

Frontiers, Borders, Edges: liminal challenges to the hegemony of exclusion

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Spatial metaphors that presuppose exclusion and separation rather than interaction and co-existence dominated in representations of landscape on Australian frontiers prior to the 1990s' legal, parliamentary and social recognition of native title. Metaphors of co-existence have emerged from the public debate about native title. This constitutes a major challenge to previously hegemonic ideas that indigenous Australians were marginal to the Australian national identity.

This paper reviews the implications of metaphors used to represent frontiers, borders, boundaries, edges and complex relations within and between indigenous and non-indigenous territories in Australia. It argues that the liminal notion of co-existence both unsettles many of the hidden legacies of colonial exploitation infecting Australian geographical imaginations to the detriment of reconciliation and sustainability. This opens avenues for geographers to address the burdens the discipline carries from its roles in creating geographies of exclusion.

Imaginarities and realities: frontier metaphors and contemporary politics

Australian landscapes are plagued by multiple boundaries that seek to divide and subdivide places, people and resources into manageable units. Despite the veneer of liberal pluralism, of which many Australians are justly proud¹, Australians' geographical imaginations have been profoundly affected by frontier metaphors and thus are ill-equipped to meet the challenges arising from the legally, legislatively and socially contested recognition of native title.

This paper draws on recent experience on both sides of the imagined frontier between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. Aboriginal people affected by mining operations and mining and exploration proposals and mining companies grappling

with cross-cultural experience have both provided opportunities to reflect on the conceptual tools available to meet the many challenges arising from the contested recognition of native title. There has been much relevant and influential work on the confrontation between the 'Same' and the 'Other' that has been so influential in social theoretical debates in recent years (eg Esteva, 1987; Marcus, 1990; Bhaba, 1994; Davis, 1996; Harvey, 1996; Lavie and Swedenburg, 1996; Rose, 1997 *inter alia*). Much of that literature, however, remains rather abstract. In this paper, I offer a grounded response to it by re-viewing and re-thinking spatial metaphors underpinning Australian geographies, and considering the challenges that arise from a new set of spatial metaphors emphasising inclusion, coexistence and reconciliation. These new spatial metaphors challenge many taken-for-granted elements of inter-cultural relations and cultural and territorial politics of Australian identities. I argue that metaphors emerging from the native title debate in the wake of the *Wik* decision² provide opportunities to turn away from the divisive neo-colonial frontier politics of the new Right and the conventional paternalism of the old Left. The ecological and permacultural concept of 'edges' provides an alternative way of thinking and speaking about these issues. It might enable us to shift away from the spatial shallowness and 'wedge politics' of One Nation³ towards a more complex, constructive and inclusive 'edge politics' that grapples with ambivalence, uncertainty, change, overlap and interaction in ways that dislodge the old-style colonial metaphors of empty spaces, and frontier heroics. In other words, I want to shift Australians' geographical imaginings away from the oppositional zoning of 'frontiers' and the categorical separateness of 'borders' to a liminal⁴, multi-dimensional, real-world idea of edges as places with a more solid and changeable engagement with complexity. Using this idea this paper advocates a dialogue within geography, and between geography and the political processes shaping Australian geographies that might extend the discipline's conceptual toolkit to tackle the politics of environment, citizenship, sovereignty and identity implicated in important questions about constitutional reform that underpin the wider importance of the native title debate.

The structural racism that so deeply troubles national, regional

and local political processes is often rooted in a spatial imaginary in which vast tracts of land and sea are treated as quite literally empty. The related legal notion of *terra nullius*, which has been a focus of much debate and analysis (for example Williams, 1987; Reynolds, 1987, 1996; Sharp, 1992; Jackson, 1995), is just one element of the multi-dimensional legacy of Europe's colonial encounters in Australia. Other elements, such as political and administrative boundaries, social and cultural divides and the many spatial images that shape Australian public policy and cultural identities are not so much a reflection of the legal complexities of *terra nullius* as a reflection of a longstanding and foundational fear and loathing of the indigenous Other constructed in response to those colonial encounters. This is not reducible to a single legal doctrine. In a memorable passage in his novel *Remembering Babylon*, Malouf gets close to articulating some of this fear:

