

“Still Country”

Continuity and Change in a Warming World

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The Scholarship of Story

There are good reasons to tell stories. In this country particularly, story has been an indispensable means by which Australian geographies have been known and named. For more millennia than anyone can really tell, human relationship to land has been situated within the context of sacred narrative. This is critical information for settler-descended peoples for whom issues of belonging are still current. But there are other, larger reasons to tell stories. Stories are bits of “disciplined magic” in which distilled wisdom and expansive truths become discernible and memorable. As an educative tool there is nothing more powerful. As historian Tom Griffiths notes, “in listening to, rediscovering and generating true stories, we change the world”.²

Within the context of the escalating climate crisis, it is both apt and fortuitous that scholars of the ecological humanities are reclaiming narrative not only as a vehicle for change, but as a method by which reality in certain of its aspects may be known. This is not to declaim the efficacy of science and its rational, cumulative pursuit of knowledge. To be sure, we need conventional scientific method to discern the causes of the climate crisis and its broader ecological dimensions, to isolate contributory factors and to test each of them individually and in turn. But we also need narratives that “enact connectivity”, that carry “multiple causes along together”, that weave a multiplicity of factors into a whole that enables insight into complex patterns and wider truths.³ Both methods are crucial to our understanding of the ecological unravelling over which our species is presiding, and to which a responsive suite of actions is most urgently needed.

It must be said, however, that while scholarship is increasingly affirmative of both scientific and narrative approaches, rarely are they interwoven and offset in the one paper as you will find below. What is more usual is the maintenance of a clear distinction between scholarly scientific reportage and more creative renderings such as those found in nature writing, where scientific information is woven seamlessly into a dominantly land-focused narrative. Occasionally one encounters more hybridised forms such as “narrative scholarship” where the “disembodied diction” of scholarly discourse is replaced with a form of “intelligent vernacular” that works the ground between subject, writer and place.⁴

Here, however, the fragments of story maintain their narrative shape and integrity. They are interposed with empirical information, with scientific knowledge and anthropological insight, with bits of philosophy and ecology. They are discursive anyway, these incursions, and the whole is experimental. It is a wondering aloud how different knowledges may look on the page; how, when lined up, science and story may nudge and shift one another towards some deeper pattern, some new imaginative path. It is an approach that puts its money on dissonance, on what may rise in the gaps between story and scholarship. And it considers the notion that some of the oldest human stories and most enduring forms of knowledge are already practised in the complex art of continuity and change.

Here then are fragments of one man’s story, of his history and his people and his place. And here are western readings of that story, of how Indigenous concepts of “country” interact with the pressing ecological questions of our time.

And here, if you can hear them, are the gaps, the fecund silences between the two.

The Plains

The Bogong High Plains hang at the southern end of the Great Dividing Range, a spine of mountains, high plateaux and tablelands that runs in a north-south direction along the eastern seaboard of Australia. The Plains themselves are lovely, open, undulant stretches of tundra, lifted, it seems, from the floor of the valley and held aloft by the mountains that rim their perimeter like a standing mob of ancestral kangaroos. At an elevation of over sixteen hundred metres, they represent rare high country in this most horizontal of lands.

On this cool January morning, two men, two Aboriginal Australians, walk out onto the Plains where they rise behind the ski village of Falls Creek. The men's bodies are painted in the colours and ceremonial designs of their country. They carry a coolamon, a solid curve of bark within which black and red coals smoulder. These men dance as they move. They speak in language. They gather the leaves of the snow gum and place them over the coals. Smoke, the palest of grey and heavy with the scent of eucalyptus, descends on the gathered crowd, and then drifts out, dispersing across the Plains for the first time in a hundred years. Standing slightly apart, as if guarding this space, as if holding the portent of this moment, is Dhudhuroan elder, Gary Murray.

