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*LAND DIALOGUES: Interdisciplinary research in dialogue with land*

**Conversing with The Undead in Australian Woodlands**

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In the 1980s an Australian comedy duo performed successfully across the English-speaking world. Their name, *Los Trios Ringbarkos*, was a neatly absurd reference to products of a practice which, for over a century, had transformed the land from Aboriginal to European priorities and management habits by ring-barking, removing forest tree by tree. Though the duo made no further reference to it, their name showed its centrality in agriculture and in the Australian foundation myth, reconfigured the ideology and parodied the Britishness of the national narrative.<sup>i</sup>



Stumps and dead trees are a common sight across the Australian countryside.<sup>ii</sup> The resonance of such remnants, suggested by *Los Trios*, has not been well-examined though the history of forest and timber use in Australia has been documented, and historical projections of ‘melancholy’ onto forest in this settler culture analysed (Bonyhady, Rutherford,).

In the present, stumps and tree-skeletons, tangible vestiges of forest destruction, have an unsettling presence that I conceptualise in current cultural, environmental and economic terms : as the ‘undead,’ as symptoms of environmental necessities

and agricultural practices. I argue they have been catalysts and magnets accumulating and generating attention across decades and genres as they do in this essay.

The essay first identifies geographical and historical contexts for the tree relics before framing their communicative power theoretically as a 'dimension of surplus animation' within the energy of things that characterises the undead (Eric Santner fn). I then discuss texts, both literary and instructional, associated with their locality, to explore that uncanny presence and to suggest they now both testify to their history and raise questions about the needs of the land for environmental and agricultural stability.

1)

Though common in many places across Australia, the dead trees and stumps shown here stand in the forest of scattered eucalypts and dense native pines that slopes down to sparsely grassed paddocks on the Danandbilla Range in south-west NSW. The trees here are overlapping ecological communities of three forest types: The Grassy Woodlands, most easily adapted to European agriculture and pastoralism, estimated to have covered 800,000 hectares when the colonists arrived. The Woodlands merge to the east with the Dry Schlerophyl Forests of the Slopes and Great Dividing Range which, less directly useful for farming, is relatively well-preserved, including the eastern states' biggest national parks (Keith 118). The 'marginal areas', exemplified by the local hillside, 'have tended to be fragmented by land clearing, intentional burning and rough-country livestock grazing' (Keith 121). To the west Riverina Woodlands species merge. The vestiges are hard-woods, several *eucalyptus* species of several iron-barks, stringy-bark (*E. viminalis*), red gum (*e. blakelyi*) *e. dwyerii*, and the more recently ring-barked soft-wood, black pine (*calitris endlecherii*).

### **Images.**

At present passed only by human and animal foot-traffic, their number and perhaps their upright figure-like grey presence appearing between the living trees and scattered across the open lower ground repeatedly draws a walker's attention. A

regular horizontal plane and saw-marks distinguish stumps from trees killed by natural causes, while standing trees with a belt of axe-marks at waist height are just as numerous.

Such marks indicate the entanglement of human and non-human from the arrival in the 1820s of the first Europeans to the district (*History of Young*) with their iron implements and fervent desire to sustain themselves with the way of life and forms of agriculture and stock-farming they best knew. Stumps either precede the 1850s, or signal timber-getting for building, fencing, fire wood, railway sleepers or telegraph poles.



From the 1860s, the 'stags' have died from 'ringbarking, the process of cutting through a tree's bark and sapwood, recently introduced by Californian gold miners with their radically efficient 'American axe'. The tree dies slowly but remains standing for many years. The purpose was to kill the leaf-canopy, allowing more sunlight onto

the ground to increase grass pasture or scope for cropping. Such land clearing rapidly transformed the condition and relations of much Australian forest. As squatter and poet John Mathew put it bluntly: 'The glittering axe with sturdy blow/ Has laid the lofty gum-trees low' (69).

Tree-removal was unregulated before the 1870s; by 1884 the NSW government alone approved ring-barking of two and half million hectares of trees, and then under (largely unimplemented) legislation, a further three million hectares by 1888 (Tim Bonyhady *Colonial Earth* 180). The dead remnants continue to disturb, astonish or enthuse different witnesses.

2)

'The sense we make of past environments is alive with the preoccupations and reference points of our own time' as the geographer Sarah Whatmore puts it. (p.1777, 2008). So it is with an Anthropocenic perception of the human in the material world; drawing on Jane Bennett's hypothesis of energy shared between material objects to underline a rediscovered mutual dependence or co-existence. The stumps and trees can be understood not as inert and circumscribed 'objects' but as interactants with energies feeding between environmental, natural and cultural zones.

