

Editorial

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“Coming into Country” is our title for this Special Issue of PAN. But what is country, and who is coming into it? Country, in the Aboriginal sense intended here, is a profoundly non-Western category, and as a category it is perhaps, as Deborah Bird Rose often remarks, one of Aboriginal Australia’s greatest gifts to the world. In Aboriginal English, as Rose explains, “the word ‘country’ is both a common noun and a proper noun. People talk about country in the same way that they would talk about a person: they speak to country, sing to country, visit country, worry about country, grieve for country and long for country. People say that country knows, hears, smells, takes notice, takes care, is sorry or happy. Country is a living entity with a yesterday, today and tomorrow, with consciousness, action and a will toward life. Because of this richness of meaning, country is home and peace; nourishment for body, mind and spirit; and heart’s ease.”¹

In the category of country then, elements of mentality – sentience, agency, intentionality – are inextricable from materiality. In this sense, country represents an alternative to the dualised concept of nature that prevails in the modern west. In western thought, and particularly in the modern era, nature has typically been represented as pure object, inert, unresponsive, devoid of any kind of intrinsic mentality, putty for us to mould as we will. The complex dualistic layering of this category of nature, so central to modernity, has been analysed by no-one more thoroughly than it has by Val Plumwood, both here, in the first essay of this collection, and elsewhere in her work.² But in the category of country, country that listens, sorrows, knows its own, the gaps opened up by the old dualisms – between mind and matter, humanity and nature, subject and object, knower and known - are closed: mind and matter intermingle, and humanity is intricately constituted by rich conversation with its community of life. With this closing up, the ranking of mind over matter, humanity over nature, subject over object, and knower over known, dissolves. The idea of country frees us from the dualistic grip of western thought that has provided endless templates for domination.

So “coming into country” portends not only the protocols for introducing non-Indigenous individuals to Aboriginal lands -protocols so insightfully explored by John Cameron and Craig San Roque in the article from which this Special Issue of PAN takes its title. Nor does it portend only the gradual, still dim awakening of the Australian people to the presence of this miraculously animate continent. It could also perhaps be seen as pointing ahead to the collective emergence of modern societies from the dualistic framework of western thinking about nature, into new

¹ Deborah Bird Rose in collaboration with Sharon D’Amico, Nancy Daiyi, Kathy Devereau, Margaret Daiyi, Lind Ford, April Bright, *Country of the Heart*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 2002, p 14.

² See most notably *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, Routledge, London and New York, 1993.

metaphysical terrain. To the extent that we are alive to the ecological call, we are all, to some degree, becoming sensitive to the resonances of “coming into country” now.

This is not to say that the Aboriginal category of country is a ready-packaged solution to our philosophical problems. It is of course a category which has evolved, and makes sense within, its own cultural contexts. But it does show a way beyond dualism and opens up metaphysical vistas new to the modern imagination. The very best critical as well as imaginative efforts, across the entire board of thought and endeavour, will be required of us all if we are to chart this new terrain and fit our modern urbanized and industrialized world to it. In this modern world country has been erased, interred, and the task of singing it back to life, “en-chanting” it, rousing it with chant, with song, while finding forms of invocation appropriate to contemporary cultures, is one which poses the profoundest challenge to modernity.

In different ways all the writings in the present issue of PAN respond to this great emerging challenge. Plumwood details how the insidious dualistic structure of the western tradition informs the project of colonialism and the attitudes to land and Indigenous peoples that accompany it; she proposes a strategy of re-naming for helping to overcome these attitudes in relation to land. David, Langton and McNiven demonstrate how the (dismissive, dualistic) thinking behind the notion of terra nullius is reflected in an ongoing assumption of “cultural nullius” in connection with Indigenous people. Wilson and Ellender draw some of the contrasts between Aboriginal and European attitudes to land, and illustrate these contrasts through the phenomenon of land succession. Presland provides an insight into the way Aboriginal identity is literally read off the land, through the signature of the footprint. Reed reveals how traditional Aboriginal practices of singing the land have been adapted to a contemporary context in popular music. Cameron and San Roque explore the protocols of “coming into country” in the context of an extraordinary event they organized for non-Indigenous people in Central Australia. Wright explores story telling as a mode of thinking consonant with less cut-and-dried, less objectified approaches to the world. Murphy takes up the challenge of the human/nature, urban/wild divide, and finds the numinous and sacred in overlooked corners of the city. Elvey realizes that there is a nexus between ancestors and homeplace that needs to be recovered. And Allinson finds in an instance of Renaissance literature an arresting retelling of our eponymous Pan’s myth, which links repression of (various forms of) desire with the destruction of landscape. Hay, Hopper and Gifford actively engage in the process of singing, of “en-chanting”, via the deeply dialogical modality of poetry.

It is the hope of all of us here at PAN that this journal will help to call forth such singing, and offer a philosophical and literary vehicle for explorations of “coming into country”, in the largest sense, for many years to come.