

When 'Area' meets 'Country': Rethinking the Territory of Colonialism

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Abstract

Australian Aboriginal novelist Alexis Wright vividly conceives of colonialism as a virus that takes up its place in its host's head. This is an image of invasion and territorialisation as intensely bodily and psychic. It calls attention, too, to those Aboriginal conceptions of country as itself a living and sensate entity: country has a body. It is animate, intelligent, and responsive, and humans are inextricably formed in relation to it. Such a conception of Country (capitalised now to indicate that the word functions as a proper name) has enormous significance for the meanings that can be attached, in turn, to ideas of belonging and ownership. The impact can be felt in the antagonisms surrounding discourses of land, sovereignty and belonging. This essay considers the effects of this concept of Country in relation to two ceremonies that are practised in contemporary Australia: Welcome to Country and Acknowledgement of Country.

Reimagining the limits and possibilities of 'area' is a project made newly urgent in the context in which we now write, where border and containment, movement and constraint, invasion and contagion are all taking on new values. As the Australian Aboriginal novelist Alexis Wright commented recently, explicitly in response to the weightiness of our present times: "Instead of being defeated by this enormous load, you can lighten the weight by constructing another way of looking at things. The story you build around the images helps you to know what the weight is composed of, and where the structural weaknesses lie—to



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understand where the virus lives” (2020). While deliberately mobilising the immediate associations that the word virus holds in the context of corona, Wright is at the same time referring to the virus of colonialism, a virus that, in her most recent novel *The Swan Book* (2013), reaches into the very brain of its host. It takes up occupancy within its host’s head and observes the world from its place behind her eyes. This then is an idea of territory and occupation that has intensely interior meanings in which mind and body become territory, but also where territory becomes corporeal, even sensate, intelligent. This suggests different meanings to ‘territory’—country that has been territorialised under colonialism. It appears not as the dumb and passive thing that the colonising discourse takes it to be, but instead as “a living entity with a yesterday, today and tomorrow, with a consciousness, and a will toward life” (Rose 1996: 7). A treatment for the virus of colonialism would entail, then, a widening of the circumference of concepts of country and a reconception of land and the concomitant ideas of belonging in the light of Aboriginal concepts of country as itself alive and sovereign.

Welcome to Country

One way of entering the nexus of meanings around body, belonging, country and colonialism lies in a consideration of two related public performances that have been practised widely in contemporary urban Australia for the past three decades: these are ‘Welcome to Country’ and ‘Acknowledgement of Country’. These contemporary urban rituals of welcome and acknowledgement often explicitly refer to traditional Aboriginal practices of welcoming strangers and, although these contemporary versions are complicated by the highly politicised conditions in which they are staged and to which they contribute, engage and contest, the rituals speak to ideas of country and land that are very foreign to the western-oriented discourses that have dominated the political landscape since this continent was declared *Terra Nullius*.

This pair of rituals has become protocol at many public events especially since 2008 when the Federal Parliament was opened with a traditional Welcome to Country, the



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day before the Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, made a formal Apology to the Stolen Generations. The rituals are now performed at the opening of events including those hosted by governments, as well as university graduations or conferences, sporting events, and gallery openings, and are increasingly commonly practised at smaller, less public events such as at the start of a meeting of managers in an NGO, or a staff meeting in a university department.

An Acknowledgement of Country takes the form of a short spoken or written statement delivered usually by a non-Indigenous person, but it can also be delivered by an Indigenous person who positions themselves as a visitor rather than a custodian of the land on which the event is taking place. The acknowledgement is of the land on which the event is taking place and its traditional custodians. Already, these words—‘traditional custodian’ or ‘traditional owner’— open up a world of meanings and also antagonisms, especially around the idea of *continuing* Indigenous presence, ownership and sovereignty rather than one neatly enveloped in the past. A typical wording would be something like the following, which is that recommended by the Australian Capital Territory Government for acknowledging the land on which the Australian capital city is built, land that is identified with the Ngunnawal:

I acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land we are meeting on, the Ngunnawal people. I wish to acknowledge and respect their continuing culture and the contribution they make to the life of this city and this region. I would also like to acknowledge and welcome other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who may be attending today’s event. (qtd in Kowal, 2015: 173)

Publications produced by these sectors—government reports, for instance, or exhibition catalogues, academic essays—might also carry a text of Acknowledgement of Country; an email signature of a university academic might do the same, for instance. That is, there is an increasing prevalence among non-Indigenous Australians of verbal and written acknowledgements of the country on which we work and live.



