

# Terra Nullius in Australian Environmentalism and Agriculture

## Implications for ecologically-based intra-action within a living-landscape

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Across Wiradjuri country and much of the continent, people lost places granting life and identity, and places lost people granting ecological stability and wellbeing. Death and displacement broke ties of mutual care.<sup>2</sup>

This quote describes a time of lost connectivity and ecological disintegration. In it, George Main evokes an Australian continent that had long hosted an interactive living-landscape which included humanity and human culture as enmeshed and intrinsic components. Throughout the 19th Century, in many parts of Australia, pre-existing “ties of mutual care” were replaced with ties to foreign commodity markets and one-sided notions of human progress.<sup>3</sup>

Previously, through creation stories of sentient nonhuman actors and totem-based systems of human identity, indigenous cultural narratives mirrored an ecological reality of continuity between people and Country. Indigenous cultivation maintained many of the ‘natural’ habitats that existed in pre-European Australian landscapes.<sup>4</sup> People created these habitats and were sustained by their use of the other species that occupied them. With the spread and intensification of European occupation, Indigenous narratives of connectivity were replaced by perceptions of separateness from this strange new landscape with its unfamiliar and unpalatable flora and fauna.<sup>5</sup>

An intensely-perceived contrast between the indigenous living-landscape—with its strange species and ‘otherly’ human culture—and the imported species and systems of European agriculture, reinforced colonial preconceptions of ‘human’ (as civilised, cultivated and European) distinction from ‘nature’ and the (supposedly) uncultivated indigenous Australian landscape. The existence of ancient indigenous-human cultivation within Australia’s ‘natural’ environments was broadly ignored, obscured and denied. Indigenous Australians were recognised as citizens of the Commonwealth in 1967 and the precedent of native-title was established in law after the High Court *Mabo vs Queensland* decision of 1992, but the European-Australian cultural-scotoma of Terra Nullius that led to the situations which these changes rectified still persists beyond these legislative and judicial strokes of the pen.

Official approaches to indigenous species and ecologies (as demonstrated by various Natural Resource Management (NRM) legislation and bureaucracies) have now

embraced goals of conservation and restoration of Australia's indigenous species and ecological communities. This represents a significant shift from early ambivalence or hostility towards native organisms, but does not indicate a meaningful reassessment of the imported ideological opposition between 'humanity' and the indigenous 'natural' world. Australia's 'natural' environment continues to be considered with reference to hierarchies of 'pristine'-ness and a lack of human presence or 'disturbance'. In juxtaposition, Australian agricultural spaces are portrayed as human domains where human science and technology provide for human life and livelihood, often in spite of the 'hostile', or at best inconvenient, nonhuman agents and processes affecting the Australian landscape.

Despite continuing perceptions of opposition between humanity and nature, we remain metabolically-entwined with various nonhuman species and the wider ecologies (the living-landscapes) which nourish us all. Although agriculture is broadly viewed as a quintessentially unnatural product of human agency and industry, it continues, in fact, to represent our most intimate interaction with the nonhuman world. Through our consumption and digestion of other organisms we maintain ourselves as living materially-embodied beings like any other evolved component of Earth's enmeshed biosphere.

What follows is an exploration of our species' present interactions on this continent in light of the fundamental reality of our continuing ecological interconnectivity and participation. I suggest that a pervasive casual assumption of intractable separation and opposition between 'humanity' and 'nature' effectively promotes two indefensible ideological versions of Terra Nullius (an 'empty land') within scientific and popular land-management narratives; one, the 'natural environment', is ideally empty of humanity and human influence; the other, the agricultural landscape, is ideally empty of nature. After a brief explication of this dualism within our abstracted and compartmentalising landscape sciences and conventional agricultural management, I outline a conceptual and practical synthesis of human cultivation as an ecological "intra-action"<sup>6</sup> within a living Australian landscape. I reflect upon Aboriginal co-adaptation with Country and suggest that we will need to nurture mindfully-integrated forms of cultivation if we are ever to maintain a healthy biotic landscape capable of maintaining ourselves.

