

## “Do we have Aussie slang for genitals?": Intellectual Elites, Vernacular Expression, and the 'Bush' as Urban Imaginary”

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**Abstract:** Towards the end of his 2014 book *The Bush: Travels in the Heart of Australia*, Don Watson describes the quietening of evenings in the rural fringe just beyond Melbourne’s outskirts where all is stilled save for the tranquil browsing of kangaroos. The raucous laughter of kookaburras then begins to reverberate through this silence. “If nothing else will pin you to your native land,” Watson writes, “this will” (355). Watson’s appeal to the senses as revelatory of a quintessential Australianness by no means underpins or supports crude nationalism, but it does reference the centrality of “the land” or “the bush” in particular evocations of belonging and identity. Our reference to the bush as a source of identity has always been somewhat incongruous given that we are predominantly an urban population and much has been written about this. Curiously, however, nowadays voices from the bush are seldom heard and when so they often draw censure. The bush is spoken for and about but seldom listened to, a position it shares with the working class among others. Despite a suite of significant rural affairs programmes, ABC RN too frequently is dismissive of and condescending towards bush voices. Yet the bush is at the coalface of where so much of what is un-settling (and un-settled) Australia occurred, and because vicariously it is where we locate our essential Australianness, we should be seeking to better understand the lifeworlds of those who live there. Their lived experience, no matter how ostensibly distant from the more delicate or righteous sensibilities of the urban elite, often reveal complex and nuanced negotiations and intersections with Australia’s past and present, peoples and places.

**Keywords:** the bush; elites; working-class; lifeworlds; Aborigines; settlers

Kenneth Cook’s searing account of Australian (and perhaps more generally) masculinity—*Wake in Fright*—was first published in 1961. A brilliant if confronting film of the novel premiered at the 1971 Cannes Film Festival. Cannes’ selection panel invited the film’s admission as Australia’s official entry, ignoring the National Film Board of Australia’s refusal to endorse it as such (Galvin, “The Making of *Wake in Fright* (Part Three)” 4). For the international audience the film was retitled *Outback*. The novel (and film) portrays the misadventures of a school teacher posted to a remote Outback one-teacher school who is returning to Sydney to spend an imagined idyllic holiday with his girlfriend. Waylaid *en-route* in a mining town he loses all his money gambling on “two-up,” which leads him to the company of a group of hard-drinking, violent, disturbed and disturbing men. Kangaroo hunting combined with heavy drinking is one of their favourite sports, and they take the young school teacher along on a hunt that is particularly graphic, prolonged, cruel and bloody.

While “the bush” is a generic description for a disparate and vast array of environments, or in Michael Cathcart’s words, “a vast generalised Australian landscape” (229), the term is inclusive of the Outback, and the arid redness of the country surrounding Broken Hill where the landscape scenes of *Wake in Fright* were filmed is in popular parlance very much the bush (see Watson

65-91).<sup>1</sup> The values depicted however, or the imputed emotional geographies of the various characters, are not those conjured by those subscribing to the “commonplace ... worldview that all that is distinct and admirable in the national character comes from the bush,” and it is the bush that has made us who we are (Watson 93). Nor are the values depicted in *Wake in Fright* the sort Penny Wensley, the then Governor of Queensland, had in mind when responding to Queensland’s 2010-2011 floods: “So much of what is best, truest and fairest in the Australian character is drawn from our bush traditions, our values forged like gold from the diggings in the challenges—and from the pressures and the opportunities—of life in the bush” (qtd. in Watson 94).

The Outback also featured, again it is a mining town, in the more recent fly-on-the-wall documentary *Hotel Coolgardie*. Filmed in 2012 (released in 2016), it follows the plight of two young Finnish backpackers who arrive at the Denver City Hotel in Coolgardie to commence a three-month stint as barmaids. Welcomed as “fresh meat” by the hotel’s manager and clientele, the women endure a barrage of confronting behaviour and the anticipation that they might be available to satisfy the sexual needs of the predominantly inebriated male patrons. One man at the bar wears a t-shirt proclaiming “I FUCKED A GOAT,” and the viewer cannot be certain it is not a boast. The few women patrons appear to be no less drunk and no less extroverted (perhaps more so verbally) in expressing their need for (heterosexual) sex. The renowned film critic David Stratton was one of many who found an association between this film and *Wake in Fright*: “what emerges is a chillingly nasty outback story to rival *Wake in Fright*” (Stratton, “Film Reviews;” see also Noyes). It is not, Stratton comments, “a very flattering picture of the Australian outback” (Stratton, “David Stratton Reviews”). Paul Byrnes writes that *Hotel Coolgardie* is “a fascinating, appalling, revealing film about the murkier end of Australian masculinity” (Byrnes). The complicity of women as noted above in the “murkier end” of certain behaviours is overlooked in this damning comment on peripheral Australian masculinity.<sup>2</sup>

Unsurprisingly *Wake in Fright*’s depiction of Australian masculinity has attracted comment—“a profoundly unsettling study of Australian male society of the late 1960s” (Docker 62)—or more broadly, “a cruelly accurate observation of a certain type of Australian life” (Malcolm qtd. in Galvin “The Making of *Wake in Fright* (Part Three)” 5). Evan Jones, the screenwriter, however, objected that “the reviewers were impertinent to write that we were making a film that criticised the Australian character. ... [I]f it were set in another place, another remote

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper the term the bush is inclusive of this vast array of environments, including the Outback, rural and regional Australia, pastoral and other remote regions and the people, including Aborigines, who dwell there. While these disparate environments and inhabitants are discrete in many ways, the discussion here is concerned with how collectively these regions are more spoken for—and down to—than heard, let alone with empathy. Distinction is drawn where necessary. See Chapter Three—“What is the Bush?”—of Watson’s *The Bush* for discussion on how collectively these regions can and do represent the bush (65-91).