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In contrast, a Welcome to Country is only conducted by a person who is recognised as being part of the Aboriginal group that can make claims to the particular land on which the event is taking place. A Welcome to Country is performed at the invitation of the organisers of the event, and it can take many forms, including a speech in Language and then in English translation, a smoking ceremony with a smouldering branch of eucalyptus, traditional dance, perhaps with men and women painted up in ochre; sometimes song, or music made with clapsticks or didgeridoo.

Both rituals have been the subject of political controversy, however. (See Bodkin-Andrews et al.). They are seen as richly symbolic, honouring Indigenous cultures, pointing to the violent and disavowed effects of colonialism, past and present, but they have also been subjected to intense hostility and ridicule, the stuff of humour and parody. They are seen as a form of land claim (Kowal 2010) *and* as a reiteration of *Terra Nullius* (Hart). They have been seen as taking “ownership of the processes of cultural representation” (Everett) *and* as empty gestures; as “having the powerful effect of drawing and holding in relationship two profoundly, contrasting conceptual systems and laws governing country, one grounded in sharing and reciprocity, the other enshrining property rights” (Dempster), *and* as moments of entertainment—as a performance of cultural practices rather than as performative of Indigenous Law and customary relations to country (Pelizzon and Kennedy; McAuley).

The idea that Welcomes to Country are benign performances of traditional cultural practices—dance, song, didgeridoo—is scarcely sustainable, however. It has been undone on so many occasions. For instance, Kristina Everett reports “how Indigenous Welcome performers, at an event organised in western Sydney by the Australian National Trust to celebrate the location’s colonial significance, enacted—instead of the expected ‘Dreaming’ story—a shooting of locals by the British. The dying performers refused to leave the stage”, apparently to the great discomfort of the audience (Merlan: 304). In 2012, front pages of the major Australian dailies carried an extraordinary photograph of the encounter between an Aboriginal man painted up



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in ochre performing a Welcome ceremony and the then-Prime Minister Julia Gillard whose terrified face and recoiling body surely would have arrested any viewer. While her discomfort was particularly visible, and very public, it is not after all that unusual. Despite some critics emphasising the pleasure, indeed comfort that is derived from these rituals by many white Australians, the truth is more complex, and shame, embarrassment and anger are not at all the sole preserve of those white critics who discredit Aboriginal claims to land and to other rights. It seems that for some participants, a Welcome to Country is something to which they feel forced to submit. As I will go on to argue, this discomfit turns on intersecting axes of belonging, sovereignty, law and land, and the subjectivities formed in their nexus.

White audience members' negative feelings are evident to Indigenous performers of Welcomes and Acknowledgements who must face their mostly white audience's attitudes written on their bodies and faces, perhaps unwittingly so. Roman Curtis, a Larrakia man born and raised on Larrakia country, suggests that these gestures of which the white Australians may not even be conscious are nevertheless abundantly clear to the Aboriginal welcomers looking at the audience looking at them in a disconcerting exchange of looks. They are not, he suggests, necessarily apparent however to other white members of the audience.

It is not only non-Indigenous, or white, Australians, then, who feel discomfort. Indigenous commentators report their own profound discomfort and anxiety when asked to perform Welcomes to Country, but the reasons are very different. As Roman goes on to say:

My people's experiences, as people whose traditional lands were made into a city, is that we have experienced the full impacts of colonization, including the destruction of traditional cultural and languages; we have been disposed of our lands and have suffered the intergenerational effects of child removal. Then, the government, through its self-made rules about Native Title, expects my people to prove to them that we



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have continued to practise our traditional customs, and we must prove this to them for us to even begin to be considered to have attachments to our traditional lands. They then ask my people, through people such as myself, to perform Welcome to Country speeches for them. They have already taken the land and do not need me to welcome them here at all (111).