### **Human-nature dualism promotes two versions of Terra Nullius**

Perhaps the most pervasive and dysfunctional delusion presently lurking within our industrialised cultural narratives is the belief that humans are somehow separated from the rest of Earth's biota—uniquely set apart from the 'natural' world. Despite all that we know today, it seems we cannot leave this long-standing perceptual perversity behind us. Scientific perspectives informed by evolutionary theory are at times indistinguishable from those of monotheistic creationism when it comes to this perception of difference and separation. Val Plumwood observes that the evolutionary process is often accepted as just another demonstration of *Homo sapiens'* dominance and distinction.<sup>7,8</sup> For many people, our apparent success in the, so-called, 'struggle for existence' merely confirms our presupposed transcendence and mastery over the rest of life on Earth. We ignore the true revelations of evolution: that we are direct biological descendants of nonhuman species; that all life on this planet is kin; that every organism alive today is related—as if 'by blood'—to an original common ancestor.

Our modern perspective—the zeitgeist of our times—is increasingly that of an urbanised intellect which imagines itself liberated from the material realities of participation within the biosphere that nourishes and sustains us. Because of this fantasised gulf between ourselves and the 'natural' world, our interactions with landscape have come to be informed by a dualised ideology of Terra Nullius; we hold

illogical aspirations to two oppositional forms of 'empty' land. Dominant notions of Australia's 'natural environment' idealise a perfected 'natural' world—a landscape perfectly empty of humanity, like my local National Parks: Budawang and Monga. At the same time, conventional agriculturalists aspire to a perfected farm; an increasingly mechanised landscape, precisely managed and technologically controlled—a landscape perfectly empty of nature and all inconvenient natural (non-human, non-domesticated) agents and processes. We create National Parks, segregated for nature, on the one hand, and battery chicken farms, for human food, on the other. The reductive and compartmentalising rationale that informs our present industrial culture hyper-discriminates on the basis of the human–nature divide, thereby endlessly abstracting and fragmenting Earth's biosphere.

### **Terra Nullius in Australian environmental science**

In Australia today, the 'natural' sciences remain significantly tainted by unexamined notions of emptiness. An explicit example is provided in a relatively-recent article on fluvial geomorphology where it is lamented that, because of European agriculture, most empirical data concerning Australian rivers comes from:

...systems that have been dramatically transformed from their primeval condition following significant human disturbance.<sup>9</sup>

The article asserts that what is being presented is authoritative new work derived from a "pristine river"<sup>10</sup> in southeast Australia. Its authors aspire to have observed an area where 'natural' landscape processes occurring prior to 1788 have continued unchanged by European invasion and Aboriginal dispossession.

This presupposition of a "primeval" pre-European landscape seems, at least, scientifically questionable, as it logically relies upon a presumption of Terra Nullius. It requires that a landscape which is uncultivated today remains the same as it was prior to Aboriginal dispossession. It follows that in previous time either Aborigines weren't there at all, or else their ancient ecological influence doesn't count as human disturbance because they didn't cultivate the landscape in a *truly* human fashion. As such, it would seem Australia was "pristine" and "primeval" until humanity finally arrived from Europe.

This lamentable fallacy pervades the environmental sciences in Australia—featuring prominently in Australian 'natural ecology' research in particular. Touted like a badge of honour, hierarchical rankings of 'intactness' or 'pristine'-ness exert an affirming allure for many environmentalists, yet blatantly rely on an imaginary continuation, or reassertion, of a perfectly-natural, undisturbed, uncultivated and non-human pre-European environment.

In her article *Remembering Judith Wright*, Val Plumwood notes how Judith was:  
...particularly incensed about the environmental community's continued use of concepts of wilderness and nature which she thought were tinged by racism.<sup>11</sup>

Clearly, Judith's perceptions are not surprising if one appreciates the dualistic human–nature divide within dominant environmental narratives and how this has promoted a simplistic and epistemologically-convenient assumption of a perfectly-natural environmental Terra Nullius. These pervasive delusions of duality and distinction remain largely unacknowledged and unquestioned. Even in popular environmentally-motivated attempts to improve our relationship with the rest of the biosphere, we continue to enact this fabricated separation whenever we insist on the sanctity of a 'pristine' and 'untouched' natural world; a world that is 'out there', beyond whatever boundaries we may wish to imagine.