<sup>2</sup> Jenny Noyes’s (“*Hotel Coolgardie*”) critique similarly overlooks the complicity of the few women who drink at the bar surrounded by what she describes as the “toxic masculinity and rape culture” on display, and that the “ever-present threat of male sexual aggression ... forces the outnumbered women to alter their behaviour accordingly.” Noyes’s concern is for the women backpackers employed on three-month contracts. She is silent on the behaviour of the few women patrons. Furthermore, one of the women barmaids whom the Finnish women are replacing appears more participant in than troubled by the culture of the public bar. Selective editing from the many months of filming and the absence of contextualising background about the women drinkers who frequent the bar (as distinct from the barmaids), leaves their behaviour in particular scenes open to presumptive critique, but there is no indication that these patrons have been forced into particular modes of behaviour.

location the essential point of the fiction would be the same” (qtd. in Galvin “The Making of *Wake in Fright* (Part Three)” 5). Nevertheless, Ted Kotcheff, the London-based Canadian director, discerned national nuances in the “sadness and despair underneath the boozy violence” (qtd. in Galvin, “The Making of *Wake in Fright* (Part Three)” 3). Furthermore, Kotcheff had seen enough of Australia to know that the “rituals of mateship and mating” depicted in *Wake in Fright* were as much an astonishing feature of Sydney social life as that of the Outback (qtd. in Galvin, “The Making of *Wake in Fright* (Part Two)” 2), where evidence of “tortured sexuality” was ever present (McDonald 112). While filming in Broken Hill, the first assistant director, Howard Rubie, recalled “a dark, attractive girl drove a pick-up truck into the courtyard of the motel where the film crew were relaxing. Standing in the back and holding a schooner of beer ... she announced to all and sundry, ‘I’m a virgin and I thought one of you fillum people could do something about it and do it right’” (qtd. in McDonald 112). Perhaps this incident contributed to one of the film crew being attacked by four young men who warned: “You fillum people stay away from our sheilas” (qtd. in McDonald 112). Both these incidents contribute to the verisimilitude of the film’s representations. Readily apparent sadness and despair also underlies the drunken (and sober) conduct of the bar patrons in *Hotel Coolgardie*, as does an ever-present tortured sexuality.

Digitally remastered and re-released at Cannes in 2009 after discovery of the “lost” master negative,<sup>3</sup> *Wake in Fright* was later adapted for a television miniseries which screened on Channel 10 in October 2017. For the miniseries the kangaroo hunt was replaced by the hunting of feral pigs. Justifying the switch, the director Kriv Stenders stated: “Obviously the roo shoot from the original film would have been impossible to re-create for a number of practical and ethical reasons, and we didn’t want to even try anyway. For us, changing the roo shoot to a feral-pig shoot just seemed to make perfect sense” (“*Wake in Fright* Remake” 16). Professional roo shooters—both men (see Cowan) and women (see Andersen)—still ply their profession, and it would have been possible (although controversial) to again use professional shooters to obtain footage of a hunt as was done for the original film.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, the substitution of a much-loved native icon—the kangaroo—with a much loathed feral pest—the pig—is not as straightforward a switch as Stenders implies. Even in 1969 the roo shooting scene was controversial. The international family-oriented television hit *Skippy*, featuring a friendly kangaroo that doubled as a detective and communicated through mouthing clicks, was produced between 1966 and 1968 (Galvin, “The Making of *Wake in Fright* (Part Three)” 2). Aware of arousing sensitivities, in an early script *Wake in Fright*’s screenwriter Evan Jones substituted a pig hunt for the kangaroo hunt. However, after the director Ted Kotcheff visited Broken Hill surveying outdoor locations the roo shoot was re-instated (Buckley 138). Kotcheff observed that “[e]very night of the week, men go out to shoot the kangaroos, generally after much drinking” (qtd. in Buckley 138), and Kotcheff wanted this reality depicted.

In an essay discussing in part the original *Wake in Fright* John Morton asserts that “[t]he one thing that cannot be doubted is that the shooting of kangaroos is a masculine pursuit. The

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<sup>3</sup> For an account of the long search and subsequent fortunate finding of the lost negative and soundtrack (they were found in a container marked “for destruction” in Pittsburgh U.S.), see Anthony Buckley, *Behind a Velvet Light Trap*.

<sup>4</sup> According to the Kangaroo Industry Association, there are approximately 2,200 commercial roo shooters active in Australia (Cowan, “From Dusk”). Some aspects of how footage of the roo shooting was obtained and of the “fight” between the actors and the injured kangaroos would be illegal today on animal cruelty grounds (Galvin, “The Making of *Wake in Fright* (Part Three).”

campaign *against* it is fundamentally feminine” (J. Morton 48; original emphasis).<sup>5</sup> Notwithstanding the fact that there are professional women roo shooters (see Andersen), pig hunting is a popular pursuit enjoyed by men *and* women. The opening sentence of journalist Rick Morton’s recently published memoir is “My sister Lauryn has taken up hunting wild pigs, which is a thing people do” (R. Morton 1). In fact, so many women do that in 2014 Louise Warren started a new women’s pig hunting magazine, *Chicks Smashing Grunters*. Distributed through 1,300 newsagencies, Warren stated the catalyst for the magazine was the dearth of publications for women hunters: “There was bugger all for women hunters ... there’s five other publications that are predominantly showcasing men” (qtd. in Barry).<sup>6</sup> Warren, as do many of her contributors, points to the number of feral pigs in Australia and the enormous damage they do to crops, livestock, native flora and fauna, and argues that women pig hunters are motivated by a strong conservationist and environmental ethic, as much as by their love of the blood sport of hunting (Warren qtd. in Barry). And it is a blood sport, literally. Not for Lauryn Morton the degree of detachment that shooting might permit; she kills by plunging a “knife into the pig’s heart.” She tells her squeamish brother, “You will feel the blood run all over your hand” (R. Morton 4).