It brought you slap up against a terror you thought you had learned, years back, to treat as childish: the Bogey, the Coal Man, Absolute Night. And now here it is, not two yards away, solid and breathing: a thing beside which all you have ever known of darkness, of *visible* darkness, seems but the merest shadow, and all you can summon up to the encounter, out of a lifetime on the other, the lighter side of things — shillings and pence, the Lord's Prayer, the half dozen tunes your fingers can pick out on the strings of a fiddle, the names and ages of your children, including the ones in the earth, your wife's touch on your naked belly, and the shy soft affection you have for yourself — weakens and falls away before the apparition, out of nowhere, of a figure taller perhaps than you are and of a sooty blackness beyond black, utterly still, very close, yet so far off, even at a distance of five feet, that you cannot conceive how it can be here in the same space, the same moment with you (Malouf, 1994: 42-43, emphasis in original).

The image of Australia as a frontier society is deeply embedded in the nation's geographical imagination. It is also embodied through a wide range of land, resource and environmental management arrangements, and community perceptions of what is 'reasonable' in

relation to processes of national development. It was also embodied in Prime Minister Howard's use of maps during the native title debate to threaten the impending 'loss' of 78% of the Australian nation to native title claims. One response to the emergence of native title as a persistent element in Australian legal landscapes, for example, has been an effort to discipline native title to conform with this imaginary — to establish a legal framework to contain it; to identify boundaries beyond which it cannot exist; to restrict its influence where it cannot be extinguished. But, what lies behind these images? How is one best to conceptualise this 'frontier' that is so deeply etched in the imaginaries and realities of Australian lives?

Although the heritage industry often seeks to capitalise on images of a frontier constructed from partial accounts of 19th century settlers' grappling with indigenous populations in remote and hostile parts of an administratively fragmented continent, this is not an adequate basis for understanding the spatial domain in current social debate. The frontier metaphor encompasses many other elements of the colonial experience, and our analysis must extend into its reproduction and appropriation in contemporary realms. In addition to the confrontation with an indigenous Other, its othering of indigenous Australians, the frontier imagery simultaneously reflects the colonial and continuing confrontation with alien environmental conditions. It reflects the isolationism of the white Australia policy and protectionism of fortress Australia policies. The frontier image simultaneously contains the familiar and excludes the alien and incomprehensible Other. The familiar takes the shape of a 'paradise for workers' (Buckley and Wheelwright, 1988), or the 'edge of empire' (Jacobs, 1996); the Other is represented as a hostile and inhospitable environment, incomprehensible distances separating the empire's edge from its heartland, variegated perils threatening 'our' northern frontier, and the indigenous Other.

Emptying the landscape: geography's role in the imperial project

One of the persistent elements in Australian notions of frontier developmentalism has been a need to 'clear the way' for development — to establish a regulatory landscape in which impediments to development are controlled and brought to order. This task has

involved the creation of knowledge, the establishment of statutory controls and authorities (including the imposition of zoning, establishment of Crown powers and other spatial disciplines), the physical removal of environmental and social resistance (including the physical removal of Aboriginal peoples from their territories); the exertion of ideological pressure on resisting populations; and the creation of interests in lands and resources through grants, leases and other transactions which have defied the spatial realities.

These processes simultaneously comprise both an emptying and a filling of these spaces. On the one hand, the colonial project sought to empty landscapes of unwanted elements: trees were cleared; rivers dammed; and indigenous populations slaughtered and contained. On the other hand, the landscapes were filled with new elements: new property titles; new pastoral and agricultural species; new people.

Geography was directly implicated in that project:

The work of the geographer goes hand in hand with that of the pioneer ... No work can be productive at home of more practical good than one which has for its object the perfection of the knowledge we already possess of 'our great land'; the existence and the distribution of its natural resources; the natural advantages offered to the settlement on Australian shores of numbers of the white race, and the preservation and civilisation of the various indigenous races.... The first care of a young nation must likewise be to obtain a thorough knowledge of its new home, the land it has peacefully conquered, and which is destined to become the home of countless generations of descendants (Marin la Meslee 1885: ix).

