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“If Land was a Head: A Critique of ‘Country’”

Abstract: This paper considers specific cultural practices and beliefs and contemplates the western rejection of exotica (head-hunting) in one instance, and the exotifying of land (increasingly referred to as country) in the other. The paper will argue that while the precise meaning of head-hunting remains elusive to aliens (even other head-hunters from different cultures), just as the full meaning of land or “country” to Aborigines remains elusive to aliens (including Aborigines from different regions), there are contiguities between Indigenous understandings of heads and Indigenous understandings of country. Contrary to the taking of heads the paper then argues that notions of land and country are readily sentimentalised along the lines of “the earth is my mother”, and that such sentiments contribute to broad support for Aboriginal land rights. Such sentiments also provide a ready means for Aborigines who have never lived on country to nevertheless explain its significance to them. A broad sweep of contemporary interests – concern for the environment for example – intersect with customary beliefs relating to country and are reified in local communities, which in turn influences how specific cultures are understood and which aspects of culture should be conserved.

Keywords: Land; Country; Aborigines; Head-hunting; Settler; Belonging

Introduction

The practice of head-hunting, both imagined and actual, has long attracted interest. This interest varies from sensationalist to sensitive informed analysis and continues to do so. Beyond the ubiquitous travellers’ and adventurers’ tales and similar of supposed encounters with macabre exotica, a vast body of more sober anthropological (and other) literature addresses head-hunting. In the latter its practice in numerous and otherwise distinctive cultures – Polynesian, Melanesian, Torres Strait Islander, and elsewhere – is explicated. Unsurprisingly the explanatory rationale for this ostensibly confronting cultural pursuit differs across the cultures that practiced it, as did the associated conventions, techniques, rituals and behavioural patterns. Insofar as there is any commonality to be found, it lies in the profound significance attributed to its practice. It was not a mundane exercise. The taking and keeping of heads was meaningful, and much of that meaning was realised through symbolic abstraction, no matter the import of the bodily artefact itself. The precise meaning of head-hunting, however, in any given culture remains elusive to aliens and continues to be the subject of scholarly debate, and like any cultural phenomena whose broader relevance manifests in symbolic abstraction, its practitioners might not be able to articulate its full significance. Alluding at least in part to this Renato Rosaldo, in his renowned introduction “Grief and a Headhunter’s Rage”, argues that “ritual in general and Ilongot head-hunting in particular form the intersection of multiple co-existing social processes” (Rosaldo: 11). Kenneth George argues for the necessity of grounding analyses of head-hunting

in the social and historical contingencies of a lived-in world, and in the practical effects of ritual discourse. For example, care needs to be taken to read, and thus theorize, “existential” predicaments so as not to overlook the political and social strains that give birth to them. (George 1996: 68–69)

The storing, maintenance and use of skulls, the need for fresh heads and the practices of and ancillary preparations towards obtaining them had relevance to social, cultural, economic, political, spiritual, religious, and historical affairs; was related to trade, warfare, cultural identity, land tenure, fertility, fecundity, personal growth and maturation; “it effected the functioning of local society” (Dureau: 89), and these functionalities were dispersed through and authenticated by “intricate symbolic webs” of meaning (Geertz: 195); [see also for example (Dureau), (Rosaldo), (Harrison), (Sheppard *et al*), (Aswani 2000a), (Aswani 2000b), (George 1991), (George 1996), (Keesing)].

Except for isolated incidents, head-hunting as an enduring cultural practice has largely ceased. Many cultures, however, revere this aspect of their past and thus it continues to resonate and have significance (and function) in local webs of meaning. Its erstwhile practice is even celebrated in children’s books (see for example Laza). If culture becomes manifest in “socially conditioned repertoires of activities and thoughts” (Harris: 62), and is realised symbolically in social relations, and reverence for a past practice of head-hunting is integral to this symbolism then the relevance of the practice continues. The locus of activities and thoughts once intrinsic to the actual practice of head-hunting and the maintenance and storage of skulls is now transferred to and articulated through other cultural mechanisms and handed-down knowledge of the tradition.

Country

One could almost seamlessly insert “land” or “country” as a replacement for “heads” in the above without jeopardising meaning. For Indigenous Australians “country” too is resonant with the same sweeping significance across social, cultural, economic, political, spiritual, religious, and historical affairs; one’s affinity to country very much effected (and effects) the functioning of local society and country’s significance was and is intricately bound to symbolic webs of meaning and ritual discourse. With a greater or lesser degree of comprehension, this much is popularly understood. It is taken as axiomatic that the relationship Aborigines have with the land is special, unique even, and its mention almost always carries with it the weight of reverence.