Don Watson reminds us that “[t]he bush has always been as much for hiding pathologies as repairing them” (354). The fictional *Wake in Fright* and documentary *Hotel Coolgardie* reveal some of the pathologies that otherwise remain mostly hidden. *Chicks Smashing Grunters* exposes another peripheral bush activity, albeit one indulged in by city dwellers too while on holidays or during weekends away. It also reveals the seldom acknowledged and little studied participation of women in rural Australian blood sports. Perhaps needless to say, these examples are not representative or indicative of the bush per se, but they are nevertheless a constitutive element of it. They are a component (and only that) of the vernacular cultures of the bush, but when voting patterns or particular incidents draw attention to rural Australia—for example, the live animal export trade—which challenge or confront predominantly inner-urban constituencies aligned with so-called progressive values, this component becomes a synecdoche and bush dwellers draw censure. In a recent interview with Lech Blaine who was seeking to understand why Queenslanders deserted Labor in the 2019 May federal election, the mayor of Townsville, Jenny Hill, alluded to this divide: “We’re closer to Port Moresby than Brisbane ... It’s a different view about a whole range of things. That’s why we consider Melbourne and Sydney the inner-city elite—they just don’t get it” (qtd. in Blaine 29).

While there is a great deal of literature critiquing the bush and its representation, and dating from the 1970s—notwithstanding earlier challenges—Indigenous rights and voices, women’s liberation, gay rights, and multiculturalism, have changed the way that Australians see and promote themselves (Arrow), few voices from the bush itself are heard,<sup>7</sup> and fewer people eke out a living in the bush. To cite one instance, the number of Australian farmers dropped by 40%

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<sup>5</sup> The frequently misguided campaign against the kangaroo industry displays little knowledge of the industry or awareness of how the population of target species has changed following the creation of more favourable conditions through clearing and the introduction of cropping and pasture and the increase in water sources such as farm dams. The campaign is marked more by emotion than reason.

<sup>6</sup> The magazine now seems to have morphed into a Facebook only publication. The still published magazine *Bacon Busters* features a “Babes and Boars” section and an annual “Miss Bacon Busters” prize.

<sup>7</sup> One of the issues identified as being responsible for the swing in Queensland to the coalition in the May 2019 federal election was that Labor and “the south” were not listening to rural voices. As Lech Blaine claims, regional Queensland was of the view that “country people deserved the same right to be heard as those in the big smoke” (28). See also footnote 13.

between 1981 and 2011. In the five years between 2006 and 2011 there was a fall of 11% in the number of farmers, equating to 19,700 fewer farmers, or a loss of 294 per month (“Australian Social Trends”). Since perhaps the early twentieth-century if not before, far fewer urban dwellers have “country cousins.” The historian Geoffrey Blainey speculates that “as recently as 1945 ... more than half of the city dwellers had either come from the bush or were in touch with relatives who lived there” (20). In a 2017 survey commissioned by the National Farmers’ Federation 83% of respondents “describe[d] their connection with farming as ‘distant’ or ‘non-existent’” (Davis 22). Of the 70% of Australia constituting the Outback—one of Earth’s very few remaining “vast natural landscapes”—only five per cent of Australia’s total population live there (Traill 21). Much of this landscape “has fewer people inhabiting and actively managing the land than at any time in the past 50,000 years” (Traill 21).<sup>8</sup> Whereas earlier many immigrant communities made their way in rural Australia—Blainey reminds us that “in 1901 the German language was often heard in at least half of the nation’s wheat and wine towns,” and that in the West Wimmera “German was widely read and spoken” (20)—more recent immigrants favour the city. As Don Watson states, the “liveliest of ... suburbs are home not to descendants of drovers and Anzacs, but to ambitious migrants from Asia and the Middle East, with no taste for rural life, and no appetite for sagas of male bonding in shearing sheds and creek beds under Banjo Patterson’s everlasting stars” (93). Even the voices of Indigenous people living remotely are mostly ventriloquised by Indigenous and non-Indigenous urban dwellers. Marcia Langton, for example, who frequently challenges progressive opinion vis-à-vis Aboriginal affairs, suggests that “despite extraordinary levels of education and achievement in public life” (Langton, “Trapped” 157), the formerly prominent Women for Wik group who campaigned for Aboriginal rights “peddle failed sentimental policies ... that utterly dehumanise” those remote dwelling Aborigines they presume to be speaking for (Langton, “Stop the Abuse”). Similarly, Langton says of Aborigines speaking up for remote communities and whose primary focus are rights, “few have ever lived in the desperate remote area communities they seek to represent and seem to be oblivious to their actual conditions” (Langton, “Trapped” 146). These are all good examples of how compassion in operation can denote privilege: “the sufferer is *over there*” (Berlant 4, original emphasis). Noel Pearson and Bess Price who on occasion both similarly challenge progressive opinion, are equally withering of those Aborigines and others who presume to speak for remote dwelling Aborigines (Pearson, “White Guilt” 30; B. Price 4).

Hence although its significance is waning in respect to being the repository of quintessential Australianness, the bush in all its guises, including its inhabitants (Watson 66), remains predominantly an imagined space; a populated, urban seaboard imaginary, varying from a wellspring of virtuous traits to the terrain harbouring our profound flaws and social pathologies. Aboriginal bush dwellers too are cloaked in the robes of multiple agendas. As Thomas Sowell says of the situation in the United States, a “crucial fact about white liberals must be kept in mind: They are not simply in favour of blacks in general. Their solicitude is poured out for blacks as victims ... as well as those blacks who serve as general counter-cultural symbols against larger society” (Sowell 57). The Aboriginal inhabitants of remote impoverished communities, exemplary in their own ways as counter-cultural symbols, serve as “mascots ... symbolizing and acting out” the societal critiques of the educated elites (Sowell 57). Remote

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<sup>8</sup> Fewer people living on and managing Outback landscapes is having a deleterious impact on its ecological health. As Barry Traill argues, “Substantial parts of the Outback ... need more people, not fewer, living in and actively managing the land if it is to remain healthy.” An example of this is the average size of fires. When the Martu were still actively managing their lands up to the 1950s the average size of a fire was sixty hectares. “By the 80s, across lands now empty of its custodians, the average fire had grown to cover 50,000ha” (Traill, “A Modern Outback” 21).

