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*LAND DIALOGUES: Interdisciplinary research in dialogue with land*

**‘Back’ to Country? Socio-Cultural Identity and the Relationship  
between Revering and Re-fashioning Landscapes and People.**

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## **Abstract**

How 'places' are constructed, experienced, shaped and perceived is strongly affected by socio-cultural histories and identities. This paper explores human relationships, specifically Australian Aboriginal peoples' relationships, with 'land', or 'Country', by conceptualising the role social identity plays in the dynamism between human and non-human expression. Conceived as a dialogue, an interplay, between competing epistemologies of land as nourishing and sustaining but often in competition with notions of 'progress' and 'civilization', humanity's relationship with its physical environment is a history bifurcating between struggle and admiration, resistance and co-dependence, yet, all the while, is a story of social change and renewal. Utilising an interdisciplinary lens, we explore rituals and narratives emergent over time to explore how social beliefs about 'Nature' confer connection to place, nationhood and, ultimately, identity. This exploration raises critical questions about the State's historical role and sovereignty in creating, legitimating or de-legitimating connections between land and people and the implications for both.

## **Introduction**

For Aboriginal people, Country remains significant, permeating every aspect of life. Country is at the heart of Aboriginal spirituality and the Dreaming, governing how we understand and interact with the world and each other. It encompasses rich oral histories of one's people that recount stories of adaptation and survival living in a continuously changing landscape. Country also is what holds the stories of ongoing dispossession and life at the margins while contributing to the economic wellbeing of families and communities. While Aboriginal people's relationship to Country continues to be transformed and new narratives created, it remains the primary source of self-identity, cultural maintenance and hope for the future. In this paper, environmental studies and socio-cultural research are drawn upon to offer a conceptual contribution to dialogues about the way we relate to, and make use of, land and its resources. Through this examination, it contributes further insight into a relationship that includes a way of living with, and caring for, Country, which profoundly influences survival in rural Australia. The environmental crisis of mass species extinction and water scarcity demand a new way of living and working on and with the land. Indeed, Castree et al., (2014) argue an interdisciplinary approach is needed if we are to fully appreciate and reduce our environmental impact for the wellbeing of all.

## **Shifting Cultural Landscapes**

For Aboriginal people, all relationships are derived from Country. When a child is born, they are born into a web of relationships that provide a sense of belonging, obligation and, most importantly, identity. This vast kinship system means people are

born belonging to country and related to all other living things, a notion that contrasts markedly from Eurocentric culture. These socio-cultural norms hold key implications for how individuals and communities relate to physical landscapes, particularly 'Nature'. Moreover, at the heart of Aboriginal spirituality and lore are beliefs that the land, and everything upon it, is a living, breathing entity. Whereas Europeans conceded a soul only to people, Aboriginal Australians perceive the soul is like the breath, permeating the whole of creation.

Perceptions and beliefs about what is held 'sacred', as classical sociologists such as Emile Durkheim theorised, deeply affect humans' relationship with, and connection to, each other and natural environments (Allan, 2011). In Australia, spirituality deeply affects what actions are condoned, or socially sanctioned, in relation to Country. Socio-cultural beliefs have profound implications for identifying, and nurturing, practices commonly known as environmental stewardship and natural resource management (Australian Government, 2016, n.p.). In an era lamented for an increasing disconnection between contemporary Western 'lifestyles' and 'Nature', a host of psychologists, ecologists and other disciplines exploring human-nature connectivity have commenced extolling the benefits of re-connecting with natural environments in our everyday lives (Laird, Wardell-Johnson, & Ragusa, 2014). Here, Indigenous culture may be instructive. Aboriginal law requires us to respect Country, care for it, 'grow it', and be co-creators of life. These ideologies, and importantly the practices they foster, mark a significant difference from conservation or sustainability ideology.

While Western environmental conservation and/or sustainability practices seek to encourage the preservation, and thus continuation, of nature, they tend to perpetuate a Cartesian dualism, a disconnection between mind/spirit and body, viewing humanity as external from its physical embodiment and connection with the land from which we all derive. Nature exists as an extrinsic variable to be manipulated, shaped, or influenced, not only for its own *a priori* needs, but often for androcentric needs. In contrast, Aboriginal beliefs, laws, and practices of co-creation offer an alternative conceptualisation. For example, the active management of species, such as native nurseries, fisheries, and 'burning off' to generate new life, are widely continued practices embedded within traditional and contemporary culture despite technological changes. The human-nature relationship is thus nurtured through rituals, for instance sacred songs where spirits that nurture the earth are sung to for a good season, food, thanksgiving and protection. Such rituals further embed the centrality of Country, reiterating its importance to everyday life.