### **Terra Nullius in conventional Australian agriculture**

Conventional agriculture is also conceptually afflicted by human–nature dualism, but instead of a landscape empty of *Homo sapiens*, it aspires to a landscape empty of nature and all uncontrolled natural processes. This perspective was clearly apparent in a letter to *The Australian* written by Dr David Smith of the Australian Institute of Agricultural Science and Technology (IAAST) concerning Peter Andrews OAM, the founder of Natural Sequence Farming.<sup>12</sup> Using highly emotive language, Dr Smith provided a derisory dismissal of Mr Andrews as a “false prophet”, warning the unsuspecting to “beware”. The letter was subsequently republished in the IAAST journal, *Agricultural Science*, under the title “Pro-nature land use lobby rebuttal published in *The Australian*”.<sup>13</sup>

The republished letter is proudly presented as an example of the IAAST “providing science advocacy and representation”.<sup>14</sup> It is clear from the appended heading and editorial preface, and from the letter itself, that the authors perceive themselves engaged in an ideological struggle between rational ‘scientific’ approaches to agriculture, and the unenlightened promoters of an undesirable ‘natural’ order (the “pro-nature land use lobby” which is, apparently, rebutted). The suggestion that Australian agriculture might best proceed in harmony with underlying landscape function is anathema to the editors of the IAAST journal and to Dr Smith, who lauded well-advised and rational human agriculturalists, who, he said, had “a proud history of steadily increasing sustainable productivity”.<sup>15</sup>

That Dr Smith and the IAAST editor would perceive scientific agriculture as in-opposition to ‘nature’ and natural processes is a predictable outcome of abstracting and reductive scientific methods (i.e. abstracting and reductive thinking) being applied to agricultural endeavour—an endeavour which inevitably occurs in a non-abstracted and non-reduced biotic reality. Such approaches to farming idealise hypothetical agricultural systems to the exclusion of many site-specific components of the real world in which we must farm. As Bill Gammage observes: whilst Aboriginal cultivation stimulated what desirable species “prefer”, conventional agriculture considers only what such species “need”.<sup>16</sup> As a result, any landscape component outside of our agricultural vision becomes superfluous. Having mentally conceptualised our landscapes without anything inconvenient or superfluous, we proceed to delete these components from reality as well. Hence our predilection for monocultures; these are an uncomplicated abstract ideal, implemented and relentlessly maintained anywhere and everywhere.

Unfortunately, this form of simplified, ‘scientific’, agricultural landscape is not a healthy landscape—it is not intended to be. It is not designed to capture and store carbon, to clean water and air, or to build soil. Neither is it expected to accumulate biomass or maintain its own diversity. In short, it is not designed as a biotic system at all; it is a mechanistically conceived and managed manufacturing system which produces commodities for market. Its primary goal is to provide a return on capital; the production of food or other real goods is a secondary consideration.

Such industrialised capital-accumulation systems ignore the ecological principles which sustain the biotic realities of our planet. They are based on linear flows of materials and, therefore, inevitably drain their own fertility and productivity. They may sometimes perform efficiently in terms of capital investment, but they leak herbicides, pesticides, excess nutrients and soil. They dominate landscapes and divert available water, materials and sunlight-energy in ways that are generally far less biologically-productive than the more complex ecological communities that preceded them.

European-Australian agriculture expanded across the continent within a cultural milieu of pioneering subjugation of the landscape and the export of non-native species to distant global markets.<sup>17</sup> Founded by this imported colonial narrative, our agriculture today remains in obvious dissonance with Australia’s biotic landscapes. The lack of indigenous ‘bush-foods’ within Australian agriculture and diets is an incontrovertible

indication of cultural disconnection from this continent.<sup>18,19</sup> However, present industrial cultivation of endemic *Macadamia* nuts shows how little the consumption of native species, per se, will necessarily improve our relation with the living-landscapes of Australia, if 'bush'-food is merely incorporated into the abstracted and mechanistic ecologies of modern conventional agriculture.

