Picturing Country: Contemporary Photomedia Storytelling and The Aboriginal Cultural Landscape

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Abstract:
Since the invention of the medium, place narratives have profoundly shaped the language of photography within the field of Australian visual cultures. Contemporary Aboriginal photomedia storytelling elaborates narratives from a dwelling perspective for which individual subjects are intrinsically enmeshed in the living histories of cultural landscapes. Through its distinct forms of visibility, the Indigenous Australian visual realm is revelatory of the extended network of subjectivities and relational commitments embodied within the culturally dense notion of country. Drawing from stories told by contemporary Aboriginal artists James Tylor and Hayley Millar-Baker, this article will argue that photomedia storytelling addressing landscape as terrain of contestation of colonial narratives enacts a sense of emplacement through the processing of a traumatic past. Engaging with an emotional memory reactivated through the recursiveness of a non-linear time, these visual yarns intervene into the public discourse around colonialism and unsettle dominant narratives of absence and invisibility, ultimately restoring connections and asserting cultural continuity and sovereignty.

Keywords: Cultural landscape; place narratives; country; memory; storytelling; photomedia

1. Introduction

From 25 July until 1 September 2018, Vivien Anderson Gallery in Melbourne hosted *Dark Country*, a duo-show by photomedia artists James Tylor and Hayley Millar-Baker, who presented sets of works in a creative exchange interweaving memory, colonial history, and place narratives through aesthetically and conceptually compelling visual landscapes. The show was presented as a window to first contact stories in Victoria and South Australia, an exploration of the impact the British invasion and settlement had on the local Indigenous groups: the Gunditjmara people of south-western Victoria and the Kaurna people of the Adelaide area in South Australia.

This article will investigate how contemporary Aboriginal photomedia can interrupt non-Indigenous claims of sovereignty through a response to historical processes that have made the Australian landscape a terrain of political and epistemological contestation. Chronicles of colonial history represent a discursive space of encounter where cultural identities can clash and coalesce. Indigenous storytelling expressed through powerful and captivating visual imagery works less as a tool of enquiry than a methodology to continuously perform knowledge and assert connections over cultural landscapes that mainstream historical narratives have whitewashed for a long time. Visual landscapes shaped and envisioned through the crafts of cutting-edge photomedia techniques become signifiers of the removal of Aboriginal people from their cultural environment, conjuring the struggles they had to uphold to preserve the mutuality of their connection to country. Against this backdrop, multilayered intergenerational experiences are actualised by narratives in which past, present and possible futures are intertwined. Relational commitments to country can therefore be re-established through the unveiling of the dark history of disruption of Aboriginal cultural and social wellbeing.

2. Visibility and the power of place

In Indigenous Australian cultures, representations—whether visual, musical, or more broadly performative—are manifestations of the ancestors' power and actualisations of their presence. As such, they are part of the moral, religious, and social order of the law: they indicate relations with other elements of the Dreaming and, therefore, signify connections among individuals of a certain group.[1] For this reason, designs and visual motifs are never exclusively iconographic, bearing an indexical relationship with the ancestral beings that have generated them. As indexes of these connections—with their obligations, duties, and commitments—visual objectifications are intrinsically political as they materialise rights to perform knowledge and assert ownership and sovereignty over a certain place. Songs, dances, rituals, and visual arts immanently manifest the ancestral power, actualising it anytime they are reproduced and performed. According to Fred Myers:

> In this revelatory regime, structures of visibility and invisibility provide the mechanics of Indigenous visual culture, in which control over the visual is central and in which the fundamental concern is to direct the potential or manifestations of Tjukurrpa [Dreaming], objectifications of ancestral power identified with persons and groups. ("Emplacement and Displacement" 447)

The visual realm represents one class of objectification of the Dreaming, made manifest through a passage from the invisible to the visible (see Merleau-Ponty). What is rendered visible is the affective and sensuous dimension of relationships implied in these bodily connections, and therefore "the emotional depth of mutuality and intersubjective belonging between individuals and their group" (Tamisari, *La danza dello squalo* 141). Within the visual domain, much scholarly literature has focused on media production and its politics since Indigenous cultural producers have started—from the second half of the 20th century—to employ media technologies to respond to and confront power structures that have traditionally undermined the basis of their social realities. As argued by Faye D. Ginsburg, at this conjuncture Indigenous activists, artists and cultural producers developed an interest in "how these media could be indigenised formally and substantively to give objective form to efforts for the expression of cultural identity, the preservation of language and ritual, and the telling of indigenous histories … creating new arenas for meaningful cultural production for people living in both remote and urban-based communities" ("Screen Memories" 51). Ginsburg has referred to this work as "cultural activism," describing the self-conscious way in which the production of media and other expressive forms not only sustain communities but also transform them through a "strategic traditionalism" for which new kinds of cultural forms become means for revivifying relationships to land, languages, traditions, histories, and articulating community concerns ("Rethinking the Digital Age" 302).