This essay shows these physical entities embody a disturbance that continues to perturb, leading to dialogue as if they are, in a contemporary concept, 'undead'; 'the dead return as collectors of some symbolic debt'. (Žižek, 23).

Eric Santner's view, setting aside the priorities of the environmental crisis for the moment, is that a 'mutual exchange of properties between natural and historical worlds' (xv) — such as the dead trees appear to participate in — occurs when a 'historical fissure or caesura in the space of meaning' opens precisely when the 'form of life decays, becomes exhausted or dies' — we experience it as something that has been denaturalised. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the fissure or caesura opened by data indicating crisis in the natural environment and global climate leads to the

'surplus animation' that emerges *between* real and symbolic death (Santner 17). The ring-barked trees arise as 'undead' and communicate this animation in two ways: first by the marks of human engagement with axe or saw which render them both absent tree and artefact. As artefacts, they call up the human hands that wielded the implements, the brief presence of the whole person, the history of gangs of single men — Chinese, European, Aboriginal — whose working lives were performing this single task; the relations between generations of people and living trees, their technology, motives, ways of life and influence on later cultural practices. Secondly, though dead the trees are full of life. As they decay, they support lichens, fungi, mosses, insects, spiders, birds and small mammals, leading into ecological and environmental trajectories.

It is thus easy to see how the stags and stumps form 'tangible and intimate interactions between people and the environments in which they live' (Lane and Cooke) and address the trajectory of dead tree and person from their prior living state. Such bonds in place become entangled cultural 'preoccupations and reference points' as we are reminded by the comic *Los Trios Ringbarkos*. The anthropologist Marc Augé argues such points function at the core of a settler society like Australia: The place ... is in one sense ... an invention: it has been discovered by those who claim it as their own. Foundation narratives are only rarely narratives about autochthony; more often they are narratives that bring the spirits of place together with the first inhabitants in the common adventure of the group in movement. The social demarcation of the soil is all the more important for not always being original. (43)

3)

The 'group in movement' is of European colonists moving steadily across NSW, social demarcation of the soil is simultaneously exclusion of Aboriginal (Wiradjuri people from their own land and highly selective access to or exclusion from ownership by Europeans; the 'foundation narratives' are the representations of the group's actions and lives as heroic and tragic endeavours that become the official, State and society-perpetuated myths. Pre-existing genres such as the ode were

ready-made castes for rendering foundation narratives. A prime example is the cantata written by the poet Henry Kendall for the opening of the Sydney Exhibition Building in 1879. At its end 'A Choir of Children', symbolising citizens of the future, sang:

A gracious morning on the hills of wet  
 A great, glad glory now flows down and shines  
 On gold-green lands where waved funereal pines.

Every phrase has symbolic resonance: 'gracious morning' suggests the blessing of God and the spread of European culture and Christianity from the east of the continent, 'hills of wet' forecasts an end to inhospitable heat and drought. 'Lands' are made 'gold-green' for the spectator by crops or pasture which occlude the prior, forest-covered, vista. Goldness is both morning light — signalling youth of the country — and ripening grain, that is, abundant food; 'gladness' is associated in 'glory' in the space of the triumphing State. The forest, reduced to 'pines' — associated with darkness and sorrow — has ceased to exist. Not surprisingly, there is little ambiguity about the past; only the phrase "Where waved funereal pines' signals potential for ambivalence in the foundation story of successful state and society, a caesura where the fate of Indigenous people and their environment might be mourned or deplored.

In Robert Pogue Harrison's view 'the destruction of the forest can be considered tantamount to the obliteration of cultural memories' but to the contrary, whilever they remain the stumps and stags sustain 'cultural memories', traceable in the wood and its historical representations. Kendall's hortatory cantata took an overview but his pastoral, 'The Wail in the Native Oak' written a decade before, provides a contrary narrative of myth- and place-making. In it the scene is of violence, in ringbarking which in turn signals murder and dispossession. Dying trees open the circumstances for recognising violence against Aboriginal people as well as the forest. It begins with a running creek:

Where the gum trees, ringed and ragged, from the mazy margins rise,  
 Staring out against the heavens with their languid gaping eyes;  
 There I listened — there I heard it! Oh, that melancholy sound.

The textual caesura, 'ringed and ragged', opens Santner's 'mutual exchange of properties between natural and historical worlds' (xv). The word 'ringed' alone signals the local and historical reality of the Gothic sunset, storms and supernatural forces. It indicates the trees slowly bleed to death and that sounds made by a nearby casuarina, are grief — at murders that the speaking voice speculates haunt the ground.<sup>iii</sup> A 'black man' comes to the creek to drink:

Here his fathers must have sojourned —

here his people may have died,

Or perchance to distant forests

All were scattered far and wide.