dwelling Aborigines also serve as touchstones of authenticity readily exploited by those questing for an identity otherwise belied by their circumstances and material conditions. On the few occasions when those in the bush are able to have their voices heard and these voices express opinions contrary to those of the urban elites, the speakers find themselves savaged. When the Central Australian Aboriginal leader Bess Price spoke in qualified support of “the intervention” on the ABC television programme *Q&A* (Jones), Larissa Behrendt, Professor of Law and Director of Research at the Jumbunna Indigenous House of Learning at the University of Technology, Sydney, retorted on twitter that she “had watched a show where a guy had sex with a horse and I’m sure it was less offensive than Bess Price” (qtd. in Langton, “Aboriginal Sophisticates”). Similarly, when Alice Springs town councillor Jacinta Price expressed support for retaining Australia Day on January 26, asking “Why aren’t the marches for murdered Aboriginal women as big as the marches on Australia Day?” (J. Price 20), she was inundated with excoriating abuse across the various social media channels (Brown and Taylor).<sup>9</sup>

Although writing in reference to another context—the lifeworlds of fourteen women in Malaysia—Earle Reybold explains how “ways of knowing ... manifest themselves in the everyday lifeworld through mundane decisions and affect” (Reybold 547). He goes on to say that the “concept of pragmatic epistemology situates knowing in the lifeworld experiences of everyday reasoning” (Reybold 547). For people of the bush, their “meaning making” arising from their “lifeworld experiences” reflect the social and geographical environs in which they are enmeshed. Instead of attempting to understand these lifeworlds or ways of knowing of the bush that challenge, contradict or even coincide with their own ways of knowing, urban elites offer critiques based on their own values. The bush is written about, not engaged with. And while there is a great deal of literature about the bush, literature *from* the bush receives scant attention. This is as evident in respect to the Northern Territory—whose entire area is representative of the bush in some respects—as much as anywhere else. In *Writing Home: Walking, Literature and Belonging in Australia’s Red Centre*, Glenn Morrison points out that although the Northern Territory has long been pivotal to constructions of Australian identity, there are negligible “rigorous evaluation[s] of [the regional] literature that goes some way toward producing it” (34). Morrison is critical of this oversight. He explains how the “lived experience of [Alice Springs] reveals much richer, nuanced and creative lifeworlds” (31) than most of the literature written about the town, and that this more edifying “lived experience” (31) can be discerned in the literature from the region, more so than in the literature about the region which tends to emphasise division and conflict.<sup>10</sup> In this way Morrison’s text responds at least in part to Alan Lawson’s urging for a more nuanced reading of the past. As Lawson explains,

Just as the ghastly violence of colonial “settlement” was once forgotten, its relatively recent remembering has produced its own forgetting of historical instances of conscience and good faith ... We have become ostentatiously good at reading the past for its moral and ethical blindnesses: to do that is no longer a theoretical or a methodological challenge. What we need to be able to do next is to find a theorized methodology for rereading the

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<sup>9</sup> The debate over the appropriate date to hold Australia Day is now highly politicised. Ten days ahead of Australia Day in 2018 the national leader of the Greens, Richard Di Natale, described his party’s opposition to the celebrations being held on the 26<sup>th</sup> of January as his “top issue” for the year (Brown and Taylor “Australia Day Trolls”).

<sup>10</sup> Morrison’s analysis includes a Kaytetye Dreaming story, the journals of John McDouall Stuart, Strehlow’s *Journey to Horseshoe Bend*, Arthur Groom’s *I Saw a Strange Land*, Bruce Chatwin’s *Songlines* and Eleanor Hogan’s *Alice Springs*.

past productively, not celebratively, not unreflectively, but with an eye to the contradictions that might enable us to learn our difficult relations better. (Lawson 1222)

To this end Morrison discerns richer and more nuanced lifeworlds in earlier regional narratives, including in the diaries of explorers (Morrison 91-122) and in the work of missionaries (Morrison 123-154; see also Pybus, “‘We Grew up This Place’” and Pybus, “North-West South Australia”).

Because the so-called bush is at the coalface of where so much of what is un-settling (and un-settled) Australia occurred, and because vicariously the bush is where many locate our essential Australianness, we should be seeking to better understand the lifeworlds of those who live there. It is also in the bush where the lifeworlds of Aborigines and settlers more often intersect and where the histories of both are more often entangled and even sometimes—though much less often—shared (Liebelt et al. 91). As Morrison argues, “[U]navelling the complex dimensions of place in the contact zone would seem key to fostering an Australian literature of place that embraces and promotes cross-cultural understanding. Otherwise, Aboriginal people and culture remain inscrutable in any settler narrative of place, trapped on the other side of a frontier divide” (245). Shannon Burns identifies similar proclivities among comfortable middleclass progressives towards the working or lower class, whose language, particularly in respect to race, frequently draws censure. Burns points out how the morals and values of the so-called progressives are rarely tested by the daily struggle to make ends meet, their empathy for the Other is largely based on abstract ideals, and seldom do the “trickier” consequences of the “enlightened policies” they espouse burden them socially or economically in any consequential way (37-38). Their “grandstanding and virtue signalling is cheap” (Murray 17). The recent IPCC Report “Global Warming of 1.5° C” argues similarly. Chapter Four is concerned with strengthening the global response to this threat and how to realise behavioural “transformational adaptation” among other things. It reports that “People are motivated to see themselves as morally right, which encourages mitigation actions ..., particularly when long-term goals are salient ... and behavioural costs *are not too high* ...” (“Global Warming” 76, my emphasis). Burns argues, “progressives *might* benefit from considering lower class points of view, and the experiences that forge them ... [A]ddressing those sensibilities, instead of ignoring them, opens up new pathways to mutual understanding and cooperation” (39-40, original emphasis). Morton remarks similarly. He describes the often petty but sometimes more substantial humiliations endured by those whose meagre resources focus priorities quite literally towards survival (R. Morton 151-171): “Living, for so many people in Australia, is *exhausting*” (R. Morton 162, original emphasis). Salvatore Babones warns of the potential consequences in this schism between educated elites and others: “The great spiritual danger facing twenty-first-century democracy is that liberal intellectuals increasingly dismiss the moral right of less-educated people to have opinions that conflict with the consensus wisdom of the expert class” (49).

