

Australia and the Risk of Colonial Blindness

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Abstract:

Australia has experienced forms of risk that arise directly from its origin as a colony and its subsequent descent into nationalism. An actual risk stems from its relationship with the environment and an invented risk arises from the xenophobia that has led to its bordering practices. The overwhelming and obvious environmental risk is that of climate change, which has resulted in a multi-year drought and unprecedented bushfires. Launching from a discussion of Bruce Pascoe's *Dark Emu* this paper considers the extent to which early explorers and settlers were blind to Aboriginal land management and how this blindness has become an existential risk. Colonial agricultural practices have led to environmental degradation and the example of the indigenous relationship with the land might offer a different way of being in place. The paper considers the extent to which colonial blindness has become endemic in Australian society and how literature might open up forms of possibility that understand, cope with and see beyond the risks with which Australia is afflicted.

Keywords: Aboriginal land management; colonial blindness; fire stick farming; surveillance; landscape Arcadia; Horizontal Sublime

1. Global Risk

In his recent book *The Precipice: Existential Risk and the Future of Humanity*, philosopher Toby Ord lists our biggest anthropogenic risks as nuclear war, climate change and environmental damage, engineered pandemics and unaligned artificial intelligence (that is, AI unaligned with human objectives). Ord observes that as a species we spend more on ice-cream per year than we do on the mitigation of existential risk.

The Commission for the Human Future goes further than this, outlining ten key catastrophic risks to the planet:

an emerging crisis in natural resources; the collapse of ecosystems; excessive population growth; global warming; global pollution; food and water insecurity; nuclear war; pandemics; new technologies; and failures in global governance to understand these risks and to be proactive in response. (Hunter and Hewson)

Six of these ten risks are environmental, which indicates the crisis quickly approaching human society. But perhaps the overarching threat is the failure in global governance to understand and respond to these risks. For instance, in Australia the federal government has consistently and tragically turned a blind eye to the climate crisis, to the maintenance of old growth forests, mitigation of rising sea levels, the preservation of rivers and preparation for drought and floods. In other words, each of these risks, whether environmental or technological, is rendered far more probable by versions of wilful human blindness. This has led recently to legal challenges

to government and to superannuation funds demanding that climate risk is not only taken into account but built into government bonds and pension funds.¹

This blindness can be understood on one level as a refusal of the unpalatable, or the increasing domination of partisan politics, but in a settler colony such as Australia it can be understood as the continuing blindness of colonisation. The book that has brought this blindness to the fore is Bruce Pascoe's *Dark Emu*. Not much attention was paid to this until it won the Premier's Literary Award in May 2016, the Bangara Dance Theatre produced an adaptation and Pascoe produced a version for children called *Young Dark Emu*. Since then, it has been relentlessly attacked by far-right commentators based on a spurious and fundamentally irrelevant questioning of Pascoe's Aboriginality.

The key point of contention and the key proposition of the book concerns the sophistication of Aboriginal land management which completely overturned the racist cliché of the feckless, wandering hunter gatherers. Although the book has been called 'ground-breaking' it did not really break the ground, for this had already been done by some outstanding historical work by Rupert Gerritsen in *Australia and the Origins of Agriculture* and Bill Gammage in *The Biggest Estate on Earth: How Aborigines made Australia*. Interestingly, these deeply researched and comprehensively argued histories were too academic to draw the attack of the Australian political right wing. Pascoe's crime was that he attempted to make this controversial and confronting reality accessible to the general reader. In doing so he fell short of academic rigour, for which he has been roundly criticised by historians (see Sutton and Walshe; Keen) and over which a spirited controversy has arisen. However, these critiques are somewhat beside the point, for the key message of *Dark Emu*—the message with which this essay is concerned—is the blindness of early colonists and explorers to the effects of Aboriginal land management.

