

Earth, Landscape and Country

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Introduction

A landscape is a perspective or view – an image torn away from the earth. Landscapes produce utopias that substitute their own presence for the presence of the divine in things. Emerging with industrialisation, landscapes order the earth to make a world come into view, a world that takes on an earthly aspect – “in perspective” as they say. Landscapes thus double the earth with its own image, thereby confusing one with the other, opening a site to be exploited in terms of myth and the ideological naturalisation of the land. But the earth persists. Landscapes cannot free themselves without simultaneously retaining material contact with the earth. This tenuous contact is called country, the resistive place in which landscape is undone by its contact with the earth.

As landscape, Australia is its own perspective, but as country, Australia is an open material configuration; a place where people might belong in different ways. In this paper I explore the disjuncture between landscape and country as a means of opening up potential for life to be lived otherwise. To do this is to un-Australia, to unpack and reshape Australia as a new kind of imagined place, one that retains contact with the earth as resistive to perspective and the imperative of control.

In this paper, I will develop an argument for a material thinking of landscape and its relation with the earth. My argument draws on the work of philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, especially his essay entitled “Uncanny Landscape” in which landscape – the image of land – is considered in terms of a material reality devoid of subjects. For Nancy, the appeal to subjectivity is a barrier to material philosophy because it invokes a subject/object opposition and the apparatus of transcendental thinking that goes with it. His challenge is my challenge: to think the world as material; not as material for a subject, but material in which subjects are “created” in their capacity to live, think and act. In this case, landscapes, as images of the land, cannot be presumed to be for a subject-viewer in the first instance, but as formed matter, as material to see with.

My argument also draws on cultural theorist Stephen Muecke’s work in indigenous culture and philosophy as a theoretical space from which to think of landscape in non- or post-Western ways. Muecke’s identification of the function of “place” in indigenous culture and its relation to “country” provides a way of reconceptualizing landscape as anchored in the earth. Having explored these ideas, I then ask how they might allow us to rethink the statement “my country” as an expression of national belonging. My aim is to provide a way of undoing the implicit essentialism in this statement, and to make us think creatively and experimentally with the idea of a country as open: as open country. In this way, I suggest that Australia might be

remade through localised practices of reshaping landscapes as material configurations.

Sacred Country

In his essay "Uncanny Landscape," Jean-Luc Nancy provides a materialist concept of landscape and its relation to the earth. For Nancy earth is the only real: "what is real is the earth, the sea, the sky, the sand, one's feet on the ground, and ones' breath, the smell of grass and of coal, the crackling of electricity, the swarm of pixels. . . . There is no real except for the earth" (56). Everything is earth, including images of it ("the swarm of pixels"). For Nancy inhabited earth is country: "the corner of the earth that one is attached to, by which one is held" (53). Country attaches us to the earth: the place "where we belong." Country is "the space of a land considered from a certain corner or angle, a corner delimited by some natural or cultural feature" (51). Country is thus an open field of places interconnected topologically. To live in country is to be grounded in one particular place yet interconnected to all the other places at the same time. Country is a univocal concept. It *expresses* the land.

Landscape is that portion of the earth seen at a distance: "landscape begins with a notion, however vague or confused, of distancing and of loss of sight for both the physical eye and the eye of the mind" (53). Landscape dematerialises the earth by transforming it into an image, but an image experienced as loss. What is lost is contact with the earth expressed in terms of an absent divine: "the landscape is the space of strangeness and estrangement and of the disappearance of the gods" (60).¹ Landscape has the task of re-invoking the divine but in the mode of a loss or absence: "the divine . . . presents itself . . . as the withdrawal of the divine itself" (60). Nancy describes this structure as "uncanny;" the absence of the divine as an affirmation, where landscape "absorbs or dissolves all presences into itself" (58).²

Following Nancy's line of argument I want to propose the following: that landscape "materialises" the divine as the presence of an absence. To do this, landscape needs to make itself dissolve as an artefact (as a product of culture) by re-appropriating the earth from which it is torn, as the idealised representation of place "over there," "out of sight," as *sacred country*. Sacred country is the divine place not currently present and inhabitable; country from which we have been exiled, or to which we have been promised. It is the "place where we belong," but out of time, out of place. In its secular versions, the West has always projected sacred country in terms of utopias (the self-correcting virtue of a capitalist commodity market, the intrinsic fairness of a democratic society, the homogenising power of the corporation, the erotic perfection of the glamorous body). Sacred country is dematerialised earth cast in the image of the secular-divine.