### **Bureaucratising duality in our care for Australian landscapes**

Australia's Landcare movement was instituted after an irregular act of cooperation between the Federal Government, the National Farmers Federation and the Australian Conservation Foundation. It was expected at the time that this marriage of environmentalism and agriculture might simultaneously restore Australia's 'natural' environment and maintain farm productivity. However, the amalgamation of two disintegrated perspectives of landscape (one excluding humanity, the other excluding nature) has, so far, served only to demonstrate the philosophical and practical limitations at the heart of presently dominant approaches.

Since our healthiest environments are consistently perceived as those closest to an 'intact', 'pristine', or 'undisturbed' pre-1788 condition, the majority of publically-funded on-ground NRM initiatives to improve environmental health in Australian farm landscapes occur in the form of fences, eucalypts and herbicides. We continue to farm conventionally and industrially, but now 'just add nature' by fencing-off areas, growing native plants and poisoning select (non-commodified) species that weren't here when the first fleet arrived. We create unoccupied (empty) pockets of our ideal 'natural' Australia in discrete locations across conventional farm landscapes. We accept the presence of native nonhuman species as representatives of 'the natural environment', but still fail to appreciate ourselves and our agriculture as components of that same idealised space. Further, we continue to overlook the active indigenous-human cultivation that existed within 'natural' pre-European Australia.

The Federal Government's (2013) "Caring for our Country" package of community grants and support is separated into two parallel funding streams: one for "Sustainable Agriculture" and one for "Sustainable Environments".<sup>20</sup> These streams are administered by separate Federal Government departments with distinct sets of directives, responsibilities and desired outcomes. Given the dynamic and co-adaptive landscapes that exist here on planet Earth, we may well ask: where does this separation of "sustainable agriculture" and "sustainable environments" come from? How exactly are agriculture and the environment separate? Where on Earth is the boundary between these two things?

In reality, this boundary exists only within our thoughts, and on paper, as abstracted cultural narratives of human-nature separation. It is a boundary which distinguishes our two ideal forms of *Terra Nullius*; one human, the other 'natural'—two imaginary landscapes, explicitly codified at the highest levels of governmental bureaucracy.

### **Living on nature, in nature, as nature**

For Val Plumwood—who survived a horrific encounter with a salt-water crocodile—the cold-blooded reality of "being prey" presented a potent flashpoint for recognising our inviolable ecological connectivity and participation within this biosphere.<sup>21,22</sup> Val notes how the seemingly distinct mental narrative of our own personal selfhood—our burbling inner voice, with its peculiar memories, preoccupations and beliefs—is left powerless and aghast when finally confronted with its material finitude as

an embodied component of the cycles of life and death on this planet<sup>23</sup>—cycles of perpetual biotic consumption and re-consumption.

From my own perspective, with a background of working and thinking in agriculture, it is not only the inevitability of finally being consumed (whether by predators or by soil microbes) that demonstrates our connection with the natural world; it is also our daily acts of consumption; it is the food that we eat. We confirm our ongoing material connection to the biosphere by each communion with our daily bread.

As, ecofeminist and embodied-materialist thinker, Ariel Salleh emphatically states:

...there is no denying it—humans are nature in embodied form. If people were not earthly flesh, the metabolism which keeps us alive could not happen.<sup>24</sup>

Similarly, popular radical US farmer and author, Joel Salatin, describes our farming and food-distribution systems as an “ecological umbilical”.<sup>25</sup> The application of this term to agriculture seems an apt way to acknowledge the role that food plays to anchor and sustain our participation within the biotic cycles of this planet. Like any other organism, we are nurtured by a direct ecological connectivity to the biosphere. We cease our material communion and consumption only when we cease to live.

The fact that Australia’s indigenous peoples lived and died as entwined participants of the trophic webs within which they dwelt presents a major philosophical (and practical) hurdle for presently-dominant forms of nativist-environmentalism in Australia. Like any other organism, these humans procured the energy and materials needed to sustain their metabolic processes from the other life forms that flourished around them. Thus, all pre-European species of the Australian continent were significantly adapted to the presence of *Homo sapiens* as an ordinary component of their broader ecological reality. Using fires and other techniques, Aboriginals deliberately and dramatically shaped indigenous ecological communities, they constructed and maintained various habitats and existed within them as a cultured and cultivating species.<sup>26</sup> Prior to 1788, the native species we know today inhabited—and were adapted to—landscapes which were significantly effected by humans (note: ‘effected’, with an ‘e’).