For those Aborigines long removed from their ancestral lands the locus of activities and thoughts that once adhered to their country is similarly articulated through other cultural mechanisms and handed-down knowledge of the relevant traditions. Just like the full significance of head-hunting (or almost any cultural phenomena) in local webs of meaning remains unknown and perhaps unknowable, what the land or “country” means to Aborigines is likewise beyond reach, perhaps even to Aborigines themselves. Nevertheless, many have attempted to capture something of its essence. Among those most regularly cited is that of Stanner’s (1991), the anthropologist:

No English words are good enough to give a sense of the links between an aboriginal group and its homeland. Our word "home", warm and suggestive though it be, does not match the aboriginal word that may mean "camp", "hearth", "country", "everlasting home", "totem place", "life source", "spirit centre" and much else all in one. Our word "land" is too spare and meagre. We can now scarcely use it except with economic overtones unless we happen to be poets. The aboriginal would speak of "earth" and use the word in a richly symbolic way to mean his "shoulder" or his "side". I have seen an aboriginal embrace the earth he walked on. To put our words "home" and "land" together into "homeland" is a little better but not much. A different tradition leaves us tongueless and earless towards this other world of meaning and significance. When we took what we call "land" we took what to them meant hearth, home, the source and locus of life, and everlastingness of spirit. At the same time it left each local band bereft of an essential constant that made their plan and code of living intelligible. (Stanner: 44)

Writing in 1976, Aboriginal leader Galarrwuy Yunupingu poignantly stated "The land is my backbone. [...] My land is my foundation. [...] Without land, I am nothing" (Yunupingu: 9). There are almost endless similar examples. Implicit in such descriptions is the drawing of a contrast between the thickness of meaning that the land has for Aborigines, and the thinness, even crass, meaning, or to be more precise, function, that land has for settlers. It is now a commonplace that for settlers land is a commodity to be bought and sold. For Aborigines on the other hand, "country is a living entity with a yesterday, today and tomorrow, with a consciousness, and a will toward life [...] country is home, and peace; nourishment for body, mind, and spirit; heart's ease" (Rose: 7). Although more and more Aboriginal claimants for land are stressing its necessity in meeting economic needs such needs remain buttressed by the claimant's casting as "*homo religiosus* rather than *homo economicus*" (Beckett: 207). These tensions are evident in the Queensland Labor government's recent re-introduction – March 2018 – of a vegetation management Bill to parliament that would ban broad-acre clearing of vegetation. The Bill provoked an angry response from Richie Ah Mat, the chairman of the Cape York Land Council, who accused the government of "talking black but acting green", and proclaimed it

a vicious piece of legislation that goes against the grain of closing the gap. Our people, 20 years ago, were just starting to get our land back. Now they've cut us below the knees with this new piece of legislation. We don't want to be sitting in the backyard as blackfellas, with no opportunity, and this is what this law is doing. It is robbing my people of an opportunity to create economic development and sustainability for the rest of our lives. (cited in Elks & McKenna)

Farmers and pastoralists too argue that the legislation will stifle agricultural production, but green groups are arguing the legislation affords too little protection of valuable habitats, including the Great Barrier Reef that is impacted by farmland runoff (see Elks & McKenna).

The richly drawn intimate affiliation between Aborigines and country and its contrast with the supposed superficiality and crudely materialistic attitudes towards country of settler Australians is accepted as a given requiring no substantiation. It is shorthand for something widely held to be self-evidently true. Yet from as early as the seventeenth century the psychopathological condition known then (and until the twentieth century) as nostalgia has been described by physicians. Related to homesickness and melancholy, it arose when an individual became ill and pain-ridden because they were no longer on their native land or feared not being able to return

to it (Rosen: 340–341). Beyond loss of appetite, insomnia, fever, insanity and even death could result (Rosen: 341, 342, 343, 346). The rupture from homeland precursing emotional and mental disorders that could find expression in various organic pathologies (even death) bespeaks of an affinity to one's homeland more substantial than country as a mere exchangeable commodity. Although observed previously it was Johannes Hofer in 1688 who provided the first detailed account of the condition and who named it "nostalgia". His case study was based on Swiss troops serving in France (Rosen: 341). As the centuries rolled on, this disorder was "recognised by physicians all over Europe as occurring among various ethnic and social groups" (Rosen: 349–352). Home-sickness manifesting more profoundly as a pathological condition arising from distance from one's native land, appears to be a condition to which all are susceptible.