Blood hath here been surely shed...

Oh the unrequited Dead.

Questioned, he 'shakes his head' and disappears into the darkness without speaking bringing the poem to an impasse, confronted by the impossibility of reconciling the Romantic poet's ethical position and the colonist's imperatives. Unable to resolve the conflict the narrative resorts to the arrival of a storm so violent the speaker loses consciousness.

By contrast, the ringbarked tree in Augé's formulation of 'the common adventure of the group in movement' —the squatters, their workforce, and later 'settlers' moving steadily inland in increasing numbers— is represented in 'foundation narratives' as transforming unused ground into subsistence- and food-providing land. Despite the scale of the decimation of trees, a surprising number of voices were heard in protest on several principles. By early mid-century for example fear of climate change saw forest-clearing as interfering with rainfall. A concept that had percolated from the American G.P. Marsh's book, *Man and Nature* (1864) which argued that the Sahara had been the 'food bowl' of the Roman empire until decimation of tree cover of the area caused desertification as it would, Marsh predicted, in the United States and Australia as a result of the mass forest clearing (Plotz).

These terms gave meaning to the dead trees of south-west NSW. In 1882, for example, a writer experiencing wholesale clearing from both a local gold rush and the land-holdings reviewed statistics in the *NSW Gazette* in *The Temora Star*. Whole tracts of country have been ruthlessly denuded of its forest trees, an insensate procedure which, independent of the destruction of valuable timber, cannot but have an injurious effect upon the climate of the colony.

Large-scale ringbarking was thus neither unchallenged nor universally accepted, campaigns were mounted for state regulation of tree-clearing on practical grounds: the waste of useful timber, loss of shelter for introduced and indigenous animals, increasing soil erosion as well as simple horror at what seemed a vandalising mania. One unexpected result in 1881 was the appointment of Henry Kendall as inaugural Chief Inspector of Forests for NSW. At an early point in his position he notes 'recommend practice of ring-barking be banned. Licenses to be granted only those with 2 years experience of the forest'. **Source** He travelled from Wagga through the eastern Riverina, assessing applications for ring-barking licenses on the grounds of existing tree-species and quantity, though implementation was at the discretion of local magistrates, themselves usually landholders. **ref**

Resonances from the dead trees continued to be relayed by other writers in the farming industries, such as Dowling and McCafferty in *Practical Dairying in Australia* (1893). The effects on trees of soil compacted by cattle was not yet understood, but, practical and professional as their advice is throughout, they momentarily attribute ecological consciousness to the living tree:

Experience has taught Australians that indigenous trees or portions of forests frequently die of what may be termed sympathy. Certain large patches were killed, and the few trees left intact do not long survive their fellows. Indigenous timber left as cattle camps frequently die. (31)

With such observations, it is not surprising that the chapter on 'clearing the land opens 'More harm can be done by an axeman in one week than seven years can repair.' They project uncanny being onto the ring-barked trees:

The intending settler will see in nearly all districts immense tracts of dead trees standing like spectres, and as he rides or walks through these there may be heard the crash of falling branches. These are from trees that were killed by sap-ringing many years before, and the dead timber as it falls is allowed to encumber the pasture. (31)

It is as if the spectral trees have a will against which the settler making pasture-land is helpless:

Fires made at the butts of large dry [ie sap-rung] trees do much clearing, but the workers have to be very careful. Many lives have been sacrificed by the unexpected fall of trees in burning off.

When the writer and activist Mary Gilmore writes of her childhood, by contrast, the living trees convey security in a benign forest:

As children of the bush and in the bush we wandered miles and miles from home, through scrub and box and stringy-bark, setting out early with our dinners and only coming home when hunger drove us, or the slanting sun warned us, yet never got lost and never failed to locate home-direction .... (*Bookfellow* 1 Aug. 1907, in Wilde p 31).

She later, however, also frames the nation-making myth in terms of tree-cutting. In 'The Australian', an ode written in 1917, the sound of the axe is definitive:

His axe is heard on the timbered height,  
And the echoing valley thrills... (Gilmore p. 243, 2004)



I want to end this trail of evidence from specific works with another poem by Gilmore, when she turned to her home region of the Riverina and focused precisely on points of change there, the lost or destroyed in 'bush' habitat, in Aboriginal society and culture and in earlier farming and domestic technologies. In 1930 she published 'The Ring-Barked Tree' in a volume of verse focused on Aboriginal and other-than-human substance, *The Wild Swan*. In this poem the fissure opens, through the ring-barked tree, on a historical moment articulated as 'mutual exchange of properties between natural and historical worlds' that she was particularly gifted at. Written against triumphalist foundation myth's version of nation-making, in this poem the dead tree with its ring-barking marks represents an aggressor the 'hard white man'. Beyond the

title, the ring-barked tree is present only in one line, but its metaphorical power resonates throughout in the Aboriginal people who remain, and in the contrast with their environmental practices represented by the life that continues in the tree that has had bark taken by Aboriginal hands. That bark, made into a canoe that transports an Aboriginal couple across the river, literally and symbolically connects traditional life on one bank with an unclear future on the other.

