

## Voices of Country

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### PART ONE

#### The Forest – Pre-colonial

A stubborn blindness persists here amidst the trees and the undergrowth.

For too long we have been unable to witness the ample signs of forms of life residing here. Millennia before the devastating events of European first contact and subsequent occupation the landscape was being tended with care. There were villages and storehouses, fisheries and tilled fields, and the cooperation of clans.

We humbly extend our respects to the Jaara Jaara people of the Dja Dja Wurrung language community, the original custodians of these unceded lands. We offer our debt of gratitude to their elders, past, present and emerging.

Pre-contact, the landscape provided what was needed because of the careful practices that were applied to it. The remains of respectful land management are easily overlooked. They tell of non-western modes of occupation that were in no need of no signed contracts, because tribal agreements and a logic of kinship relations was respectfully observed.

Dja Dja Wurrung means ‘people of the forest’, whose stories are distinct from those of the riverine areas, and those closer to the bay, and those by the coast. Part of the Kulin Nation, their moieties are bunjil the wedge tail eagle, and waa the crow. Moieties determines kinship, descent, and effectively who you can and can’t marry.

Did you hear the evening chorus of babblers and whistlers, butcherbirds and ravens, currawong and magpies, just now? Vulnerable and endangered are the Shoveler, Crake, Curlew, Egret, and a great many others. 65 species of threatened birds find their habitat in this region, to say nothing of mammals, fish, reptiles, amphibians and invertebrates.

What we have been lacking so far is an adequate respect for the knowledge that is embodied here. Knowledge is shared through stories passed down, and through rites and rituals performed, including shared practices of land management and engineering.

Obliterating the stories passed down for millennia, are the stories imposed upon the land through colonial misadventure. Acts of barbaric violence resulted in the erasure of ways of life, and the deadly logic of terra nullius, which assumed that none had cultivated and settled here before the white Europeans. When they arrived in their infected boats, spreading disease, and spreading a foreign logic of land claims, intoxicating substances, and firearms, they took advantage of the storehouses and fish traps before finally destroying them.

A western colonizing logic of property rights came to determine how land and its resources could be secured and controlled. Worse than this, a modern logic of property based on an assumption of European superiority and entitlement produces racialized subjects who are left bereft.

A stubborn blindness persists yet, blind to over 60, 000 years of continuous inhabitation and intimate knowledge of Country.

The trees bare witness, they have been looking on. The earth has trembled. Too many stories have been lost. In many ways, if you have no claim to a relation to the peoples of the Dja Dja Wurrung, then there is little more that you can say as you respectfully pass here.

Perhaps lower your head, or when you dare to raise it, do so in wonder.

If we are able to learn from indigenous knowledge of Country, what futures will this knowledge lead us toward? Is it possible to imagine a greater corroboree of efforts that join us together, despite and because of our differences?

## PART TWO

### The Farm – Colonial

The house requires that the land is cleared. Planned cycles of plantings and the importation of livestock mean the eradication of the fields of yams that once held root here. The introduction of thirsty foreign seeds requires more of the soil than the soil is otherwise used to giving. Hard hooved European mammals, horses, sheep and cattle, wreak havoc where formerly the soft pawed kangaroo and her mob has passed near unnoticed. Kangaroo tracks, and the passage of other marsupials, break narrow paths through the undergrowth.

The land is cleared, and the walls are raised, and then, as a precaution, fences are constructed. Signs of fortification are to be found in the diaries of settlers, and in early paintings of their basic constructions. Rather than reading what is existing, these paintings tend to remember the European countryside scenes that have been left behind. Fortification signals the perception of danger, the fear of trespass. A fence defines a claim for land, saying inside and outside, mine and not yours. Free passage across is effectively severed, and otherwise prohibited.

A roof is constructed, a wide verandah keeps off the brutal summer heat. Nearby a reservoir is dug for the sake of convenience. Containment and supply begin to impose their infrastructural logic at a scale that explicitly transforms the landscape. Europeans settle in place, refusing to pass through. Their perceptions and interpretations are culturally coded, which means for the most part they cannot see what is before their very eyes.

Subtle means of slowing, capturing, easing the flows of creeks and riverways, the use of dug out channels, block points and weirs, as well as finely woven nets, had already been implemented for countless generations. This was work undertaken in relation to seasonal patterns, working with ancient religious-environmental knowledge, sometimes resting for longer near a known water hole, or using animal skins to store supplies. Possum skins in the cooler months are patched together as cloaks.