The People

In Australia the ecological impact of colonial conquest has been profound. For Aboriginal Australians degrees of loss have been equally pronounced. Not only has colonisation meant the devastation of their homelands, but also the ravaging of their population, their languages and their networks of cultural coherence and exchange.⁵ And yet, in the face of this, and in actions like the one just described, Aboriginal people have maintained continuity with their own past and have exercised extraordinary flexibility in dealing with almost unimaginable levels of imposed change.

As the global environmental crisis intensifies, it is our capacity to anticipate and respond to rapidly changing circumstances and our willingness to integrate a range of knowledge systems that may prove to be crucial in the fostering of life into the future. The Aboriginal concept of "country" and the highly detailed knowledge and practices of care and adaptability that flow from it, have the potential to both model and inform strategies for dealing with the environmental shocks and surprises that will likely come the way of us all.

Country

In the Aboriginal worldview "country" is both geographical area and a nourishing life system in which place and living things attend to one another in relationships of mutuality and care.

Anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose explains that in Aboriginal English

the word "country" is both a common noun and a proper noun. People talk about country in the same way that they would talk about a person: they speak to country, sing to country, visit country, worry about country, grieve for country and long for country. People say that country knows, hears, smells, takes notice, takes care, is sorry or happy. Country is a living entity with a yesterday, today and tomorrow, with consciousness, action and will toward life. Because of this richness of meaning country is home and peace; nourishment for body, mind and spirit; and heart's ease.⁶

Within this profoundly non-Western category the old binaries that separate mind from matter, humanity from nature, subject from object are dissolved. Materiality is reinstated as a locus of "sentience, agency and intentionality".⁷ As such, Rose posits the concept of "country" as "one of Aboriginal Australia's greatest gifts to the world".⁸ Furthermore, "caring for country" has the potential, she says, "to become an ethos of the settlers as well as the Aboriginal inhabitants of this continent".⁹

Dhudhuroa

It is the reclaiming of country that fills our conversation when I meet with Gary Murray a number of weeks after the smoking ceremony on the High Plains. Gary is Dhudhuroan. He has other ancestry too. Wamba Wamba, a thin thread of Indian, and an impressive Scottish heritage. But it is his Aboriginal ancestry that occupies him. He has the names of his ancestors written on a laminated scroll that

he unfurls across the floor of his flat in suburban Melbourne. Metres of heredity, more than six generations deep and hundreds of names wide. He has laminated maps too. Maps of language boundaries, of tribal country, of areas under Native Title claim. Gary's country is ridge and valley country. At its heart lay the Bogong High Plains. It is country walked, sung, cared for and storied by Gary's ancestors. It is country he is calling up, singing up, through language and ceremony, through art and education, pushing back the long years of displacement, of dispersal and silence. It is country he is fighting to protect through western legal structures. And it is country into which he invites settler as well as Indigenous practices of restorative labour and care.

Hospitality

One of the projected outcomes of global warming is the increased movement of people and of species between habitats as former home places become uninhabitable or conversely, as previously unsuitable places become newly congenial. Given such scenarios there is a need, posits ecocritic Kate Rigby, for humans to rethink the ethos of place and to accent notions of hospitality rather than notions of belonging and endemism.¹⁰ Rigby uses a line from Derrida to foreshadow the unconditional hospitality that may be required. It is a form of welcome and acceptance that relies not on reciprocity, but on our capacity to say "yes to who or what turns up, before any determination, before any anticipation, before any identification ... whether or not the new arrival is the citizen of another country, a human, animal, or divine creature, a living or dead thing, male or female".¹¹