Across these media, photography holds a particular place because of its peculiar forms of visibility and its unique—as well as controversial—relationship with indexicality. Photographs—once reappropriated by Indigenous cultural activists and their traditionally

[1] The notion of Dreaming stands for a complex of meanings in Indigenous Australian cultures: a narrative of things that happened in the past, something that still happens in the present, and a transcending principle of moral and social order (see Stanner, "The Dreaming" 23). Such a complex of meanings corresponds to a cosmogony, an account of how the universe was created and how it became a moral system. Accordingly, the term 'law' is widely employed to entail the juridical implications of customs and duties established by the journeys of the ancestral beings, whose itineraries have traced the norms of social organisation and, therefore, peoples' socio-political identity as well as the interrelationship between individuals and their communities.

objectifying functions are overturned—can reveal "other histories" (see Pinney and Peterson), holding recuperative meanings as they are "enmeshed in stories, most notably structured according to genealogies and memories … in a process that creates and extends identities and relationships" (Lydon, "Behold the Tears" 247). Like other visual languages, photography operates within this revelatory regime as "for many Australian Aboriginal people photographs are not merely representations, as in the Western tradition; within Indigenous cultures they may assume the powers of the ancestors, embedded within social relationships with both the living and the dead" (Lydon, "Introduction" 9).

A crucial phenomenological cornerstone in Indigenous worldviews, the act of rendering visible (see Tamisari, "To Render Visible") is therefore revelatory rather than representational. Jennifer Deger explains how photography, practised from an Indigenous standpoint, establishes a sensuous connection between images, knowledge, and affect:

> We need to move from an idea of representation to attune ourselves to the revelatory agency inherent in acts of showing … To show is a deliberate act of making visible; it is an intervention into a shared and public field of visibility … What is quite literally brought to light—what is photographically materialised—is actually the underlying dimensions of their relationship, the immanent aspects of identities which are not visible in every moment, but which are made visible in other circumstances, most notably in ritual. (120)

In Indigenous cosmogonies, creation stories follow a transformative dynamic for which the land itself is an objectification of ancestral beings and an actualisation of their presence (see Munn). Their vital power renders the creation act of a particular place perpetual, and, consequently, places exist in a dimension of happening rather than one of being, they are events rather than a concurrency of observable natural features (see Casey 26). According to Michael Jackson, the Indigenous Australian landscape is storied:

> abounding with story places the earth is said to embody the accreted and vital essence of ancestral lives, journeys and creative action … Every sacred site may be said to coalesce or interleave a sense of the effort, sweat, pain, and reproductive labour that has occurred there in the past as well as contemporaneously within each person's own specific experience and in the course of his or her own particular life. (31-32)

Country is an emotional, affective, more-than-physical landscape whose temporal dimension blends permanence and continuity, in which change is assimilated to forms of pre-existing life and not dialectically opposed to them (see Myers, *Pintupi Country* 52-53), and in which all aspects of Indigenous lifeworlds—events, places, people—are mutually involved.[2] Relationships to place are pivotal in Indigenous cultures, and the objectifications of these connections express what—drawing from Heidegger—defines as "dwelling perspective" ("Emplacement and Displacement" 436), one that refutes a distance between the land and the Indigenous subjectivity. According to his view, considering visual objectifications of the land

[2] A thorough definition of the concept of country is provided by Thorner et al.: "Country refers to places that are considered homelands for generations of extended family. Country is geography, ecology, memory, and history; it exists out in the world and is also intrinsic to one's identity. Country is a way of referring, too, to the inextricability of personhood, Ancestors and their knowledge, cultural beliefs, and practices, and the places which people identify as home, sites of nourishment, and responsibilities of care" (56).

as representational would imply a re-affirmation of such a distance; because they are revelatory rather than representational, in making the land visible they disclose "a complex range of experiences and understandings that are not, themselves, only visual" (436).

As early as the 1970s, the Australian artworld started nurturing an interest in the power of place (see Rose, "The Power of Place") in Aboriginal cultures, particularly with regard to representing the land by questioning principles of locality and belonging. As argued by Judy Annear:

> For Australian contemporary artists, whether Indigenous or non-Indigenous, the relationship to the land or country seems to be more to do with the idea of place … Place can be a location or a site and because its history as a word begins with the description of an urban social space, its contemporary neutrality provides a breadth of meaning which does not imply terra nullius and can incorporate land which has been changed by people, where there is an interaction between nature and culture regardless of which culture. (202)

Place is certainly a term which does not deny history, distinct from concepts such as wilderness or outback (see Wright), which presuppose a certain degree of detachment between place and people, framing the land as a merely utilitarian container of an anthropocentric human experience.

In a seminal article on the cultural implications of wilderness, Marcia Langton has argued that this concept represents "an amnesia of the fate of Indigenous peoples" and a "mystification of genocide" ("What Do We Mean by Wilderness?" 19-20) for which the territories of people displaced were recast as wilderness. According to Deborah Bird Rose (see "Why I Don't Speak" 10), in conquering wilderness the settlers ignored the fact that Indigenous people had been looking after the environment for millennia, exercising the proper care that prompted it to an ability to self-renew and self-repair. As terms such as wilderness exclude the perspective of human interaction from allegedly pristine landscapes which nevertheless have been peopled and culturalised for a very long time, Langton (see "What Do We Mean by Wilderness?" 30-31) has claimed that the European fantasy of wilderness was a lie as much as terra nullius, since there is no wilderness but rather cultural landscapes that Aboriginal people, past and present, have shaped through their ongoing relationship with the environment and the continuous exercise of sovereignty over their homelands. As stated by Rose, a definition of wilderness that excludes the active presence of humanity and frames landscapes as simply 'natural' misses the whole point of country as a nourishing terrain, as "there is no place without a history, no place that has not been grasped through song, dance and design, no place where traditional owners cannot see the imprint of sacred creation" (*Nourishing Terrains* 18).

