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## Coming into Country

### With Jessie



**Figure 1.1. Jessie Wirrpa and the author, out bush on Victoria River Downs (VRD), 1982.**

Source: Photograph by Darrell Lewis.

When Jessie Wirrpa took me walkabout she called out to her ancestors (Figure 1.1). She told them who we were and what we were doing, and she asked them to help us. ‘Give us fish,’ she would call out, ‘the children are hungry.’ When she was walking through Country she was always with a group, and that group included the dead as well as the living. As her brother Allan Young Najukpayi said:

At night, camping out, we talk and those [dead] people [and they] listen ... When we're walking, we're together. We got dead body there behind to help ... Even if you're far away in a different Country, you still call out to mother and father, and they can help you for dangerous place. And for tucker they can help you. (Quoted in Rose 1992, 73)

Every place we visited was part of some story or other. Here the owllet nightjar (Jessie's and Allan's 'totem') burnt his whiskers, there he flew away. Here the bandicoot and possum were hanging out, and over there the flying foxes chucked their spears. Jessie spoke to the Dreamings too, calling out to them to let them know that the people who were there belonged there, that strangers were accompanied, that this was all lawful.

As we walked, we took notice of other living things. When we startled the cockatoos so that they squawked and flew away Jessie laughed because they were making a fuss about nothing. When the green flies bit us, we knew the crocs were laying their eggs, and Jessie began to think about going walkabout to those places. When the *jangarla* tree (*Sesbania formosa*) started to flower, we knew, or Jessie knew, that the barramundi would be biting. The world was always talking about itself, and Jessie was a skilled listener and observer. She knew how to interpret tracks, too. She knew who made what track, and she knew when and why those tracks were made, and where the animal was likely to be now.

We never walked aimlessly, but always opportunistically. Jessie knew the soils, creeks, ridges, springs, shelter and other aspects of her Country. Each such niche was a habitat: this is where we go for conkerberries, this is where we go for lilies, and here is where we'll spot the signs of yams. When we went for conkerberries she knew it was time to go because the fireflies had appeared. We saw the bushes from a distance, and she pointed to where a turkey had been eating the berries. When it is eaten up that high, it's a turkey; higher again and it's an emu. Then she hushed us, because she saw marks of a goanna under the bush. With a few hand signs she organised the kids to circle the conkerberry bushes, and told the young women to flush out, stun and kill the goanna.

Every species of tree had a name, and every tree lived within relationships of beneficial connections. This one provided shade for humans, and food for black cockatoos; that one you could make medicine from; another one had bark that you would turn into ashes to roll your chewing tobacco in.

Many of the species of grass, and most of the shrubs and other plants, had names and were in relationships. There were stories for them too: the owllet nightjar didn't crack his lily corms properly and that is why they exploded in his face and burnt his whiskers. The bandicoot and possum were digging 'cheeky yams' on that hill—that's where they grow.

Everywhere Jessie went she encountered signs of former activities. A discarded stone spear point, some charred sticks from a campfire, a Dreaming tree that got knocked by lightning when her oldest father died. No distinction between history and pre-history for Jessie; in her Country the present rolled into the past on waves of generations who all belonged there. As she walked, she told the stories: here the owllet nightjar burnt his whiskers and flew away, there we saw the goanna track; here he jumped out, and over there Margaret hit him. Debbie didn't know what to do, and we all had a good laugh. Here we cooked him—'good dinner camp, that one.'

I know that Jessie's Country gave her life; I walked with her, and it gave me life too. It nourished her, and she took care of it. She was a presence in her Country, and her Country knew her; Country fed her and her group; it held the signs of their lives and stories and continued to bring forth life. Tagging along behind her, I did my best to learn.

The questions I brought with me from America in 1980 were philosophical in the main. I wanted to learn something about the meaning of life and death from the viewpoint of some Australian Aboriginal people. These first questions went onto the back burner while I threw myself into participant observation. I had a lot to learn about how to make a fire, how to catch a fish, how to understand North Australian Kriol and other languages. Of course, I had to learn who people were, and this meant learning about their connections—to other people, other plants and animals, to Countries and to Law. That meant learning terms for species, and learning placenames, Dreaming tracks, places of danger. I followed behind Jessie as I learned how to behave properly in the face of all these people, animals, plants and places. By the time I returned to my research questions I was in a different world, a living world made up of Countries. I had come to understand Country as a geographical area and as a system of nourishing life, a place within which responsibilities and reciprocities are recursive, and in which living things take care of their own (Rose 1992, 1996).

Country is full of sentience—animals, many plants, Dreamings, the ancestors and other things like hills or stones take notice, as people say. Jessie took notice too, and she knew that all these other beings were taking notice of her. Her footprints, her fires, her songs and stories, her visits and her calling to the Country were all communicative acts. They worked within the broader communicative system of Country, and they intended to be noticed. Correspondingly, her way of teaching required one to pay close attention. When I hollered for help and she showed me what to do she would say: ‘I’ll show you once, after that you do it yourself.’