Aboriginal Australians have long experience with "new arrival[s]", with species, human or otherwise, that "turn up" and stay to become somewhat naturalised. The "new arrival" of colonial conquest, has profoundly ruptured their holistic way of life and yet, wherever possible, Aboriginal people have, as I say, continued to "care for country" and to maintain cultural practices. Part of what has enabled this continuity is what Mathews calls a capacity to "engage with the given", to incorporate the new once it has become actual.¹² This is expressed as a capacity to "uncannily Aboriginali[se]" the trappings of modernity as they emerge, to incorporate materiality into the spiritual and ethical domain.¹³ This inclusiveness extends to everything from exotic plants and animals, to "tin cans [and] Toyotas".¹⁴ "Country" is the underwriting authority here. It is not the role or right of humans to decide what values will prevail. Country has its own reasons and its own strategies for bringing systems into balance. Furthermore, plants and animals, no matter their origin, are participants in a living system, and therefore have their own rights, meanings and ends. As Rose suggests, "Aboriginal relationships to land link people to ecosystems" rather than giving them dominion over them.¹⁵ These links simultaneously embody openness to the new and continuity with what endures, and are rendered artistically in the sacred designs of country.

Cloak

Gary places in my hands a possum skin cloak. The pelts have been finely matched and sewn. The cloak falls from shoulder to floor in a smooth, warm line. Its under side, the skin side, is finely etched with images of mountains, of high rivers and clouds. A row of people and animals is in the foreground, facing the mountains, deliberating the mountains – longing for them you could say. The people are all wearing possum skin cloaks. You can see the designs of country on their backs. All are barefoot. Below them, beneath the ground on which they stand, is a series of concentric circles, small galaxies it seems, whirling through the subterranean space. Here, the artist seems to be saying, is a world of Dreaming, pushing up through the feet of its people. The artist, I later learn, is Gary's daughter.

Integrated into Country

This artefactual and artistic representation of the symbiosis between people and country reminds us that in Aboriginal cosmology, human beings are always integrated into the land. Within this context Deborah Bird Rose highlights the crucial distinction between Indigenous and Western notions of "wilderness". One of her Aboriginal teachers in northern Australia refers to country that is devoid of human presence and ongoing care as "the wild. Just the wild."¹⁶ Healthy or "quiet" country is, by contrast, country that has had generations of care practised upon it, that knows its people are

present, performing the ceremonies and regularly “cleaning up country” through burning regimes.¹⁷ “Quiet” country is engaged with its people in a relationship of mutuality and care. Humans work with life processes, fostering the patterns of sustained flourishing and resilience, and country, in turn, cares for its people. Within this construct there is “no suggestion”, confirms Rose, “that country abandoned by, or sequestered from, people is better able to take care of itself than country in which people are active participants.”¹⁸

Within the horizon of global warming, this more integrated approach to land management may become crucial, not only in preserving vastly diminishing rates of biodiversity, but in fostering the conditions under which adaptation of species takes place. Ecologists such as Manning¹⁹ and Bengtsson²⁰ are floating the idea of “dynamic reserves” where ecosystems may be assisted towards adaptation through human intervention, and stabilised by the promotion of keystone species which hold crucial “ecological memory”.²¹ Once stabilised these reserves could then revert to mixed use. Alternatively, in order to maintain resilience in the face of environmental shocks, conservation and production may need to be integrated much more widely within the landscape, more in line with the Indigenous model outlined above.

Bones

It is human efficacy in the landscape that Gary is referring to when he sets out on the table in front of me a series of photographs. We had been talking about bones. Of the importance of bones being returned to country. Of how in death people re-enter the Dreaming and their bones continue to nurture the living.

In the photographs a number of Aboriginal men stand beside long, hand-dug pits in which lines of human skulls have been carefully, ritually placed. Femurs lay vertically, like a row of pickets, below the skulls. Below the femurs, lines of tibia and fibula and at their base a more eclectic row of knuckles and vertebrae and here and there the clean curve of ribs. The bones of more than 1800 people, stolen from Aboriginal graves in the early part of last century.

Slowly, universities and museums, governments and individual hobbyists are relinquishing their collections.

Anticipating Change

This system of land care and management, where even bones within country have their recursive and ramifying effects, also has a predictive edge. By this I mean a capacity to anticipate the future needs of country in order to maintain the coherence of the system as a whole. One such practice is “fire-stick farming” or “cleaning up country” as it is colloquially known.²² The skilled use of fire promotes the health and fertility of certain ecosystems, while investing in larger scale biological productivity.