Both Gerritsen and Gammage produced abundant evidence of Aboriginal land management. Gerritsen's focus on agriculture raises some interesting questions: what is agriculture, and what distinguishes Aboriginal land management from agriculture? Furthermore, how does Aboriginal land management distinguish itself from what we understand to be farming? According to Pascoe, agriculture can be defined by five activities: selection of seed, preparation of the soil, harvesting of the crop, storage of the surpluses and erecting permanent housing for large populations, all of which were carried out by Aboriginal people (13). So, did Aboriginal agriculture make them farmers or was Aboriginal land management more subtle, widespread and consistent than we have understood?

The key determinant of our contemporary understanding of farming lies not in approaches to agriculture but in the concept of property. Indeed, early settlers could not separate the concept of place from that of property because property undergirded any conception of a profitable future. The cause is described by John Locke whose *Treatise of Government* states that:

As much Land as a Man Tills, Plants, Improves, Cultivates and can use the Product of, so much is his Property. He by his Labour does, as it were, inclose it from the Common. (332)

¹ The most recent of these was the successful litigation by eight students in the Federal Court that the environment minister owed them a duty of care when assessing a mine proposal. With 85-year-old Sister Brigid Arthur as litigation guardian, the court found that the government has a duty of care and responsibility for the effects of climate change on the next generation. (See Serong)

Notice that this definition assumes a single owner, an owner responsible for the productivity of his property. The prevailing and illusory orthodoxy was that hunter gatherers were capable of only the most tentative claims to land ownership and the basis of this lies in the communal nature of Aboriginal cultivation. Indeed, when the management of land for the proliferation of game was concerned, any concept of individual property was completely irrelevant. Consequently, the Aboriginal capacity to manage the land was held to be non-existent and this myth has been amazingly resilient, lying behind the criticism of Pascoe today.

2. Fire

Fire has become an increasingly catastrophic phenomenon in Australia as the globe warms and climate changes, so it is fascinating that the thing characterising Aboriginal land management, and the explanation of its continent-wide impact, is the use of fire. About seventy percent of Australia's plants tolerate fire and many require fire to germinate. The Aboriginal use of fire worked on five principles:

1. The majority of agricultural lands were fired on a rotating mosaic
2. The time of year when fires were lit depended on the type of country to be burnt and the condition of the bush at the time
3. The prevailing weather was crucial to the timing of the burn.
4. Neighbouring clans were advised of the fire activity
5. The growing season of particular plants was avoided at all costs (Pascoe 166)

Given the disastrous nature of bushfires in contemporary Australia it is important to recognise that fire was a servant rather than a master to Aboriginal people. The term coined by the anthropologist Rhys Jones was "fire stick farming" by means of which "cool burning" ensured that there was plenty of feed for animals and the maintenance of a rich friable soil, effectively extending Aboriginal habitat zone (Jones 7).

According to Gammage, fire stick farming was a highly controlled form of land management,

It was planned; it was precise; it could be repeated hence predicted; it was organised locally; and it was universal—like songlines it united Australia. People accepted its price. They must be mobile, constantly attendant, and have few fixed assets. In return they could ration its feed, unleash but never free it, and move it about, sustaining more diversity than any natural fire regime could conceivably maintain. It was scalpel more than sword, taming the most fire-prone country on earth to welcome its periodic refreshing, its kiss of life. Far from today's safe and unsafe fires, campfire and bushfire were one; far from a feared enemy, fire was the closest ally. (185)

The use of fire to shape the landscape is where Gammage makes the most remarkable discoveries about Aboriginal land management by comparing the country as it was first encountered by the early colonial artists, and the country as it is today. By rigorous exploration of the art and wide-ranging examples of the way the country looked to the first arrivals, Gammage showed how these invaders encountered a carefully managed environment. On May 1, 1770, Cook

made an excursion into the country which we found diversified with woods, lawns and marshes; the woods are free from underwood of every kind and the trees are at

such a distance from one another that the whole country or at least a great part of it might be cultivated without being obliged to cut down a single tree. (Gammage 34)