To reiterate, in the Western tradition, landscape is an image of the earth from a distance, invoking the divine in the mode of its absence. The earth ceases to have any real, material presence, and instead is replaced by an image-representation that takes on the function of the divine as world-immanence. The divine, or its secular version (the destiny of the people imagined as a utopia – for progressives, a place "to come," or for conservatives, a place "from which we have come") is confused with the earth as country, or to be more precise, as sacred country.

The zero point of a landscape image is the surveyor's map or the engineer's plan, where the earth is transformed into land available for use and exploitation. Landscapes map the earth as so many sites (sets of positions, perspectives, angles, lines, arcs, views, gazes etc.) in which subjects are positioned in relation to one another.³ They form the earth into an image of itself; a project that "objectifies" land into a project or plan. Landscapes shape the earth.⁴ In environments controlled by landscapes, there can be no earthly life, or very little. Rather, what life there is, is life lived in perspective, in subjection to representation and calculated reason. This is a problem today because it stands in the way of earthly experience, which is always present but in a resistive, confined and precluded way. For an ecologically aware future, ways need to be found to return experience to the earth, as open.

Materialising Landscape

Stephen Muecke has argued in his recent book *Ancient and Modern*, that Western culture can learn from indigenous ways of thinking about the land, and specifically about place. He writes of the kind of power that Australian Aborigines have in their sense of place:

People can be sure about their belonging in places; historical time becomes far less important. The power that created the world resides in these physical locations. When an Aboriginal man or woman travels to one of these sacred places they put their bodies in the locus of creation and of continuity, and thus the power that resides there not only recognises them but also inspires them to act. (*Ancient and Modern* 22)

Here Muecke describes a mode of being and acting in which place, as the site of the divine, is all-important. People's actions are guided by their spiritual and ethical interconnectivity to other places: "what maintains their relationships between places is the maintenance of kinship, the interconnected web of kin and country and the roles of custodianship" (16). This is country without landscape, where the divine is simultaneously present in each and every place: "Country can hold several moments simultaneously, just as an Ancestor may be present at many places simultaneously" (17). The whole is expressed univocally in each of its singular parts. An indigenous culture would thus seem to offer a way of being and acting within country which might apply in non-indigenous locations, as a means of overcoming the authority of landscapes to transform the earth into a utopia of uninhabitable places.

However, I think that difficulties prevail in any wholehearted take-up of this version of country within Westernised contexts. Indigenous experience invokes an immanent whole from which individuals, both singularly and collectively, receive their being. Singular existence cannot "be" outside its expression as part of the whole which precedes it. The risk in adopting such a model is in recreating a community with its own essence, in which singular existence is entirely absorbed. At first glance, this seems entirely at odds with Western ideas of individual autonomy, and suggests a return to communitarian thinking of an essentialist kind.⁵ Nevertheless, the exposure of singular existence without mediation, implied in Muecke's understanding of indigenous culture, is a powerful idea that can be fruitfully developed in a non-essentialist way. It provides a way of releasing singular existence from bondage to essence, as singular-plural, to use Nancy's phrase – as the "touching" of one

singularity by another, in what might be termed an open-whole. The open is the immediate touch of one singularity to another *in resistance* to the whole.⁶