Performing these rituals can produce anxiety for an Indigenous welcomer on a number of counts:

To begin with, the person doing the Welcome to Country speech does not represent other people at all, and they do not know if other people from the group of people who are either traditional custodians or claiming to be will be in the audience. This means that they do not know for sure if they and their speech will be publicly challenged by others ... The person also has no knowledge of the politics of the organization and does not know what to say. They can also feel discomfit as a result of the tokenistic feel of the speech and can feel anxiety about how non-Indigenous people in the audience will receive their speech. The feeling is that the organization wants someone to deliver a Welcome to Country speech; however, people in the organization may be concerned that the person doing it may say something political, or uncomfortable and challenging, for the audience (113).

What is most discomfiting, most unsettling, to a non-Indigenous subject might be the ontological shock of finding oneself out of place, shamed in finding oneself no longer a powerful and sovereign subject, not owning and belonging, but instead facing protocols that are not one’s own, and which are experienced as impositions. There is an estrangement from the place and position a western-centred subject can otherwise assume, a shock of estrangement that cannot be wholly covered over—as the Indigenous welcomers’ testaments make clear.



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Whose country, or, who’s Country?

If I make an Acknowledgement of the Country on which my work is done—the country of the Wurundjeri of the Kulin alliance—what does that signifier ‘country’ mean, across the differences between settler and Indigenous Australian? For I don’t live in the same country that some others do, as Indigenous men and women do, even if I share the same coordinates of latitude and longitude. As Saussure argued, the sign never appears the same twice, and ‘country’ is not the same entity for Indigenous and western-centric Australians. It is not *merely* a different *idea* of country—the difference reaches into the mind and body of its speaking subjects. Those who live in the idea of Indigenous country are differently substantiated.

There are many witness accounts on which to draw when considering the reach of this difference, what is a radical and perhaps incommensurable difference. John Bradley provides an account of what he has been told by Yanyuwa people about their idea of Country: “People visit country and listen to country; they sing for country and cry for country. They worry greatly about country and speak longingly of places they are unable to visit because it is now a part of a pastoral property, a mining lease, or just too hard to get to without transport. They feel their country, in return, hears, thinks, and feels about its human relatives.” (Bradley: 228)

Within Australian Indigenous conceptions of country, country is bound with story itself—country speaks. As Alexis Wright has said: “Stories are told *to* and *by* this ancestral land.” Wright speaks of country as telling stories and of being storied; other accounts refer to a land-form that in English we would call a hill or a rocky outcrop but which is spoken of as ancestor, capable of telling stories. The country enunciates itself. Country carries the Law; country and human are responsive to each other, and responsible for feeding each other, it is a relation of mutual nourishment. As Deborah Bird Rose reports from her time spent with Yarralin people in the Gulf country, quoting senior Yarralin men: “Everything come up out of ground—language, people, emu, kangaroo, grass. That’s Law.” “The Law is in the ground” (Rose, 2000: 57).



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Clearly, notions of Indigenous sovereignty refer to a wider concept than ownership of land, or a thin notion of independence. Country, too, is made in its substance and capacities by the presence of other living forms, such as humans, in whose bodies in turn are carried stories of country. That is, against the western view of country as fixed, immutable and non-sensate, as dumb and mute, the country might instead be substantiating of human embodiment, and perhaps also substantiated by it.

It is important to note that these are not only stories *about* the country: country itself has stories that are told by its humans in song, told in dance. Recalling one of the last big ceremonies in Arrernte country around 1955, artist and storyteller Kathleen Kemarre Wallace speaks of the dancing practised every night during the long walk, over several hundred kilometres, from Uyetye almost as far as Alice Springs. Every night “different dances were performed by the ones whose country we were in...This kind of dance cycle doesn’t happen nowadays because the old people who knew the songs and the dances have passed away ... As we travelled, we connected the places and the people through the dances. Different country has different stories and that came through in each dance” (17). The dancing in a Welcome to Country ceremony is surely resignified for non-Indigenous observers by the realisation of dance as a textual practice carrying specific knowledge of the country on which it is performed and which is nourished by and nourishes the dancers and now their own enunciating bodies.

In those accounts, it is the country itself who can—but might not—welcome the stranger.