This observation looks curious to us today for the bush has much underwood and no bare hills. Yet Cook's observation was repeated time after time. Curiously these different fires made similar plant patterns across Australia. The contradiction between encountering a wild "unpopulated" country and the evidence before them goes to the heart of colonial blindness. Dawson thought the country inland from Port Stephens

truly beautiful: it was thinly studded with single trees, as if planted for ornament ... It is impossible therefore to pass through such a country ... without being perpetually reminded of a gentleman's park and grounds ... The first idea is that of an inhabited and improved country, combined with the pleasurable associations of a civilized society. (Gammage14)

Gammage provides many examples of artists' early encounters with an ordered and managed environment. Sydney Parkinson's picture of the Endeavour undergoing repairs in *A View of the Endeavour River Qld July 1770* (35) shows very clearly the carefully spaced trees running down the slope to the water, forming a natural funnel for game which could then be easily hunted. John Lewin's, *The Second Cataract on the North Esk near Launceston* 1809 (37), which also shows carefully spaced trees with little undergrowth, is compared with a photo of the same cataract in 2008 heavily wooded and unkempt. Eugene von Guerard's, *Crater of Mt Eccles* 1858 (47), shows very clearly how lines of trees formed access for game while the crater photographed in 2007 shows a similarly overgrown vista of bush. John Abbot's *Mt Lindesay* 1829 (66) shows even more clearly a park-like arrangement of trees spaced by open grassland in a way that is obviously managed. Joseph Lycett's *Aborigines Using Fire to Hunt Kangaroos* 1828 (91) demonstrates that fire was not only used to prepare the ground for game but also to direct the game towards the hunters.

3. Seeing and Not Seeing

So, given the evidence provided by these paintings, what did the early explorers and settlers see? To think about this, we could turn to Oliver Sachs, who, in his essay "To See and Not See" from *An Anthropologist on Mars*, talks about Virgil, a man blind since birth who has an operation to restore his sight. After the operation Virgil still cannot see but must *learn* to see. Sachs's explanation of this has immediate relevance to our forms of cultural perception:

We are not given the world: we make our world through incessant experience, categorization, memory, reconnection. But when Virgil opened his eyes, after being blind for forty-five years—having had little more than an infant's visual experience, and this long forgotten—there were no visual memories to support a perception; there was no world of experience and meaning awaiting him. He saw, but what he saw had no coherence. (6)

The fact that we must *learn* to see, to give the visual world coherence, explains why early settlers and explorers failed to see the evidence of Aboriginal land management even when they remarked upon the park-like appearance of the environment and the abundant evidence of human intervention in the physical environment. It would not be too far-fetched to propose that seeing, because it is so much a function of learning, is a discursive construction, arrived at through discourse. In *Sites of Vision* David Levin makes the point that

the “nature” of the visual perception (vision, sight, seeing) about which philosophers talk, and which they claim to be “describing” and critically examining ... is, and must be recognized as a discursive construction. This “visual perception” is never just a simple, immediate, straightforward, unproblematic presentation of the phenomenon and experience of vision. First, it is always something the description, or account of which arrived at in and through discourse ... an intricate “historical discourse” built up over time. (7-8)

The physical phenomenon of visuality—what is seen and how it is seen—is itself a function of discourse in that it must be learned.

Visuality is a model for representation, and in the Western tradition, given its deeply ingrained habit of ocularcentrism, it is *the* model for representation. The world presents itself to us, but we learn to see it, contextualise, and understand it, through representation. A good explanation of the process of representation is giving concrete form to ideological concepts. In both physical seeing and metaphoric representation what we ‘see’ is a confusing, unstructured array of shapes and colours that must be built up into a picture of the world by a patient and painstaking process in which objects are linked to each other and to broader discursive contexts. Seeing, like consciousness itself, is not simply passive. The world does not simply present itself to us; we must learn to structure the observed world in a way that gives it meaning.

