms; only humans are excluded.

These stories suggest an unexpected form of human exceptionalism. Western thought about the difference between humans and animals has characteristically turned on our exceptional (superior) status, a status marked by all that they (the others) don't do. Thus, we foresee death; they don't and therefore die insignificantly. We are self-aware; they are not and thus merely exist. We think; they run on instinct. We have logos; they don't. The list could go on for a long time. The point is that Old Tim's dingo stories offer a very different perspective, suggesting that humans are different because we, and only we, do not see dingo transformations. The one creature with whom we can reliably and predictably share names and language refuses to let us see how close we really are. How extraordinary!

The idea that we are exceptional on account of what we lack is taken up in an exquisite prose poem by the Australian poet Peter Boyle:

Travelling in a caravan towards the World Capital where the Great King had invited him to speak at a symposium on the four elements, the philosopher let his mind drift from topic to topic, seeking an adequate response to present. Already they had crossed many lands and for some time now the unbounded sea ran alongside his meditations. The philosopher wanted to think of how we are in the world. The words "violence" and "loss" seemed essential to him, the words "cherishing" and "holding back." The sea the caravan journeyed beside stretched all the way to the island of dogs, the island where dogs cast aside by sailors had established their own community—a space little more than a sandbank where an immense loneliness ranged for here lived the dogs who had been cast out by humans.

On the sandbank where the dogs lived the wild closeness of the stars generated the music of grief. Eventually the resonances of the music sealed the island off and, like many things that become too strong for human consciousness, it flickered inside and outside time, appearing and disappearing across the void, indifferent to the changing names of the millennia.

He wondered in turn what would become of the people without dogs, those who sailed on to make new lands abandoning everything once cherished. Deciding that speech and closeness robbed them of marketable time, they developed a thing language to replace the old creature languages. Instead of talking, they held up objects and compared one with another, and so stillness was banished to the remotest distance.⁵

Boyle's prose poem dives into two huge effects of loss and shows how they are related. One effect is the impoverishment of humans who cast off Earth others and are left with nothing but objects. The other effect is the ongoing harmonics of connectivity (dogs and stars). The relationship works both ways in a negative synergy: as the dogs' harmonics of grief expand, the humans' capacity to discern them diminishes.

The pattern of cascading loneliness is familiar (see chapter 3), and we are left wondering how such a barrier might be breached. The story of how dingoes refuse to reveal themselves to humans may be understood in this context. The dingoes' insistence that if humans are to talk with other creatures they will have to understand and respond to creature languages can be understood as a move to curb the ever-present desire among humans to have it all their own way. Dogs could have formed a closed communicative world with humans from which all the others were excluded. In their shape and language-shifting, they are a constant reminder that if communication is to occur, people have to learn to understand the others. The "old creature language" that Boyle writes about forces us to take our attention away from a singular enchantment with our own kind of language, and to pay attention to the multitude of communicative registers—sounds, smells, behavior, the flowering trees, the seasons, the coming and going of birds, insects, and other creatures, the howling, and the silences too: all the myriad communication of living beings as they sing up themselves and their connectivities. Creature language is never monological; always relational, it is a call to enter into life-affirming dramas of encounter and recognition, to be inside the world, co-present, participatory, and engaged.

Dingo stories offer an account of humanity that is not particularly flattering, speaking as they do to our propensity for arrogance,

triumph, and isolation. The story of the Moon is relevant not only in relation to death but also in relation to awareness of connectivity. The Moon knew he was alone, but in his arrogance he couldn't or wouldn't find a way out. Similarly, Job called God into dialogue, and although God spoke, he remained enthralled with his account of his own power. When we humans claim an exemption from connectivity, we slip into just such a place of arrogance, a place with no apparent way out.

The return into life through cross-species transformations suggests that the Beginning Law prevents us from thinking only about ourselves. Crossovers affirm the collaborative multispecies dynamics of birth and death. Indeed, the Beginning Law offers a deeper truth: that death is a move into connectivity. One way out of isolation is to accept the mortality of life on Earth. To accept mortality is to accept one's creaturely fate, and in the empathy of fate, to enter into call-and-response. Further, crossovers affirm the participatory quality of ethics. And even further, they affirm an Earth-based solidarity that embraces all of us—we whose bodies arise from the only ground we will ever know, ground that is saturated with the blood of birth as well as death.

Connectivity Ethics

Tim's work to bring new people into the world depended on songs and other knowledge that he had been given by old people who are now dead. Because the population loss during the period of initial invasion and for several decades afterward was so devastating (about 95 percent), he had become the repository of knowledge that had belonged to many people and countries, people who had no descendants and who desperately hoped to keep the knowledge alive in the world. Mary's songs had a similar genealogy. Only later did I learn that Tim and Mary had had no children of their own. Their work thus seemed to me to be acutely generous: they had experienced the extinction of many clans, and with no children to take over from them, their own future looked bleak. And still they worked to keep life coming.