Today, my local National Parks, and most other parks of south-eastern Australia, are no longer occupied by this keystone species: *Homo sapiens*. The ecological influence of Indigenous-human cultivation is no longer present; the particular habitat structures and communities that Aboriginal management maintained have disintegrated in their absence. As such, these unoccupied parks are not fragile and protected remnants of a pre-European ‘natural’ world; they are, instead, recently-constructed replicas of an imagined ‘empty land’. Without the living presence of humanity they are not restored or preserved, they are essentially abandoned; ghost-landscapes—Terra Nullius now made real on Earth.

As modern Australians, we may feel a sense of communion with ‘the natural’ when visiting these empty landscapes, but we are surely deluded in our doing so. It seems logically counterproductive to cultivate an emotional connection with an ‘untouched natural world’ when our original (and ongoing) connection to the biosphere comes from a direct ecological participation within the material cycles of the ecosystems around us; we consume, and are consumed, just like any other species of this planet. Perversely, as environmentalists we often seem to champion an esoteric emotional-connectivity to a landscape of Terra Nullius, in preference to our palpable metabolic-connectivity to ordinary agricultural landscapes all over the world—landscapes where (we disdainfully imagine) ‘nature’ has been somehow absented.

## A cultured ecology

In his book, *The Biggest Estate on Earth: How Aborigines made Australia*,<sup>29</sup> Bill Gammage provides a compelling perspective of the degree to which Indigenous peoples created and maintained Australia’s living-landscapes, blurring the line between ‘culture’

and 'nature' and between cultivation and the natural environment. Native species and ecological communities were significantly adapted to the presence of humanity for thousands of years before European arrival.

However, it was not just humans, per se, that they were adapted to; it was clearly a very specific human culture and specific forms of human cultivation. Self-evidently, Indigenous culture continues today, and should be a source of pride for all who share it, but it is also self-evident that this culture does not continue uniformly across our continent and does not continue unchanged after 225 years of invasion and dispossession. Nor should a culture be expected, or required, to continue unchanged in the face of this unprecedented upheaval. Living cultures are dynamic and adaptive cultures, they are not the frozen cultures displayed in some museums. Living nature is not the nature displayed in museums either. Post-European-arrival, the culture of the Australian landscape has undeniably changed. Equally undeniably, and irrevocably, so has its nature.

The fact that 'disturbance' in supposedly 'natural' environments (National Parks and other reserves) often occurs in the form of nonhuman 'weed' species further complicates present-day conservation narratives regarding protection from human 'disturbance'. Today, these landscapes receive regular management to ensure that only the right species occur within them. Despite being reserved as non-human domains, dominant perspectives suggest it is only humans (specifically, those of us with appropriate bureaucratically-condoned knowledge) that can decide which is the 'correct' species assemblage for these living-landscapes. The existing nonhuman agents themselves (indigenous or otherwise) are not scientifically-qualified to compose a list of acceptable species, or to determine which may be slated for eradication. Nor are nonhumans able to rank different landscapes and their communities of nonhuman inhabitants in terms of their 'intactness' or 'pristine'-ness.

Ensuring a permanent state of biosecurity, in these situations requires ongoing human policing of our biosphere to be maintained *ad infinitum* wherever nonhuman species threaten cultural perceptions of appropriate 'natural' order. Therefore, in spite of the recalcitrant tendencies of countless nonhuman-others, the application of existing social narratives of human-nature dualism continue to determine (to a significant extent) the species composition of the living-landscapes of this continent.

Gregory Bateson's "ecology of mind"<sup>27</sup> suggests that human learning and narrative develop in response to (that is 'in connection with') the socio-cultural and bio-physical components of their immediate environment. Learning and change are directly linked to external stimulus. Likewise, the surrounding environment responds in relation—and eventually adapts—to the content of the human mind. It follows that there is a direct, ongoing, and biologically-inescapable connectivity (an 'ecological connectivity') between the content of the human mind and its surrounding environment.