Paul Carter in his *The Road to Botany Bay* asks a question that we find difficult to answer: Before the name: what was the place like before it was named? How did Cook see it? We know from their writings that Cook and others gave the managed environment coherence by placing it in the context of his experience—a pleasant park-like land. But, Carter suggests, “We see what the first comers did not see: a place, not a historical space” (xiv). It seems impossible for us to get inside Cook’s head to understand historical space unmoored for its identity as a place. We simply cannot see space uninscribed as place. Our imagination cannot escape its visual inheritance.

When it came to the very first encounters with the environment such as Cook’s, vision was foreshortened. The reference to gentlemen’s parks gave vision some sort of coherence. But this was still vision of a space, not a place; it was a vision that grasped for coherence in the memory of the look of British estates. This was a curious and unavoidable form of blindness, but that blindness became the underlying principle of Australian attitudes to the environment. Our view of Australia is *learned*. It is impossible for us to imagine an Australia outside the frame of reference of the representations which have gone to make it up. It is impossible for us to see it as *new*. Carter is not talking about imagining a place without human settlement; he is talking about imagining a space before it has become a place—imagining this space without any of the frames of reference that we have inherited historically. In the same way, when it comes to the environment, Australians have learned *not* to see.

What, then, underlay the peculiar blindness of those who went out to explore the land? Why did they not *see* the reality that produced the evidence before their eyes and which they noted in their journals? It was the fact that the only coherence they could give it was provided by what the land might *become*. This was a different kind of blindness from Cook’s. Any recognition of an existing civilisation that was sophisticated enough to transform the environment would have undermined every justification for being there. The land must be surveyed because that surveillance was the only thing that could give it coherence. Where early paintings encountered

“pristine” space, that is, country that had been managed by Aboriginal fire stick farming, surveillance was required to turn it into a place.

4. Surveillance

The first impressions of painters varied greatly from the perceptions of explorers and settlers looking for grazing land. Why? Because there is a great difference between encountering and surveying. One of the most powerful strategies of imperial dominance is that of surveillance. Surveillance is different from the observation of the early painters because it implies a viewer with an elevated vantage point, it suggests the power to process and understand that which is seen, and it objectifies, and interpellates the colonised subject, and the environment, in a way that fixes its identity in relation to the surveyor. The importance of the gaze was emphasized by Jacques Lacan, since the gaze of the mother in the mirror phase is the initial process by which identity is achieved. This gaze corresponds to the “gaze of the *grande-autre*” (Lacan 140) within which the identification, objectification and subjection of the subject are simultaneously enacted: the imperial gaze defines the identity of the subject, objectifies it within the identifying system of power relations and confirms its subalternity and powerlessness.

Surveillance of colonial space is a regular feature of exploration and travel writing. The emergence of ‘landscape’ and the concomitant desire for a commanding view which could provide a sweeping visual mastery of the scene was an important feature of nineteenth-century poetry and fiction. It became a significant method by which European explorers and travellers could obtain a position of panoramic observation, itself a representation of knowledge and power over colonial space. The desire for a literal position of visual command is metaphoric of the ‘panoptic’ operation of the imperial gaze in which the observed find themselves constituted. When a writer takes this position, as occurs time and again in Orientalist discourse, the invulnerable position of the observer affirms the political order and the binary structure of power which made that position possible. As in the Panopticon the writer “is placed either above or at the centre of things, yet apart from them so that the organization and classification of things takes place according to the writer’s own system of value” (Spurr 16).

The power of surveillance was not limited to explorers. The gaze of European travelers as they secured a prominent vantage point and took in the panorama is a practical demonstration of the establishment of a fixed and all-seeing point of view which underlay the project of Renaissance mapping. The act of seeing not only knows what is seen, it occupies space, it becomes that which it sees, thus suggesting the incorporating ontological reach of the imperial gaze.