Nevertheless, the occasional attempts to explain the sense of belonging that settler-Australians have for country can attract harsh criticism. Critiques often raise the appropriative nature (intent is alleged) of settler Australians supposedly indigenising themselves. Having dispossessed Aborigines of their land, now settlers seek to supplant Aborigines by they themselves becoming Aboriginal. As Emma Kowal notes,

[a]ny exploration of non-indigenous belonging in the Australian nation-state is considered by definition to be at the expense of Indigenous belonging. From this point of view, Indigenous claims are automatically diluted, dissolved or negated when mentioned alongside other kinds of belonging. (Kowal: 177)

Ken Gelder's critique of Peter Read's *Belonging* (2000) is in this regard an exemplar (Gelder; see also Probyn). Gelder is highly critical of attempts by settlers to explain their "deep relationship" to country, and of Read's framing of these attempts. The issue here is not whether Gelder's concerns are justified or the merits or otherwise of Read's *Belonging*. It is the scepticism, cynicism and suspicion that non-Indigenous / settler proclamations of their own profound sense of place and belonging provoke. Furthermore, Indigenous claims to a "deep relationship" to country do not suffer the same scrutiny. So a self-proclaimed "urban, beachside Blackfella, a concrete Koori with Westfield Dreaming" (Heiss: 1), is able to write without provoking so much as a murmur that although spending most of her life on Gadigal land in Sydney, hers is the rural "voice of a Wiradjuri woman aware of where she will always belong" (Heiss: 3), and that Wiradjuri land is her "country" where her "spirit belongs and will finally rest" (Heiss: 3). Again, there are many number of similar examples (see Grieves: 11, 21 and *passim*). The invocation of "country" and immutable spiritual ties to it is a device Aborigines use to unite themselves with a trait immediately evocative of a seemingly authentic Aboriginality shared with a deep ancestral past. Whereas Gelder is highly critical of historians who have "enacted the fantasy of indigenising the 'non-Aboriginal'" (1), he is mute on the devices that Indigenous people distant from the outward markers of Aboriginality (language, lifestyle, their ancestral country, and so on) use to indigenise themselves. Gelder's political engagement (and his review of *Belonging* is advocacy), constrains his theoretical commitment (in this review at least).¹

1 Gelder's critique of *Belonging* long predates Heiss's *Am I Black Enough for You*. Heiss is used here as an example to show how Aborigines too deploy notions of having a "deep relationship" to "country". How to reconcile critical theory with political engagement and advocacy is an important, complex but necessary challenge. It is an issue that anthropologists have struggled with albeit without resolution. It remains

Invoking “country” and one’s sense of belonging to it in a spiritual sense works because it resonates with something that many – Indigenous and non-Indigenous – sense, often in a visceral way, in their own feelings for certain places or a place. These feelings arise from multiple factors, including comparatively recent socio-historical association. This is no less true for Aborigines as it is for others. To take but one example, the reverence that Tasmanian Aborigines have for Wybalena on Flinders Island, an island which had not been inhabited for four and half thousand years or so, arises from the devastating consequences of their forced and temporary re-location there in the nineteenth century (see Ryan: 219–252). Taking another example, the lifescapes of work and experience tie settlers to land in ways that far transcend its understanding in arid economic terms, as a mere exchangeable commodity. As Nicholas Gill and Kay Anderson have revealed through their fieldwork with pastoralists in Central Australia and the Top End,

the pastoral body and land permeate each other through physical co-presence and labour. [...] Pastoralists [...] came to gain not only knowledge of the physical features and layout of the land, but also to develop a way of knowing that provided them a place within it. This knowing is specific to their mode of land use and occupation, and arises in part from the variability of the land. (Gill and Anderson: 3)