Jessie took care of her Country, and her Country took care of her. Country was the ground of her being and she herself was a walking and ephemeral nexus of Country, Dreamings and care. Nothing stood alone in Jessie’s Country; everything was happening because of the care of others. She took notice, and I never knew her to hear silence. Her attending presence was, to her knowledge, always reciprocated. Her voice and action, footprints and other traces, communicated to others. She never thought there was nobody out there.

I do not want to suggest that Jessie Wirrpa somehow escaped the lash of colonisation. It descended upon her in the form of conquest, and it killed most of her people (Rose 1991). Australia is a modern settler society, a nation designed to achieve the great prospects of modernity. The Enlightenment vision of liberty and equality had a rough ride in Australia; the penal colony was founded in violence, control, displacement and hierarchy. The Enlightenment vision, however, has been a powerful force in the making of a modern plural society, and in achieving justice for the marginalised and dispossessed. Along with visions of a better society, there were and are the social and cultural practices that Scott (1998, 4) defines as high modernism: self-confidence about scientific and technical progress, expansion of production, mastery of nature and rational design of social order. To these I would add a triumphal narrative of how these dreams of progress and control are being implemented for the betterment of society.

When the goal of mastery of nature and of society is coupled with ‘new world’ settler colonialism in contexts defined as frontiers, the result is massive eradication—of human societies and local knowledge as well as of ecosystems in the integrity of their diversity and sustainability. Faith in progress works in dynamic feedback with violence: conquest requires violence, violence leads to less diversity, less diversity (human and environmental) leads to greater demands for scientific and technological

control, which leads to more intensification in favour of greater perceived productivity, which leads to less diversity. The cycle is fuelled by faith along with violence.

Jessie's Country is certainly not a place that has no knowledge or experience of modernity. Rather, she, her people and her Country know modernity all too well, for they have borne the brunt of its underside. Colonisation came late to the backwaters of the Victoria River District. Here in the savanna regions of the monsoonal north, white settlers established huge cattle stations just over one hundred years ago. Overrunning the homes of the Indigenous hunter-gatherer peoples of the region, they first shot and hunted away the local peoples, and later pressed them into service on the cattle stations as an unfree and unpaid labour force. In the mid-1960s many of the Aboriginal people in this region went on strike against the appalling system of oppression which ruled their lives, and as support for them was manifested throughout the nation, they began to articulate what to them had been an underlying purpose in all their forms of resistance: to regain control over at least some portions of their traditional homelands. By the 1990s, legal recognition of land rights had benefited some far more than others, but fuller citizenship (realised around 1967<sup>1</sup>) has enabled people to participate in national and international struggles for equality. The story is by no means over. Indigenous people's cultural survival continues to be contested locally and nationally.

Jessie lived for most of the twentieth century, and her life took this shape: under the name of progress, settler Australians used up her labour for much of her life (see Rose 1991). In the dry season the cattle were mustered, branded, sorted and driven to market. Aboriginal workers were required both in the stock camps (mostly men) and as domestics (mostly women). In the wet season cattle work was discontinued and station life was reduced to the basics. Aboriginal workers were sent walkabout, to travel the Country and to survive using their Indigenous knowledge and skills. Until about

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1 According to Tim Rowse, it is a common misconception that full citizenship was granted by the 1967 referendum. The successful 1967 referendum meant that Indigenous Australians were counted in the Census and enabled the Commonwealth to pass laws affecting them. In fact, Indigenous Australians became citizens through the *Nationality and Citizenship Act 1948*—a law declaring that persons living in Australia who were 'British subjects' (as Indigenous Australians were) henceforth were citizens of Australia. However, State and Territory laws in five of the six states (not Tasmania) and in the Northern Territory continued to regulate Indigenous Australians in many ways, curtailing freedoms that we usually associate with 'citizenship'. These restrictive regulations and policies of assimilation, such as child removal, were slowly repealed, so that the cumulative effect of these changes amounted to a fuller sense of Indigenous citizenship by 1967. For more detail see Chesterman (2005)—eds.

1965 people worked for white station owners for most of the year and lived by and for their traditions during part of the year. As I discuss in subsequent chapters, people's lives in the bush were more complex than this seasonal schema suggests, but the broad outline shows that knowledge of the nomadic life, and the detailed knowledge of Country were essential skills for physical and cultural survival. At the same time, however, as I will also discuss, the impacts of cattle monoculture diminished the availability of subsistence resources to a high degree. Even before Jessie was born in 1917, large portions of the original resource base were so severely damaged as to be non-viable for subsistence; many of the springs and billabongs had dried up (or were drying up) and the predictability of resources was diminished. Pastoralism had also eradicated some of the species with which she and her family were intimately connected and on which they depended. The years since then have intensified these processes of loss. Just as living things are connected through benefit, so losses ramify destructively. The loss of eucalyptus trees, for example, is a loss of food for flying foxes and for native bees, and loss of habitat for arboreal marsupials. Such losses diminish human food supplies, as well as reduce available firewood, medicine and other benefits.