5. What Did the Early Explorers See?

The distinction between the early paintings and the reports of explorers gives us a fascinating insight into the ways in which the gaze is learnt. The perception of early painters was not innocent. They had a tradition of landscape into which to fit their observations; but the coherence given their observations by the tradition of landscape was very different from the wilful blindness of explorers who recorded evidence of Aboriginal occupation and cultivation yet submerged this evidence beneath the demands of exploitation. This is a key to *Dark Emu*. While Gerritsen and Gammage are the forerunners of Pascoe’s book and ones on which he draws at length, the difference is not only that Pascoe wants to explain Aboriginal land management to the ordinary reader but that he is one who is particularly attuned to the explorer’s blindness, to the blindness of surveillance. That blindness had a very specific colonial orientation. “It is clear from the journals of the explorers,” he says, “that few were in Australia to marvel at a new civilization; they were here to replace it” (Pascoe 5). Therefore,

early observers of the country manifested the most profound cognitive dissonance—seeing evidence of Aboriginal land management but obscuring this with the vision of future colonial development.

A good example of this is Major Mitchell whose surveillance of the country had the technical advantage of his skill as a surveyor. Mitchell was a complex character, ever willing to replace the names given by other explorers with his own names. But Mitchell is a classic demonstration of the blindness brought about by the vision of civilisation.

Even though [Mitchell] relished and appreciated his witness of this incredible civilization, it brought no halt to his search for grasslands. Despite his admiration of the housing structures, and the industry and innovation required to produce them, he reserved his greatest praise for the land and the wealth it would afford the conqueror. (Pascoe 110)

Like all other newcomers he failed to see that the richness of the land was the result of prolonged and careful Aboriginal land management.

Importantly, it is not as though Mitchell did not see any evidence of Aboriginal building and cultivation, but they occupied the periphery of a vision that was entirely consumed with the possibilities of colonisation. While on one hand referring to the banks of the Darling River where “the buzz of population gave to the banks at this place the cheerful character of a village in populous country,” Pascoe celebrates elsewhere:

A land so inviting, and still without inhabitants! As I stood, the first European intruder on the supreme solitude of these verdant plains, as yet untouched by flocks or herds; I felt conscious of being the harbinger of mighty changes; and that our steps would soon be followed by the men and animals for which it seemed to have been prepared. (204)

“Without inhabitants,” “solitude,” “untouched”—words that define the supreme confidence and ultimate blindness of colonial surveillance. As a surveyor Mitchell’s view of the country was entirely dominated by what might be. “He found intricate fish traps, but barely paused to describe them ... his writing was full of speculation about the position of roads and great estates that might take advantage of the open grasslands created by the Aboriginal people ...” (Pascoe 112). He often seemed confounded by the order and beauty of the parklands he crossed, describing them as the effects of “artless nature” (112). As Pascoe says, “He is so full of visions of inns and roads and romantically smoking chimneys that he ignores things that are staring him in the face” (111-112).

6. Seeing Australia: Paradise or Prison

The discursive grounding of sight suggests that representation is an aggregation of forms of blindness. This is particularly so because neither of the two major ways in which Australia came to be seen—paradise or prison—make allowance for the Aboriginal presence in the land and the profound effects of their land management. The Antipodes, the upside-down world in the European imagination, became both a Utopia and Dystopia and these have had a tenacious hold on the way Australia continues to be seen. James Anthony Froude, in *Oceana—Or England and Her Colonies* (1886), envisaged a global commonwealth of English-speaking colonies in which the words of ‘Rule Britannia’ would come true. Froude quoted James Harrington’s seventeenth-century belief that *Oceana* would become “a commonwealth for

increase, and upon the mightiest foundation that any has been laid from the beginning of the world to this day” (Froude 1-2). But by the time Froude wrote *Oceana* this attitude had already been severely undermined by convict experience and a more pervasive *Unheimlichkeit*. From the beginning of convict transportation, the dual perception of Australia as both a dystopian prison and a realm of utopian possibility, set in for the next two centuries. The Australia we have learnt to see is ambivalent, conflicted and contradictory. Froude’s response was that “No such commonwealth as Harrington imagined for his *Oceana* was, or ever can be, more than Utopia” (15) but he shares the perception of the Antipodes as an extension of Britain: “... the arduous part of it is no longer to create. The land is our possession” (15).

