

EVANESCENT, OSCILLATING, NEVER QUITE SETTLED UPON: THE OUTBACK AS CULTURAL MIRAGE

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NAIDOC Day¹ 1988 was a day of dramatic symbolism and action throughout Australia. In towns and cities across the nation Aboriginal people massed to demonstrate the unsettling ambiguity of State recognition in the year declared to celebrate a Bicentenary of the European occupation of the continent.

In the tiny outback town of Marree it was also a day of high drama. In the morning the Aboriginal flag was raised, without fanfare, on the town's flag pole. Someone soon replaced it with the Australian flag. Later the two flags were flown together—at first with the Australian flag uppermost, later with the ordering reversed. This battle for sovereignty continued throughout the day as the flags were raised and lowered and re-strung in innovative combinations.

Another 'flag incident' was raised on the global arena in 1994. Cathy Freeman, Aboriginal winner, gave identity and ambiguous sovereignty another run for its money at the Commonwealth Games. A tall superwoman flagged the double-edge of her Aboriginal heritage over her Australian representativeness and a small white Australian male contested her right to do so.

Such contestations reaffirm for me that nations are states of being in which millions of mutually unknowable individuals conjure up (or have conjured up for them) a sense of self-evident relatedness. As Benedict Anderson has demonstrated so well, nations are 'imagined communities'.

The territory of the nation is no less a vista of the imagination. None of us can claim to have traversed the length and breadth of our homeland, nor to have seen it all with our own eyes. Any history of knowledge about Australia demonstrates that Australia, since its very conception as *Terra Australis nondem cognita*, has been profoundly imagined terrain. Conceptions of Australia and its nature have always had far-reaching material consequences for this land and the people who live in it.

The 'outback' has become a powerful and defining locus of the nation for Australians. Though at the core of the nation, the outback is a space from which the majority of Australians are profoundly distanced. These interiors perch remotely beyond us. The outback is an imagined space on the horizon of the nation.

My task here is essentially exploratory. So too I suggest is the orientation of most Australians to the outback.

In this article I want to point to the complex relationship between the imaginings of our 'minds' eyes' and the entailments of our lived experiences. This paper sets out on a brief excursion into the space that the arid outback takes up in the nation. It seeks to explore the disjuncture between metropolitan imaginings of the outback and the nature of its terrain in the

lives of people who make their homes there. This paper seeks to point to the power of metropolitan imaginings, for these ideas have profound material consequences in the everyday lives of people there.

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In an important sense representations of the outback are founded in texts of exploration. This is cultural terrain about which narratives of both fact and fiction share an abiding exploratory orientation. What has been contested over time is the expectation of what can be discovered there.

Australia's inland explorers in the early and mid-nineteenth century searched for a *fertile inland sea*. Commenting on the accounts of the explorers Eyre and Sturt, Carter has noted:

what unites their narratives is their unusual ambitiousness in attempting to constitute their journeys under the aegis of a single, unifying metaphor: that of the sea. Figuring forth the spaces of their journeys as sea-like, as resembling the sea, as contiguous to the sea, even as contrasting with the sea, both Sturt and Eyre were able to orchestrate the variousness of their experiences into a single, swelling symphonic theme. Whether the sea was 'real' or imaginary was, from the point of view of the interest of the narrative, by the way. Its significance lay in its symbolic fertility as a hypothesis of exploration....it represents an attitude towards reality, a model for constructing truth....Explorer and reader alike travel along an imaginary boundary, where opposites meet and threaten to become one another. (91-2)