Burning is selective, highly regulated and controlled. It relies on detailed knowledge of soils, land forms, water sources, vegetation types as well as breeding and weather patterns. Low-intensity, patchwork burns create a mosaic of habitats within the landscape, supporting the fertility patterns of diverse plant and animal species and making wild foods and game more easily accessible to the human community. The knowledgeable use of fire was one of the primary means by which the biodiversity of the continent was, and in some places still is, maintained.

Ecologists such as Adrian Manning suggest that as landscapes become more fluid in their composition in response to rapid change, anticipatory practices may become newly significant. He advocates the concept of “anticipatory restoration”, where certain properties may be either enhanced or restored in order to make ecosystems viable into the future.²³ This may include such diverse actions as “rewilding” areas to create “connected, self-organising ecosystems” through to “the targeted return of key ecological processes or properties to an otherwise managed landscape”.²⁴ As with Aboriginal burning regimes, however, anticipatory restoration as a tool of land management must be predicated on intricate ecological knowledge

Ecological Knowledge

This domain of highly specific ecological knowledge is one area where Rose affirms a congruence between settler and Indigenous knowledge systems and suggests that this may be one site where all can “share in the work of life” on this continent.²⁵

For Aboriginal people, knowledge of country rests on an understanding of world as a communicative reality. The world, as Rose observes it among her Aboriginal

teachers is, she says, "always talking about itself".²⁶ Responsibilities of care are positioned as knowledgeable action in response to the communiqués of country. "The country tells you when and where to burn" for example.²⁷ It tells you when the wet season is about to break, and it tells you which animals are on the move, where fresh water may be found, which food sources are coming into season. The communicative patterns within country are, according to Rose, highly localised and highly detailed, particularly in respect of foraging activities. For example, when the green flies bite, the crocodiles are laying their eggs. When the jangarla tree starts to flower the barramundi are biting. When cicadas sing figs are ripe and fresh water turtles are getting fat.²⁸

Indigenous knowledge reveals connectivities and patterns between species and within systems that articulate principles "for how life really works".²⁹ It is this kind of finely detailed knowledge, whatever its origin, that will be crucial, suggests Adrian Manning, in tracking both trajectories and gradients of change within a landscape, and also in attending to the individualistic responses of organisms within life systems.³⁰

Still Country

Finally, as Deborah Bird Rose tells us, the relationship between Aboriginal people and their country is "symbiotic" and "kinship-based". It is also a relationship that is "forever". No matter how damaged or transformed their home-place may be, the changes must be lived with. There are, as she says, "no greener pastures".³¹

Notwithstanding the fact that global warming will actually render some places uninhabitable – lost to rising sea levels or climate extremes – this scenario of people remaining in and with damaged or radically altered places may become for many of us an increasingly familiar scenario.

How we respond to such changes and how able we are to employ all available knowledge systems in "singing up" the fractured life of the land may well become a critical factor in the ongoing viability of place.

As Gary Murray says of his own Dhudhuroan homelands, "The damage has been immense. But this is still country. Its spirit is still here, ready to be awakened."

The Plains

On the plains the ceremonial smoke darkens as it merges with a cloud shadow. Its circular stain skids across the land and drops abruptly into the slot of a nearby valley.

The clap of music sticks and the drone of didgeridoo call us forward, gather us into a tight circle around these men who dance and speak in recognition of elders past and present. Shyly, some of us step out totemic dance moves and speak the Dhudhuroan words we are taught. With touch of feet and sound of voice we are requesting safe passage through these lands and waters.

From high above, the call of a raven filters through the still air. It falls upon us like a soft lament, like some old fragment of song. "Wakarra," the ceremonial leader says, pointing in the direction of the call. "Wakarra – one of the ancestors." With the decisiveness of confirmation, he turns towards us then, smiling through face paint and feathers. "Welcome to country," he announces. "Welcome to country."