Potential ownership was the belief that underpinned the early explorers’ blindness. This sense of the possibility of a new beginning, coupled with the ideology of the civilising benefits of imperialism, determined the early depictions of the first settlement. The ideology of the very first representation of Sydney, Thomas Watling’s painting, *A Direct North General View of Sydney Cove* (1794), is the ideology of colonialism itself, even though he was a convict. As we look through an opening in the bush towards a town arranged in the orderly ranks of a military parade, we see that the civilising effect of colonialism creates order out of chaos, produces planned urban settlement in the wilderness. The many subsequent paintings of Sydney town are like photographs of civilization: Order, construction, organisation, the establishment of settlement.



**Figure 1. Thomas Watling, *A Direct North General View of Sydney Cove*. 1794
Courtesy of the State Library of NSW**

On the other hand, many of the assumptions of colonial painters who painted what they ‘saw’ were the assumptions of Western and Romantic pictorial art. If we look at the city painted by Conrad Martens around the middle of the nineteenth century, we see a scene driven by the conventions of landscape painting. Martens in particular painted Sydney Harbour in a picturesque style in which signs of settlement are almost invisible.² This was a more subtle way of domesticating and civilising the wild.

² http://m.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/media/collection_images/7/7633%23%23S.jpg

7. An Antipodean Arcadia

The vision of a rich land that would afford great fruitfulness and wealth to the conqueror underpinned the utopian spirit. But it was a vision of plenty afforded to the owner of property. In John Glover's famous *A View of the Artist's House and Garden* (1835)³ he offers a classic 'Arcadian' depiction of the fruitfulness and bounty of the place. He has exaggerated the sharpness of the conical hill and the flatness of the plain, thereby making a slightly artificial stage to display a garden in bloom. The gabled room and general appearance of Glover's farmhouse looks more like its English counterpart than Australian houses. But the domestic abundance is a testament to the productivity of settlement. The scene of agricultural harvest in Glover's *My Harvest Home* (1835)⁴ provides a vision of a bountiful land. Australia became an important supplier of commodities like wheat, wool and minerals to the factories and homes of England and gradually became seen as the 'bread-basket' of Europe.



Figure 2. John Glover, *My Harvest Home*. 1835

In this painting we see the source of that habit of thinking in the Australian psyche that saw its role as Europe's farm. Rich graziers often commissioned painters to paint prize-winning stock or their properties. Although Robert Dowling's *Jeremiah Ware's Stock on Minja Station* (1836)⁵ appears to be simply recording the home and stock of Jeremiah Ware, it is telling a story about the richness and productivity of the place.

8. The Horizontal Sublime

Beyond this vision of a verdant and productive land lay a very different picture of a country of endless, and, to the European eye, featureless, space. The eighteenth-century reformulation of the sublime in the work of Joseph Addison, Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant was to affect European art for a long time after. Burke remarks that "Whatever ... is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime" (39). For Immanuel Kant, "Mountains with peaks above the clouds, deep gorges descriptions of raging storms, Milton's portrayal of hell, all arouse 'enjoyment with horror'"

³ <http://www.artexpertswebsite.com/pages/artists/glover.php>

⁴ <http://altoonsultan.blogspot.com.au/2011/02/against-american-exceptionalism.html>

⁵ <http://nga.gov.au/Exhibition/DOWLING/Default.cfm?IRN=192003&BioArtistIRN=22797&MnuID=3&GalID=2&ViewID=2>

(46) and initially the vertical sublime was something colonial painters sought to reproduce. But, as with much colonial painting, we can ask: to what extent are they painting Europe?