In the vast pastoral leases of the Victoria River valley, introduced pastures, thousands of miles of fences, the suppression of Indigenous fire regimes, and many other factors aimed toward improving cattle productivity have massively degraded the rangelands. As a result of the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976*, there are now Aboriginal as well as settler pastoralists; all are under considerable pressure to maintain the productivity of their businesses. Pastoralists in the Victoria River District achieve economic independence through intensification of their use of the ecosystems, including ecological services, upon which their enterprises depend. The industry continues to call for more scientific knowledge to enable people to intensify the outputs of their overdeveloped monocultures.

Jessie and her mob are not independent pastoralists; the amount of land they own under Anglo-Australian law is too small to be economically viable. And yet for them the pressures are much the same: how to achieve some form of sustainability in landscapes in which the former subsistence practices are no longer viable, and in regions remote from markets.

## Experience

In the dry season out here in the tropical savannas you wake up hoping somebody else has already gotten up and started the fire. The last nightjars call out, the sky starts to lighten, and you wiggle further into your swag for warmth. A big fire, a cup of tea and some sunlight change your perspective. The air is so clear, the sky so hugely blue, the light so crisp that you are eager for whatever the day may bring. By midday the world is hot again, except on those rare days when the southerly busters break through to the tropics. Then the winds fly up out of the south, from Antarctica it feels, demolishing every bit of warmth. They rush across the Central Australian deserts losing little of their cold energy, and when they hit you, you huddle up, find a windbreak and wait it out.

Such days are rare. For the most part the dry season is a time of warmth and clarity. The breezes carry the invigorating smells of spinifex and eucalyptus blossoms, both of which get you thinking of native honey. As the dry season continues past the winter equinox, the days become hotter, the nights less severely cold. The ground starts to warm up too. Previously, you thought longingly of socks, now you're happy in thongs [flipflops]. Before long you will bless those thongs because the ground has become so hot that your bare feet can't take it. Aboriginal people are happy for thongs, too. Those beautiful tough nubby feet that have walked the Country for years and years, even they find the hot ground of the hottest time of year hard to take.

As the season progresses, the cattle eat most of the grass. What is left is dry and brittle, poor in nutrition, with little by way of substance or structure. White settlers drove the shorthorn cattle into this Country, coming out of Queensland where they had experience of hot arid Country. In the 1950s a few brahmans were introduced, and since the 1970s they predominate. Their silver hides, dignified humps and sedate faces seem part of the place. In the late dry they will cluster at the bores, losing condition and looking more stoic than elegant. The trees lose their vivid colours, except for some of the sturdy hot weather trees whose deepening colours tell you that the season is progressing. With the ground cover drying out, the soil becomes ever more friable. The ants are busy, as usual, but even they look hot and dusty.

In the late dry the humidity builds up. The air becomes hot and feels even hotter. It is exciting, too. Sometimes you see a huge red cloud that fills one whole section of the sky and comes towering toward you. It is a wind front that has picked up the red dirt. The air is filled with sticks, leaves, pieces of

wood, perhaps even corrugated iron, as well as the choking dust. Everybody runs for shelter—it hits like a train, slams through your area picking laundry up off the wire along with anything else that is detachable and dropping bits of debris. Once it is gone you look around and laugh together with relief.

The first rains seem to take forever to arrive. You have watched the thunderheads move across the sky. The lightning has been fantastic in its varied forms and its prolific intensity. You are reminded of the fact that the lightning strike rate is one of the highest in the world. Some nights when you sit longing for a breath of air and watching the lightning circle around, you see off in the distance the glowing line of a bushfire, another lightning strike. Wherever you are, it seems that the rain always falls somewhere else first. It may tease you with tormenting little sprinkles, but finally it comes pouring down in glorious cool floods of relief.

The rainbows are multiple and vivid. I think of God's promise to Noah and wonder if a holy rainbow could possibly be as large, pure and vibrant as these. There are light rains and dark rains and, every once in a while, a rain unlike any other. The drops are huge and widely spaced. When the sun is shining, each drop catches the light and shines like a crystal as it slowly makes its way toward the ground. The depth of vision—bronze earth, golden grass and silver rain, is transporting; all is in perfect clarity. After rain the colours intensify. White trees turn silver, yellow grass turns gold, and the light seems to hang in the air as if it were buoyant. As the sun goes down it all becomes more intensely silver and gold until it shades into burnished copper and then goes out, leaving you breathless.