The colonizing Europeans take more and expect more than what is available. On arrival, the more observant of them note how the landscape appears like a well-kept park. The trees loom, and the grass seems clipped. Indigenous traditions of managed fires have assisted in producing this effect. Pastoralism soon devastates the found park, hardens the spongy soil,

disrupts water ways, which leads to a decline of kangaroo and emu populations. Inevitably, squabbles break out between indigenous peoples and recently arrived squatters. A white man is speared for abusing indigenous women, the squatters retaliate disproportionately. Influenza wreaks its toll, when gunfire does not meet its mark. After just a few seasons, the early visions of a well-kept park, with its subtle irrigation systems, evidence of storage and supply, settlements and patterns of movement following the seasons, are obliterated.

Newly arrived convicts and settlers instead bear witness to a passive, silent and taciturn peoples, their necks bent in servitude and exhaustion. Disenfranchised, cut off from their spiritual homelands and daily practices. The memory of the sensitive and slow custodianship of the land will be all but obscured. A brutal history will unfold that is genocidal in effect if not intent.

### PART THREE

#### The Field – A Utopian Postcolonial Future

What happens when the landscape speaks back? By now we must begin to project the unsettling idea of the landscape without the presence of the human subject. A post-anthropocenic environment-world that has bid goodbye to the signs of life that the species-being human leaves in its wake. Environmental crises and climate events, the toll on landscapes of extraction, the violence that comes with the avaricious insistence of mining interests. Species extinction, pollution. So much has been lost, so much thoughtlessly destroyed. You might have heard of the dynamiting of the Guukan Gorge caves in the Pilbara region of Western Australia. It is clear that the mining giant is insincere when apologizing for the hurt caused, while carefully avoiding culpability for the material and cultural devastation. Ancient cave paintings, artefacts, sacred sites that cannot be reconstructed. All of them gone.

A fence, a gate, signs of ownership that cordon off and carve up space. We are now venturing into the field. A field cleared in preparation for an event. Most clearings, such as this one, suggest the preparation of the land in readiness for agricultural interests. A mob of kangaroos suddenly make an appearance in the south-west quadrant. They hear the dogs barking and disperse. Remember the park lands, the evidence of care expressed there. The diaries of early explorers speak of haystacks composed of collected grasses. Grain that has been ground into paste. Seed that travels the whole continent, passed from one tribe to the next. Villages, in

clusters of circular huts. Bark, grass. Coated in clay. Some trees still show where the bark has been stripped from the trunk. Wells were to be found along beaten paths. Organized groups of women were once bent over digging for yam.

Aboriginal Dreaming combines spirituality with a holistic engagement with care for the land. Economies and ecologies are balanced. Sacred sites are associated with spiritual persona and stories to be told. Patterns of kinship establish relationships with others as well as with the universe. Responsibilities are thereby determined, responsibilities to Country. Relational systems compose a complex environmental knowledge. How might we learn from this, and combine our knowledges?

Passing through you may not at first notice where smaller and larger camps were once set, usually close to the water ways. Firestones and ashy soil leave behind the traces of past meals. Yams, tubors, roots, reptiles, mammals. Small fish, yabbies, insects, bird's eggs, nuts, berries. Once steeped in water for some time, the blossoms of the ironbark make a sweet drink.

String, bone, shell and reeds formed part of the local economy. Bullrushes were prepared in earth ovens, large nets were produced to catch fish in the waterways. Elaborate eel traps can still be discovered here and there. Life was once managed by close observance of the seasons, and by following the materials environmentally available. There were cooperative relations established between humans and non-humans.

Following such devastating colonial destruction, is it possible to imagine the emergence of other possible worlds where sharing again prevails? The challenge is to speculate upon utopian futures – invested in a decolonizing ethos that obliterates Capitalist avarice. While there is no return to the well-kept park with its carefully managed resources, yet there is much that can be learned while proceeding forwards. Fostering biodiversity, embracing the rhythm of the seasons, acknowledging the subtleties of micro-climatic zones, exploring indigenous modes of agriculture, pushing back at the threat of ongoing species extinction, taking the time to pay attention.

What seed gifts can we offer to each other as a matter of survival?

What other practices might we perform together?

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