A network of colonial geographical societies was established in the 1880s in southern-eastern Australia. At the meetings to establish these societies, speeches celebrated explorers' contributions to geographical knowledge (Howitt and Jackson, 1998). Both exploration sponsored by the geographical societies, and the more scholarly work of early academic geography helped build a dominant geographical imaginary which saw Australia as empty, unknown, and waiting for (white) settlement (eg White, 1907; Holmes, 1935, 1936; Lowndes,

1941; Taylor, 1947).

More recently, although geographers have been actively involved in the working with indigenous peoples on a range of decolonisation and empowerment projects, there has continued to be an internalisation of some elements of the old imperial project within the discipline (Howitt and Jackson, 1998). The most dramatic example remains Davis and Prescott's much-criticised effort to document Aboriginal frontiers and boundaries (Davis and Prescott, 1992; see also Sutton, 1995), but the field of urban and regional planning as an important area of applied geography appears to continue aiming to clear the land for development in many jurisdictions (Jackson, 1997, 1998).

It is beyond the scope of the present paper to explore in detail the extent to which the old imperial project remains embedded or implicit in current disciplinary structures. It is worth noting, however, that the Institute of Australian Geographers established a study group on indigenous issues at its 1997 meeting and passed a motion in support of recognising the persistence and importance of native title in Australian landscapes at that meeting. In the current context, however, it seems more urgent to consider in some detail the opportunities for geographers to actively contribute to practical, political, theoretical and cultural responses to the challenges posed by recognition of native title and coexistence.

Geographies of coexistence 5: unbounding Australian geographical imaginations

Rose makes the point that the persistent notion of a bounded individual in western philosophy has had direct implications in Australia's northern frontier territories. It has, she suggests, created a process of development through monologue (Rose 1999). The white Australian pole of Self has defined indigenous Australians in terms of absence, creating a politics (and a geography) in which:

a critical feature of the system is that the 'other' never gets to talk back on its own terms. The communication is all one way, and the pole of power refuses to receive the feedback that would cause it to change itself, or to open itself to dialogue.

Power lies in the ability not to hear what is being said, not to experience the consequences of one's actions, but rather to go one's own self-centric and insulated way (Rose 1999: 176-177).

This lays foundations for a dangerous deception, which Rose describes in memorable terms:

The self sets itself within a hall of mirrors; it mistakes its reflection for the world, sees its own reflections endlessly, talks endlessly to itself, and, not surprisingly, finds continual verification of itself and its world view. This is monologue masquerading as conversation, masturbation posing as productive interaction; it is a narcissism so profound that it purports to provide a universal knowledge when in fact its practices of erasure are universalising its own singular and powerful isolation. The pole of 'self' is both a deformed and deforming power: deforming because it seeks to bend all else to its will, and understands all else only in terms of itself; deformed because it thinks (or gambles) that its will is the will of the universe (Rose 1999: 177).

This, then, provides the philosophical underpinning for the denial of coexistence. It is a view of cultural identity that not only denies the value of diversity, but even questions its possibility. It is a view that leads directly to a politics of exclusion, control and myopia and reflects and reinforces a geographical imagination rooted in images of empire as certainty. In this geographical imaginary, power is exercised to construct spaces that one could understand and feel comfortable in — spaces that provided certainty, identity and security. Aboriginal Reserves, urban areas whose by-laws excluded the indigenous Other, national parks, pastoral leases and freehold estates were all neatly bounded spaces that conformed to this imaginary. The uncomfortable, messy reality of coexistence — the contingent and circumstantial need to always contextualise knowledge of 'property' — fundamentally threatens this sense of spatial order. In an effort to create this kind of order, Davis and Prescott (1992, 24) claimed to demonstrate that 'in large parts of Australia outside the tropics precise information about

Aboriginal boundaries has been lost forever'. This seeks to locate coexistence as a moment in a colonial past. It seeks to bound the possibility of coexistence in the present into a regulated space by enclosing boundaries that meet their poorly considered criteria for 'traditional' indigenous societies.