By late dry, the rivers have stopped running and are shrunk back to their permanent waterholes. Every day they seem smaller, every day more suspended in anticipation. When you go fishing you smell the flying foxes who have come to the river for the flowering eucalypts of the late dry season. The first big rains hit the desiccated and barren soil and run off into the creeks and rivers. They pull the heat out of the ground and deposit it in the water. To a North American like me, the sound of water rippling across the stony riverbed is a call to refresh myself but, when I leap in, I find it is too hot to be enjoyable. This is the run-off that stuns the fish and brings them floating and flopping to the surface.

Some years the rains settle in and hang around for weeks as cyclonic depressions move across North Australia. Other years it hardly rains at all, and the heat and humidity just go on and on without respite. Unless there



is a near absence of rain (and this happens, although I have not had the opportunity to see it), new growth starts to come forth. Green grass springs up out of the ground, new leaves appear on the trees, the vines spring to life and wind and tangle along the ground and up the shrubs. The rivers are flowing well; in good years they run a banker [river flooded to the top of its banks].

The next lot of wind starts to clear away the rains. In the early dry the grasses brown off and many fruits, bulbs and tubers are ripe. The humidity departs, the nights become cooler, and as the ground dries out you can start to drive around the country again. Everything that moves is walking around now—the kangaroos, wallabies and other marsupials are on the hop, the birds are active, and the ants are in heaven. Cattle get around the country in smaller groups, moving gently along the horizon. You smell them from afar, a dense, clean herbivore smell, and you look across the country for them, to see what sort of group is there. The flying foxes are gone, but they will return; that is their way.

## Life and death

Through walking with Jessie and many others, and through being taught by a large number of excellent teachers, I developed a heightened sense of life and a stronger sense of the possibilities surrounding death. These two themes run through this book, sometimes explicitly, often latently.

The first is a state of becoming; I call it ‘seriously alive’. To be seriously alive is to be in connection—caring and being cared for. In Country, as I have briefly mentioned, almost everything lives within relationships of beneficial connection (Chapter 7). To be seriously alive, then, is to be in connection. Not only does the person, or organism, or Country, live from one moment to the next; they also contribute to the lives of others and gain benefit from the lives of others. To be seriously alive is to be complexly connected in relationships that sustain systems of life.

The second theme is that of ramifying death: ‘double death’ in my terminology. Death, as we know, occurs when the spark of life flickers out or departs. In a system of life that is seriously alive, death is worked back into the fabric of life (Chapter 9). Double death breaks up this process, so that death leads to more death. Loss, destruction, extinctions: double death invades

systems of life, undermining their capacity to sustain the relationships that enable people, organisms, or larger systems such as Country to be seriously alive (Chapter 8).

Jessie's own life and death offers an excellent exposition of both concepts. As I discuss in *Dingo Makes Us Human* (Rose 1992), Yarralin people talked about the components of the human person in ways that suggested at least two animating spirits (and I also expressed caution about the use of the term 'spirit'). One of them keeps returning from life to life, so that death becomes an interval leading into transformation into new life. Often the genealogy of 'spirit' includes animals as well as humans—this life force moves through life forms and continues to bind death and life into the ongoing and emerging life of the place. Another 'spirit' returns to the Country to become a nurturing presence. These are the 'dead bodies' I spoke of earlier—the dead Countrymen (the term includes both women and men) who continue to live in Country and to whom people appeal when they go hunting. This ecology of emerging life sets up recursive looping between life and death; Country holds both, needs both and, most importantly, keeps returning death into life. The return is what holds motion in place, and in the dynamics of life and death, life is held in place because death is returned into place to emerge as more life.

Double death breaks up this dynamic, place-based recursivity. The first death is ordinary death; the second death is destruction of the capacity of life to transform death into more life. In the context of colonisation, double death involves both the death that was so wantonly inflicted upon people, and the further obliterations from which it may not be possible for death to be transformed. Languages obliterated and maybe gone forever, and clans or tribes eradicated and maybe gone forever are examples of double death.

Ecological violence performs much the same forms of obliteration. Thus, species are rendered extinct, billabongs and springs are emptied of water, and soils are turned into scald areas. This violence produces vast expanses where life founders. It amplifies death not only by killing pieces of living systems, but by diminishing the capacity of living systems to repair themselves, to return death back into life. What can a living system do if huge parts of it are exterminated? Where are the thresholds beyond which death takes over from life, and have we exceeded those thresholds violently and massively in the conjoined process of conquest and development? These processes are not always irreversible, but in many areas the answer is yes.

In Jessie's way of life and death, she has joined the other 'dead bodies' in her Country, and, like them, is becoming part of the nourishing ecology of the place. In life she was a great hunter, in death she joins the providers. Double death puts her in double jeopardy. The rivers are rapidly deteriorating from erosion and siltation, and even more severely at this time, from invasions of noxious weeds. It is probable that in the near future riverine ecologies will collapse, and with that collapse the possibility for the living to go fishing and feed their families will be radically impaired, if not completely obliterated. For Jessie, then, there's a doubling up: first her own death as a living person, and subsequently, her obliteration as a nurturer within a flourishing Country.

