

Indigeneity, ferality, and what ‘belongs’ in the Australian bush: Aboriginal responses to ‘introduced’ animals and plants in a settler-descendant society

DAVID S. TRIGGER *University of Queensland*

This article investigates responses among Aboriginal people in Australia to animals and plants introduced through the process of British colonization. While there is some rejection of exotic species as emblematic of European dispossession, the article explores cases where certain fauna and flora have been embraced intellectually within Aboriginal cultural traditions. The broader discussion canvasses links in Australia between ideas of ‘nativeness’ in society and nature. If Indigenous people have incorporated non-native species, what are the implications for an Australian identity defined substantially in terms of ‘native’ landscapes? The article considers the significance of non-native nature for flexible constructions of cultural belonging among Aboriginal people in a post-colonial society. The concept of ‘emergent autochthony’ is proposed.

Accounts of Indigenous people’s close relationship with native species of plants and animals are so common as to constitute something of a signature genre of writing in anthropology. From the extensive classic literature on totemism (e.g. Durkheim 1976 [1915]; Leach 1967; Lévi-Strauss 1969 [1962]) to more recent ethno-ecology studies discussing ‘Indigenous knowledge’ (e.g. Ellen, Parkes & Bicker 2000; Gragson & Blount 1999; Nazarea 2003), we have a plethora of case studies depicting aboriginal beliefs about the material and spiritual qualities of the natural species with which such cultures are so often intimately familiar. The peoples of the Arctic are perhaps exemplars – where humans and animals share personhood and, indeed, the perceived relationship between them may be understood as a ‘master code’ for their cultures (Fienup-Riordan 1994: 48-9). Animals such as caribou and reindeer are regarded as ‘sentient beings able to hear, judge and react to human thoughts’ (Anderson 2004: 15).

However, less attention has been paid to Indigenous responses to newly encountered species, which have often been introduced through colonial impacts. Recent work on Arctic region Indigenous human relations with native animals (Anderson & Nuttall 2004) contains little about how northern aboriginal cultures have responded to the exotic creatures that have arrived with settlers and associated economic enterprises. While there have been celebrated studies of cases such as American Plains Indian

adoption of horses, where the new animal was accorded spiritual as well as politico-economic significance (Ewers 1955; Fowler 1987; Kehoe 1999: 39), the research focus in anthropology is most commonly on Indigenous relations with 'native' nature. More general works, such as Crosby's (2004) wide-ranging study of colonialism's ecological impacts, also remain relatively silent on aboriginal intellectual responses to new plants and animals.

This lacuna in the literature is somewhat surprising, given the substantial attention paid to the broad issue of cultural change and the construal of tradition among Indigenous peoples (Jolly & Thomas 1992; Keesing & Tonkinson 1982; Linnekin & Poyer 1990; Sissons 2005). The matter of 'nativeness' and associated assertions of autochthony has been debated extensively across a range of countries (de la Cadena & Starn 2007a; Hodgson 2004; Kuper 2003; Paine 2000); however, much less discussed is how indigenously responses to exotic species of animals and plants fit with claims to an authentic, albeit changing body of traditional ecological knowledge and practices. As the case of Hawaii has shown (Helmreich 2005), this can be a complex issue encompassing concepts of 'nativeness' in nature, the perceived origins of introduced species of animals and plants, and contested claims over who has an 'indigenous' identity in society.

This article begins with a discussion of available sources concerning a particular aspect of changing cultural traditions among Aboriginal people in Australia. I then present results from primary research investigations in two relatively remote regions of the continent. The general Australian context is one where much scientific ecological discourse presents an anti-exotic species message. Maps depicting the status of landscapes, produced by the Australian Government Department of Environment and Heritage,¹ directly associate 'landscape health' with the more 'undisturbed', 'native', or 'indigenous' regions (Fig. 1). The areas that have been penetrated by weeds and feral animals are less 'healthy'. From the perspective of cultural analysis, such figurative depictions of the ecological impacts of European settlement immediately prompt parallels with maps showing the history of impacts on Aboriginal people. On the 'landscape health' maps, a line divides eastern and southern Australia (an 'intensive use zone' that has depleted native environments) from northern and most of Western Australia (which still has more than 90 per cent native flora).² And this line largely mirrors a designation of historically more intense socio-cultural impacts upon Aboriginal groups in the south and east as compared with those whose languages and cultural traditions have remained less affected by the broad process of European settlement (Broome 1982: 37; Rowley 1972: xiv-xv).