Addison's view of the sublime sees the horizon opening up the utopian possibility of space. For him "the spacious horizon is an image of liberty" (397-398). But in Australia it is precisely the excess of space that engenders the dystopian terror of an absolute displacement intimated by the 'psychic line' of the Australian horizon. This horizon was potentially liberating and terrifying at the same time because it projected the soul utterly beyond the civilised limits of place. Thus, a movement begins in Australian art and writing around the middle of the nineteenth century toward a conception of the infinite in the representation of place. The horizontal sublime enters the Australian imagination through painting, and in the journals of explorers such as Leichhardt, Sturt, and Eyre in the 1830s and 1840s. It gains currency as those journals become more widely disseminated in the 1850s and 1860s and becomes more elaborated in the writing of Marcus Clarke and Charles Harpur as Australian literature matures.

While there is a rich array of texts to examine the emergence of the horizontal sublime in colonial Australia, the phenomenon is most clearly indicated in painting. Three paintings of the 1840s demonstrate the way in which the vastness of Australian space came to dominate the imagination: E.C. Frome's *First View of Salt Desert, Called Lake Torrens* (1843)⁶ captures the moment in which the explorer, about to set off into the vastness of the desert, considers the overwhelming prospect of the horizon.



Figure 3. E.C. Frome, *First View of Salt Desert, Called Lake Torrens*, 1843

George French Angus's *Emus in a Plain* (1844-1845)⁷ places the unique birds as signifiers of an *unheimlich*, sun-scorched wilderness of space beyond human amenity; S.T. Gill's *Invalid's Tent, Salt Lake* (1846) demonstrates the isolation and physical vulnerability of the human at the mercy of the vastness of Australian space.

⁶ <http://www.artgallery.sa.gov.au:8080/agasa/home/Collection/Australian/index.jsp?artist=f>

⁷ <http://www.artgallery.sa.gov.au:8080/agasa/home/Collection/Australian/>



Figure 4. S.T. Gill, *Invalid's Tent, Salt Lake*. 1846

Each painting depicts the ‘psychic line’ of the imagination of place in Australia, the horizon that intimidated the distance and ‘placelessness’ that overwhelmed the colonial imagination. It is striking how this perspective continues into the 20th century in a photograph taken by Sidney Nolan on a journey inland. While we think that photography simply records ‘what is there,’ this photo is a consequence of two hundred years of colonial representation.



Figure 5. Sidney Nolan, *View of Sturt's Desert*. 1955

What is striking about these very different visions of Australia is that none made any allowance for prior human settlement. The vision of the horizontal sublime had no way of assessing the productivity of the vast open space (Burke and Wills died in June 1861 despite the efforts of the Yandruwandha people to feed them, within reach of water). On the other hand, the vision of agricultural wealth simply transported European farming practices to an environment in which such practices often failed. Cloven-hoofed animals compacted the soil, introduced grasses failed to resist drought, European agricultural practices exhausted the soil.

Indigenous practices point the way towards a transformed ecology but responses to the idea are beset by the habit of blindness. Australia as a country and a culture is built on expansion and growth. It was born in the growth made possible by abundant, stolen, highly productive land. Now growth has overshot our physical limits—resources, energy, ecological systems—and we have reached an inescapable stage of degrowth. This may be the point at which the benefits of indigenous practice may be realised.