## Ecologies

I believe that Aboriginal people's culture of connectivity has strong points of connection with contemporary ecological thought. The demands that the new ecology puts on western scholarship are a partial guide to some of the demands that Dreaming ecology puts on western scholarship. For a scholar such as myself, one of the great obstacles to engaging with Aboriginal culture is the west's atomistic legacy, a legacy that has marginalised motion, process, recursivity and connection. Gilles Deleuze, in particular, has carried the argument against atomism in social theory. His work bends western philosophy towards its own margins and invigorates history with critique arising from concepts of fluidity, multiplicity and difference (see also Douglass 1992). His work is part of the emergence of parallel domains of converging scholarship that marked the latter half of the twentieth century. On the one hand cybernetics, systems theory, theoretical physics and ecology have started to reshape how we think about the world and to give us a language for engaging with a post-atomistic cosmology (Mathews 1991). On the other hand, feminist critique, post-structural theory and philosophies of intersubjectivity are reshaping and reimagining how we think about the world and our own analytic practice. As an anthropologist I am strongly influenced by Gregory Bateson who, in his enormously influential life, contributed to almost all of the domains mentioned above.

In brief summary, the new ecology starts with the assertion that the fundamental condition of life is connection (Bateson 1972, 436; Harries-Jones 1995, 66; Mathews 1991). The implication is that being is inherently, inescapably and necessarily relational. This new thinking is part of the radically unsettling paradigm shift now taking place in the western world.

From Newton to Einstein, life was conceptualised in the mode of atoms—single entities whose essential characteristic was separation. Atomistic theory had difficulty accounting for motion; atoms were assumed to be inherently in stasis (Mathews 1991). In the twentieth century the theories of relativity, the development of quantum theory and other world view-altering achievements require us to rethink the nature of life. Relationships, not atoms, are the foundation. Motion, not stasis, characterises the universe. According to Ilya Prigogine, the shift is ‘from substance to relation, to communication, to time’ (quoted in Midgley 1992, 40).

Amongst ecologists, whose training is principally in the fields of science, the shifts in thinking are revolutionary. An ontology of connectivity entails mutual causality: organism and environment modify each other. Relations between organism and environment are recursive, meaning that ‘events continually enter into, become entangled with and then re-enter the universe they describe’ (Harries-Jones 1995, 3). Once, scientists could imagine that proper methods were capable of bringing the universe into the mind of humanity. Some theoretical physicists still hold this to be the case, but most ecologists have become more humble. Frank Egler (1977) is reported to have said that ‘ecosystems may not only be more complex than we think, they may be more complex than we *can* think’ (quoted in Dietrich 1992, 110). This view represents a fundamental shift from the proposition that incomplete knowledge is an obstacle to be overcome, to the proposition that incomplete knowledge is a condition of any participant in a living system.

From my perspective, the key points of connectivity are:

1. the fundamental condition of life is connection (not separation),
2. the basic unit of survival is ‘organism and environment’,
3. systems are holistic; knowledge is therefore of necessity partial.

I am not, of course, suggesting that Australian Aboriginal culture is either post- or pre-Newtonian/Cartesian; I would actively resist the universalising tendency implicit in forcing another culture into a position defined by western history. In writing this book I work toward encounters. I do not

argue against anthropological or other theory as a primary purpose. Rather, I bring different discourses into proximity so that they may resonate with each other. The book is a site that must of course include both author and reader in encounter. I am aiming for an intersubjective process in which knowledge can arise in excess of the information and analysis presented in the text.

## Care of Country

Australia is the world's most arid inhabited continent, a land of many deserts and few rainforests. It is a land of monsoonal tropics in the far north, and temperate Mediterranean climates in the coastal south. Between these two relatively well-watered areas there is a vast zone of arid and semi-arid unpredictability within which is located the greatest portion (80 per cent) of the land mass.

Before European colonisation, the only domesticated animal was a recent arrival, the dingo (*Canis lupus dingo*), who has been in Australia for only a few thousand years. During most of the period we would identify as the time of fully modern humans, Aboriginal people lived in Australia without domesticated plants or animals. They learned to know and work with their island continent, embedding themselves ever more intricately into the places which they shaped and which shaped them. It was a continent of hunter-gatherers, as Harry Lourandos (1997) puts it. Here humans developed, to the greatest degree knowable in the history of our species, a way of life that works with the grain of nature, seeking connectivities that enmesh humans ever more recursively into the places that sustain them.

Western thought pervasively and profoundly has contrasted those who cultivate the soil with those who do not. Many of the differences between cultivation and hunter-gatherer modes of subsistence have been conceptualised in western thought by reference to human intentional action in the world, and rest on the western nature–culture dichotomy (see Plumwood 1990, 1993 and other authors). According to Tim Ingold (2000, 58):

The producer is conceived to intervene in natural processes, from a position at least partially outside it; the forager, by contrast, is supposed never to have extricated him- or herself from nature in the first place.