The pastoralist’s sense of place, as it is for other settlers, is rich, deep and informed (see Gill: 49, 50). As Keith Basso (102) has argued in another context, “landscapes are always available to their seasoned inhabitants in other than material terms. Landscapes are available in symbolic terms as well”. The salient point is that proclamations postulating a uniquely Indigenous sense of belonging work because the sentiments informing these postulations are recognisable and even familiar in the same way that the proclamations concerning the “deep relationships” that arise through the taking of heads are not. It is easy to emote about the land and one’s feelings towards it, for sentiments along these lines to be mutually intelligible and for that emoting to have a foundation of some if varying substance. It is less easy (for many anyway) to emote, at least in a mutually intelligible feel-good heart-warming sense, about the necessity of taking and keeping human heads. In these instances the factors that led to the valorisation of a distinctive relationship to land and ultimately the cessation of the practice of head-hunting following contact with Europeans, exemplify how colonial encounters “made particular practices or customs emblematic; different encounters produced different referents for what was characteristic of a place or a people” (Thomas: 214). As Nicholas Thomas posits, this is a

political contest [...] that is manifest not only in the process of selecting aspects of past heritage or present custom that are to be privileged in the construction of ethnic identity, but also in radical rejections of what is local and traditional. (Thomas: 214)

By way of illustrating another way in which the broad appeal of the seductiveness of land is harnessed for strategic ends, the rise of the Green movement internationally and its successes is partly attributable to humankind’s capacity to emote about places, even those we have not been to (see for example Read 1996: 127–131). The renowned Tasmanian nature photographer Peter Dombrovskis’s iconic image

highly contested terrain (see Sylvain). Literary scholars, however, have shown little appetite for confronting this challenge.

of Rock Island Bend on the Franklin River is widely held to have swung popular opinion against the damming of the river during this fiercely contested early 1980's federal election campaign.² The power of this image is not reliant upon familiarity with the section of the Franklin River depicted. Comparatively few have seen it first-hand. Tim Bonyhady argues that photographs “address a need for information in a way words cannot do. They show us what was at stake” (Bonyhady 1); (see also Read 1996: 127). In this instance what was and is at stake is provoked by the arousal of feelings towards places, elements of which are widely shared, recognised, and familiar.

Feeding into today's perception that the Indigenous relationship to the land is uniquely deep and that of others exceptionally shallow is the widely held belief that Aborigines' impact on the environment was minimal. In popular parlance they trod lightly wherever they went. This was not an artefact of available technologies, small populations, but the outcome of an ethics consciously geared towards sustainable exploitation of the environment. Bill Gammage introduces his *The Biggest Estate on Earth* (2011) with “This book describes how the people of Australia managed their land in 1788. It tells how this was possible, what they did, and why. It argues that collectively they managed an Australian estate ...” (Gammage: 1). Further, “[m]anagement was active not passive, [...] committed to a balance of life” (2 my emphasis). The coupling of Indigenous peoples with a consciously directed environmentalist ethic is a standard repertoire in critiques worrying about environmental degradation, habitat destruction, and loss of flora and fauna. In this respect Indigenous people are costumed according to the needs and interests of others, as well as strategically donning themselves in the costumes laid out for them. It was in this guise that “the Indian was introduced to the American public as the great high priest of the Ecology Cult” (Martin: 157).

Habitually coupled with its opposite, the Nonecological [sic] White Man, the Ecological Indian proclaims both that the American Indian is a nonpolluting [sic] ecologist, conservationist, and environmentalist, and that the white man is not. (Krech III: 22)

Aborigines, with the now common refrain that they belong to the “oldest country” and possess the “oldest [continuing] culture” (Colbung in Grieses: 25), have assumed the mantle of exemplary environmentalists, usurping the Native Americans in this respect. As Annette Hamilton argues, “the litany of ‘a culture over 40,000 years old’ stands for the notion of sustainable continuity against the destruction of 200 years of white settlement” (Hamilton: 22). The ease with which the notion of Indigenous environmental responsibility – whether Native American or Australian Aborigine – arising from management practices decisively implemented for the purpose of “living in harmony” with the natural world can be categorically refuted – notwithstanding the ostensibly more benign Indigenous exploitative practices – has not mitigated the enduring force of this perception (see Rolls 2003; McCarthy: 1–5).