The public broadcaster the ABC attracts much criticism for its ostensible progressive (left-wing) bias, principally but by no means exclusively from the Murdoch press, conservative politicians and radio shock jocks. This accusation is of course rejected by the ABC and the progressive class. To what extent if any the ABC is biased towards support for a vanguard of progressive causes is debatable and not of concern here, but there is a bias away from the values and characteristics of the distinctive lifeworlds of rural and regional peoples and also working-class cultures. As the journalist Rick Morton explains, whereas formerly journalists in Australia (and in the UK) comprised many from working-class backgrounds who rose through the ranks after commencing their career with cadetships, journalism is now one of the “most exclusive middle-class professions of the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (R. Morton 155; see also 154-56).

Consequentially, “the media isn’t filled by people from ‘state school, battler backgrounds,’” and where media organisations implement diversity targets these tend to reflect race, culture and sexuality, not class differentials (154). In respect to reflecting the lifeworlds of rural Australia this is notwithstanding the ABC offering a suite of acclaimed programmes (on both television and radio) covering rural Australia.<sup>11</sup> It is in the generic programming of “national” broadcasts where this bias is most evident. For example, a recent “Life Matters” episode on ABC RN discussed in its weekly “Modern Dilemmas” segment the “etiquette when playing games online with strangers.” The “dilemma” was the appropriateness or otherwise of certain words when playing online scrabble, in this instance “vagas.” This led to mention that an “Aussie slang version” of scrabble had just been released, leading one on the panel to opine that we can now “put down all those terrible words like bonza,” with another panellist contributing “strewth” as another “terrible” word. One of the panellists then asked, “Do we have Aussie slang for genitals?”, prompting the host to say “hmmm, yeah, I reckon we might but let’s just leave that one where it deserves to be left” (“Modern Dilemma”). While there are sound reasons why the programme was not desirous of broadcasting slang for genitals, this ignorant prissiness—“do we have...?”—together with dismissing slang with such casual contempt bespeaks of a broad bias towards particular cultural forms favoured by the educated. Burns argues that “[w]hen rules of expression are forced on people who have their own peculiar relationship to speech, and who can reasonably be expected to struggle with the constraints, it is not a fair imposition” (40). The values underpinning such smug complacency as the ABC’s need critiquing. There is a reason why language reclamation projects find the vernacular environs of primary industry workers—for example the dockside pubs where fisher folk and their families drink—such vital sources.<sup>12</sup>

Morrison, whose concern in *Writing Home* is “[h]ow might settler Australians find an autochthonous sense of belonging and home?” (xvi), notes how pastoralists “share with the Centre’s Indigenous people a tradition of placemaking through storytelling and journey, of droving and settlement, a tradition core to constructions of Australian identity” (248), and that “Aboriginals (sic) and settlers share elements of a sense of place and identity” (249). Noel Pearson argues similarly:

Often, it is among the good-hearted Right that the strongest support for meaningful recognition and reform tends to emerge. The salt-of-the-earth National Party types, the people of the land, farmers and nativists—practical people with many Indigenous Australians in their electorates—are most open to genuine, open and honest discourse with their indigenous countrymen. Where the average inner-city liberal has met few indigenous Australians in their lives, let alone sought to understand their hopes and dreams, country people have lived and worked side by side with them. Like indigenous peoples, these Australians share an intimate love of and connection to their country. As patriots, they usually understand that the indigenous heritage of this land is their heritage too. (Pearson, “Pauline Hanson Can Empower” 4)

Such an understanding challenges the views of the progressive class, who as argued above show little to no interest in understanding values other than their own, who seek to impose those values on others, and who privilege abstract ideals that have few consequences for them, over

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<sup>11</sup> This includes the acclaimed television programme *Landline*, ABC RN’s *Country Breakfast*, and on local ABC radio Sunday morning’s jingoistic *Australia all Over*.

<sup>12</sup> For example, the early revivalists of Cornish turned to the fisherfolk who in the eighteenth century were the last speakers of Cornish (pers. comm. Philip Payton 23 October 2017).



and above sensibilities wrought from lifeworlds whose exigencies more directly confront the hard scrabble of living.

One of the major failings of progressive politics in Australia, indeed around the world, is a preoccupation with the grievances of the middle class. Put another way, this brand of politics prioritises the woe of people who can afford to worry about anything other than paying the bills and feeding themselves. (R. Morton 162)

The current post-colonial and settler colonial orthodoxies proposing notions of white settler guilt, illegitimacy of settler occupation, assertions of settler insecurities over whether or not we can ever truly belong, and indulgent, anxious pronouncements that the “foundational violence of settler colonialism ... perpetually haunts the national psyche” (Edmonds 2, 185; Hodge and Mishra 14, 26, 144; Maddison) and the need for settlers to reflect on their own “privilege” are self-regarding. Their Othering compassion is “a narcissistic mirror in which the privileged can express to themselves their worthiness” (Berlant 5). This province is contested by the many Australians who possess a profoundly and untroubled “intimate love of and connection to their country” (Pearson, “Pauline Hanson Can Empower” 4). Such expressions of intimacy are often the subject of scorn for there is a tendency among historians and others to read into them a racist’s dismissal of Aboriginal dispossession, their enduring marginalisation, socio-economic disadvantage, and related grievances and interests. There is a similar propensity for inner-city Greens voters among others to “think suburban people are backwards, racist and bigoted” (Brown 7).<sup>13</sup> Further, those on the land, particularly those whose forebears arrived on the land two or more generations ago, are viewed as being more complicit in the dispossession of Aborigines than their city counterparts. Those farmers and pastoralists whose sense of belonging appears to elide recognition of local Indigenous history find themselves accused of (at best) strategic amnesia. Skye Krichauff’s *Memory, Place and Aboriginal-Settler History* (2017) is a sensitive and empathetic investigation into “variations in the historical consciousness of ‘white Australians’” (166) and in particular those who “settled” the mid-north of South Australia, including Krichauff’s forebears. Krichauff reveals how the ostensible “pervading sense of disconnect between settler descendants and the fate of Aboriginal people” (192) throughout rural Australia is often not a consequence of the exercise of wilful forgetting or the defensive mechanism of denial or arises from an interest in covering-up a forebear’s complicity in atrocities. Rather, “the past which is most powerfully known and readily related to is the past that is known and understood through lived experience” (Krichauff 283). Krichauff explains that:

For mid-northern settler descendants, the past which is most real—which is least abstract—is that which is known and confirmed through everyday life. The long physical

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<sup>13</sup> This is relevant to rural and regional Australia too. The divide between more Green-leaning constituencies and rural and regional Australia was made glaringly apparent in an incident leading up to the 2019 May federal election, an incident which paradoxically united in opposition conflicting views. Lech Blaine recently conducted interviews throughout regional Queensland in an attempt to understand why Labor won just six of Queensland’s 30 seats in this election. One issue exercising much attention was the so-called Adani coal mine. Three weeks before the election, a convoy led by Bob Brown travelled from Tasmania to the electorate of Capricornia—the site of the prospective mine—in a very public demonstration against it. As one of the local anti-Adani landholders told Blaine, Brown’s “convoy was like a pimple that burst ... It brought together people with opposing views. Coalminers and cattle farmers had the same message: we don’t like greenies from Victoria and Tasmania telling us how to run the show. Even those who’d been anti Adani. The response was: *Well, they can go and get stuffed*” (qtd. in Blaine 25, original emphasis).

absence of the traditional owners in the districts in which they dwell means that the enduring violence of colonialism on Aboriginal people is not part of these settler descendants' lived experience, their everyday world or their embodied subjectivity. (Krichauff 163)

Krichauff takes issue with the settler colonialists who among other scholars demonstrate a proclivity to speak on behalf of constituencies they have never engaged with, and in doing so inadvertently reveal their contempt for these constituencies. With a sense of unabashed righteousness, many scholars assume the capacity to discern the depths of our national psyche, which as discussed is supposedly "haunted" and/or burdened by "collective guilt" (Maddison 7, and *passim*). As Krichauff reasons,

Veracini argues that "settlers fear revenge" and that "ongoing concerns with existential threats and a paranoid fear of ultimate decolonisation" are "a constituent feature of the settler colonial situation." My interviewees don't fear revenge, they are not paranoid about decolonisation, do not understand their presence in South Australia as immoral, are not riddled with insecurities regarding their right to belong, do not feel illegitimate, have no fear of being cast out and do not perceive themselves as alienated from their environment. To the contrary, their consciousness of the past—their awareness of their family's generational occupation of the same district—contributes significantly to their firm and secure sense of belonging. (Krichauff 190)

Furthermore, referring to the plethora of politically charged work of revisionist historians and apropos Burns' and Morton's concern with how the progressive class privilege their moral values over the lower classes, Krichauff argues that "for people who were not present at the time and whose position has not been tested, it is easy to occupy a position of moral outrage and superiority, but such a position is not necessarily earned" (291). When Krichauff raised with her interlocutors the plight of Aborigines whose country it was and whose plight was outside these settler descendant's historical consciousness there was genuine interest to learn more, not defensive rejection.<sup>14</sup>

Further evidence of rural Australia's desire to embrace a fuller understanding of Aboriginal history, including that which reflects colonial conflict most egregiously, is the response to the so-called "Massacre Map," a continuing team project led by the historian Lyndall Ryan. This interactive on-line map marks sites where six or more Aborigines were killed during frontier conflict. While the project is ongoing, the map was released publicly mid-2017, pinpointing the 150 massacre sites already documented for eastern Australia. Ryan was immediately "flooded with emails and enquiries," with most coming from regional Australia. It is there, Ryan believes, where "there is an even stronger desire to know the truth than in urban areas, perhaps because massacre stories tap directly into the family histories of many Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal families still living close to where the events allegedly took place" (qtd. in McKenna 38). As elaborated in Krichauff's work, settler interest in knowing more is not necessarily

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<sup>14</sup> Among many other possible fine-grained distinctions, some rural/regional based-professionals and white-collar workers might share similar views to their urban counterparts, as might some rural/regional blue-collar workers, or they might not. The issue of concern at this point in this paper is how sweeping generalisations that give succour to progressive orthodoxies—to wit Veracini's frenzied assertion that "settlers fear revenge" (cited in Krichauff 190) and Edmonds' psychopathologising of the national psyche as being "perpetually haunt[ed]" by "foundational violence" (Edmonds 2, 185) are accepted as givens requiring no substantiation. The evidence presented here and below contests such orthodoxies.

predicated on prior awareness of the fate of a region's first inhabitants who might not feature at all in the lived experience of settler descendants or in their family histories. For many, the exigencies of meeting the day-to-day demands of living leaves no time to explore beyond the essentials. Nevertheless, investigating the catalyst for the desire to know more comprehensive accounts of local and regional histories would be a worthy project in itself for what it might reveal.

In a 2014 interview on ABC local radio (Newcastle), Don Walker, perhaps still best known for his role in the pub rock band *Cold Chisel* and the many hit songs he wrote, spoke of his love of Australia's regional vernacular, and how he tries to emulate the rhythms of its speech patterns in his writing:

I think my love of words, language and humour - which is very much part of it - comes not so much from reading but from listening to regional speech in Australia, listening to the way people talk.

I love the enormously intelligent use of language that you get in regional and grassroots Australia. I like to laugh and Aussies say stuff that makes me laugh all the time. I try and write in a way that's close to conversation, and the conversation that I know is the way that I talk, and the people around me whose company I enjoy, talk. (qtd. in Duncan)

