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Indigenous Australia in the Anthropocene

Introduction

We acknowledge the Anthropocene era as a geological and biophysical era and an imaginary, shaping human relations, to Mother Earth and to our environment. But our view of the Anthropocene era goes beyond. It aligns with the view articulated by Davis and Todd, in which colonialism is seen as the start date of the Anthropocene.¹ Indigenous peoples have argued that “the trajectory of contemporary planetary ecocide [has] obtained its footing over 500 years ago with the onset of global colonialism”.² We see this work as advancing inter- and trans-disciplinary perspectives on Australia reflecting current issues and changing human relations moved by accelerating planetary-scale environmental shifts.

This special issue covers three areas: *Indigenous Knowledges*, *Colonial Plunder/Looting and Contemporary Repatriation* as well as *Questions of Justice*. The contributions include articles, short interviews and testimonies by Indigenous Elders. These testimonies “hold within them knowledges while simultaneously signifying relationships”³ and are seen as key in the intergenerational transmission of knowledge. They also reflect Indigenous ‘ways of knowing’, thus promoting an appreciation for alternate views and modes of communication.

Indigenous Knowledges

The initial paper is on Indigenous participation in the northern Australian carbon economy. In their paper Bentley James, Glenn James and Dany Adone discuss Indigenous settler state relations, carbon economy, fire and ongoing struggles for ‘Country’ in the Anthropocene. Indigenous land owners/managers are using the carbon economy through reintroducing nuanced management of fire, concomitantly forging greater access to their Country – collectively about 70 per cent of the land area of north Australia. These ‘two-toolbox’ partnerships, incorporating local and Indigenous knowledge and Western style science, produce precious visits to Country, support for on-Country life projects, homelands, refresh cultural knowledge, language, psychological well-being and resilience, create new science and help stem global warming.

The interview with Glenn James focuses on Indigenous fire knowledge and emergent Western technologies tackling local and global issues. He also addresses e.g. the issue of carbon emission with respect to Indigenous land management

1 Cf. Heather Davis, Zoe Todd: On the Importance of a Date.

2 Deborah McGregor: Indigenous Environmental Justice, p. 416.

3 Cf. Margaret Kovach: Indigenous Methodologies.

and his role as a facilitator. Working closely with Indigenous community members and emergency management agencies can be seen as a contribution towards improving the outcomes in the hazard management sector.

In her contribution, Anne Pattel-Gray describes the cultural authority held by Aboriginal women in traditional society, a role regarded with great respect, holding the balance of spiritual and cultural relationships, a balance that must be maintained. Aboriginal women embrace significant roles as keepers, holders and teachers of sacred knowledge, law and wisdom, on Country. An Aboriginal woman's role was not such that they were dependent or dominated. It is a role of independence, responsibility, and authority, wherein they continue to struggle to enhance their power as Indigenous women. The roles and authority of Aboriginal women have been greatly impacted by British imperialism, invasion, and the ongoing colonial violence of the settler state. Forced missionisation and its imposition of Eurocentric cultural values, racism and misogyny were proximal causes of the erosion of Indigenous women's authority, power, and independence.

In her contribution to save Yolŋu Sign Language (YSL), Doris Yethun Burarawaŋa, a Yolŋu Elder from Galiwin'ku, describes her passion to pass on her knowledge of YSL, Yolŋu languages, kinship and Country, in light of the extraordinary changes to life on Country, and the mission, in the modern era. Her living story speaks of the deep ancestral connections of kin, Country and YSL, 'lakaram goŋdhu' (Lit.: the hand speaks), and its resonance in the production and giving of an illustrated handbook of YSL for Yolŋu children, in schools and homelands across North-East Arnhem Land.

In his paper on Indigenous knowledges in astronomy, Duane W. Hamacher discusses the recognition of Indigenous nomenclature in astronomy and Meteoritics. As scientific organisations work to decolonise their respective fields, Indigenous languages, ontologies, and epistemologies are being recognised for their important contributions to the canon of human knowledge as well as the practice of scientific research. One of the initial steps taken by scientific organisations is to recognise Indigenous languages with special reference to nomenclature. The astronomical community is leading this effort by establishing protocols and guidelines for the naming of celestial objects and phenomena, and formally adopting Indigenous names for stars, planetary features, and asteroids, as well re-naming astronomical and space facilities, such as observatories. This paper focuses on designing protocols and guidelines for naming terrestrial meteorite craters.