Bruno Latour's concept of "nature-culture" also describes a connection between human culture (the content of mind) and the environment or 'natural' world.<sup>28</sup> In fact, "nature-culture" implies there is no meaningful distinction between these two things; culture and nature are inextricably linked as a single ecological continuum. Accepting these perceptions in the context of the present discussion, we see that despite widespread assumptions of distinction between humanity and nature, culture is always enmeshed with—and remains an intrinsic component of—the natural context of our existence.

What characteristics might we observe within a nature-culture (a living-landscape inclusive of human culture) where people promulgate social narratives based on human-nature dualism? Surely, a culture of distinction and separation would persist within a living-landscape that was itself disintegrated and compartmentalised. We should expect to see 'nature' corralled over here, and 'humanity', separately, over there; a wildlife refuge, beside a cattle feedlot, beside a canola field, beside a state forest. A farm beside a

town, beside a National Park, etcetera.... And the more this fragmented biosphere reflected the disintegrated cultural narrative, the more the cultural narrative would develop in response to a fragmented and compartmentalised environment. Nature-culture presents a balanced equation; each side of the intruding hyphen comes to reflect the reality of the other.

## **Ecological approaches to agriculture**

If, today, we wish to conceive a coherent approach to the reality of humans living within healthy living-landscapes, we will need to reconcile our separated conceptions of humans and nature and find ways to integrate environmental and agricultural ideals. This will not be achieved by super-imposing imported nativist-environmental perspectives of a 'perfectly natural' Australian landscape on to our imported capitalist-industrial ideals of perfected agricultural endeavour; integrated approaches must do more than simply overlay these two disintegrated landscape ideals. We can improve the health and productivity of Australian landscapes in ways that are far more effective than a Terra-Nullius-inspired sprinkling of native species across our simplified and mechanistic farming systems could ever be. But to do so we must expand our perspectives of nature to include ourselves and the species we prefer to cultivate, and then cultivate both in ways that promote living-landscape-health, rather than undermine it.

Agro-ecology has been a recognised scientific discipline since the 1970's, but the techniques and principles with which it is concerned are as old as agriculture itself.<sup>30</sup> Practicing agro-ecologists from around the world have measured and tested traditional, indigenous, and experimental agricultural-ecologies. These systems often incorporate multiple compatible plants and animals to maintain functional complexity within cultivated landscapes. Such techniques were employed in traditional polycultures on all inhabited continents (including Australia<sup>31</sup>) prior to the installation of abstracted industrial-agricultural systems. Many of them have proven ecologically-sustainable over thousands of years.

In Australia today, popular ecologically-based agricultural perspectives and techniques include approaches such as: Natural Sequence Farming, Cell Grazing, Permaculture, Companion Planting, Fukuoka's 'Do-nothing' Farming, Organics, No-till Farming and Pasture Cropping. Wherever these approaches are effective it is because they proceed in accord with ecological principles. They emerge from observation and experimentation within a complex living reality; not from a mechanised abstraction, and not from an imagined Terra Nullius version of Australia's 'perfectly-natural' past. These ecologically inspired forms of agriculture blur artificial boundaries between 'perfected human cultivation' and 'a perfected natural world' and prompt us to accept that both may occur in the same place at the same time.

In addressing the theme of the "cultural landscape", Val Plumwood refutes the notion that a space must be *either* cultivated *or* natural by observing that multiple living agents and their particular narratives are always inevitably present.<sup>32</sup> She emphasises that would-be-enlightened cultivators need to reconceive nature: "in agentic terms as a co-actor and co-participant in the world."<sup>33</sup>

From an ecological-agricultural perspective, David Holmgren's first principle of Permaculture, "Observe and Interact"<sup>34</sup>, provides a succinct summation of an appropriate approach. For many, 'interaction' is probably the hardest part of this principle to grasp because 'inter-' implies a two-way-street of influence and obligation between human and nonhuman actors of a given landscape. Permaculture enthusiasts may miss this implication if they consider Permaculture as merely a set of manipulative techniques applied to passive biotic landscapes by intelligent and rational human 'designers'.

Thom van Dooren<sup>35</sup> explores concepts of complex and dis-anthropocentred relations between humans and domesticated plants in a discussion framed by Donna Haraway's notion of "companion species"<sup>36</sup>. These perspectives can be expanded beyond arbitrarily defined thresholds of domestication, to include co-influential relations between any living actor and its bio-ecological context. Such interactive dialogues are obscured by delusions of inviolable separation between humans and nature, but, as living participants of a living and co-adapting biosphere, all organisms inevitably will interact for their metabolic livelihood—we interact or we perish.