This terminological discrepancy highlights deeper cultural issues around land and landscape within the arena of encounter between Indigenous worldviews and the Australian colonial psyche. Since visual objectifications of the ancestral power are ontologically charged with a sense of emplacement—a dwelling perspective—in a confrontation with the Australian postcolonising society the landscape becomes a politically fraught and contested terrain, particularly fertile for narratives and counter-narratives revolving around the settler-colonial fantasy.[3] Drawing from the richness of oral cultures and from its power of engendering

[3] In her momentous reflection on Indigenous belonging and place, Aileen Moreton-Robinson uses the term 'postcolonising'—as opposed to postcolonial—to describe the current and ongoing nature of colonising relationship for which the "incommensurable difference between the situatedness of

relations, storytelling in Indigenous Australia acts as a mode of political performance. According to Tom Griffiths, storytelling is a powerful educational method, and narratives have the power to enact connectivity by carrying multiple causes along together. Similarly, Deborah Bird Rose and Libby Robin argue that "narrative is the method through which the reason of connectivity will find its most powerful voice telling stories that communicate, invoke, and invigorate connections" ("The Ecological Humanities in Action"). As a result, storytelling can work as a research technique and a method to explore the complexities of all such relational entanglements and commitments to country, law, and lore.

3. Dark Country

Relationships between places as objectifications of the ancestral power and the human experience of people past, present, and future are compellingly manifested through captivating visual storytelling that contemporary Aboriginal artists working with photomedia elaborate in their practice. Addressing the culturally dense notion of country, Hayley Millar-Baker and James Tylor's *Dark Country* processes the colonial dispossession not only to the extent of people's physical displacement but also through the disruption of duties, relational commitments, and cultural obligations. The two series composing *Dark Country* were Millar-Baker's *A Series of Unwarranted Events* and Tylor's *From an Untouched Landscape*. *A Series of Unwarranted Events* features four black and white inkjets on cotton rag photo-assemblages recounting the chronicles of the Eumeralla wars, the frontier conflict the Gunditjmara people of South-Western Victoria fought against the European settlers in the 1840s. As with all works by Millar-Baker, these images are the outcome of a meticulous multilayering of dozens of different photos that, in the case of this series, the artist took on Gunditjmara Country around Budj Bim National Park, Lake Condah, and the coastal areas of Portland and Warnambool.[4]

Figure 1. ***Untitled (The Theft of The White Men's Sheep)*****, inkjet on cotton rag, 80x100 cm © Hayley Millar-Baker, courtesy of the artist.**

Indigenous people and those who have come here" cannot be made into the sameness of equal access to symbolic and material power (see 30).

[4] *A Series of Unwarranted Events* is the first series to be assembled out of pictures entirely taken by the artist, who is originally trained in painting and has embraced photomedia after inheriting her grandfather's photographic archive in 2016. These negatives and slides have largely contributed to building narratives for previous series such as *I'm the Captain Now* (2016) and *The Trees Have No Tongues* (2017).

The first image depicts the theft of the colonisers' sheep by the local Gunditjmara people. During the frontier wars, the Aboriginal resistance to the occupation was also led through guerrilla-style actions of fightback such as the seizure of livestock. In this image, the sheep hang in the middle of two sections of the composition evocative of the contending parties: just beyond the fence of the colonisers' settlement but still far from the Aboriginal territory which coincides with the artist's and the viewer's vantage point. The rocky ground in the lower portion of the frame connotes the Indigenous space, as settlers would generally struggle to venture through the rugged country the local Gunditjmara people were most familiar with.

As stated by Henry Reynolds, "where the terrain favoured the Europeans, their horses, guns and racial solidarity allowed them to crush overt resistance in a short time. In craggy, mountainous country the conflict lasted far longer and exacted a proportionately greater toll on the colonists and their economy" (ix). The syntax of elements featuring in this image indicates the active agency the Gunditjmara people had in fighting against the expansion of settlements in this area of Victoria. Referring to Ian D. Clark's (see 25) register of massacres in Western Victoria, this scene seems to coincide with an episode investigated by Charles La Trobe that saw five Gunditjmara people killed in retaliation for stealing sheep.[5]

Figure 2. ***Untitled (So He Mixed Arsenic With Half The Flour And A Raging Thirst Was Created)*****, inkjet on cotton rag, 80 x 100 cm © Hayley Millar-Baker, courtesy of the artist.**

[5] Before becoming the first lieutenant-governor of the newly established colony of Victoria in 1851, Charles La Trobe was—at the time of the incident narrated by Millar-Baker—superintendent of the Port Phillip District of New South Wales.