Close reading of Gilmore's work shows unequalled attention to detail of Wiradjuri life, respect for culture and the biosphere (though it is not without problems). At first glance 'The Ring-barked Tree' is a bad if not brutal 'dying race' poem framed in what first seems an awkward register of now-sentimental tropes of sunset on vanishing people and inexorable current in the stream of time. These parallel the set-up of Kendall's 'Wail in the Native Oak', which Gilmore may well have had in mind.

Her poem however focuses on the people not the narrator. Hands and fingers, also used by the ring-barker, recur; bark-cutting hands become full bodily presence at the midpoint of the poem, at a 'nexus of the natural and the human' (Santner xv) where tree, human, water and air are integrated and used consciously. A branch is used to guide the canoe against the current; it works like a fin, its twigs and the similar human hand communicate between canoe and water, the air is parted by the tree-leaves, a kind of hands. The smallness of human gesture needed to interact effectively with the other-than-human world exemplifies a seamlessness of being:

When, on a current veering,  
 They held a branch as fin in conquest over strain.  
 Gather the twigs to stay the swirling flow —  
 The little hands the tree hangs down to part,  
 As thou the waters, all the winds that blow.... (37)

'With hand and leaf diffuse what pressures toward thee set' (38) suggest 'pressures' that the delicate balance is unequal to meet. Colonization by 'the hard white man', destroying tree, human life and culture is summed up in ringbarking. Yet the midstream turbulence is negotiated using traditional skills, the spectral figure in the

bark canoe becomes an embodied couple engaging the currents. The figures use the stream to reach 'the landing place' on the other side, a metaphorical survival within disruption, still explicit in repetition of 'lonely', of Aboriginal society and life. A tree has been transferred

#### 4) conclusion

'A past that awaits' continues to resonate in Gilmore's two trees in the repercussions of environmental desolation and dispossession of Aboriginal people (Kyle William Bishop in Rutherford, p. 31). It awaits while the trees and stumps decay slowly and themselves disappear from the land. The Soldier Settler projects after each World War developed areas hitherto uncleared, and economic pressures or lack of knowledge lead to ignoring the disappearance of the trees.

That the stumps and dead trees continue to be 'undead' and to speak of changing technology, contested ideologies and political developments is shown again in the 1980s when *Los Trios Ringbarkos* took to the stage, though the practices of ring-barking had largely ended with the introduction of the chain-saw in the 1950s, and clear-felling techniques using bulldozers, chains and tractors shortly after.

From the initial the stump and the ring-barked tree have communicated through fissures in culture; materialising as historical testaments, ecological informants and unresolved spectral presences generating fear, regret, curiosity and affection.

As we have seen, rather than 'obliterating cultural memories', they keep them in circulation. 'The return of the dead is a sign of disturbance in the symbolic rite, in the process of symbolisation; the dead return as collectors of some symbolic debt' (Žižek 23). As well as calling up colonisation, the dispossession of Aboriginal people and denuding the land, they resonate in the material world, heard in initiatives to preserve or restore living trees, action stimulated by surveying the species and quantities of trees that once sustained a healthy ecosystem. Stewardship programmes for land-holders, Landcare and Catchment projects and individual initiatives, contribute to living tree presence. The 'destruction of the forest' paradoxically may, rather than 'obliterating cultural memories', have preserved them with both comforting and discomfiting resonances.



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i Los Trios Ringbarkos

<http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2003/03/30/1048962641326.html> (6/05/16)

ii Long-dead standing trees are also known as 'stags' because their dead branches resemble antlers. For brevity 'stag' will be used in this essay to mean ring-barked tree. Throughout the writing, it has been difficult to find an appropriate vocabulary as ideological weight in the conventional terms repeatedly deflects accuracy: for example 'clearing'— the term for large-scale removal of tree-cover — erases the means and gives a positive nuance. The wholesale term 'destruction of forests' obscures both the human precision of the practice and the individually ringed trees.

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iii 'Sap-ringing', ringing' and 'ring-barking' were terms for distinct processes now all known as 'ring-barking' (Dowling p. 31). The 'voice' of the *casuarina* (native oak) is heard in both Aboriginal and Australian cultures (Holloway).