As important as the dynamic tension between the sea and the desert which Carter notes, were evocations of the transmogrifying capacities of the interior heat. A passage from Sturt (referring to being stranded at Depot Creek in 1844 and 5) was, I argue, critical in the withering away of the idea of the interior harbouring a sea of fertility and the developing influence of a contesting view. Sturt wrote in his account of exploration:

the tremendous heat that prevailed had parched vegetation and drawn moisture from everything....Under [its effect] every screw in our boxes had been drawn, and the horn handles of our instruments, as well as our combs, were split into fine laminae. The lead dropped out of our pencils, our signal rockets were entirely spoiled; our hair, as well as the wool on the sheep, ceased to grow, our nails had become as brittle as glass....we found it difficult to write or draw, so rapidly did the fluid dry in our pens and brushes. (305-6)

The image of a *fertile inland sea* gradually perished in the desolating heat and vast aridity which made real life explorers into parched corpses and led once-hopeful pastoralists to 'walk off' the stations they had sought to establish in the interior.

By the mid 1860s new visions of the outback were emerging from the failed corporeality of explorers like Leichhardt and Burke and Wills. Visions of the continent mimicked their physicality. Its heart, like theirs in discovering it, was dead.

This monstrous and mortifying realisation made carrion of the idea that the continent had a fecund inland sea at its core. Vivid imaginings of fertility were made destitute by ideas of sterility and death.

Australia, it began to seem, had a *heart that was beyond redemption*. The outback was back of beyond—beyond taming, beyond cultivation, beyond life. The outback was the continent's *dead heart*. Even when Europeans moved to take up residence in these regions they failed to convert this terrain into 'settled areas'. Their beasts only grazed the surface of the outback.

The popular assertion of this ensemble of ideas over the vision of a fertile inland sea became apparent by the severe droughts of the 1890s.²

Perhaps presaged by Patrick White's *Voss*, but certainly given increasingly popular momentum since the early 1980s when the Roxby Downs blockade re-configured the vantage of environmentalists on the terrain of the nation, a new ensemble of ideas about our interiors

has been elaborated. I refer to this vantage as the *redemptive wilderness heartlands* view. This vista contests the view of the outback as the continent's *dead heart*.

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In 1994 'Vaseline Intensive Care' was the subject of a provocative advertising campaign. In a 'Skin Science Update' safari-suited swimming star Lisa Forrest walked towards the camera in a vast, wide-angled outback landscape:

Out here in Sturt's Stony Desert the temperature reaches up to 55 degrees. Yet it's under this scorching heat that grows the very thing that will help soothe sun burn. Its called aloe vera...Research shows vaseline intensive care with Aloe soothes the drying effects of sun burn. Sometimes the best scientific discoveries come from nature.

—From intensive research comes vaseline intensive care.

The ad begins by recalling the transmogrifying capacities of the interior sun, capacities to which Sturt drew attention when there was still some hope of discovering a fertile inland sea. The commercial ends by drawing a very contemporary link between nature, science, and healing. As the camera pans the landscape the voice-over points to a broad range of images of the nature of the arid outback. This ad demonstrates the abiding relevance of exploration to our 'knowledge' of the continent's interiors.

Today it is not only chartered explorers and intrepid scientists who venture forth into our interiors. At the end of the twentieth century Australians have embraced expeditionary tourism. And this exploratory orientation is no longer an exclusively male activity—Mitsubishi, for example, advertises its Pajero as perfect for Olga, Alice and Katherine, and 'ANZSES: The Exploring Society' has offered all-women's expeditions to the Lake Eyre Basin since 1988.³

The outback is now available to every woman, every man and their kids. As Ann McGrath has noted:

Anyone can actually travel to the outback and 'know' that it is real. The white people defined as 'real Australians' can be met and their reality 'known' by the tourist. 'Real Aborigines' can be seen and tourists are pleased with the authenticity found, especially if they attend a tourist corroboree. Outback travel...authenticates national identity. (114-15)

The outback is now a realm in which visitors, tourist and researcher alike, can see themselves as explorers and their journeys as explorations into the interiors of both self and nation. The highways of the outback are now the tracks of a complex of four wheel driven dreamings. This is, as television dramas and documentaries frequently remind us, a frontier of 'Our World' to explore. And now, simply by buying the bait of a 'great outback verandah' we can bring the frontier of our imagined selves into the suburban sociality of our own backyards.