A second image tells the story of the 1840 Murdering Flat massacre, which took place nearby a spring at the junction of the Wannon and Glenelg rivers. The Henty brothers, early colonists of Victoria, had hired a watchman named Connell, who resided in a hut on a hill near the spring. As the stealing of food supplies was a warfare tactic used by the Gunditjmara resistance fighters, one day Connell poisoned a bag of flour with arsenic, causing a 'raging thirst' that brought members of the raiding party to drown in the spring. Chronicles of frontier massacres in Victoria between the 1830s and the 1850s report more than one case in which arsenic or strychnine poisoning was planned by the settlers, a pattern proving how violence was not only perpetrated through open warfare. The most notorious is probably the Murderers Flat massacre—similar in name and circumstances to the episode depicted by Millar-Baker—which saw settlers delivering poisoned bags of flour to members of the Kerup Gundij clan nearby Lake Condah.

Figure 3. ***Untitled (The Circumstances Are That A Whale Had Come On Shore)*****, inkjet on cotton rag, 67 x 67 cm © Hayley Millar-Baker, courtesy of the artist.**

A third image features a stranded whale on a coastline and tells the story of the infamous Convincing Ground massacre of the mid-1830s. Local Gunditjmara people would generally reach Allestree beach from Budj Bim to get whale meat. That day, a party of about two hundred people—almost the entire Kilcarer Gundidj clan—found a group of white sailors and whalers

on the beach. The encounter eventuated in a clash for the possession of the stranded animal and the intruders made recourse to firearms to 'convince' the opposing party of their alleged rights not only to the whale but to the land itself.

Figure 4. ***Untitled (The Best Means, Of Caring For, And Dealing With Them In The Future),*** **inkjet on cotton rag, 80 x 100 cm © Hayley Millar-Baker, courtesy of the artist.**

The fourth and final image shows the façade of a church erected on a pile of crumbling ruins. It does not recount any specific episode of violence but is rather set forward in time, symbolising the construction of Lake Condah mission in 1867, a device of control, power, and assimilation imposed on the local Gunditjmara people who had survived the Eumeralla wars.

As with most settler-colonial countries, the Australian national psyche has been deeply influenced by the recurrence of the frontier as a narrative trope. This paradigm has shaped white Australian identity since the first contact, in the interactions with the First Peoples of the continent as well as in the deeply contradictory relations the settler culture has established with the environment, perceived, and represented as wild, dark, and enigmatic. The frontier as a

metonymic image of colonialism has ultimately been instrumental to mainstream historiography to convey biased and detrimental discourses underpinning the expansion of European settlements across the continent.

Being such a dense narrative trope in Australian national history, the frontier represents a rich space of enunciation for Aboriginal storytelling. This counter-narrative potential is particularly explored by Hayley Millar-Baker in her methodological approach to *A Series of Unwarranted Events*. The artists' preliminary historical research consists of a survey of written colonial sources in which frontier stories are reported with omitted or sugar-coated details, which she can detect by comparing information with the oral transmissions of these same stories by the members of her family and the wider Gunditjmara community. Millar-Baker is interested in the gaps in evidence of history she encounters in colonial diaries, journals, photographs, and letters, a harsh territory to emotionally navigate that requires her to be mentally ready and equipped before entering the space of inherited traumas (see Millar-Baker, qtd. in Karipoff 57). In *A Series of Unwarranted Events* the consultation of colonial sources is made explicit in the subtitles in brackets which—in the case of three pictures out of four—come from colonial reports and correspondence.[6] Appropriating colonial documents, Millar-Baker's visual storytelling fills these gaps and overturns mainstream narratives offering healthier sources of education on colonial history.

The last image of this series evokes the establishment of Lake Condah mission, specifically conjuring the process of assimilation and attempted erasure of the Aboriginal presence from the Australian landscape, which is also a major theme of James Tylor's *From an Untouched Landscape*, made of four series titled *Deleted*, *Erased*, *Removed* and *Vanished Scenes*. This project features black and white landscape photographs connoted by differently shaped black voids, allusive of the absence of Indigenous cultures from the landscape as a result of the British invasion and settlement. *From an Untouched Landscape* addresses the impact of colonisation by questioning the condition of invisibility Aboriginal people have been forced into within the Australian landscape. The past participles in the titles of each individual set are enunciative of absence as underlying concept of the entire series: absence of land, culture, language, made manifest through depictions of erased, deleted, removed, and vanished landscapes.

[6] As for the second piece of the series, Clark reports E.R. Trangmar's *The Aborigines of Far Western Victoria*: "Connell got very annoyed with the constant raiding, so he mixed arsenic with half the flour and hid the other half … A raging thirst was created, the natives went to the river to drink and tumbled head first into the stream, they were thus drowned as well as poisoned" (28-29).
As for the third, sources such as Clark (19), Russell (29) and Newton (137-138) quote George Augustus Robinson's report on his 1841 voyages through Western Victoria: "The circumstances are that a whale had come on shore and the Natives who feed on the carcass claimed it was their own. The whalers said they would 'convince them' and had recourse to firearms."
As for the last image, the subtitle quotes the header of an 1877 Royal Commission report to the Victorian parliament (Stawell): "Report of the Commissioners appointed to inquire into the present condition of the Aborigines of this colony and advise as to the best means of caring for, and dealing with them, in the future, together with minutes of evidence and appendices."