So this is what it means to keep faith with life, I thought. Ethics within connectivity don't allow a person to give up. Life is always

calling. When I think this, I have to remind myself that many people at Yarralin thought Old Tim was a bit crazy; he truly was a holy fool. In chapter 2, I suggested that if Old Tim's people had a first commandment, it might be: *thou shalt not turn thine eyes away from the deaths of animals.* To live in the world, to live in connectivity, is always to be living in proximity to death as well as to life, to cause death as well as to nurture life. The life that moves through us all does not give us morally unambiguous or pure sites to occupy. In a world of connectivity, there are no unambiguous rules such as "thou shalt not kill." We have already considered the main problems with this injunction. It cannot mean that humans must never kill; without death there could be no life. One response is to set up a boundary on one side of which killing is allowed, on the other side forbidden. The human-animal boundary is one way to make the cut about who can be killed with impunity. Another way is to put humans and animals together and exclude plants. One can refine the boundary by saying that killing can be acceptable provided there is no suffering, and so on. There is satisfaction in such rules—one can know how to keep one's hands clean. And of course I acknowledge that it is socially useful, indeed necessary, to have rules. But if we hold fast to relational principles, then we face a conceptualization of ethics based not on rules but on action. Relationally, purity is a delusional *as-if*. It is the refuge of those who do not want to face the fact that to live is to be part of it all: clear boundaries become an invitation to act *as if* there were a place of moral purity. Arguably, both the Moon and God (in relation to Job) could be thought to occupy such a place. It is not that they claim purity, but that in refusing connectivity they refuse responsibility and accountability, as the stories make amply clear. In contrast, the connectivities of life on Earth ensure that we are always called to face ambiguity and to act, to be responsible.

To be in relationship is to be vulnerable, as we have seen. The more we think about vulnerability, the clearer it becomes that the call of life within multispecies communities of fate must always contain both joy and grief, desire and loss. Shestov said something about this years ago, and I want to revisit his thoughts because they link multiplicity, shared suffering, existentialism, and craziness. The context of Shestov's great words is a rave against "reason," by which

he means Certainty, scientific positivism, some forms of rationality, and other aspects of modernity that he dissected so vividly:

If we turn to reason, we shall receive a finished philosophy of all-unity which satisfies our "theoretical need" and gives us truths obligatory for all and a morality obligatory for all. . . . If we do not recognise reason, then. . . . from behind the comprehensible compelling truths which move obediently according to eternal laws within the boundaries of the unity of the universe, will break forth innumerable selfhoods that philosophy has kept in fetters during the course of thousands of years with their unsatisfied desires, with their inconsolable sorrows.⁶

In the face of these innumerable selfhoods with their calls of desire and grief, Shestov urges us "to learn anew to be horrified, to weep, to curse, to lose and find again the last hope". And that hope? That hope is the "enigmatic craziness" that he finds in relation to God,⁷ and that I urge in relation to Earth. This kind of craziness, as I am learning, can also be understood and cherished as faithfulness in the face of all that is unknown and unknowable.

Connectivity ethics are open, uncertain, attentive, participatory, contingent. One is called upon to act, to engage in the dramas of call-and-response, and to do so on the basis of that which presents itself in the course of life. I am thinking of Old Tim chuckling to himself as he remembers the half-drowned White guy who wanted to know what happened. As I reheat the story again in my mind, I realize that Old Tim's action constitutes an ethical position. Levinas would have recognised this position, as would have Mencius.⁸ Levinas would have seen the trace of God in the face of the drowning man; Mencius would have seen human empathy pressing Tim into action without the need for instrumental thought. Old Tim didn't engage in this kind of analysis, but he seems to have articulated a principle in his own clever way. He offers us the great "I don't know," a marvellous phrase that refuses justification and universalization. The ethical point of the story goes to Soulé's statement that people save what they love. We have seen that sometimes people do not save what they love, at least philosophically (see chapter 3). Now we see that some people also save that which they do not love. Old Tim

saved the guy because the guy needed saving. There was no instrumental reason, no time to think through the reciprocities, no time to determine the rights and wrongs of things. Indeed, if Tim had thought the whole thing through, he might have come to the view that he didn't really want to save a man whose people had killed and dispossessed his, a man who in his own life and actions was an undesirable character from the point of view of the Aboriginal workers who were under his rule. If Tim had taken the time to think about it, he might have experienced thoughts such as these. I expect he would have saved the guy anyhow, but he seems to be telling us that he didn't think it through at all. He just did it. In refusing an overt decision-making process, he can be seen to be asserting a kind of love—a faithfulness to life in which call-and-response are yet another flip. Call-and-response, like life and death, are two types of events, co-present, shaping and making each other, and shaping and making the participants who flip back and forth, coming and going, calling and responding. The flip connects even as it differentiates. It is foundational to world making in a life-affirming awareness of uncertainty and connectivity.

Come Back

At this time, the rate of extinctions is somewhere between one thousand and ten thousand times the usual background rate as deduced from the fossil record. It is not possible to calculate with certainty the difference between the old usual rate and the current rate because we do not know how many species today are being eradicated. What we do know is that a rapidly expanding number of species is tipping into the "thin zone from the critically endangered to the living dead and thence into oblivion."⁹

People do want to save what they love, and perhaps one response to anthropogenic extinctions is to imagine that we can get by with loving less. As our world diminishes, so too might we harden our hearts to devastation, and proceed with yet another delusional *as if*—the delusion that we are not in connection and therefore that what happens doesn't concern us. We seem to do this well, but clearly it is a dead end. This much at least is certain: our lives are held in the hands of others; without them there is no us.