The long duration of Aboriginal occupation of Australia – now postulated to be somewhere between 50,000 and 65,000 years – is also pointed to as a contributing factor underlying the “strong connection” to landscape that Aborigines express, and the importance of the land to them. A typically sober scientific report based on DNA

2 The image appeared in full-page newspaper advertisements ahead of the 1983 federal election. It was captioned “Could you vote for a party that would destroy this?”

evidence – sufficiently sober for it to be published in *Nature* – states dryly in the “discussion” section that

[t]he long-standing and diverse phylogeographic patterns documented here are remarkable given the timescale involved, and raise the possibility that the central cultural attachment of Aboriginal Australians to “country” may reflect the continuous presence of populations in discrete geographic areas for up to 50kyr. (Tobler *et al.*: 183)

Newspaper reporting of this research was less restrained. Stephen Fitzpatrick, *The Australian’s* Indigenous Affairs Editor, asserted that this research “corroborat[ed] scientifically for the first time the basis for indigenous understanding of ancient links to country” (Fitzpatrick). One of the researchers, Alan Cooper, was also less restrained in his comments for this newspaper, stating that the research “helps explain why there’s such a strong connection to the landscape, and the critical importance of being on country” (cited in Fitzpatrick). In commentary there is always the danger if not the temptation to step beyond one’s area of expertise. Asserting that the “deep relationship” that Indigenous people have with country is evidenced in all its complex entanglements – scientifically corroborated indeed – by biological markers indicating long and stable habitation is an example of overreach absent from the pages of the report in *Nature*. However, this slipperiness that uses scientific evidence to buttress sociocultural formulations attracts scant criticism when it is consistent with received and popular wisdom. Postulations characterising the Aboriginal relationship to country as being unique and profoundly deep are now, it is claimed, underpinned by nothing less than DNA evidence, the very evidence which in popular understandings is irrefutably authoritative. As Catherine Nash warns in another but related context,

[w]hen the dominant model for understanding inheritance is genetic, genealogical explanations for personal and collective character can easily slip into the language of genetic essentialism, which thereby explains and naturalises social practices, structures values and relations. (Nash: 35)

Anthropological Influence

Marshal Sahlins noted how the term “culture”, formerly the province of anthropologists, has been appropriated by Indigenous peoples and used as leverage against nation states.

The cultural self-consciousness developing among imperialism’s erstwhile victims is one of the more remarkable phenomena of world history in the later twentieth century. “Culture” – the word itself, or some local equivalent, is on everyone’s lips. Tibetans and Hawaiians, Ojibway, Kwakiutl, and Eskimo, Kazakhs and Mongols, native Australians, Balinese, Kashmiris, and New Zealand Maori: all discover they have a “culture”. For centuries they may have hardly noticed it. (Sahlins: 3)

There is a rich lode of anthropological literature describing the cultural elements of Indigenous peoples. The affinity between Aborigines and their country is part of this anthropological lode. In contrast there are few anthropological or ethnographic studies of non-Indigenous peoples seeking or revealing the rich cultural detail of

their relationship to country. As David Trigger states, white settler farmers “are not usually ‘natives of choice’ in anthropology” (Trigger: 404). For this reason there is scant anthropological or ethnographic material on how white settlers “acquire authenticity in relation to place” (Rata: 234). On the other hand, anthropology has given Indigenous an extensive literature that can be mined vis-à-vis their ‘feeling’ for country, as well as the terminology and conceptual frameworks enabling articulation of this relationship.

Hence in a similar fashion to how Indigenous peoples are now self-consciously cultural, having learnt well the anthropologists’ stock-in-trade (see Sahlins: 3–5), many Australian Aborigines (among others) now self-consciously articulate their enduring bonds to country. Writing of the influence of the Yolngu in advocacy for Aboriginal rights, Bain Attwood (344) explains how “they had produced an understanding of their world through dialogue with anthropologists and anthropologically trained missionaries over several generations”. And just as “culture” has become a somewhat meaningless but nevertheless a strategically deployed catch-all that sees proclamations that something (practice or behaviour) is “cultural” rarely challenged (see Rolls 2011), so too are the claims of bonds to country rarely challenged. This is so even when those bonds rest on supposed innate senses arising from biological heritage no matter how distant, rather than knowledge gained from intimacy with the country claimed. White settlers learn and scholars naively reinforce that cultural distinctiveness and an abiding affinity to country are the privileges of Indigenous Australians.