The nature–culture dichotomy, although now massively destabilised through feminist critique, continues to situate hunter-gatherer people ambiguously. Ingold (2000, 58) notes that contemporary usage which replaces the term ‘hunter-gatherer’ with the term ‘forager’ perpetuates both the dichotomy and the slippage: like animals, foragers graze across a landscape.

A growing body of knowledge in Australia is currently reconfiguring most of what once stood as conventional wisdom concerning Aboriginal hunter-gatherers, leading to a quiet revolution in anthropological thought concerning the relationships between Aborigines and their Country. In recent years, issues of Indigenous land management have come to be understood as questions for research. In Australia the long-term lack of research, like the lack of general public awareness of these issues, is connected with the settler view that Aboriginal people were parasites on nature. A.P. Elkin (1954, 14) gave the mark of scientific authority to this view in a book first published in 1938: ‘The food-gathering life is parasitical; the Aborigines are absolutely dependent on what nature produces without any practical assistance on their part.’ This view of parasitism was intricately connected to the view of *terra nullius*: the idea that the land was untransformed underpinned the idea that the land was unowned. By this logic, Aboriginal ‘parasites’ were excluded from forms of ownership by reason of their own nature (i.e. lack of culture).

An important corollary was that hunter-gatherers did not shape the landscape, or that the landscape was shaped by them only as a by-product of their foraging activities. Nancy Williams and Eugene Hunn’s (1982) publication *Resource Managers* marks a key moment in shifting the accepted conventions surrounding these issues (see also Williams and Baines 1993). The start of the demolition of the parasite view, however, dates to Rhys Jones’s (1969) work on the use of fire in a system of land management. He called this system fire-stick farming, and his use of the term ‘farming’ was deliberate (Jones 1995, 14). Inaccurate as it is in attributing the culture of cultivation to Aboriginal people, it provocatively targeted an intellectual and political nerve. If Aboriginal people were fire-stick farmers they could not be mere parasites, and their labour would have to be construed as productive. Within Lockean logic, having invested labour in land, there must exist the basis for land ownership.

Since Jones’s original work, there have been numerous studies that show Aboriginal people’s proactive care of Australian fauna, flora and ecosystems. Increasingly it is becoming evident that both the distribution and the

diversity of Australian biota across the continent are artefacts of Aboriginal people's intentional actions. This is not to say that Aboriginal people have always and only managed ecosystems well; knowledge and practice are not always in synchrony for Aboriginal people, any more than for others (Lewis 1993). On the other hand, 60,000 or more years of stable life in the world's most arid inhabited continent speak to successful interactions with ecosystems. In this context we should bear in mind that Aboriginal people do not hold labour to be a sign or proof of ownership; rather, they hold knowledge to constitute such a proof.

The implications of this new knowledge of proactive care are enormous. Research is in a very early stage; it is interdisciplinary and has yet to be fully accepted within any mainstream discipline. Although there is a vestigial debate about whether Aboriginal people actually did engage in fire-stick farming (Horton 1982, 2000); today it is almost universally accepted that they consciously managed large portions of the continent through the use of fire, and contemporary Anglo-Australian land managers now seek to use fire to manage landscapes in many parts of Australia and to work with and learn from traditional owners (Head 1994; Pyne 1991).

Looking at the continent as a whole, it is now evident that Indigenous people's actions are almost certainly responsible for maintaining the open grasslands that covered much of the continent (Jones 1969), for the preservation of specific stands of fire-sensitive vegetation such as acacia (Kimber 1983), cypress (Bowman 1995; Bowman and Panton 1993) and remnant rainforests (Russell-Smith and Bowman 1992), for the protection of refugia including breeding sanctuaries (Newsome 1980), and the preservation of sources of permanent water in arid environments (Latz 1995). In addition, their actions are directly responsible for the distribution of many plants (Hynes and Chase 1982; Kimber 1976; Kimber and Smith 1987, 233), and probably for the distribution of some fauna such as freshwater crayfish (Horwitz and Knott 1995). If research continues to produce new knowledge at this current rate, it is probable that today's knowledge is only the tip of the iceberg (more extensive summaries of many of these issues are found in Rose 1996).

The idea that Aboriginal people were parasites depended on three main assumptions. First, it posits a separation between humanity and nature. Second, it assumes a linear flow of energy from the natural world to the human world. Third, it assumes a separation of production and consumption, such that nature produces and humans consume. In absolute

contrast to these assumptions, my teachers worked with an assumption that they are part of the world around them. As many people said, they were born from and for their Country. Further, they understand themselves to be participants in life processes, and understand life processes to involve other living things as well as the broader seasons and elements discussed earlier in this chapter. They understand themselves to be the beneficiaries of many parts of the world around them. At the same time, they understand other living things also to benefit, and they understand benefits to be mutual and reciprocal. Much of this understanding can be summarised in the context of Country and expressed in the foundational moral principle; a Country and its people take care of their own (see also Rose 1992, 106–10).