The call that crosses the zone of death—the great "come back" that we have howled for millennia—is the cry of love. Eros longs to remain in connection, but if love fails to be as fierce as death, death becomes ever more powerful. We are seeing deaths expand and expand, shifting into another state altogether. The current cascade of extinctions is drawing life out of Earth, unmaking the fabric of life, severing the bonds of connectivity. The numbers are terrible, and they aggregate an even more terrible fact: that extinctions are the result of many, many individual deaths, each one of which matters and many of which may have no future at all, ever.

That thin, scary zone where life and death brush close together is an opening wherein we are vividly called into ethics. The call is not on any grounds at all other than that there is peril, and there is power, and we are called. What happens? We don't have to know. We respond. We turn our faces toward the innumerable selfhoods of the living world, and we do what we can. Perhaps the most that can be said is that we encounter a wild and crazy ethic: we respond because we are here, because this opening occurred in our presence, because the zone is so thin, the lives so precious.

The Australian poet MTC Cronin seems to speak exactly toward these issues:

Whatever Becomes Itself

"*Cada nivel tiene su propia irrigación sanguínea*"—Gloria Gervitz

"Every level has its own irrigation of blood;" every level possesses a shudder, sway, sweet from the tips of the shadow, scug, cell passing, every emotion finds its own level, whatever becomes itself has that passion, *whatever becomes itself has that passion*, every thing finds its level, eyes, seeing life is seeing it going, eyes are sand, life, life is blood that moves, blood is sand, stars, stars are sand, every passion finds its level, cry warming itself in the blindness of blood, blood only flows in darkness, shudder, sway, sweetness of shadow, whatever becomes itself finds its own level, eyes, blood, stars and sand, and sand, sand becomes sand with the passion of eternity.¹⁰

The plummet toward some sort of level is a bloody cascade. And in the end the connective patterns between humans and others are open to emptiness too. The emptier Earth becomes, the emptier are

those who remain alive. That emptiness may produce a particular gaze, a “mere life” gaze that refuses to live fully because it refuses to face all this death. The challenge, therefore, is to look into emptiness and, understanding the interdependence of life on earth, face the future. Will expanding death effects diminish us further as the life-sustaining capacities of Earth are degraded and extinguished? Is there a human tipping point? How much of our own humanity will we lose before we, too, collapse into irremediable loss?

Or perhaps we will reach out to make a difference. Perhaps voices from the death space *will speak* to us. If we could hear these harmonics, we would hear the call of those who are slipping out of life forever. There we might encounter a narrative emerging from extinctions, a level of blood that connects us rather than driving us apart. Such a narrative would enjoin us to rethink everything we thought we knew about who we are and how to live within the imperiled family of life on Earth.

Notes

1. Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?
[1. www.colongwilderness.org.au/Dingo/Dingopage.htm.](http://www.colongwilderness.org.au/Dingo/Dingopage.htm)
2. Wilson, *The Future of Life*, 77.
3. Milton, “Fear for the Future.”
4. Quoted in Ivan Doig, “West of the Hudson, Pronounced ‘Wallace,’” 127.
5. See Rose, *Dingo Makes Us Human*.
6. See Rose, *Hidden Histories*.
7. Spoken by David Gulpilil in the biographical film (see Darlene Johnson, *Gulpilil: One Red Blood*).
8. Kepnes, *The Text as Thou*, 125.
9. Fackenheim, *To Mend the World*.
10. Shestov, *Athens and Jerusalem*, 63.
11. Ibid., 70.
12. Discussed in greater detail in Rose, *Hidden Histories*.
13. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rain_Dogs.](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rain_Dogs)
14. Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 325.
15. Ibid., 290.
16. Ibid., 323–25.
17. Ibid., 327–30.
18. Kohak, *The Embers and the Stars*, 5.
19. Heidegger, “The Way Back into the Ground of Metaphysics,” 214.
20. Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 167.
21. Quoted in Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, 221.
22. Kohak, “Varieties of Ecological Experience,” 268.
23. Kohak, “The True and the Good,” 291.
24. Newton, *Narrative Ethics*, 12.
25. Tsing, “Unruly Edges”; Shepard, *The Others*; Graham, “Some Thoughts on the Philosophical Underpinnings of Aboriginal Worldviews.”
26. Eckersley, “Deliberative Democracy, Ecological Representation and Risk”; van Dooren, *Being-with-Death*.
27. Hannah Arendt focused on the human sphere, but was not indifferent to the other-than-human world (see Arendt, *The Human Condition*). Donna Haraway uses the term “worlding” more than “world-making” (see Haraway, *When Species Meet*).
28. Newton, *Narrative Ethics*, 12.
29. Hatley, *Suffering Witness*, 24ff.
30. Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*.
31. Fackenheim, *To Mend the World*, 141.