Indeed there are arguably more images, representations and accounts of the Australian outback than there are people conducting their everyday lives in it. This poses a particular 'problem' for an anthropologist—disciplined so firmly by the interrogation of everyday life. The problem is that despite the rich texture of everyday lives lived in the outback, those lives are ever more tightly girt by the complex interaction of ideas, imaginings, cultural texts and practices founded in distant metropolises.

But it is more than this. These are ideas, imaginings and texts with material consequences: in policy, in legislation, in bureaucratic practice and in the practices of everyday life. These imaginings are not immaterial. Any study of the outback would be impoverished if it failed to recognise these dimensions of social and cultural realities and neglected to take them into account.

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This article is founded in a study of the outback which began in 1987 as an ethnographic study of the Marree-Birdsville Track District in South Australia's Far North. In that study I set out to explore lineaments of culture in the practice of everyday life and the taken-for-granted assumptions which gave that lived experience a sense of predictability and meaning. While I was concerned that my study should not be confined by a particular focus on indigenes, ethnics or even the 'traditional' approach of 'anthropology at home', I wanted my study to be thoroughly ethnographic. I wanted my insights to emerge out of an intensive interaction between my own lived experience and the lives of other people living there.

The cornerstone of this ethnography was laid in 1989 when Rod Lucas and I moved into a government house in Marree's First Street and spent the good part of that year there. When not engaging in everyday life: at kitchen tables, on the radio, in the Oasis, the Great Northern, in a myriad of meetings, at the races, camping, at the computer, as ethnographers do around the world, we recorded genealogies and memories, and the stories which emerged from them, of life in this place.

We developed other dimensions of our project. Our fieldwork coincided with a boom time for expeditionary tourism. Between 1987 and 1990 Rod and I joined scientific expeditions of various kinds and served expeditionary tourists at service outlets in town and up the Track. We watched the tethers of dust connecting caravans of expeditionary tourists over many miles. We observed the popularity of unmarked photographic posts whose only attraction seemed to be the view that their rises gave of an apparently vast and empty landscape. We heard these ideas spoken by visitors struck by the apparent emptiness and barrenness of the environment—even after rain when the swales were filled with bright flowers.

We also began to read the long history of popular literature exploring this region. We recognised its long and abiding exploratory orientation. We found the same orientation in film and television and all manner of cultural texts 'set' in the outback. These texts, I suggest, frame the orientation of most visitors to the region. No explorers can ever begin their traverse or make account of their survey with virgin eyes. Known realms, cultural frames and assumptions are always points of departure for expeditions of exploration. As much as explorers see themselves as going beyond existing horizons, most ultimately bring those experiences and visions back into some relationship to their points of departure.

As our work in the region progressed, we recognised the marked disjuncture between metropolitan-expeditionary orientations to the region and those of people who had made their lives in it. For them this region was not characterised by vastness or emptiness. It is not a sparse landscape devoid of differentiation and meaning. To the contrary: it is brim full. As one pastoral patriarch told us: 'I know every tree, every stone on this place'. I have no doubt that he does, even though 'this place' of his covers nearly 2000 square kilometres. This is not an unusual level of knowledge or attachment.

A drive along the Birdsville Track is not impartial. Friends are dropped-in-on all along the way, and those with whom relations are strained often avoided. Quick trips into town require strategising. It is not just bore heads and homesteads that map out the journey along the Track. Grids, trees, tanks, yards, areas in need of road repair and even stock, locate people in time, place and relationships. 'Big Red' is a sandhill used for rugger bugger tourist sport just outside of Birdsville. It is, I think, one of the few sandhills whose 'name' is known by tourists. By contrast 'Jack's Tank' is off the main tourist track. It is one of many landmarks in time and space for people who work and live in that stretch of country. Jack may now be long gone but his name, and the water it locates, signposts significance.