Jessie took me walkabout. Sometimes I walked in her footsteps, sometimes we went hand in hand. Her history was laid out on the Earth around her in the sites and stories, in the land and in her memories, and in the unpredictable events of the living world. As we travelled, we saw all around us the roads, fences and ‘no trespassing’ signs, the erosion, the scald areas, washaways and caved-in river banks that told of conquest in action. I have met and worked with many people, settler descendants and Indigenous, who are concerned about what is happening to the place, but I know of nobody who takes care of Country with the holistic passion that senior Aboriginal people like Jessie bring to their lifelong practices of care.

This book is an exploration of walkabout. It has as its core the ethnobotanical and related work that I have done, and is built up out of experience, knowledge and memory. Memory is important because both the Country and people’s lives are changing rapidly. While ethnographic from start to finish, this book also contains much environmental history. It tells of things that settlers cannot know without the help of Aboriginal people: what used to be here, where it was, what was its beneficence, its Dreaming, its sites of increase, its connectivities. This is a book of survival and loss, of love, care and accommodation. And so, it is also a study of Indigenous philosophy examined through an ecological lens. Ecology is the study of connectivities in the living world; this book follows issues of connectivity into domains, place, time, ethics and nomadics.



## Nomadics

Aboriginal Australians were for some 60,000 years or more nomadic hunter-gatherers. Their root paradigm for sustaining and understanding life worked with mobility. Their territoriality articulated both their belonging and their mobility. Aboriginal people thus engage with a particular nomadic problematic: that of being here and not-here at the same time, of being both localised and mobile.

‘Place is pause’, according to Yi-Fu Tuan (1977, quoted in Flores 1998, 31). He means to point to the idea that place comes into being because human beings stay there long enough to articulate meanings for it. Without denying the importance of this emphasis on pause, it is significant that Victoria River Aboriginal people would not define place in this way, nor would they adhere to Tuan’s other great dictum, that place is ‘space plus people’. This dictum, similar to the former, asserts that humans make the meanings that distil place from pre-existing space.

In contrast, my Aboriginal teachers speak about and act toward place in a dialogical mode, so that place can be understood as a site of multiple presences and encounters. The sacred geography of Aboriginal Australia is wonderfully inclusive: the Country, the waterholes, the increase sites for plants, animals and humans, the fishing places and yam grounds, the birth and burial sites, the Dreaming sites and tracks, the histories, the stories, the songs, dances and much more are part of the geography of Country. The lived time of ephemeral life unfolds in real and located (not geometric or imagined) places.

Place is also intensely political. There are people for Country, and Dreamings for Country, generations of deceased people and unborn people for Country; there are other species who belong there, and there is vast knowledge (daily as well as ritual, secret as well as open, formal and informal) that belongs to the Country. The people and other living things who belong to the Country are usually spoken of as ‘owners’ of the Country and of the knowledge that is crucial to the sustenance of the Country, the sites and tracks, and contemporary Dreaming action in the world.

I have discussed these and other matters at length elsewhere (Rose 1992, 1996). The issues I raise here are widely discussed both in the literature and because they form the basis to almost every Aboriginal claim to land heard under the *Aboriginal Land Rights Act (Northern Territory) 1976*, in

court records. The right to sing the songs of the Country, to lead the rituals of the Country, to dance the Dreamings of the Country through, or bring them up from within, the Country are prerogatives of those people who are identified as 'owners' under the system of ownership that obtains in a given area. Ownership is actualised in the exercise of responsibilities; it is best to think of rights primarily as rights to responsibilities. That is, to be an owner is to hold certain duties of care, to have the right to exercise those duties, to collaborate with others in the exercise of duties, and to prevent misuse by people who are not entitled. Duties of care arise out of relationships. Rights, in this most fundamental sense, are rights to be in and to sustain relationships.

There is an ongoing debate about whether the term hunter-gatherer (or some variant thereof) actually refers to a category at all, and if so, whether the term is appropriate. Annette Hamilton (1982) takes up this issue, noting that it really is a residual category. That is, it includes all the peoples who are not cultivators, wage labourers and so on. Lourandos (1997) also offers a critique which requires him to transform categories into a continuum. He is then able to show overlapping areas along a continuum between hunter-gatherers of Australia and hunter-horticulturalists of Papua New Guinea. The boundary between hunter-gatherers and their nearest neighbours in terms of subsistence strategies is not clear-cut but rather constitutes a cline.