Figure 5. (*Removed Scenes) From an Untouched Landscape #12*, inkjet print on hahnemuhle paper with hole removed to a black velvet void, 50x50cm
© James Tylor, courtesy of the artist.

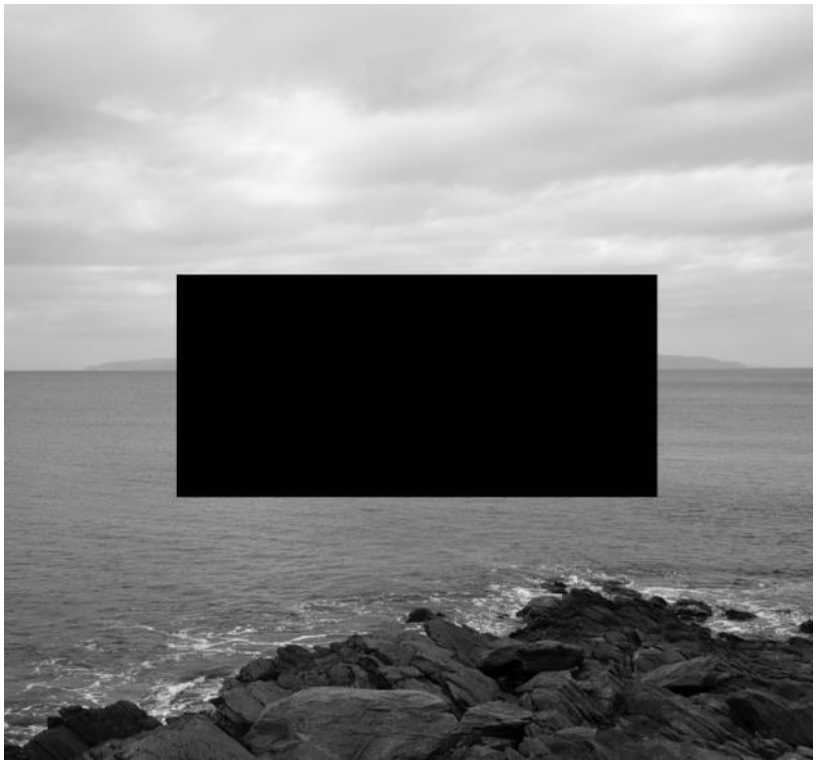

Figure 6. (*Removed Scenes) From an Untouched Landscape #5*, inkjet print on hahnemuhle paper with hole removed to a black velvet void, 50x50cm
© James Tylor, courtesy of the artist.

The voids are the artist's direct intervention on the photographs, which have been cut and pierced to reveal a layer of black velvet beneath the prints. Obliterating portions of these pictures is what conceptually substantiates the series, as the black velvet represents the connotative device the artist employs to convey and symbolise this feeling of deprivation. In the blackness of its textures, the fabric acts as material signifier of forced absence and invisibility, disclosing an impenetrable darkness that evokes the mournful perception of physical and spiritual disconnection. Tylor has spoken of the dispossessions and the establishment of missions and reservations as:

> A tactic used by the British across Australia in order to steal the land and distribute it to newly arrived farmers. Once the British had removed the local Aboriginal people from their land, they would begin clearing it for farming and, in the process, they would destroy almost all the Aboriginal culture present in the landscape. (139)

Tylor's series therefore reflects on colonisation not only through the forced detachment of people from the landscape but also through the environment and its resources, as concerns related to the environmental impact of invasion and settlement are deeply rooted in people's culture and identity. The massive impact of European farming, forestry and agriculture has—over the course of two hundred years of occupation—radically transformed and reconfigured the features of the landscape; such process has seriously compromised signs of the Aboriginal culturalisation of the environment, and has ultimately been instrumental to the affirmation of the terra nullius legal fiction, perpetuating the hunter-gatherer myth and the belief that the landscape was virgin and 'untouched' before the settlers reached the Australian shores.

Figure 7. *(Vanished Scenes) From an Untouched Landscape #10*, inkjet print on hahnemuhle paper with hole removed to a black velvet void, 25 x 25 cm © James Tylor, courtesy of the artist.

Figure 8. ***(Vanished Scenes) From an Untouched Landscape #11*****, inkjet print on hahnemuhle paper with hole removed to a black velvet void, 25 x 25 cm © James Tylor, courtesy of the artist.**