This is not to deny that the “sense of the links between an aboriginal group and its homeland” (Stanner: 44) is anything but unique. Perhaps, though, the sense of links between *any* group or individuals of that group and their homeland or places of significance to them are unique, and that the English language is not furnished with words – recalling Stanner’s statement vis-à-vis Aborigines that “[n]o English words are good enough ...” (Stanner: 44) – that adequately convey the profundity of this sense either. As discussed earlier, the term nostalgia was an attempt to explain the significance of the malaise of homesickness and its aetiology, but it is inadequate as an explanation – particularly in its current rendering as a sentimental longing or wistful affection for something past – for the sociocultural substance underlying the emotional depths which people feel for place or places. Hence lacking a body of relevant anthropological and / or ethnographic literature to draw on to help elaborate the non-indigenous sense of country however defined, attempts to do so are often rudimentary and clumsy, leaving them open – as previously described – to spirited critique.

Similarly, the language used by those attempting to explain the emotional and spiritual depths of their feelings for country is frequently inadequate and can appear sentimental and naïve. Indigenous explanations of their emotional and spiritual ties to country are just as often equally sentimental and naïve – “the earth is my mother”, for example – nostalgic even for an imagined past. However, because Indigenous explanations rest on dense records of evidentiary material from which there has been seepage into the public realm, credulous assertions of spiritual ties to country are seldom questioned. The wider community ‘know’ of the ‘substance’ underpinning such claims.

The little research there is into settler notions of belonging points to equally profound emotional, cultural and social depths buttressing feelings for country. Michele Dominy's *Calling the Station Home* (2001), based on research with New Zealand's South Island high-country farming families, is one of the few anthropological texts explicating the relationship between settlers and their land. As Gerard Ward (331) states in his review of this text, Dominy reveals how these settler families have come to know country "as an intimately named landscape, saturated with meaning". In her review Elizabeth Rata (234) writes how Dominy sets herself to the anthropological task of understanding "the process by which groups acquire authenticity in relation to place" and that the high-country farmers "families' affinity to land is voiced in the complex interplay of social practices and symbolic forms". Dominy (3) explains that her research aimed to

explore what it means to come to belong to a place. [...] I examine place not as setting, but as what high-country folk call "country", a physical space invested with cultural meaning, a site of intense cultural activity and imagination - of memory, of affectivity, of work, of sociality, of identity. I examine place as it is conceptualized [sic] endogenously not merely as scenery or panorama, but as habitat, as in inhabited and deeply culturalized landscape.

As mentioned in brief above, the geographers Gill and Anderson in their fieldwork with the pastoralists of the Northern Territory have also explained the various processes through which pastoralists achieve their authenticity in respect to place and arrive at their sense of belonging. Such work as Dominy's, Gill's and Anderson's avoid hierarchical assignments of belonging in which the Indigenous is profound and spiritual and the settler superficial and materialistic. They also do not posit settler belonging at the expense of Indigenous belonging. Trigger (405) writes how Dominy concludes that "cultural identity [...] cannot be understood in simple one-dimensional or binary terms; Maori and Pakeha farmer identities are entwined together in a fluid relationship whereby both draw on the other's traditions". It is telling that post-colonial critics like Gelder who discern exploitative appropriation in works like Read's *Belonging* and who are contemptuous of the supposed superficiality of settler expressions of their feelings for place do not engage with the more scholarly research on settler belonging. Were they to do so their critiques, if their politics would allow, might be more tempered.

It is ironic that "what is widely understood as worthy in what is 'Aboriginal'" (Merlan 1998: 169) is so closely tied to an entity - land, country - that evokes a sense of knowingness or at least familiarity among so many. Francesca Merlan explains how Aboriginal worthiness "is assumed to involve certain distinctive and traditional forms of social relations - in respect to place, dependence on the countryside for survival, intimacy with it, reproduction of personhood in relation to it, and so on" (Merlan 1998: 169). Merlan explains how this assumption constitutes an acceptance of "an economy of values of cultural authenticity" (Merlan 1998: 169-170). What I am suggesting is that an influential reason why there is such demotic acceptance of this particular suite of economy of values of cultural authenticity is because it is based on an entity - the land or country - which has meaning that resonates beyond Aborigines. Although writing in the context of the Western Apache, Basso's discussion on the relationship between discourse and landscape is relevant to any community apprehending the physical environment in which they work and dwell.

