

# Decolonising Relationships with Nature

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## Colonisation, Eurocentrism and Anthropocentrism

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **Dualism: Exaggerating Differences, Denying Commonality**

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

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

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

<sup>5</sup> H. Beston (1928), *The Outermost House*, Ballantine, New York.



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

### **Countering Centric Structure**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Disabling Land Relationships: An empty, silent Land

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

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

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

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<sup>13</sup> For an historical account of this development, see Plumwood (1993).

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

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

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



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

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

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

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<sup>17</sup> 'Birds Australia' Newsletter, April 2001.

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

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

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

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<sup>18</sup> See Warren (1990).

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

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

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

## **The colonising politics of place names: renaming as decolonisation**

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

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

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

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

<sup>22</sup> H. D. Thoreau (1992), “Walking” (1862) in *Walden and Other Writings*, ed. Brooks Atkinson, the Modern Library, New York, p. 655.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

Several things emerge from this account. First, Columbus' naming was an act of power over the land and those who inhabited it; an act of incorporating the named places into what is thought of as an empire. Second, Turner contrasts dialogical indigenous modes of naming with colonial monological modes that are not a response to the character of the land and are "in no way appropriate" to the lands themselves. Columbus' naming does not record any of the land's features or any real encounter with the land, but merely registers its conquest and incorporation into the empire. Beyond this incorporative meaning, these names invoke no depth of knowledge or narrative, being little more than mnemonic devices holding place for a neutral marker, like the logical positivist labels. It seems to me that far too many Australian namings are in the Columbian tradition, with a difference being that the names of Christian saints were replaced by those of the bigwigs of the British Colonial Office, many of whom never visited the places that were named after them. Seen in this light the names of many of Australia's capital cities – such as Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide and Hobart – are but empty reminders of largely forgotten power plays.<sup>27</sup> Such naming practices overlay the land, conceived as neutral, with a grid of bureaucratic or political power that registers obeisance to the empire, or commemorates those in the surveyors' office in 1903.<sup>28</sup> The names of those cities and many of the suburbs within them sadly locate us in terms of a grid of colonial power that is now largely meaningless to most of us.

### **Assimilation, colonial nostalgia and feral names**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Yawk Yawks live in the slowly moving water along the edges of this little stream that drains a huge area of the stone country. In the narratives of the Kunwinkju people of the western part of Kakadu, these sisters are little spirit mermaids with fish tails instead of legs. They dwell in the holes beneath the banks and come out to sing and play where the pandanus plants grow. From underneath the water they watch women swimming, ever on the lookout for one ready to become their mother, to birth them as human. For a *balanda*<sup>31</sup> woman like myself, the Yawk Yawks offer welcome sisterly and *binitj* travelling companions in the landscape, enticing westerners across the high wall we have tried to build between the human and non-human worlds. Many *binitj* namings invoke narratives like those of the Yawk Yawks. These striking stories function both to impress their meanings cunningly and irresistibly into the memory, and to bind together botanical, experiential, practical and philosophical knowledge. They build community identity and spiritual practice in a rich and satisfying integration of what we in the west usually treat as opposites – ie, life and theory. *Binitj* stories and namings envelop a journey in their land in a web of narrative, so that one travels through a speaking land encountered deeply in dialogical mode, as a communicative partner.

## Decolonising the naming relationship

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

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

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<sup>31</sup> Some Aboriginal people of Arnhem land use the terms *binitj* for Aboriginal people and *balanda* for non-indigenous people.

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

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

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



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

In summary, recovering a popular naming practice that decolonises the mind and generates meaningful, dialogical names is part of recovering a meaningful relationship to the land. We need to construct new naming practices to replace, or at least provide alternatives for, the problem categories of power names, feral names, and monological names, and we need to rethink our relationship to stolen names. In this decolonising project indigenous patterns, models and practices have much to teach non-indigenous culture, but we need an active, dynamic practice of naming and narrativising that can also incorporate elements from non-indigenous Australian cultures, not a slavish imitation or colonising assimilation or incorporation of indigenous naming and narrative<sup>33</sup>. Such a dynamic outcome could only be possible if we can make the project of renaming the land one of cultural co-operation and convergence between indigenous and non-indigenous communities.

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