Some Indigenous people (largely those remote dwelling) who live on country for which they exercise custodianship may enact small rituals to introduce newcomers or visitors to particular places: they water their heads from local water sources, rub underarm sweat on them, and speak to forebears and Dreamings at particular locales to make the newcomer known (Merlan 300).



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As Merlan goes on to say: “Welcomes enact a triangular kind of relation in which locals mediate between country, understood to be sentient and able to be addressed, and visitors” (300). This is a protective move: the living country may present dangers to people unknown to it and whose being is not intimately involved with it. This, then, is a notion of country as, in the words of Deborah Bird Rose, an “organising matrix of identity, knowledge, and action” (2000: 28). In her own experience of living with Warlpiri, Rose was taught: “to take notice of country, to see it as a living system which would keep me healthy and allow me to nurture others” (29). The signifier ‘country’ is now revalued in English language by its proximity to Indigenous English ‘Country’, where the meanings of Country reverberate and bring a shimmer into the nexus of discourses through which the non-Indigenous subject is made.

Coming back then to Welcomes to and Acknowledgements of Country: what is performed in these is an entirely different concept of ‘country’ than anything the white or western-centred conceptions can incorporate without changing the corpus. The Welcome is not to Canberra, say. It is not a Welcome to place as conventionally conceived—as city, or suburb or rural shire—but to Country itself, Country as a living entity in which the Law is made and carried. Country *is* Law, to which we are all subject. This might be the almost unfathomable reach of the idea of Country that is reiterated in a Welcome to Country ritual, and which quite precisely is unbearable—it cannot be borne, or carried or held—by non-Indigenous Australians while we remain so profoundly attached and formed within western concepts of land and country.

Belonging

One way in which the differences between Indigenous and western-centric ideas of country can be said to depart from each other is around the crux of meanings associated with belonging. Western-centric ideas of belonging tend to turn on ownership—one’s sense of belonging to one’s country is intimately and inextricably bound with one’s claim on it: country—as nation and as land—belongs to sovereign



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subjects as much as they belong to it, and they insist on their rights to the privileges of belonging. Among Indigenous expressions of belonging, however, the relationship tilts the other way, and the subject belongs to Country and it is Country itself that is sovereign: ‘The Law is in the ground.’

Belonging is one of the lenses through which the effectiveness and importance of Welcomes to and Acknowledgements of Country have been analysed. I’d like to turn to two examples, one by Emma Kowal, an Australian whose close family were European migrants, and another analysis co-authored by Jade Kennedy, a Dharawal-Yuin man from South Eastern Australia, and Alessandro Pelizzon, an Italian living in Australia. To each of these authors, then, negotiating relations of belonging have immediate and intense significance in considerations of how to live together in this country now.

Kowal takes a distinctive line of argument in relation to these two rituals. While quite intensely critical of the rituals as they are generally performed and received—“as anti-racist speech acts that maintain White identities and manage White stigma” (paradoxically, in that characterization, absencing Indigenous persons in the meaning-making of these performances)—she argues that they could be redeemed if instead they were “thought of as a device to encourage reflection on belonging”. (Kowal, 2015) This leads her to propose a more inclusive approach to Acknowledgements of and Welcomes to Country through introducing the following text to accompany the more conventional wording:

I would like to also acknowledge my own and your own ancestors and all the diverse places they were born in and journeyed to. I would like to acknowledge the injustices committed by many of our ancestors who journeyed to new lands, as well as the injustices that caused many to journey from their homes. I honour the courage it takes to make a new life in a new place, and to welcome newcomers. I also acknowledge the ancestors that we share with others in this room, whether those shared



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ancestors are hundreds, thousands, or tens of thousands of years in our past. (173-4)

The Indigenous meanings of country are elided in such a text; difference is muted, even annulled. An Acknowledgement of Country, with its immensely radical implications, is tamed by making it no longer an Acknowledgement of *Country* but as an acknowledgement of a generalizable belonging.