In many Aboriginal communities the importance of being 'grounded in Country' begins at a very young age. Some continue to rub earth over their children at birth to connect them with 'the mother'. Adults continue to feel the earth of their Country, claiming it is what gives them strength and the aged often return to Country 'to die' so their spirit can find its way home. Indeed, the spiritual attachment to Country can be one of the most stabilising influences throughout one's life. These beliefs and practices manifest in cultural traditions old and new, as Geoffrey Yunnipingu sings of being conceived and carried by 'Wititj' (the Rainbow Serpent and Creator Spirit) while Indigenous singer and songwriter, Christine Anu, sings of her 'Island Home'. Actor Ernie Dingo speaks of Country as being central to 'who he is', while Vicki

Couzins, an Aboriginal artist and storyteller, reminds us that when Country is strong, so are its people. Country provides the road map for life where the Creator Spirit dwells. In Barkandji Country, one can see the footprints of the Creator Spirit 'Biamee' who left an imprint of his journey at the time of creation, evidenced by consecutive plateaus, while in Wreck Bay the Yuin people continue looking to the skies, reassured at the presence of the 'sea eagle', 'the father' and protector of them all.

Although how Indigenous Australians use the land and its resources has altered dramatically, Country continues to be a priority. In Wagga Wagga, the conservation of bush food is seen through the establishment of native gardens, seed collecting and basket weaving. In Wreck Bay, the planting and conservation of bush medicines is an ongoing task while a vast range of wild fruit and berries continue to be planted. In Peak Hill, pigibilla continues to be eaten because it is good for the skin while Mount Gulaga continues to be a place where Yuin women gather. While contemporary Indigenous Australians' relationship to Country, with their land, and hence with their selves, both individual and collective, changes over time, lessons from historical lived experiences are instructive for guiding new relationships with Country. One particularly instructive lived experience for reconceptualising how contemporary human-nature relationships are affected by systemic conditions and varied ideologies is the historical experience of Aboriginal dispossession.

### **Narratives of Dispossession**

Access to country remains central to a sense of 'well being' and the mental health of Indigenous Australians (Kanowski et al., 2008). Given national statistics reveal Aboriginal Australians bear a disproportionate burden of mental illness by population size, understanding what contributes to their mental health is of great importance. Particularly noteworthy is the change in suicide rates from hardly any in pre-colonial Australia to double the rate of non-Indigenous Australians according to Australian Bureau of Statistics (2012) data. With government reports attributing, "the disproportionate number of these deaths (over three quarters) [to] where there was a history of having been forcibly separated from natural families as children", and noting remote geographies and access to regional centres require consideration (Australian Government, 2013, n.p.), it is timely to reconceptualise what 'well-being' entails.

Across Australia, many Aboriginal Australians continue to live in third world conditions if it allows them to remain close to Country. This is supported with national statistics revealing Aboriginal Australians have shorter life expectancies and experience "persistent and chronic disadvantage" (p.3) on a majority of socio-economic/demographic categories in contrast with non-Indigenous Australians; 75% live in regional areas or cities, not remote locations, a common misconception, although remote communities pose considerable health and well-being risks comparable with those in developing countries (Australian Institute of Health & Welfare (AIHW), 2011). Despite known disadvantages of remote living, including

implications for mortality rates, the Australian Government reports, “rates of positive wellbeing were higher in remote areas than non-remote areas” (AIHW, 2011, p.37) and remoteness was associated with increased cultural identity and higher participation in cultural activities (ibid, p.43), a factor known to improve sense of well-being.

In light of the positive influence cultural identity has on Indigenous Australians' well-being, and the importance of Country irrespective of whether one's location is demographically described as urban or rural, combined with the deleterious effects from physical and psychological dispossession, it is unsurprising many Indigenous communities seek justice through reclamation of traditional grounds. Indeed, Country not only has great spiritual and economic importance, it holds the history of one's people. The rich oral stories of Indigenous Australians provide a key source of cultural identity and offer a history of life reaching back across generations, connecting people and landscapes. Many narratives include stories of living on the land prior to invasion. For example, at Brungle, a mission near the foothills of the Snowy Mountains, the Elders recall the location of violence with the Ngungawal of the Southern Highlands. “Over there is where we fought a war with the neighbouring tribe - over there between those two hills” and, in relation to the rivers, we recount, “Wiradjuri people are river people....it's our meeting place and always has been (Kime, 1999).

More recent narratives include often violent dispossession and describe life on 'the missions'. At Darlington Point in New South Wales, memories of mission life remain with the residents who are known for pointing to the location of significant buildings, such as 'the manager's house' and 'the rations shed', recalling where 'too many of our children are buried'. At Cowra, people continue telling the story of a life as refugees, as fringe dwellers, in their own country and stories of living in the 'red huts' under the railway bridge or in make shift shelters along the banks of the Lachlan River. These rich historical narratives include the regular passing of trains, a sight 'not to be missed' that provided short reprieves from grinding poverty and struggle for survival over diminishing access to land (Kime, 1999).