Karen Barad dramatically expands notions of enmeshed ecological interaction through her discussion of relational "intra-activity".<sup>37</sup> This novel concept conveys the further realisation that all phenomena—including living entities—emerge within a complex universal-whole of infinite interdependencies and interconnectivity. So intrinsically are we a situated product of relation that all 'interactions' are essentially the internal dynamics of a single process within which we participate. We are not separate to the 'things' around us; we are contextualised and made by them. In contrast to dominant epistemological separation between objective human investigators and the natural world, Barad insightfully points out:

...the "knower" does not stand in a relation of absolute externality to the natural world...there is no such exterior observational point.<sup>38</sup>

Thus, no entity or event emerges or occurs in isolation; all are connected within a fabric of mutual influence and mutual adaptation. With reference to this discussion of agriculture and environmentalism, intra-activity suggests a contextualisation of self, of culture, and of living-landscapes as one. What characteristics would prevail within a world that contained this form of human self-perception? What qualities might we expect within such a continuum of nature-culture?

## Nature nurtures

It is a truism to say that the first people to arrive in Australia were not from Australia. It is also true that the living-landscapes they found were not the same as those occupied by Europeans 50,000 years later. Neither was the culture these first Australians brought with them the Aboriginal culture encountered by Europeans. This first culture was adapted to somewhere north of Australia—a place with different nonhuman species and different ways of making a living from the land. The first people who came to Australia were not Aboriginal Australians; they became Aboriginal over thousands of years of intra-action with Country.

Country too developed new forms of expression following human arrival. As in other parts of Australasia, the first people would have found a good living for themselves and their descendants, easily exploiting an array of nonhuman species not adapted to their presence.<sup>39</sup> Accepting this, it would beggar belief to expect that these new arrivals did not change the pre-existing ecologies of this continent.

I do not raise this point to shame those first Australians for disturbing the holy grail of Terra-Nullius-inspired environmental ideology: a 'pristine' natural environment. Rather, I wish to emphasise that over thousands of years the culture of these people and the nature of Australia actively co-adapted. They learned from each other and both were changed. Aboriginals made the various landscapes of Australia<sup>40</sup> and, vice versa, they were made by them. People interacted and adapted with place—slowly forming their "ties of mutual care"<sup>41</sup>—and both continued in this way until the interjection, in 1788, of more *Homo sapiens* with another culture adapted to a different living-landscape.

By 1788 Australia was a complex ecological-web of various intra-acting flora and fauna which included deliberate cultivation by Indigenous *Homo sapiens*.<sup>42</sup> We may suppose that such cultivation began as a series of stochastic interventions—repetitive

observation and deliberate interaction—which gradually stabilised into a dynamic and responsive cultural component of the Australian continent.

As Australians today, we must face the facts of nature and our own naturalness. We have inherited imported agricultural paradigms, but equally we hold imported paradigms of environmentalism. Both are forged from an illusory ideological separation between humanity and nature and neither can be relied upon to provide a resilient and healthy living for our descendants upon this continent. We need to stop lamenting the loss of an imaginary ‘pristine Australia’ that only ever existed as a fantasised Terra Nullius. But also we must stop pretending that our species can make a living by churning through non-renewable resources, exploiting energy and materials that are dwindling and disappearing forever, pretending these living-landscapes are machines that we can control.

Like the first human Australians, we can learn to intra-act with the nonhuman presences within our landscapes. We must allow for their continued occupation, but we must also accept their capacity for dynamic adaptation and change. More than just manipulative techniques and technologies, an improved approach will require significant cultural adaptation on our part. Perhaps more than anything else, we need new, mindfully-integrated, perspectives of agriculture and the environment.

Our current plethora of ecological crises are not caused by us becoming separated from the natural world, as some believe; they are caused by us *thinking* we are separated from the natural world. In reality, we are not separated, and we never could be. Whatever we may think, we remain metabolically entwined components of dynamic living-landscapes. These are the facts of life here on Earth.

.....What’s for dinner?

## Acknowledgements

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