Not long after we arrived to take up residence in Marree we drove an Aboriginal elder from Birdsville back home. As we drove along she pointed to hills, lakes and other distinctions in the landscape and located them in a system of meaning which took other tracks as their points of departure, and embodied other significations of boundary and distinction. She made connections between this cultural topography, human beings and its other inhabitants. She sang the country.

Local people enlivened the landscape for us. They revealed it to us as eminently cultural terrain.

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Sturt, Eyre and MacDouall Stuart have long since joined Burke and Wills in death, yet metropolitan Australians have maintained an expeditionary orientation to the interior. Though we often lose sight of it, the contours of culture and the terrain of the nation continue to be wrought in explorers' tracks. This orientation to a distant unsettled frontier is clear in our literature, in our art, in advertising, in the images of film and television, even in our maps. It is evident in our everyday lives.

In *The Road to Botany Bay*, Paul Carter focused attention on the metaphor of the sea in early explorers' accounts. Yet another metaphor has sustained us through time in our view from the fringe of 'our' interiors: the image of mirage.

Captain S.A. White described how in 1916 he and his scientific expedition had approached the township after many weeks exploring:

Long before reaching Hergott [Springs, now known as Marree] a wonderful mirage showed us the northern town far up in the sky with the roofs pointing downwards. The Hergott Hotel looked like a palatial building on the edge of a glorious lake, with a fine city built along its shores, the red roofs of the houses lending a warm colouration to the scene. In places wonderfully coloured cliffs bordered the lake, and the few pepper trees in the township were transformed into huge weeping willows, overshadowing the water. Our camels shuffled noiselessly on, and soon the wonderful painting in the sky began to disappear, and those who knew Hergott were thrilled at the wonderful deception the desert air had played us. Camels became more plentiful, as they wandered round looking for something to eat, and away across the dismal barren plain the railway tanks showed us where the steel track wound its way round the shores of Lake Eyre into the far beyond. (124-5)

White's party was, as this mirage suggests, on their way 'home'.

Forty or so years later the film-makers Charles and Elsa Chauvel, in the midst of an expedition across the outback, described their vantage:

the mirage always stalked the land. It was the phenomenon which upset the calculations of so many explorers and settlers. There is one mirage which often occurs out here, and that is the 'Mirage of Marree'. It appears in the sky as a shimmering lake and upon the waters of this lake there appears a settlement with palms and a mosque and islands of green trees. Many travellers and people who live in this country have seen this strange mirage of Mohammedan mosque and bleached, galvanised-iron buildings and clumps of large pepperina trees—the whole conglomeration of township is metamorphosed by the desert air and sunlight into a mirage of phantasy. (99)

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It is the metaphor of mirage which unites the variousness of our national narratives about our interiors. Outback mirages hang magically beyond us. They are refractions of reality—real images whose substance is founded in the material world but bent by the haze of heat, distance and vantage. Mirages delude, entice, enchant and beckon. They cannot be conquered.

The motif of mirage invites us to reflect upon the complex processes by which the material and imagined dimensions of our lives are contingent on each other. Mirages locate us in cultural terrain.

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The outback is a *cultural mirage*. Evanescent, oscillating, shimmering, never quite settled upon...this mirage provides a locating and identifying horizon for Australians from Bondi to Burnie, Broome and back. If the continent over which the first settlers asserted sovereignty was understood by them as unsettled, 200 and more years later it is the outback, defined by remaining beyond the settled districts, which is an unsettling force at the heart of the nation.

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Notes

- 1 The day of celebration declared by the National Aboriginal and Islander Day Committee.
- 2 Though it first crystallised in the title of J.G.W. Gregory's 1906 book—*The Dead Heart of Australia*.
- 3 Formerly simply the Australian New Zealand Scientific Exploring Society. Indeed, I was a participant-observer of their 1989 'Expedition Cooper Creek'.