

'Against Native Title': Conflict and Creativity in Outback Australia

by Eve Vincent

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Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the Shadow
— T.S. Eliot

In *'Against Native Title'*, Eve Vincent takes the reader to Ceduna, South Australia, where she explores the conflicts between the idea that the 'traditional owners' of the country can and will be identified and recognised under the *Native Title Act 1993*, and the reality of angry intra-Aboriginal contestings of historical and contemporary identities amongst Kokatha, Wirangu and Mirning. We meet 'Aunty Sue', Sue Coleman Haseldine, confidently Kokatha, dedicated to caring for her country, for whom the 'motion' and the 'act' fuse. Aunty Sue's repudiation of native title is not contrarian but a creative celebration. Her 'Rockhole Recovery' regime is testament to her connection to country. Her knowledge of its stories give form and meaning to her action. This is *her* 'title' to act.

Eve Vincent is well aware she has ventured into shadow lands as she maps the ruptures in the national narrative of progressive enfranchisement of the first Australians. She turns her unflinching gaze onto the contradictions, tensions and dilemmas that simmer and explode in this outback service town poised on the edge of the Nullabor Plains where 25 per cent of the 3,500 population identify as 'Indigenous' (p. 1). From her introduction to Aunty Sue in 2006 through a Melbourne-based anti-nuclear waste dumping campaign friend, to her 2007–08 fieldwork as a

PhD student in anthropology, through the granting of native title to the Far West Coast peoples of 80,000 square kilometres, and her reflective Epilogue that takes us to 2016, Eve offers fine-grained ethnographic insights of daily frustrations and anxieties alongside the existential and political quagmire of post-Mabo Australia. A native title claim, decades in the making, disenfranchises and disrupts. Native title claims reinstate ‘colonial relations between the nation-state and Aboriginal people’ (p. 119).

Privileging Aboriginal perceptions and experiences, Eve interrogates the demands of native title to document unique enduring, unchanging identities where fluidity, transformation and accommodation prevail. ‘It would be really good if someone could do something about Tindale,’ says a disdainful Aunty Sue (p. 109) of ethnologist Norman Tindale, whose genealogies have become the gold standard of connection. In ‘Engaging with the historical record’, the notion that ‘the earlier the record, the more highly valued’ is scrutinised. How to track change? The ethnographic present freezes the capacity of Aboriginal people to manage change – be it climate change, demographic change, any change before the definitive baseline accounts of the first literate observers.

Questions abound: How to navigate the potential conflicts of interests, loyalties and personal politics in Ceduna, where whitefellas’ and Aboriginal people’s lives intertwine but racial hierarchies persist? How to plumb the relationship between greenies and ‘Aunty Sue Mob’? Eve’s nuanced analysis of the cooptions, misreadings and motives in ‘Making assertions’ is exemplary (p. 145ff.). How does the ‘deep past’ inform contemporary notions of Aboriginality? Eve juxtaposes the land beyond the ‘dog fence’, country of bounty and apprehension, the outback, the ‘out of town’, the ‘away from town’, where dingoes howl, with the town patrolled by dog squads reclaiming control of public space in the shadow of a manufactured threat from the wild.

Why did Aunty Sue Mob turn their back on native title? In 1992, the High Court had ruled by a majority of six to one that the Meriam people were ‘entitled as against the whole world to possession, occupation, use and enjoyment of (most of) the lands of the Murray Islands’. The court held that the common law of Australia recognised a form of native title. On 1 January 1994, the *Native Title Act 1993*, legislation that ‘recognises and protects native title ... provides that native title cannot be extinguished contrary to the Act, commenced operation’. Yet, as Aunty Sue Mob explain, their experience of the native title claim process is an attack on their self-understanding (p. 133). They know who they are.

In ‘Tending to rockholes’, Eve paints a vivid picture of the trips with urban-based greenies that entail about a week of 4WD travel to a series of rockhole sites strewn across the Yumbarra Conservation Park, Yellabinna Regional Reserve and the more distant Yellabinna Wilderness Area:

One rockhole is a dramatic formation that rises steeply out of the scrub that can be climbed up and wandered over. Its blotchy brownish, orangey, greenish surface resembles the pockmarked skin of a wizened reptile with folds and wrinkles ... Auntie Sue is thrilled by this tendency of the rockhole to conceal and reveal itself, as if it conspires to sometimes hide and at other times pop out, teasing and beckoning those who approach it (pp. 135–36).

Accounts of preparing for a rockhole visit will resonate with anyone who has undertaken fieldwork in 'outback' Australia: the consultations, negotiations, addressing the needs of the elderly, infants, provisioning and equipment maintenance (p. 142). The visceral reality of cleaning out and restoring rockholes, of 'plunging hands into thick foul smelling gloppy sludge at the bottom of rock holes to dig out sticks, whole bones and feathers' (p. 149), for Auntie Sue Mob, this is assertion of connection. Eve is at her best when writing of the country and rockhole trips. The tone, energy and uncluttered style contrasts with a text that is too often burdened by citations of worthy scholars whose wisdom disrupts rather than enriches the narrative.

There is much more to be said of *'Against Native Title'*. It rewards a close reading and deserves to reach a wide audience. The Epilogue invites new questions as the intensity of the conflict ebbs, a Mirning-Wiangu-Kokatha identity emerges and Auntie Sue accepts an invitation to join the Prescribed Body Corporate (PBC) representing the native title holders (p. 195). I look forward to the next chapter.

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