A further aspect of these debates concerns the quality of relations between hunter-gatherer peoples and their environments. Nurit Bird-David (1990) has been a major contributor at the conceptual level, and in a series of articles has argued for a third kind of economy: in addition to commodity economies and reciprocity economies, she suggests a giving economy. Based on her work with hunter-gatherer peoples of India, as well as her reading of the literature, she suggests that many hunter-gatherers treat the environment as a friend or relative: a sharing partner with whom relations are founded in trust (1992a, 31). In another article she proposes that the activity is not well termed hunting-gathering, that it's a mistake to try to force it into a production category, and that it would be better termed 'procurement' (1992b). Ingold (1994) endorses Bird-David's (1992b, 40) case for the appropriateness of the term procurement in its connotative range of 'management, contrivance, acquisition, getting, gaining'. In yet another paper, Bird-David (1993) looks comparatively at metaphors of relations between peoples and their environment. Here she looks at forms of relatedness, or metaphors of relatedness, and considers Warlpiri people to be related to their Country through the procreative powers of the ancestors.

While I think this is too simple, and the article is full of inconsistencies, Bird-David nevertheless offers an insightful reading of the available evidence;<sup>2</sup> I take these issues further in broadening the analysis to concern the proactive dimension of human and other living beings (discussed further below) so that procreation is engaged in across species and domains of Dreaming and ordinary life.

Neither 'production' nor 'procurement' does justice to Aboriginal Australian ecological interactions. There are two aspects to the issue: the bringing forth of life and the sustenance of life. Bringing forth would seem to be locally prior, since without life there would be no sustenance. On the other hand, without sustenance, there would be no life to bring forth life. The relationships between bringing forth and sustaining are interactive and mutually generative.

Ingold's finest contribution in these debates is his essay *From Trust to Domination*. In this work, Ingold (1994) offers a critique of the western paradigm of production in which nature provides the substance and human reason provides the form, so that production lies in the inscription of form upon substance (5). Hunter-gatherer peoples do not inscribe form, nor do they 'exploit' resources; rather they keep up a dialogue with the environment (11). The relationship in which this dialogue takes place is one of trust. Trust, he says, involves dependence without loss of autonomy (14). Trust is not a metaphor; it is literally the quality of relations that hunter-gatherers have with constituents of their environment. Ingold asserts that they do not separate out human from non-human agencies: there is just one world, embracing humans, animals and plants, and landscapes (Ingold, comment in Bird-David 1992b, 42).

Ingold asserts that 'the real challenge of hunter-gatherer studies is to develop conceptual vocabulary that will enable us to capture the dynamic potential of a radically alternative mode of relatedness' (comment in Solway and Lee 1990, 131; see also Ingold 1996). The difficulties go beyond conceptual vocabulary, and the metaphor of capture may be inappropriate, but I agree completely with his view that in our encounters with hunter-gatherers, we encounter a radically alternative mode of relatedness between people and the world. I seek to understand this relatedness through the root paradigm of nomadics.

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2 Debbie intended to discuss these inconsistencies here but did not do so—eds.

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In recent years a public misconception has arisen concerning nomadism. The idea seems to be that nomads are free to travel here and there as they see fit, and thus that their purposeful activity can actually be described with the vague term 'wandering'. This view completely misrepresents nomadism as a form of subsistence activity and not as a serious way of life. It conflates nomadism with transience (Flores 1998, 31), perhaps in the nostalgic fantasy that contemporary diasporic peoples, global tourists and corporate transients can be sensibly equated with nomads (see also Rose 2000).

Aboriginal nomadics, unlike transients, are set within the political, ecological and sacred geography of Country. Place is not pause, as Tuan (1977; quoted in Flores 1998, 31) would have it, so much as it is return. Living things are coming and going, and, most importantly, returning. The Aboriginal problematic is beautifully stated by Stephen Muecke in the dedication of his co-authored book *Reading the Country*: 'To the nomads of Broome, always there and always on the move' (Benterrak et al. 1984, 3). There is both movement away, and movement toward, both the departure and the return. A Country includes a plurality of places, and people have rights to travel in, learn about and undertake ceremonial and daily responsibilities for more than one Country, so that the 'range' (to use Stanner's 1965 term) is quite broad. But at the same time, it is bounded not only by social and ecological limits, but also by an ethic of return that keeps people 'always there' as well as 'always on the move'.

Aboriginal nomadics work with the departure and the return, and this same ethic underpins much of the communicative quality of Country, as I discuss in Chapter 6. The point to bear in mind is that Aboriginal mobility is not a matter of being pushed from one depleted resource to another in an endless quest for survival. Rather, people conceptualise their mobility in a communicative mode. The Country tells what is going on, and people respond to messages of Country. Rather than being pushed by necessity, they are called into action by communication.

Concepts of presence and absence take on a specific gravity in this culture of motion and return. Presence is an embodied emplacement and, as I will show in Chapter 2, is relationship. One is always present to and for others. Absence is the state of being somewhere else. It is not an ontological empty space, but a departure set within an ethic of return.

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