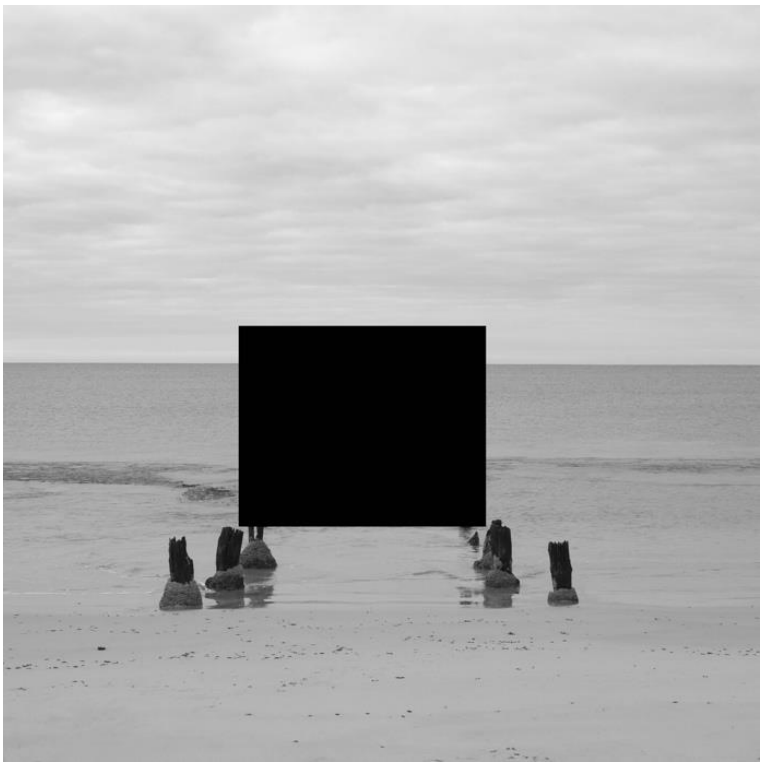

Figure 9. ***(Removed Scenes) From an Untouched Landscape #6*****, inkjet print on hahnemuhle paper with hole removed to a black velvet void, 50x50cm © James Tylor, courtesy of the artist.**

Figure 10. ***(Removed Scenes) From an Untouched Landscape #7,*** **inkjet print on hahnemuhle paper with hole removed to a black velvet void, 50x50cm © James Tylor, courtesy of the artist.**

In *Dark Country*, the two series have established a mutual dialogue and a thought-provoking interaction based on their common conceptual grounds. The set up at Vivien Anderson Gallery features Millar-Baker's works surrounded, almost encircled, by Tylor's landscapes, smaller in size but larger in number. In addition to the images, the set up features a dozen tools, weapons, and implements belonging to both settlers and local Aboriginal groups, such as clubs, spears, knives, and different kinds of firearms. These have been crafted by James Tylor himself, who is trained in carpentry and usually presents his photomedia work in set ups featuring handmade instruments of material culture integrating the overall exhibition concept.

Reading the set up right to left, the narrative unravels from the maritime and waterways scenes towards the interior of plains and hills, and this seems to follow the chronicles of the European settlement, which on the southern coasts was spearheaded by the passage of whalers and sealers. The main thematic point of convergence in Millar-Baker and Tylor's storytelling is precisely the coastline, as two of Tylor's pieces (Figures 9 and 10) flanking Millar-Baker's *Convincing Ground* image are taken on the same beach of Allestree, just out of Portland, Victoria, where the massacre occurred.

Figure 11. *Dark Country*: James Tylor & Hayley Millar-Baker, Vivien Anderson Gallery, Installation image

This introduces another salient aspect in the exhibition rationale, which concerns chosen locations and the way the artist has articulated his relationship with places portrayed. *Deleted* and *Erased Scenes* are mostly made of Kaurna landscapes (for example around the Adelaide Hills and coastal portions of the Fleurieu Peninsula), but also include Coonawarra (South Australia), and Tasmania (Mount William National Park) where the artist lived between 2012 and 2013 when he started working on the project.[7] *Removed* and *Vanished Scenes*, which are the sets featured in *Dark Country*, present a combination of images taken on Kaurna Country and surrounding areas such as Kangaroo Island, plus a set of photos from Western Victoria which establish a dialogue with the artist's composite cultural heritage: part of Tylor's paternal lineage reconnects him to the first whalers and farmers who settled in Victoria in the late 1830s, and for this reason he believes (qtd. in Millar-Baker and Tylor 34) it is important to acknowledge that his ancestors perpetrated violence towards Aboriginal people.[8]

The artist intends to find a sort of balance between the different events that coexist in his family history, a conciliation between the coloniser and the colonised, which does not leave out any aspect of the historical burden of a composite cultural heritage that characterises most Australians today. Confronted with the most problematic aspects of his family history—the involvement of some of his whaling ancestors in the process of dispossession of Gunditjmara territories—Tylor has chosen to dedicate almost an entire set to Western Victoria in the latest editions of *From an Untouched Landscape*, honestly welcoming his historical experience as a

[7] Tylor, James. Personal Interview. 11 October 2019.

[8] A recurring concern in James Tylor's practice, the settler experience of his family history is the major theme of his daguerreotype series *Whalers, Sealers, and Landstealers* (2014).

settler as well. The series is thus enriched with a non-Indigenous point of view that restores the intersubjectivity of the encounter, further substantiating his artistic and conceptual reflection on a cultural landscape stratified by narratives.

4. Reactivating the past to unsettle dominant narratives

Dark Country offers an engaging reading of the history of violence and dispossessions that came with the early European settlement of south-eastern Australia. Hayley Millar-Baker's multilayered sites and James Tylor's removed, and vanished scenes are compelling manifestations of cultural landscapes that are storied and eventful. The interconnectedness of place and lived experience emerging from their visual storytelling is constitutive of a concept of country that, within the space of inherited trauma and memories, becomes 'dark', ambiguous, forsaken, pervaded by a sense of loss.