Notes

1. Noelene J. Kelly lives and teaches in inner-city Melbourne, but balances a dedication to cafe culture with regular forays to the windswept plains of Victoria's high country. She is currently completing a PhD in nature writing at Victoria University. The focus of her doctoral studies is the Bogong High Plains in north-east Victoria.
2. T. Griffiths (2007), "The Humanities and an Environmentally Sustainable Australia," *Australian Humanities Review*, 43, p. 4.
3. *Ibid.*
4. M. Tredinnick (2005), *The Land's Wild Music: Encounters with Barry Lopez, Peter Matthiessen, Terry Tempest Williams, and James Galvin*, Trinity University Press, Texas, p. 17.
5. D. Rose (2004), *Reports from a Wild Country: Ethics for Decolonization*, University of New South Wales, Sydney, p. 35.
6. D. Rose in collaboration with Nancy Daiyi, Kathy Devereaux, Margy Daiyi, Linda Ford & April Bright (2002), *Country of the Heart: An Indigenous Australian Homeland*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, p. 14.
7. F. Mathews (2002), "Editorial", *PAN*, 2, p. 3.
8. In the *PAN* (2002) editorial cited above (note 7), Freya Mathews claims that Deborah Bird Rose makes this remark often.

9. D. Rose (1999), "Taking Notice," *Worldviews: Environment, Culture, Religion*, 3 (1), pp. 97-103.
10. K. Rigby (2008), "Relocations: Ethics of Place in a Warming World," Home and Away Conference, Canberra.
11. J. Derrida & A. Dufourmantelle (2000), *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond*, trans. Rachel Bowlby, Stanford University Press, Stanford, p. 77.
12. F. Mathews (2005), *Reinhabiting Reality: Towards A Recovery of Culture*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, p. 47.
13. *Ibid.*
14. D. Rose (1996), *Nourishing Terrains: Australian Aboriginal Views of Landscape and Wilderness*, Australian Heritage Commission, Canberra, p. 1.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
16. Deborah Bird Rose quotes this statement by Aboriginal elder Daly Pulkara in *Nourishing Terrains* (*op. cit.*), p. 19.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 63.
18. *Op. cit.*, D. Rose (2004), *Reports from a Wild Country*, p. 174.
19. A. Manning (2009), "Landscape Fluidity: Unifying Perspective for Understanding and Adapting to Global Change," *Journal of Biogeography*, 36, pp. 193-99.
20. J. Bengtsson, P. Angelstam, T. Elmqvist, U. Emanuelsson, C. Folke, M. Ihse, F. Moberg & M. Nystrom (2003), "Reserves, Resilience and Dynamic Landscapes," *Ambio*, 32 (6), pp. 389-96.
21. *Ibid.*
22. *Op. cit.*, D. Rose (1996), *Nourishing Terrains*, p. 63.
23. *Op. cit.*, A. Manning (2009), "Landscape Fluidity," p. 196.
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Op. cit.*, D. Rose (1996), *Nourishing Terrains*, p. 63.
26. *Op. cit.*, D. Rose (1999), "Taking Notice," p. 97.
27. *Op. cit.*, D. Rose (2002), *Country of the Heart*, p. 78.
28. This information can be found in a range of works by Debbie Rose, some of which include *Nourishing Terrains* (1996), *Reports from a Wild Country* (2004), and the 2005 article "An Indigenous Philosophical Ecology: Situating the Human," *Australian Journal of Anthropology*, 16 (3), pp. 294-305.
29. D. Rose (2005), "An Indigenous Philosophical Ecology: Situating the Human", p. 301.
30. *Op. cit.*, A. Manning (2009), "Landscape Fluidity," p. 195.
31. *Op. cit.*, D. Rose (2002), *Country of the Heart*, p. 14.