Yet we **are** able to begin constructing a less bounded geographical imagination — to decolonise Australians' geographical imagination. Again, I would like to turn to Rose's work for assistance (see, for example, Rose, 1984, 1988, 1992, 1996, 1999; also Christie, 1990, 1992, Christie and Perrett 1996). She provides insights into a philosophical system founded not upon the solipsistic singularities that dominate western philosophy, but rather on multiplicities. Difference (and diversity) becomes fundamental to one's own identity and one's place in the world. Rather than threatening, diversity becomes defining. Rather than a negative requiring extinguishment, coexistence (not just of native title, but of other subjectivities and the prospect of sharing nourishing terrains with 'Others'), becomes a positive. Here we begin to view a notion of subjectivity, of being-in-place if we might reconstruct this notion in geographers' terms, which is not isolated and afraid, but is always interleaved with other subjects (human and non-human) and always contextualised:

It seems that subjectivity is not confined by the boundaries of the skin, but rather is sited both inside, on the surface of, and beyond the body. Subjects, then, are constructed both within and without; subjectivity is located within the site of the body, within the bodies of other people and other species, and within the world in trees, rockholes, on rock walls, and so on. And of course location is by no means random; country is the matrix for the structured reproduction of subjectivities.

A ... multiplicity of social contexts provides innumerable opportunities to argue about social context, social responsibility and social action ... Equally, however, this same multiplicity of contexts works to contain tension and conflict. The cross-cutting of categories and the multiple sites of subjectivity ensure that power is located throughout the system. Politics [in Aboriginal

societies] lies in the art of locating one's self in as many contexts as possible, rather than in accumulating contexts and collapsing them into a singularity (Rose, 1999, 180-181).

If we might begin to re-imagine geographies constructed on the basis of this unbounded notion of the Self, we might rethink a range of regional policies.⁶ Rose uses Levinas's (1977) term 'nourishing terrains' in the title of her 1996 book encompasses the landscape of such a contextualised and unbounded self encompasses both socio-physical and intellectual spaces. In unbounding the geographical imagination of Australian public life from the spatial metaphors that were produced by and reinforced the notion of *terra nullius*, it might be possible to unsettle the political certainties that have grown around structural racism, stolen children, a critique of globalisation and cynicism about representative politics.

The challenges ahead

In making such contributions, geographers themselves need to be contextualised. New imaginaries, in which regional futures are grounded in notions of coexistence rather than separation and are committed to delivering social justice, ecological sustainability, tolerance of diversity and economic equity, need to recognise and respond to a range of challenges. Whatever one's personal political position (Right, Left, Green etc), the recognition of native title and the factual reality of coexistence present specific challenges. In analysing and addressing these challenges, geography as a discipline has much to contribute.

Challenges to the Right: the mythic landscape of separation and extinguishment

In 1996, the High Court's decision in the *Wik* case issued a challenge of major significance to those Australians whose ideas and values are rooted in the geographies of exclusion, exploitation and isolation. That challenge has been met with a rather backward-looking effort to mobilise legislative, social and media processes to try to put the native title genie back into a 1950s-vintage bottle. While they occupy different positions on the spectrum of this back-to-the-future

thinking, many right-wing leaders argued that the way to secure 'certainty' and 'workability' was to put indigenous people back on a road of conformity with an ethnocentric vision of what being 'Australian' might possibly mean. Such myopic and repressive one-nation-ism is, in my view, ignorant, wrong-headed and dangerous. It leads to the same sort of thinking that lay behind the genocidal policies revealed in the stolen generations report (Australia 1997) and which many on the Right of Australian politics have found equally as troubling as the High Court's 'activist' judgements on native title.