A strong dimension of *Dark Emu*'s popular appeal is the practical inspiration it offers for caring for the land and cultivating native perennial plants; Pascoe has himself invested in the bush foods industry. Having seen the evidence of Aboriginal land management is there any way in which it can teach us how to avert, or at least slow down the descent to climate catastrophe? The question is: what can contemporary society learn from Aboriginal land management? Changing ways of dealing with the environment seems impossible when the habit of denial is so ingrained and non-indigenous relationship to the land is so different. It is perhaps too late to revert to fire stick farming on any large scale, but there are ways of beginning to change farming habits. Individual graziers have already experimented with drought resistant native grasses and organic fertilisers. But what of animal husbandry? Pascoe asks “what would happen if we replaced or augmented sheep and cattle with emu and kangaroo?” (63). The health benefits of Kangaroo are well attested, and their impact on the environment is far better than that of cloven-hoofed animals. Pascoe also asks: “What would happen if we tried some of the Aboriginal grains instead of the thirsty and disease prone grains of Asia and Europe?” (64).

The debate about the transformation of the agricultural and pastoral industries in Australia is both extensive and heated. Harry Recher notes some choices discussed at a forum of the Royal Zoological Society of NSW (see Recher): Farm kangaroos (Chance of entirely replacing sheep and cattle are minimal; environmentalist objections; massive change in diet required); Adopt native animals as pets to ensure their survival (Majority of Australian are urban dwellers, so few species would be suitable); Stop land clearing and revert fifty per cent of cleared land to natural forest. (What if this land reverted to Aboriginal land management? Governments of all parties continue to allow land clearing for spurious reasons such as ‘food security’; develop Native seeds and grains.)

9. The Deep Consequences of Not Seeing

This blindness underpins our present vulnerability to climate change. It underpins our failure to see the immense damage done to the environment by imported techniques of farming. The blindness to the strategies of indigenous land management has repercussions in Australian society's relationship to its physical environment that has repercussions today. But blindness has become denial, and denial has now become a method of governing in Australia. As Ross Gibson says:

The dull fact bears repeating: routines of denial are so powerful and widespread in Australia because they are habituated; generation after generation, knowing-but-not-acknowledging gets re-inscribed in almost everyone's cognition every single day that we live under the charring sun, on the taken ground. The fact is, we are habituated to denial. Denial comes easily, almost automatically, because we have been rigorously trained in the rubber-necked routine of seeing and looking away since the inception of the nation.

Denial extends far beyond the refusal to see Aboriginal land management. We reprise the blindness of early explorers who were blinded by the vision of wealth. This underpins the

actions of mining companies that destroy Aboriginal sacred sites; the denial of the Uluru voice to parliament; the appalling indignity of the cashless welfare card. We see it in the denial of the recent catastrophic fires being the consequence of a warming globe. Indeed, we have a government at present that is founded on denial, on secrecy, on the absence of transparency, on the denial of the very people they were elected to govern, and the consequence is now being revealed, of a Parliament that is a toxic bubble of rape and abuse and the protection of a government minister accused of historical rape. In the words of a journalist “We’re now in the business-as-normal mode: duck, weave, deny, gasp for breath, hang on for grim death and hope the caravan moves on” (Ackland 2021). The consequences of not seeing have come to define contemporary Australian society and the blindness to the fate of Aboriginal societies continues. The consequences of not seeing are now also the failure to *hear* the voices of the invaded. But those voices will not be silenced. The *Wiyi Yani U Thangani (Women’s Voices)* project shows that Aboriginal voices, and particularly those of women, will not be stilled. Those who strive have not lost, just not yet won.

But it may be that the vision of the future is best articulated in the creative imagination. As poet Lionel Fogarty foresees:

Today up home my people are
Beautifully smiling
For the devil’s sweeten words are gone
...
For now Today up home they free (266)

Fogarty’s hope, expressed as much in terms of recovery and critique of the present as in terms of possibility, concerns his people conceived as a group connected to the earth, survivors of devastation, a people in country, a people at home. Aboriginal visions of the future are driven by the dynamic of hope, not as a vague wish but a powerful anticipation grounded in cultural memory. It may be through Aboriginal art and literature that the home that has been sensed but not yet known, becomes a reality. Perhaps the consequence of such hope so powerfully expressed by Aboriginal artists and writers will be the capacity of Australian society to finally see.

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