Place is addressed "from the standpoint of its contestation" (Basso and Feld 4-5), as site of power struggle, and the process of displacement as histories of annexation, absorption, and resistance. Such histories are confronted by Tylor and Millar-Baker in ways that articulate visual storytelling as a form of cultural activism since, as Matteo Dutto explains, "making history, engaging with the past and retelling stories of resistance can be understood in itself as an act of cultural resistance" (8). Reactivating and elaborating memories of colonisation and assimilation, *Dark Country* reassembles and conveys emplaced narratives through landscapes that are processual and dynamic. According to Ed Wall:

> Landscapes are defined by our relationships with the worlds around us, and as these relations are mediated by our experiences and perceptions, we can recognise the subjective positions and partial perspectives from which they are composed. Landscapes are also piecemeal compositions in which understandings are constantly made and remade from incomplete knowledge. Such a definition contrasts with European conceptions of landscape as a way of seeing employed to frame, beautify, and commodify lands (and representations of them), from singular positions of power. (2)

Both artists share a certain sensitivity towards this sense of incompleteness pervading landscapes that are metonymical of displacement and absence, particularly in their methodology, since filling the gaps in mainstream accounts of Australian history is a leading concern in Hayley Millar-Baker's preliminary research, and these same historical gaps are visually rendered by James Tylor through the cutting of his prints.

The eventfulness of these landscapes as historical and cultural processes is underpinned by the artists' approach to the intersubjectivity of time, rendered and signified by differing and fascinating aesthetic solutions. For Millar-Baker (qtd. in Karipoff 59), time is a massive net with no start and end point. She argues that her landscapes in *A Series of Unwarranted Events* are built from scratch, as all rocks, trees, or ripples of water are photographed one by one and then assembled and merged into one another. The addition of layers is specifically functional to her conceptualisation of storytelling: layers operate as symbolic currency of such temporal stratification and wedded together into her narrative, they amount to a hybrid and interstitial time reconnecting past, present and future experiences. A cornerstone of the artist's practice is, in fact, a blood memory in which she thinks of herself as her ancestors, and her visual storytelling stands as intergenerational research continually connecting her, her family, and her people to a collective emotional and experiential heritage:

> The concept of time is really important for me because I am a product of my mother's experiences, who is a product of her mother's experiences, who is a product of her mother's experiences, and so on. Everything that happened before me has made my life, and I wouldn't be who I am without my mother's life. To disconnect the line wouldn't make sense. Time is continuing, it lives, and it never ends. We all intersect at some point; it might not happen with the next direct offspring but surely, we come to meet again through experiences, memory, and trauma. I began my photographic practice through the inheritance of my grandfather's archive so for me it would make sense that I start with my mother's life, which came back into my life.[9]

If Millar-Baker's main visual figure of speech is addition, Tylor orchestrates his conceptual motifs through subtraction. The recursiveness of time is rendered through the cutting of his prints and the uncovering of the black velvet, ultimate sublimation of loss and absence. Black holes reveal an all-encompassing void which symbolises not only the historical dispossession and displacement but also the persistence of such dramatic absence of Aboriginal cultures from the contemporary landscape. The aggression of the surface puts history back in circle to enunciate its perdurance in the present. A temporal continuity is therefore enacted, deconstructing and subverting those hegemonic discourses the colonial culture has traditionally invested the landscape with, from the terra nullius legal fiction to contemporary assumptions of authenticity within the Native Title's legal framework.

Questioning and contesting the collective amnesia of the "great Australian silence" (Stanner, "After the Dreaming" 207), these images enunciate a dialectics of presence-in-absence which has notorious precedents in Indigenous Australian photography, most notably in Ricky Maynard's *Portrait of a Distant Land*. According to Langton (see "We Are Here" 47), Maynard's contemplative and elegiac visions of Tasmanian landscapes seize the emotional territory, something that Tylor similarly achieves highlighting the absence of visible signs of trauma in the landscape while emphasising the persistence of that same trauma as part of the experiential heritage of contemporary Aboriginal cultures.

The recirculation of historical meanings performed by Tylor's voids emerges starkly as it coherently intersects with the diachronic conceptualisation of Millar-Baker's intergenerational discourse, therefore connoting *Dark Country*'s temporal plot as anti-linear and intersubjective. This represents a common thread in what Victoria Garnons-Williams defines the "alternative aesthetics" (326) and the multiple discourses provoked by Indigenous Australian contemporary photomedia practices:

> Many images reflect an Aboriginal perspective based on a circular, non-linear sense of time and narrative. Circular non-linear time is the sense that all time is always present, and narrative—the stories, be they Dreamtime or individual—are permeable; the past as well as the future is constantly interacting.[10]

[9] Millar-Baker, Hayley. Artist Statement. 11 May 2019.

[10] According to Garnons-Williams, contemporary Indigenous Australian artists (particularly women artists in the case of her analysis) working in photomedia employ a broad range of 'alternative aesthetics' revolving around confrontation, reconciliation, diplomacy, humor, and irony, by adopting technical solutions such as collage, multi-media, digital interventions, hand-made directorial interventions and other inventive and processual approaches that hark back to the pre-genre time of photography.