The controversial Ten Point Plan to amend the *Native Title Act* was criticised internationally as reducing the rights and benefits that might flow from native title in a discriminatory way (eg Jonas 2000, chapter 2). The ambivalent decision in the Hindmarsh Island case was heralded as a victory by the Federal Government not only because of its implications for the construction of a specific project in South Australia, but because it revealed that at least some High Court judges believe that the national government is constitutionally empowered to impose discriminatory legislative regimes on some citizens on the basis of their race (Tehan 2000). At the same time, having abandoned the Social Justice Package that the Keating Government had agreed to establish as the third leg of its comprehensive response to the native title negotiations in 1993, the Howard Government insists that its emphasis on health, education and employment as priorities in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Affairs portfolio is decent. There is incomprehension when indigenous Australians fail to conform to the conservative's helping hand approach to achieving equality. The notion that those on the 'other side of the frontier' may not even want to be included in the sort of citizenship on offer is, it seems, almost unthinkable.

In the mining industry, negotiators continue to put together compensation packages comprising money, training and jobs. Even in companies such as Rio Tinto, whose policy of 'recognition and respect' for indigenous groups is amongst the most progressive and constructive around, the ability to genuinely listen to indigenous people is rare. The ability to understand what is said in negotiations is even rarer. 'Good neighbour' style responses still imply the persistence of a spatial separation and denial of co-existence. If a

company offers the support that a 'good neighbour' should provide, the notion that they possibly co-exist with those who become the target of their 'well-intentioned paternalism' is submerged. And if 'compensation' is paid, the prospect for some persistent residual interests that require ongoing relationships with 'native title' claimants, even after legal extinguishment is achieved, is not easily grasped. Yet it is clear that legal extinguishment of title does not imply (nor in the High Court's view should it anticipate) extinguishment of the cultural identities and indigenous law and custom that produced the rights and responsibilities the common law recognises as native title. Extinguishment of native title, what ever the One-Nation-ists might wish, will not extinguish indigenous peoples.

Challenges to the Left: unsettling the boundaries of multiculturalist paternalism

Public critique in the native title debate has often focused on the awkwardness and inadequacy of conservative responses. It would be easy to think that the Australian Left, however inadequate the simplistic reduction of contemporary Australian identity politics into a 'left' and a 'right' might be, has not faced similar challenges arising from the recognition of native title. The celebratory pluralism, multiculturalism and diversity that characterises the cultural Left is often very paternalistic, and co-opted into a spatial politics of boundary setting. Native title is easily reconstructed in this domain as another issue on the Left's progressive political agenda. The struggle focuses on the legislative and legal domain of land claims and avoids the demonstrable failure of both major parties to deliver sustainable futures to rural and remote communities. While (some) Aborigines are generously included on 'this side' of the Left's frontiers, the spatial metaphor of the frontier as a zone of exclusion and conflict continues.

The High Court's recognition of co-existence as at least a potential reality in many parts of Australia requires a more sophisticated political and spatial imagery. For those comfortable with pluralist politics, the nature of native title presents some profound challenges. The republican movement has argued that a minimalist model of constitutional reform would be sufficient to reconstitute Australia as a republic. Australian sovereignty, derived from the

previous Crown sovereignty, would apparently be unproblematically created. Yet what of those rights and responsibilities that derive not from Crown sovereignty, but from systems of law and custom whose roots pre-date any possible version of Crown sovereignty in Australia, and which the High Court has determined the common law is both able and obliged to recognise and respect? In the United States, it is legally clear that many American Indian Nations retain a range of rights and responsibilities that pre-date the American Constitution. While the struggle to have these rights and responsibilities acknowledged and respected in practice remains, it is clear that the American melting pot did not completely dissolve these prior sovereign peoples. In Canada, efforts at constitutional reform (both in the form of Québec separatism and renegotiation of the terms of federal-provincial cooperation) have foundered on the failure to accommodate pre-existing First Nation rights. And closer to home, the East Timorese resistance and the Bougainville rebellion should serve as reminders of the inability of repressive or ungenerously inclusive nationalist ideology and legislative and legal solutions to extinguish territorial and representative aspirations that are rooted in the complex politics of colonial frontiers, neo-colonial economic relations and post-colonial pluralism that patronises exclusion, marginalisation and alienation.