Colonial Plunder/Looting and Contemporary Repatriation

Gareth Knapman examines looting and the taking of Aboriginal property during colonial time. He argues that police played an important role in the collecting of Aboriginal objects for colonial and imperial museums. Although ostensibly in a policing role, after 1835 the colonial police acted as a paramilitary force in frontier colonies enabling colonisation. Most scholars have noted the unequal

power relationship that occurred when police 'collected' Aboriginal objects on the frontier, scholarship has not previously explored the 'authority' of the police to collect objects. Recent research by Knapman and Boonstra has demonstrated that colonial plunder, far from being an unregulated activity – as previous scholarship has assumed – was actually highly regulated by Western law, although rarely enforced. The article examines the collecting activities of three colonial police constables: Harry Ord, Ernest Cowle, and William Wilshire. The taking of Aboriginal objects was theft under western law unsupported by any colonial legal regimes. The article argues that in many instances, police collecting was, thus, unlawful under western law.

In his paper, Michael Pickering discusses cultural processes and rights in repatriation in the context of Australia. Major museums across the world are being approached by Indigenous communities for the return of Ancestral Remains and other cultural property. Apart from a very small number of specialists, many museum professionals, in particular senior decision makers, have limited knowledge of the actual collections they hold and the cultural significance of those objects, both in the past, the present, and into the future. They, thus, often apply limited and restricted criteria in assessing the merits of an application for repatriation.

Questions of Justice

In tracing the roots of current Indigenous matters of disadvantage and injustice in the Anthropocene, we have the Indigenous perspective of a sovereign Budjiti woman Elizabeth McNiven from the Paroo River Country of Southwest Queensland. She questions the validity of the British and subsequent Australian claim to sovereignty and to the collective wealth of Aboriginal nations across the continent. The dark side of British colonialism in Australia sees a global power at war against a non-militarised, therefore weaker opponent, against families of Aboriginal peoples, against unarmed men, women, and children. This legacy of land theft and genocide, of Aboriginal socio-economic disadvantage, of social exclusion, of intergenerational trauma, of the denial of Aboriginal peoples' rights as defined in international law, is the blood on the wattle, is the stain Australia cannot remove and can no longer hide from the world. Over the past two hundred and thirty-five years, Aboriginal peoples in Australia refused to concede, to give up the fight. In presenting solutions, the article looks to international law to the enshrinement of Aboriginal peoples' rights and interests, in an international sovereign treaty, including reparation and compensation to the peoples of the Aboriginal nations.

Ghil'ad Zuckermann examines the link between language reclamation and Aboriginal wellbeing. He postulates heritage language as core to people's wellbeing, spirituality and happiness. Chandler and Lalonde reported a clear correlation between lack of conversational knowledge in the native tongue and youth

suicide.⁴ However, so far, there has been no systematic study of a correlation in the other direction, i.e. the impact of language *revival* on *empowered* wellbeing, *improved* mental health and *reduction* in suicide. This is partly because language reclamation is still rare. This article hypothesizes that just as language loss *increases* suicide rate, language gain *reduces* suicide rate, improves wellbeing and increases spirituality. The article focuses on the Barngarla Aboriginal language of Eyre Peninsula, South Australia. Barngarla became a Dreaming, Sleeping Beauty tongue in the 1960s. It belongs to the Thura-Yura language group, which is part of the Pama-Nyungan language family, which includes 306 out of 400 Aboriginal languages in Australia. The name of that family is a merism derived from the two end-points of the range: the Pama languages of northeast Australia (where the word for ‘man’ is ‘pama’) and the Nyungan languages of southwest Australia (where the word for ‘man’ is ‘nyunga’).

In the interview on the Referendum, Anne Pattel-Gray reflects on the Referendum of October 2023, in which the citizens of Australia decided on the recognition of Aboriginal people in the Constitution. She gives her perspective on the outcomes of the Referendum and addresses questions such as how to go forward after the vote and what the next strategy for Australia’s First Nations might be. However, the most important question remains – How can Aboriginal people reconcile with a nation under those circumstances?

References

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4 Michael J. Chandler, Chris E. Lalonde: Cultural Continuity as a Protective Factor against Suicide in First Nations Youth.