Dark Country stands as a remarkable example of how storytelling practices of contemporary artscapes can provide an understanding of the living world through emplaced and situated Indigenous forms of knowledge. Landscapes featured in *A Series of Unwarranted Events* and *From an Untouched Landscape* are manifestations of ecosystems, not to be interpreted through a nature/culture divide, but rather as "lively ecologies of meaning and value, entangled within rich patterns of cultural and historical diversity" (Rose et al. 2).

The dwelling perspective of *Dark Country*'s storytelling actualises the permeability of the notion of country connecting individuals not simply to sites and locations but to their lived and living history, for "place-centred histories directly involve local people, and provide insight not only into the past itself, but also into the life of the past in the present" (Rose and Robin, "The Ecological Humanities in Action"). This pattern of iteration is inherent in relational commitments of an Indigenous law that presupposes a larger-than-humanity living system characterised by a social time 'bent' into cycles or circles, with each cycle being a principle for dealing with social interrelatedness (see Stanner, "The Dreaming" 34).

5. Conclusions: from incompleteness to embodied connectivity

Dark Country tells tales of violence and dispossession settling in time-cycles that expose the persistence of absence and dramatic memories in the present, but also the power of survival entailed in the unveiling of those stories, leading into a future of awareness and reparation.

For much contemporary Aboriginal photomedia storytelling the assertion of survival is to an extent concurrent to the processing of trauma, as these narratives reclaim a sense of rootedness through the uprootedness of diaspora and exile, therefore conjuring the Indigenous struggles for homelands and sovereignty. For this reason, "displacement is no less the source of powerful attachments than are experiences of profound rootedness" (Basso and Feld 11), as these are mutually interwoven by Indigenous forms of resistance and resilience nurtured over two centuries of ongoing colonisation.

This duality resonates with what Moreton-Robinson (33) has defined as marginality and centring, the first being the outcome of colonisation and proximity to whiteness, and the latter attesting the continuity of ontology and cultural protocols among Indigenous people:

> Our ontological relationship to land is a condition of our embodied subjectivity. The Indigenous body signifies our title to land and our death reintegrates our body with that of our mother the earth. However, the state's legal regime privileges other practices and signs over our bodies. This is because underpinning this legal regime is the Western ontology in which the body is theorised as being separate from the earth and it has no bearing on the way subjectivities, identities and bodies are constituted. In Australia, Indigenous subjectivity operates through a doubling of marginality and centring, which produces an incommensurate subject that negotiates and manages disruption, dislocation and proximity to whiteness. This process does not erase Indigenous ontology; this suggests that Indigenous subjectivity is processual because it represents a dialectical unity between humans and the earth. It is a state of embodiment that continues to unsettle white Australia. (36-37)

In a project like *Dark Country*, these embodied connections are rendered as visual manifestations of the Indigenous cultural landscape and actualise a unity among the living and the dead, past, present, and future generations, through the recursiveness of a cyclical and

processual time. The subversive potential of narratives refuting a chronological linearity lies in their ability to open a space from which the disruptive temporality of enunciation displaces discourses of the Western nation that are written in homogeneous and serial time (see Bhabha 37). As argued by Dutto, what emerges from Indigenous storytelling and history-making practices is "the direct connection between stories of past resistance and their legacies in the present as well as the complexity and heterogeneity of Indigenous strategies of resistance across time and space," a kind of resistance that resides in the "way in which Indigenous people experience and act in the settler-colonial present as well as in their engagement with the past and in the strategies they deploy to decolonise their futures" (10-11).

Transporting life experiences from one temporal dimension to another, contemporary practitioners such as James Tylor and Hayley Millar-Baker prove how forms of visual storytelling are always part of a process of mutual involvement that effectively informs about the relational models of a given social group. A collective and emotional memory reconnecting past, present, and future experiences is performed through newly constructed narratives for which memories of the Indigenous people's ability to resist colonisation may become more significant than the oppression they endured (see Peters-Little 4). The past is experienced as a form of personal and collective knowledge, which involves layered memories made of constantly evolving narratives and actions. Recollections of peoples who have undergone a process of colonisation are clearly compromised in numerous circumstances due to the destruction of communities, kinship, and cultural affiliations; therefore, an emotional memory is one articulated as a response to the pain caused by these specific historical processes. According to Linda Tuhiwai Smith:

> The remembering of a people relates not so much to an idealised remembering of a golden past but more specifically to the remembering of a painful past and, importantly, people's responses to that pain…This form of remembering is painful because it involves remembering not just what colonisation was about but what being de-humanised meant for our own cultural practices. Both healing and transformation become crucial strategies in any approach which asks a community to remember what they may have decided unconsciously or consciously to forget. (146)

Contemporary Aboriginal artists like Tylor and Millar-Baker work precisely in this direction as they do not embrace a sense of individual authorship but rather advocate for commonality and mutual engagement within an artistic process that is built on emplaced narratives shared by their families and communities. Chronicles of systemic violence involve a profound disruption of such reciprocity, and within the space of trauma "any radical erosion of these modalities of interaction between the world of self and the world of others threatens the very basis of a person's being" (Jackson 71). Providing a testimony to these events through visual storytelling helps to re-establish the intersubjectivity of relations between public and private domains, between the Indigenous sphere and the rest of society, therefore reaffirming presence and cohabitation neglected by mainstream colonial narratives.

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