The ethical claim of this approach is based in the argument that non-Indigenous concepts of belonging can be acknowledged and welcomed without Indigenous concepts being subordinated or eclipsed. Indeed, there is an imperative, Kowal argues, for non-Indigenous senses of belonging to be strengthened, because, in her view, the antagonism towards Indigenous Acknowledgements of and Welcomes to Country witnessed among conservative and racist white Australians lies in the fragility of these Australians’ own sense of belonging. “It is imperative that we find ways to recognise all kinds of belonging in a manner that promotes mutual flourishing—or at least that we retain hope that such modes of recognition are possible.” But an inclusive Acknowledgement turns on the notion of a “common humanity” (177) to whom the Acknowledgement is addressed and on whose behalf it is uttered. The problem is that this “common humanity” remains profoundly rooted in a western-centric understanding of what it is to be human. The ‘human’ that is spoken of as if shared is the colonisers’. This is not a notion of ‘human’ understood in inextricable relation to Country.

‘Belonging’ in Kowal’s approach elides the key question concerning that to which one can belong: is it country, or Country? The rituals of Welcome and Acknowledgement of Country have their greatest performative powers when it is Country that is being acknowledged with all that is implied not only of the land but of the other living forms, including humans, in which it is in relation. An Acknowledgement of Country then is performative as a decolonising gesture only when the Indigenous concept of Country in its complexity is acknowledged—as a sovereign Law to which all life is



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subject. (In the context of widespread and devastating environmental degradation in Australia, engagement with ideas of Country as a network of interconnecting relationships is increasingly considered to be relevant, if not vital, in new ecological discourses.) In an Acknowledgement of Country is an opportunity for western-centric subjects to remake ourselves, or at least, to borrow Judith Butler's words, to imperfectly reiterate our whiteness which is fundamentally bound with ideas of land and country.

Indigenous perspectives on the potentialities of these rituals to affect a shift in settler discourses vary. Even while many published accounts of Indigenous perspectives on the rituals are sceptical of the sincerity with which settlers observe and participate in the rituals, they mostly retain an interest in the rituals' potentialities for renegotiating understandings of the terrain, as it were, on which notions of land and belonging take root. One such commentator is Jade Kennedy who has written on the possibilities of the rituals contributing to "establishing a new dialogue about a renegotiated sense of belonging" (58). This renegotiation would not be a capitulation to or inclusion of settler notions, however, but a transformation.

Kennedy and Pelizzon are clear about the antagonisms that institutional Acknowledgements and Welcomes cannot cover over, and which the rituals themselves often point to. As Kennedy says about the speeches he makes when invited to perform a Welcome to Country: "I welcome you all to my Country and yet I have no Country to welcome you to" (60). He points, too, to the obligatory nature of these rituals: "Can I *not* welcome you all to my Country when you invite me to do a Welcome? If I cannot refuse, then, is it really a Welcome, or rather a forced acquiescence to your presence? How can I welcome you all to my Country and then watch you dismiss all that my Welcome implies as soon as I finish?" (67).

For Kennedy and Pelizzon, Welcome to Country ceremonies are inescapably political acts, despite the resistances and disavowals with which they are met by the



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institutions that invite them: “They represent intersections of contemporary political acts of resistance to the ongoing process of colonisation with traditional normative and spiritual meanings” (63). “Aboriginal ontologies defining what constitutes Country ... must be taken into account when participating in a contemporary recognition of Country event” (65). Kennedy and Pellezoni work with a different idea of inclusiveness than Kowal does: theirs is an invitation to non-Indigenous people to acknowledge an Aboriginal view of Country and belonging rather than introduce once more the western-centric, settler view which is after all so very dominant. It is to have one’s ideas of country and belonging ‘Aboriginalised’ through the performance of the ceremony. The ‘other’—now the settler—“is culturally situated in relation to Country”, it is they who are “incorporated”, entering the body of the country and the Law. In this way, “all participants in a recognition of Country event engage in a political act of decolonization.” (67)

‘White’, ‘settler’, ‘colonist’—these are among the many names for non-Indigenous Australians, each one ambiguous, each available to perjorative meanings, each one taken with pride, somewhere by someone. The relations of colonialism are just as ambiguous, enigmatic and violent. They do, however, hold in them the promise of their own demise, their own imperfect repetition. In a Welcome to Country, the white-settler-colonising subject is offered an opportunity to bear witness to another idea of land, of land as Country, and to allow their own attachments to ‘country’ and ‘belonging’ to be brought under pressure.



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