### **Lessons from the Dispossessed**

Dispossession has often been driven by economic imperatives (McLean, 2013). The first one hundred years of European occupation saw Aboriginal people removed and/or killed to 'free up' land for colonial expansion and industries such as pastoralism (Nettlebeck, 2011; Reynolds, 2013). Missions and Reserves became convenient places where Indigenous people could be located to further such efforts. Stolen Generations were sent to 'training institutions' to be 'of service' and integration policies of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century saw Aboriginal people moved off these locations into larger towns and/or cities with false promises of employment and better housing (Broome, 2010). Today, the withdrawal of basic services to 100 Indigenous communities in Western Australia not only frees the land from human habitation, but, more significantly, makes the land 'available', coinciding with the

expansion of mining (Anonymous, 2014; Brueckner et al., 2013). Similarly, income management in the Northern Territory requires many Aboriginal people leave their community to access basic necessities at the 'identified' stores. Thus, Galloway (2015) points to a 'new wave' of dispossession, driven by the broader agenda to open up 'the last frontiers' of economic development.

Dispossession of Country has forced Indigenous Australians to undergo rapid change, while long held traditions manifest in new and dynamic ways. Country remains at the heart of Aboriginal identity, with dispossession marking grief and loss across generations. The resilience of Aboriginal people, and their ability to retain a unique identity as Australia's Indigenous people, gives pause for reflection. At a time when climate change presents major challenges to all Australians, and particularly those in rural and remote communities, we might ask, what can we learn from the dispossessed, including how they have dealt with change and environmental crises on the Australian continent? Hawke (2012) points to first Australians' lack of eco-cultural literacy and how early settlers failed to heed lessons of survival. Similarly, Weir (2011) claims Indigenous custodians' ecological knowledge is crucial in our era of climatic change and mass species extinction which is directly affecting the wellbeing of rural communities. Weir (2011) refers to a loss of connectivity and possibilities for existence. Long-term knowledge of caring for Country reveals intimate and detailed knowledge of flora and fauna, including care of a changing landscape. Moreover, it demands an integrative and holistic sensibility which some would argue requires a paradigmatic shift in conceptions of self, community and connection to the land, nature, sustaining all.

Stories of creation working cooperatively with humans are found in Aboriginal communities across Australia and concepts such as the 'common good' are broader and deeper than in Western societies. Within Aboriginal storytelling, animals are often referred to as having rights to exist that are equal to humans and far beyond the binary thinking and economic equations currently dictating broader debates. Survival depends on our ability to enter into this extra-human dialogue. Weir (2011) writes of the need to form 'ethical relationships with nature' which may expand our thinking about the economy to recognise the diverse labours and exchanges in the 'more-than-human-world'. For instance, the vital work of bee populations or the essential filtering system provided by crayfish in our waterways both contribute to the survival of human and more-than-human species. As noted by Rose's (2014) ethnographical work, every species plays a role in keeping ecosystems healthy.

If a relationship of respectful connectivity were to be embraced, it would demand change in land and water usage. For instance, the use of Western agricultural systems in Country too arid to sustain them and diversion of water from more-than-human-populations fail to equally appreciate the role of nature in the human-nature relationship, prioritising androcentric values. A paradigm shift towards a more synergistic relationship with Country by all Australians demands empathy with our environment and deeper appreciation of how human survival is dependent upon nature. As purported by Hawke (2012), it would demand a more expansive economy, one far beyond simplistic commodification of natural resources. Aboriginal spirituality, which undergirds such use and contributes to the common good, has much to offer, including the values of interdependence, cooperation, waste

avoidance and resource sharing that permeate Aboriginal ways of being and doing (Chilisa, 2012; Wilson, 2008).

Many important lessons for survival and coping with environmental change may be derived from Aboriginal people's culture and experiences. Natural scientists now recognise the wisdom of Custodians and its significance for biodiversity with recent initiatives including increasing numbers of national parks jointly managed with Aboriginal communities and the growing number of Indigenous Protected Areas across Australia. Indeed, the importance of Indigenous ecological knowledge to survival in a changing landscape is not only recognised (Davies et al., 2013), but the potential for improved human health and conservation Indigenous biodiversity management offers is well documented (Nursey-Bray & Hill, 2010).

## Conclusions

Aboriginal Australians survival of change wrought from colonisation is attenuated by a strong connection to Country as ancient as the land. Country embeds family history, contains stories of resilience and transformation, and, more recently, foretells survival of marginalisation. Country provides for Indigenous Australians by connecting cultural identity with a sense of 'place', 'belonging', and most importantly, acceptance. It facilitates unity through the shared experience of dispossession and a multi-layered identification system that is diverse yet central for Aboriginal people.

Human-nature relationships hold profound lessons for survival, particularly for rural and remote Australians. Aboriginal epistemology and ontology can help humanity confront the momentous biophysical implications of its own actions, including the necessary changes in land and water usage that must accompany it. Such change requires a cultural shift to transform how we live, work and play on Country. The relationship must be built on respect, rights and obligations in the care of our natural environment and prioritise fostering a deep understanding that the care of Country directly impacts our wellbeing and that of future generations in our human and more-than-human world.

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