Challenges on the ground: understanding that edges are not boundaries

In northern coastal areas, the inadequacies of frontier images are often laid bare. For most non-Aboriginal Australians, the distinction between 'land' and 'water' is an ontological given. Nothing is so fundamental as the separation of the land from the water. It is privileged as one of the 'big stories' of Genesis in the Bible, and it is easily mistaken for a 'natural' distinction — a 'natural' boundary, an ontological given. Yet when one comes to fix this ontological divide in space and time, it is indeterminate and shifting. The tide constantly redefines the position of the frontier; heavy sediment loads produce muddy estuaries with shifting muddy tidal meanders that are colonised by mangroves and flattened by cyclones⁷; the Wet season regularly inundates coastal plains so that the 'land' looks very much like a

swamp whose continuities with estuarine environments are at least as notable as their continuities with terrestrial ones. Sea, sky and land mixes up as Country 8; saltwater, freshwater and the land entwine and interpenetrate in a complex and fecund embrace of coexistence, rather than confined in zones of exclusion and non-interference. As Adams (1998) also notes, in these same places there is not only ecological complexity, but simultaneously a bureaucratic and administrative complexity imposed by the state's efforts to manage biodiversity conservation — often badly.

In ecological terms, the edges of ecosystems are often characterised by enormous diversity and complexity. These are liminal spaces, in which 'edges' are not lines of separation but zones of interaction. They are zones of transformation, transgression and possibility. Many things range across the edges, many develop specific ways of dealing with niches within the edges. And the edges themselves change. Mangroves colonise/nurture mudflats; mudflats entice/colonise the mangroves; the land expands and new species move in and establish changes. Are we, as geographers, to interpret this image of vegetation sequences as a metaphor for colonial occupation and displacement — or a metaphor for the creation of new spaces through co-existence and reconciliation?

And what of the spatial imagery of settler Australians' coastal obsession, their crowding into a coastal zone along the southeastern edge of the continent, producing continual and expanding ecological damage and cultural tension? Is the depopulation of rural communities because of the failure of rationalist policies to deliver sustainable futures for them a shifting of the frontier back to the coast? Or is this a new edge — a new opportunity to re-think how liminal communities of interest in these towns and regions might inter-relate/cohabit/co-exist rather than separate?

Whatever priorities and aspirations the national policy agenda might pursue, on the ground coexistence is the reality that people need to encompass within their imaginaries. At Weipa, on the west coast of Queensland's Cape York Peninsula, thirty-five years of unmitigated social, cultural and, to some extent, environmental impact of open-cut bauxite mining has produced a complex legacy of marginalisation and dissatisfaction. In social impact research

undertaken in 1996 in preparation for negotiations between Comalco and western Cape York indigenous communities affected by its operations, it became clear that local-scale reconciliation must involve a sophisticated understanding of the ways in which the mining and indigenous communities have co-evolved, enmeshed with, misunderstood and accommodated each other. There can be no doubt that Comalco has been part of the damage done to Aboriginal families, communities and country over the past thirty-five years.⁹ But the 'problem' is not simply Comalco's to 'solve' as they see fit. This situation is not reducible to a good neighbour problem. Comalco's use of the term 'good neighbour' in its community relations policy is revealing of an underlying imaginary in which the conventional spatial imagery involves 'good fences' and a clear respect for property rights. It implies separation rather than co-existence; colonisation rather than entwinement. At Weipa, the situation is not resolvable with handouts or tokens. Comalco has sought to offer freehold titles to businesses and families (some of whom have now been in Weipa for a third generation), but the land is covered by mining and special purpose leases that Aboriginal people understood would return to them when mining of these areas was completed. Local government arrangements are equally complex, but simplistic proposals to merge Comalco's Town Authority and Aboriginal Community Councils will do little to grapple with the issues of co-existence (Kealy, 1996).