[W]henever the members of a community speak about their landscape – whenever they name it, or classify it, or evaluate it, or move to tell stories about it – they unthinkingly represent it in ways that are compatible with shared understandings of how, in the fullest sense, they know themselves to occupy it. (Basso: 101)

There are many traditional Aboriginal practices that westerners view with abhorrence, and these practices are not “widely understood as worthy in what is ‘Aboriginal’”. If a culture was to assert its authenticity on practices deemed unworthy, such as head-hunting practices and prowess as a number of cultures once did (some still do), change was demanded of their “economy of values of cultural authenticity”. In this respect rather than seeing the land or country as uniquely Indigenous, it could be argued that country has become the talisman of universal Aboriginal authenticity on the basis that it reflects “mainstream emphasis on Indigenous identity and being” and perhaps more cynically, as a way of managing postcoloniality (see Merlan 2014: 297, 297–298).

Conclusion

Of course the land is the basis for many modes of production essential to survival in ways that decapitated heads, arguably, are not. It is the land (and sea, lakes, rivers etc.) from where we draw our nutritional sustenance. Nevertheless, whether or not the land is more productive in a functional sense than the taking of heads in respect to the maintenance of the sociocultural institutions that are essential for survival – that “intersection of multiple co-existing social processes” (Rosaldo: 11) and “the practical effects of ritual discourse” (George 1996: 68–69) – is by no means straightforward. The issue here though is how the relationship to land *and* heads and the function of land *and* heads is described and explained and the demotic acceptance of land having special meaning for Aborigines, not whether or not land is more or less productive at a sustenance level than taking heads. Writing of *Calling the Station Home* Rata states that Dominy’s “contribution is to suggest the need to explore the ways in which Pakeha ways of elaborating the symbolic nature of land are shared with Maori although expressed differently” (Rata: 235). In Australia and just as for Aborigines, settler Australians too enjoy an affinity with land that arises from that complex of social practices and symbolic forms. Although the nature of that complex differs – in terms of social practices and the symbolic abstraction through which this complex gains its profound significance – it is not a difference that can be arrayed in a hierarchy, in either degrees of authenticity of belonging or degrees of significance / depths of feeling. Merlan argues how

[e]mphasis on culture and its maintenance [...] has intensified concern with how culture is to be understood and conserved. This, in turn, stimulates many processes of the mimetic sort, in which representations of Aboriginal practices – including how practices are to be understood as “Aboriginal culture” – come to play a material role in the shaping of Aborigines’ lives. Aboriginal people, of course, participate in these processes in various ways. (Merlan 1998: 226)

The dispossession of Aborigines from their lands and the necessity of restitution – notwithstanding significant returns of land under the Northern Territory Land Rights Act, other land rights acts, Native Title legislation, Indigenous Land Use

Agreements, and other forms of “handback” – makes land a potent issue. Drawn into the social and political contestation over unresolved issues pertaining to loss of land, are the anthropological constructions of what land means to Aborigines. To be authentically Aboriginal one must be able to demonstrate ‘authentic’ ways of belonging, and those ways by necessity need to be distinguishable from the ‘inauthenticity’ of settler belonging. The ‘special’ relationship that Aborigines are said to enjoy with land (more eloquently expressed as “country”) has reified into an essential element at the core of Aboriginality.

The innocuousness of claiming a profoundly spiritual attachment to country facilitates an uncritical general acceptance. So too does the fact that emotional ties to place or places – even imagined places – is a shared feature of human experience. The distinctive and esoteric nature of Aboriginal ‘belonging’ is lost in the more generic sentiments of universal experience, but it is this generic understanding that has enabled those distant from the cultural esotery where distinctiveness is made manifest in specific socio-cultural contexts and the concomitant complex of symbolic abstractions to assert an Indigenous relationship to country and the inference of participatory experience in this complex. Drawn into this complex are a raft of external concerns. Most prevalent are anxieties arising from environmental issues such as destruction of delicate ecosystems, loss of biodiversity, protection of native flora and fauna, global warming and so on. Peculiarly western notions underpinning our contemporary environmental consciousness are reified in local Indigenous expressions of their relationship to country and its management. This contributes to how the broader community understands these cultures and which aspects of those cultures are deserving of their support and conservation. Moreover, this has material influence, in that certain aspects of cultural esotery – those that enjoy popular support even if only as a rhetorical device to critique the west – are emphasised, even exaggerated. If, however, the range of characteristic Indigenous traits is secured through a practice offensive to delicate western sensibilities – the taking of heads for example – measures to force cessation of the practice are implemented. Only the constituent elements of Indigenous cultures that are acceptable to western sensibilities are granted leave to flourish.

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