Can there be a landscape in which the divine no longer appears as an absent presence? Such a landscape would need to recover the place from which it sees the earth, and incorporate that place as part of its strategy for making the earth appear. By doing this, the image becomes earthed in its own material configuration, foreclosing transcendence onto the divine, while moving into the open. The paintings of Brisbane artist William Robinson provide an example of this kind of landscape. Muecke discusses Robinson's landscapes as possible exemplars of a Western art style in sympathy with indigenous experience of the land: "Robinson ... has continued strongly as a landscapist precisely because he too is expressivist and challenges the distance between viewer and image, re-engaging with an understanding of land as personal and lived in, rather than viewed from a distance" (72). Robinson's more recent art works bear this out. In them, the distance between the viewer and what the viewer sees has collapsed. This creates a peculiar morphing effect in which the image is rendered plastic. In *Seascape with Morning Star* (2006), the image of the sea beside a coastal rainforest is warped through an anamorphic distortion, so that the sea appears to loom out of the canvas, threatening to overwhelm the viewer.⁷ Here the fixity of perspective is virtualised so that the still image appears caught "in flight." In the image, the artist has recovered the place from which he paints as a dynamic experience of the world moving in space and time. What the viewer sees is not the earth mediated by the distancing effect of perspective, but the earth that inhabits perspective collapsed back onto its own material support. Earth is made immediate, or un-mediated (in the active, doing sense), plunging the viewer into the open.

The open is place *in resistance* to the landscape. It is the place in the landscape that cannot be absorbed by any perspective. This is not a representation of subjective experience, but the dissolution of subjectivity into the plastic materiality of the image. It defies perspective and leads us to an unseen potential that is nevertheless close at hand. The open is country, open country, without transcendence or divine immanence. The open is not "out there" in the plains and spaces of the landscape, but very close at hand, always at risk of being closed off, each and every time we move into it. As Nancy describes it, the open is "tightly woven and narrowly articulated" (*The Sense of the World* 3) right at the edge of being. Each open is singular, distinct from all the others, so that access to it is never predetermined, but is always "for the first time." The open is thus a potential for something to become other than what it is; a field of potential interconnection, where connection can only be made singular to singular in the materiality of the earth.

Unaustralia

The statement "my country" is confusing. It simultaneously refers to a place where one lives, where one has one's home, with an identity formation in which others also live, also have their homes. It confuses an expression of country as a place of belonging in a singular-plural sense, with a transcendent concept of country as a principle of identity and community belonging. To confuse one with the other is to ossify the earth into a monolith in which country and landscape are made to coincide; where being and belonging are already in place without question. The danger here is

that of a single world view, in which both conservative and progressive politics cannot think or imagine otherwise. This is a world view inherent in Western knowledge modes, traceable to their Judeo-Christian sources, which have been obscured for centuries by universalising Enlightenment ideals. But in recent times, with the direct challenge of non-Judeo-Christian modes of thinking, the West has been forced to confront its own secularised monotheism, as the presence of the divine within its systems of knowledge and world experience. The secular divine, or the divine cast in the mode of its absence, manifests itself as the dematerialisation of the earth as “sacred country,” projected as an image.

Australia as “my country” expresses a landscape image that presumes an essence of “Australianness” immanent to all of its places. Here I do not refer to Australia as a nation or an imagined community, both of which require a strong sense of subject identity. Rather I am referring to Australia as a material configuration of places linked together by sense. To belong to one’s country is to share “being in common” with others, to be *exposed* to others, singular to singular being, on each and every occasion. Nancy defines being in common as “the place of a specific existence, of being-in-common” (*Inoperative Community* xxxvi) which he opposes to “common being” where each individual receives a subject identity to which it becomes indebted. Communities of common being are essentially closed. I am trying to imagine an Australia without subjects, as a country of places in which people might dwell without the burden of a subject identity to defend, promote or realise. I am trying to imagine Australia as open country.

To transform Australia into open country, one would need to materialise its landscapes, by drawing out the being in common of its people, not in terms of a transcendent identity, but as a localised practice of *making*. Being in common is not something presupposed, but that which is made in bringing together singularities. This practice is both technical and creative. Technical in the sense that it requires technique in working with the material at hand, skills at drawing things out and forming them into objects or structures; creative in the sense of making new connections between things, of opening up new lines and directions, and of experimental mixing of different materials. Here we might be guided by Ross Gibson’s practice of divination:

Divination ... is a secular activity, something technical. For me, divination is a process whereby you help fragments adhere and integrate so that the dismembered elements of a scene might share some sensible connection, some re-membering. With divination, there is an urge to connect. (3/7)

Divination is the “divining” of flows and configurations according to the “lie of the land;” a certain sensitivity to the earth as a material presence within human experience. If the secular world no longer responds to the divine as closed pre-eminent sense, then divination, as a secular and technical practice, might become a way of making connections that are sensitive to the earth as essentially open.