In Kakadu National Park, a world heritage area in the Northern Territory, the environmental evidence suggests that biophysical environmental damage from the Ranger Uranium Mine has been relatively contained and minimised. The sophisticated work of the Environmental Research Institute of the Supervising Scientist has carefully monitored and mitigated these impacts. In contrast, the social impacts of the changes set in train by the development of the Ranger Mine (and the associated development of Jabiru town, Kakadu National Park and increased tourism) was studied for five years by a poorly-resourced Social Impact of Uranium Mining Project (1979-84), which made recommendations to reduce and mitigate impacts that went unheeded (Dodson et al, 1997; Levitus et al 1997). In 1996-97, I reviewed twenty years' worth of social research in the region for the Aboriginal Project Committee of the Kakadu Region Social Impact

Study, as part of the processes engendered by consideration of the Jabiluka No 2 Uranium Mine (Howitt, 1997). As at Weipa, one has to say that compensation packages and imposition of 'good' solutions will not make the problems go away. In recommending that Aboriginal opposition to the Ranger proposal not be allowed to prevail in the mid-1970s, the Ranger Inquiry commissioners lay the foundations for dissatisfaction, conflict and resentment. Imposing another exclusion zone between Aboriginal and mining interests around Jabiluka is hardly a propitious way to pursue co-existence, although the Kakadu National Park Board of Management provides some valuable contrasting pointers in that direction. The development of Jabiluka against the wishes and efforts of the local Aboriginal traditional owners recreates the disempowerment that accompanied approval of the Ranger mine. Coming as it does in a period when the Commonwealth's lease over Aboriginal Land for the national park are under close and critical scrutiny by the area's traditional Aboriginal owners, it risks reinscribing a geography of separation, where coexistence is a continually developing legal, administrative and economic reality.

Challenges to Australian geography: what roles might we play?

Recent work on a social impact study for the Alice Springs to Darwin Railway (Howitt, Jackson and Bryson, 1998; Howitt and Jackson 2000) has challenged me to think about dealing with issues of co-existence in a landscape affected by a large-scale and spatially complex project. The spatial imagery of separation has always understood the processes of sacred site clearances for development projects as a process of bounding spaces — refining the boundaries around the sacred and the non-sacred in ways that free up the non-sacred and make it available for development. While many people have discussed the inadequacy of this simplistic representation of sentient landscapes and nourishing terrains (Gelder and Jacobs, 1995a; 1995b; Munn, 1996 *inter alia*), it has at least minimised damage to some important sites. But in reviewing the detailed site clearance work for the railway — a project that stretches more than 1400 kilometres across many Aboriginal countries — it has become clear to me that site clearance work also involves Aboriginal people in

reconstructing local geographies. In identifying routes and locations that are acceptable (or less unacceptable) than others, Aboriginal people are fitting development proposals into their geographical imaginaries. They are certainly not identifying empty corridors through which the railway can go. In this and other ways, they are not simply creating space for development to proceed or emptying landscapes of their value. Indeed, that is unthinkable in most Aboriginal people's terms. Rather, they are confirming coexistence and reasserting the imperative (and inescapability) of co-constructing new geographies. They are implicating all of us in the creation of new liminal spaces (edges) in which we are all embedded. Indeed, in Aboriginal terms it is probably appropriate to say the country — the sentient and nourishing terrain itself — is trying to harness the engineers and planners to its own purposes. Rose (1998) makes a similar point in her discussion of a non-Aboriginal dairy farmer on the NSW South Coast who has been engaged in a struggle to save a mountain sacred to Aboriginal people. Her account of his experience reveals a geographical imagination 'knocked into shape' by experiences that have allowed the mountain to inscribe itself on him, rather than the conventional settler imperative of indelibly inscribing oneself onto the landscape.

If we are able to nurture a spatial imagination as part of Australian political life which is more geographical, sophisticated, literate and grounded in the realities of coexistence (with other cultures, with other people, with other species) we might find geography becoming as crucial a discipline as history in the reconfiguration of Australian identities and landscapes. Reynolds and others have been criticised by the separatists as advocating a 'black armband view of history' (Partington, 1994) — what colour armband might be appropriate for a decolonised geographical view of the landscape?