It is likely that local ABC radio in Newcastle, with its solid working-class background (steel works, coal mining, fishing, and so on), would not be so affectedly and pretentiously prissy as its peers hosting and appearing on the aforementioned "Modern Dilemmas" segment on ABC RN. Furthermore, Walker, born in 1951, is of the same generation as Don Watson (born 1949). The regional Australia of their childhoods (North Queensland then Grafton and Gippsland respectively) is rapidly changing. The exodus of farmers from the land continues to increase, with a corresponding (though not necessarily directly related) change in the composition of rural constituencies. More broadly in June 2015, 28.2% of the population, equating to 6.7 million persons, was born overseas ("Migration, Australia"). Many of Australia's most recent immigrants have a different set of responses to the natural environment than those of earlier settler Australians, and this in turn reflects how they engage not only with public nature and conservation reserves and national parks but also regional and rural Australia (see Rolls; Martin Thomas; Mandy Thomas). To what extent and how or even if the bush will continue to be "a mirror of our imagined natural and unvarnished selves, an emblem of our natures" (Watson 94), or that it can be said that "Our country's dust, drought, flood, blood and harsh beauty have made us what we are" (Woinarski 1) is difficult to predict, but it is hard to see how this "emblem of our natures" might withstand the demographic and cultural changes it confronts. The issue is not so much the fact that an overwhelming majority of Australians continue to choose to live in cities or are otherwise forced to move there having abandoned the hardships of life on the land. For as Watson writes, this

does not diminish the power of the bush, but on the contrary adds an exotic or romantic dimension to the suburban cliché of our existence. The bush is where the real Australians live, and whatever hurts or threatens them the rest of the country feels. Our literature, our language, our politics and our prejudices all have deep roots in the countryside, or at least exist in a state of constant interaction with it. (Watson 94)

The "our" of Watson's analysis is more reflective of the demographics of his generation's formative years. Contrary to Watson the symbolic power of the bush is now much diminished;

its core values contested and subject to sometimes scathing critique. Moreover, as Watson recognises of more recent suburban dwelling immigrants, their literature, language, politics and prejudices do not have deep roots in the Australian countryside, nor is it apparent that the roots that Watson speaks of will nowadays be influential in shaping notions of Australianness. Although it is debatable to what extent we ever were, the notion that “we are a nation of individualist, resilient and resourceful individuals because our land is isolated, expansive, capricious and unique” (Woinarski 1), increasingly rings hollow. Incidental travel and experience such as that associated with touristic ventures through Outback Australia and the bush more generally—to Uluru, Birdsville, Cape York, the Kimberley, crossing the Simpson desert, the Canning Stock Route, Broken Hill, Lightning Ridge, and so on—no matter the hardships and resourcefulness proclaimed do not replicate in type the conditions or livelihoods in which our essential characteristics were supposedly forged. Nor could this be said to represent our “constant interaction” with the countryside for the interaction is too transient and as a percentage of the overall population too few are interacting. The number of domestic (and international for that matter) tourists to remote and regional Australia continues to decline, despite the beauty of Outback Australia featuring prominently in tourist brochures (Taylor and Carson; Ironside).

In this lacuna, regional Australia and the Outback, or the bush more generally, come not so much to represent “what is best, truest and fairest in the Australian character” (Wensley qtd. in Watson 94), but instead the setting where the worst of Australian social and psychopathologies manifest and find expression. Hence *Wake in Fright* and *Hotel Coolgardie* are read as indicative of a shared pathology that outside of the bush remains latent in the Australian character (see Noyes; Byrnes). This permits the stigmatisation of those living beyond the civilising constraints of the censorious inner-city. Yet frequently the values and/or actions of those so stigmatised challenge the rationale for their dismissive contempt (see Burns). And this is not to draw upon the cliché of the good-hearted honesty and integrity of blue-collar morality. A report published by the Pew Charitable Trust based on research concerned with the management of the natural resources of the Outback, and based on interviews with twelve groups over a year to ascertain how people living and working in these regions saw their lives and the landscapes in which they dwelt, revealed that

Although they may want different things from the land, miners, pastoralists, Aboriginal landowners, wildlife rangers and tourism operators all share some pivotal values, concerns and language. ... All seek to treasure and maintain its productivity and health; all recognise the new threats that may be subverting it; all feel a sense of belonging and a responsibility to it; all appreciate the need to know how it works in order to draw benefit and sustenance from it; all see beauty and wonder in at least some of its constituent elements; all recognise the challenge of managing vast lands with few people; and, to some degree, all understand a mutual dependency between land and people. (Woinarski 2)

The mutual interests and understanding between seemingly disparate and ostensibly antagonistic cohorts in the bush are poorly understood by those espousing notions of collective white guilt, alienation from the land in which we dwell, haunted settler psyches predicated on foundational violence, and finding incorrigible racism and violence a central flaw in the Australian character. To recall Pearson’s observation, “Where the average inner-city liberal has met few indigenous Australians in their lives, let alone sought to understand their hopes and dreams, country people have lived and worked side by side with them” (Pearson, “Pauline Hanson Can Empower 4). Jenny Hill, the mayor of Townsville, makes the same point: “People

think we're rednecks ... That's bullshit! Our kids grow up and their best mates are Indigenous and Islander" (qtd. in Blaine 29). Such empathic engagement—though not without tension—found in regional Australia is extended to others too. When an Indian family opened a new liquor franchise in Bendigo and the franchisee of the established bottle shop wrote across the fridge an underlined sign reading "No curries here", the local community objected to what they took to be a racist remark, boycotted that bottle shop and took their custom to the new one run by the Indians (Grindlay). There are numerous examples of immigrant communities who after moving to small country towns for work find enjoyment and acceptance in their new environs.<sup>15</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Where the blood sport of hunting is spurned by many of those who have not had to struggle with vertebrate pest management or had to kill to feed the family, accusations of cruelty are easily made. "In the country you understand your place in the food chain and what it takes to put food on the table. You don't mourn the death of your dinner" (Cowan). We can and often do simultaneously hold apparently contradictory attitudes towards animals. As Nicholas Humphrey explains,

our relationships with animals ... [are] complex and thoroughly non-linear. We can hold multiple, even seemingly contradictory, attitudes to the very same animal—we may choose to enslave, worship, consume, abuse, befriend, hunt, play games with, grieve for it. (Humphrey 478)