Paul Carter proposes “material thinking” as a creative practice of thinking with images, in which localised material is reshaped into new material configurations: “In the sense that materials are actively forming and unforming, patterning and repatterning themselves and their surroundings, they are analogues of the effort to become oneself at that place and their activity can reasonably be described as

discursive" (180). Carter suggests that through experimental working with localised material we can actively make and remake social relations, as "materialise[d] discourse" (9). Material thinking would be the materialisation of landscape by making contact with the earth. By doing this, we open the landscape out to new configurations and interconnectivities, as potentials inherent in the earth itself, and not as projected calculations of a perspective or point of view. A practice of creative making along these lines is always resistive to what is currently operating, and open to the surprise of the immediate grasped as a place of opportunity.

The creative practice I am thinking of here is one in which Australia as "my country" is undone by reconfiguring its places. This is not a critical position from which Australia's "essence" is attacked from the outside. But nor is it a reclamation of place as the location of essence said to be lacking elsewhere (eg. the identification of a "heartland" or "core values"). Essence does not reside in some originating source, but exists wherever one finds it, here and there, in the plurality of places as an open configuration, or open-whole. Essence is unanticipated potential. It can only be released creatively and experimentally. To release potential means reshaping material at its edges, where one thing comes in contact with another – in the open.

To undo Australia, then, is to occupy its places at their edges, where they can touch and be touched by other places. To be at the edge of a place is to be in its region or vicinity; to be where a place leads elsewhere. To think of place like this is to think of it in terms of regions. A region is a fuzzy transitional territory made up of loose, interconnecting lines and edges (Mules). As a region, Australia is an amalgam of real and imagined places, both actual and virtual, in the process of forming and deforming, in which people live in various ways and for various purposes. To "un-Australia" is to provide opportunities for people to re-imagine themselves otherwise, in other modes of belonging that nevertheless carry with them a sense of Australia as ever-present, as a reshaped landscape, not in terms of a tradition or prefigured destiny, but through localised practices of re-making place potentially interconnected to numerous other places at the same time.

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Endnotes

¹ For Nancy, "The divine is precisely what manifests itself and is recognisable outside of all knowledge about its 'being'" (*Inoperative Community* 115). In Western monotheism, the divine is effaced: "the distinctive character of Western monotheism is not the positing of a single god, but rather the effacing of the divine as such in the transcendence of the world" (Nancy, "Of Being Singular Plural" 14). In this case, the world is its own divine, but expressed as an absence. This condition can be termed the secular-divine.

² Elsewhere Nancy has argued along similar lines with regard to the sense of the world: "For as long as the world was essentially in relation to some other (that is, another world or an author of the world), it could have a sense. But the end of the world is that there is no longer this essential relation, and that there is no longer essential (that is, existentially) anything but the world "itself". Thus, the world no longer has a sense, but it is sense" (*The Sense of the World*, p. 8).

³ Subjects cannot inhabit a landscape. They can only be formed outside it. Landscape is essentially uninhabitable. It only becomes inhabitable when turned back into country, as the place "where we belong."

⁴ The etymology of the word landscape as *Landschaft* in Germanic languages connotes shaping of the land. See Olweg 633.

⁵ For a discussion of communitarian thinking in social theory, see Paul Morris, "Community Beyond Tradition." Morris offers a critique of communitarian thinking through a reading of Jean-Luc Nancy's idea of community as "being-in-common" or being as singular-plural (233).

⁶ See Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, especially pp. 32-33. Being in resistance to the whole does not mean that the singular stands outside the whole; rather its being for the whole is in the mode of a resistance.

⁷ An anamorphic image is one in which perspective is distorted on one surface through reference to another. Anamorphic images can be "corrected" by use of special viewing devices, or by viewing them from an oblique viewing position (eg. the signage on a sports field that sits up correctly when seen on television). Robinson's images do not correct themselves when viewed obliquely. Rather, they lead

into a vertiginous space of fluid perception, in which the world seems to be in motion of its own accord.