Decolonising frontier spaces: the challenges at the edges

The places in which I work continue to exhibit the socio-cultural and political-economic characteristics of colonised places. The legacies of colonial acts are inequitable power relations, diversion of resources to non-local private gain, alienation, pauperisation and a range of health, environmental and economic concerns within the affected

communities. As some mining companies are finally starting to realise, not only is the whole nation diminished by the treatment meted out by colonial and neo-colonial processes to indigenous Australians, but their own companies are also diminished by such inequities. Reconciliation, coexistence and sustainable local outcomes require decolonisation of the relationships that underpin the 'frontier relations' that so deeply characterise relations within and between these interests. At wider scales, such decolonisation opens the possibilities of co-existence in terms of the troubling questions of how to accommodate traditional law and custom as a legitimate authority in indigenous domains, how to recognise indigenous diversity rather than privileging a government-authorised and authenticated version of 'Aboriginal', how to constitute national sovereignty without submerging or denying indigenous sovereignties, and how to build citizenship communities that do not require the overthrow of indigenous responsibilities.

In my view, exploration of new spatial metaphors needs to displace the naive spatial certainties suggested by the notions of frontiers and boundaries that have so dominated the geographical imaginaries of many Australians. We need to confront the ambivalence and openness that is part and parcel of the complex, contingent and uncertain reality of co-existence. We need to develop a new lexicon of co-existence and explore socially, intellectually and culturally fertile edges in our real and imagined places. Integration of analyses at multiple scales to contribute to decolonisation of indigenous peoples, territories and resources are also urgently needed. In these fundamental challenges geographical research and Australian geographers' (and anthropologists') geographical imaginations have much to offer.

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NOTES

- 1 For a challenging and less optimistic reading of liberal pluralism in Australia see Povinelli 1998.
2. In December 1996 the High Court of Australia found by majority decision that native title could survive the granting of some land titles that were less than freehold. In particular, the Court found that pastoral leases, a common form of tenure in large areas of Australia, did not automatically extinguish native title and that native title could coexist with other interests (see eg Hiley 1997). The political debate that followed involved the development by the Commonwealth Government of a Ten Point Plan to deliver 'bucketloads of extinguishment' (a phrase used by the Deputy Prime Minister) and to secure certainty for all stakeholders except native title claimants.
3. One Nation was the political party established by Pauline Hanson, a Liberal Party candidate in Queensland who was dis-endorsed prior to the 1996 Federal election. One Nation's appeal to the extreme right produced a new level of political division within conservative parties, and highlighted divisions between urban and rural interests. Langton (1997) provides a powerful account of the party's 'wedge' politics.
- 4 The term liminal is conventionally applied to inter-tidal zones in physical landscapes. It is used here to suggest similarly ambiguous and (at least) bi-polar spaces within social discourses where multiple influences and positions need to be considered as shaping cultural landscapes. Shields (1991) found the concept useful in his consideration of the in-betweenness that people experience in temporal and spatial transitions in the life cycle. He highlights the transgressive and transformational nature of the idea. These themes are taken up by Winchester et al (1999) in their discussion of rites of passage associated with 'Schoolies Week' on the Gold Coast.

5 This title is taken from the title of Jackson's PhD thesis (Jackson, 1998).

6 It is worth noting that this version of the 'unbounded self' is far removed from the New Age notion of an undifferentiated human-nature-spirit. It is simultaneously embodied and emplaced in ways that demand a sophisticated engagement with difference, diversity and responsibility. It encompasses quite specific relationships between (specific) humans and elements of the landscape, rather than a 'warm and fuzzy' one-ness. See, for example, Langton, 1998,: 28; also Rose, 1999; Davis, 1996.

7 Lesley Instone drew my attention to the way that this representation of the link between mangroves and mud 'naturalises invasion'. It would be just as appropriate, she suggests to describe the link as 'a love affair between mangroves and mudflats where the mudflats entice the mangroves to co-habit!' (pers. comm.). The extent to which the term colonisation is naturalised in such images is precisely the sort of uncolonised geographical imagery that I want to challenge – yet this turn of phrase reveals its embeddedness in my own thinking.

8 On the concept of country as used in Aboriginal English, see (inter alia) Rose 1996, 1999; Widders and Noble, 1993; and Sutton 1995.

9 See for example Howitt et al., 1997; Howitt, 1995, 1996. The latter remains confidential pending conclusion of prolonged negotiations between Comalco and Aboriginal groups on Cape York.

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