Such apparent contradictions among those who enjoy the blood sport of killing extend into other facets of their lives. Rick Morton's sister Lauryn who thinks her gay Sydney-sider brother has gone city "soft" (6), advises him that after plunging the knife between a feral pig's ribs in order to pierce its heart it is necessary to "wriggle the knife around while it's inside" (4). Aware of her brother's sensitivities she forewarns him: "The worst part is the squealing" (4). Lauryn Morton "loves" the "pain and blood and the theatre of suffering," which her brother explains is one of the reasons "she became a midwife. That and also because this wild pig huntress is absolutely in love with bringing new life into the world. It's a beautiful contradiction" (4). Whereas Lauryn Morton was born on a remote pastoral station—the Morton family once owned 0.4% of the Australian landmass (R. Morton 12)—and has now returned to an Outback station, Jane Hammond grew up in coastal Taree before moving to inland Walgett where she works in the local pharmacy. Hammond says, "I love pig hunting for it's an adrenaline rush for me. ... We go piggin' pretty much every Friday, Saturday night. Sunday afternoons and of an afternoon through the week if we're not too tired. We're always keen for a hunt" ("Babes and Boars"). Hammond won the "Miss Bacon Busters" award for 2013, which is administered by the

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<sup>15</sup> The Karen in Nhill in western Victoria is one such example (Bearup, "Where There's a Nhill"). So too is the rural community of Katanning. In the early 1970s Muslim Malays from Christmas Island began moving to this small Western Australian farming town to the south east of Perth. Many other nationalities followed in their wake, including Burundians and Afghanis. In 2016 10% of the total population of Katanning of 3687 were Muslim. One third of the students at the primary school are Indigenous (Ewart, "Back Roads"). In the bush genial hospitality is extended to prospective asylum seekers too. In August 2018 the first so-called refugee boat in nearly 4 years reached Australian shores near the Daintree River. Two crab fishermen rescued two of the Vietnamese they saw in the mangroves nearby a large crocodile. The fishermen offered them a beer, and as described by Justin Ward, "We gave them a ride up the river and had a few laughs. Got them to help us pull in a few crab pots" (Baker, "Daintree Locals"). More recently the small rural town of Biloela in central Queensland rallied to try to prevent the deportation of a Tamil family who have lived and worked in Biloela for some three years. Biloela has a significant immigrant population (see Percy, "Federal Court").

magazine *Bacon Busters*, “the pig hunter’s Bible.” It features a “Babes and Boars” section. Following exposure on the SBS programme “The Feed” Hammond was branded “a monster” on social media. As with the contributors to *Chicks Smashing Grunters*, Hammond defends her sport on environmental grounds and protecting the livelihoods of farmers. “You don’t know until you come out here and you see the damage they do to the crops”, she says. “You can’t say that it is cruel. ... We are doing it for a reason, we are not doing it just for fun” (“Babes and Boars”). In 2013 she killed 360 pigs and like Lauryn Morton, she kills by stabbing the squealing pig, captured by dogs, through the heart (“Babes and Boars”). At the 2016 census, the population of Walgett was 6107, 29.4% of whom (1798 people) were Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. It should be no surprise then that SBS’s “Babes and Boars: The Feed meets Miss Bacon Busters 2013” also screened on NITV. As Morton quips vis-à-vis outback Queensland in the opening sentence of his book, pig hunting “is a thing that people do” (R. Morton 1).

When former Prime Minister Paul Keating quipped, “Mate, if you live in Australia and you don’t live in Sydney, you are camping out” (Craven), he was exaggerating for rhetorical effect an extant social, cultural, political and economic divide that exists between the major metropolitan centres and the bush, and the outer suburbs for that matter (Brown). This divide has contributed to the propensity to speak for the bush rather than listening to its voices. All too often when those voices manage a hearing in the metropole they are dismissed with withering and at times abusive contempt. The proclivities and anxieties of a particular cultural milieu dominate discourse and tend to be prescriptive. Yet it is in the bush where the lived worlds of peoples intersect, and as Morrison argues, where “the past is absorbed through lived experience” (164). These are more explicitly Australia’s contact zones, where cultural exchange is a facet of everyday life (Morrison 245). It is in the embedded knowledge inscribed through the landscapes of work, social life and experience that the emotional geographies are formed through which people organise and make sense of their lived practices.

The point of this is not to condone the abjectness revealed in *Wake in Fright* or *Hotel Coolgardie*, but nor is it to rise in rancorous censoriousness over the character flaws of Australians the films supposedly depict. Less dramatically but perhaps more significantly, the bush (and often lower socioeconomic outer suburbs) are frequently castigated for social conservatism. Morton’s *One Hundred Years of Dirt* is also in many ways an extended gift to his mother who struggled to raise a family through enormous hardship and distress. He is angered by ideologues on the left and right who either co-opt or dismiss the accounts and views of people like his mother.

When you’re trying to survive you don’t give a fuck about the culture wars. Nor, even, about identity politics, or being “woke” ... To be awake to problematic behaviour as defined through the prism of identity politics is noble enough ... but only some people have the time. What has become problematic now? Who cares, we’re trying to put fuel in the car for night classes. (R. Morton 162, see also 161)

In *Redbirds: Memories from the South*, Rick Bragg, the 1996 winner of the Pulitzer prize for feature writing (among other prestigious awards) paints a similarly empathic portrait of his mother’s struggles against distressing poverty, and America’s poor white southerners more generally. A Sunday morning ritual is seared into his memory, that of watching his mother with “eyes closed, lips moving in prayer, both hands pressed to the warm plastic top of the black-and-white television” (79), finding solace in the assuring balms spoken by the tele-evangelists, who “did not know or care that she was wearing old blue jeans cut off at the knee and rubber dime store flip-flops ...” (80). Although his mother understood the preachers’ avarices, she

“forgave it, because the words the men spoke were comfort to her and their preaching was first-rate” (80).

In the bush many are also uninterested in the culture wars, and do not have the time or energy to examine their own “privilege.” Yet their lived experience, no matter how ostensibly distant from the more pretentious, delicate or righteous sensibilities of the urban elite, often reveal complex and nuanced negotiations and intersections with Australia’s past and present, peoples and places. Hence rather than the bush being the repository of rugged and resourceful masculinist individualism, the hider and from time to time revealer of insular or terrifying pathologies, it is perhaps more the wellspring of the very traits we now seek and which the elite argue we are deficient in. Even if the language occasionally offends—those in the bush could provide a ready supply of Aussie slang for genitals to the hosts of ABC RN’s “Modern dilemmas”—it behoves us to listen more carefully and with a more empathic ear to bush voices, to read literature produced there, and to be more careful in our reading of it.

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