These two geo-spatial records of colonization are unmistakably connected in the national consciousness of Australian society. Thus, Morton and Smith (1999) aptly depict a public meshing together of the qualities of natural and cultural autochthony, such that nativeness in plants and animals is linked with aboriginality in persons, and both forms of indigeneity are attributed the quality of authenticity in national identity discourses. There is a 'general fascination with the primordial, be it in the form of Aboriginality – "the first Australians" – or non-introduced species of plants and animals' (Morton & Smith 1999: 155). As part of this process, Aboriginal knowledge of nature can be generally elevated as a cultural ideal worthy of societal incorporation, if not, in some cases, attempted mimicry.

However, 'indigenous knowledge', ecological or otherwise, has hardly remained unchanged during up to 200 years of European settlement. In particular, if there is to be coterminous celebration of Aboriginal relations with land and the superior qualities

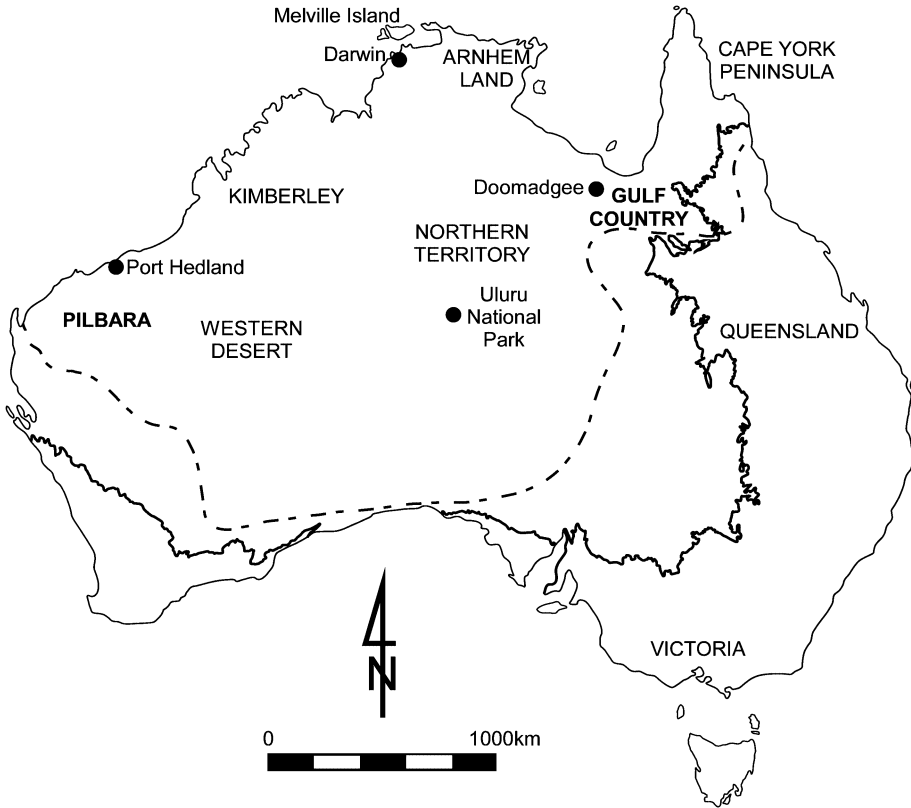


Figure 1. Australia – impacts on native ecology (east and south of continuous line), and on Aboriginal cultures, east and south of dashed line (Broome 1982: 37; Rowley 1972: xiv-xv).

of native plants and animals – such that the ‘question of naturalness is always at least partly framed in terms of the presence or activities of aboriginal peoples’ (Head 2000: 222) – how do the views of those identifying as ‘Indigenous’ persons fit with such assumptions? While it might be commonly assumed that introduced plants and animals are necessarily foreign to traditional Aboriginal thought and environmental philosophy, or at least regarded as alien to Indigenous land ethics, this is a matter that is appropriately addressed as an open empirical question. Might there not be a form of ‘emergent autochthony’ in Aboriginal cultures, whereby new species become ‘naturalized’, in cultural terms?

Aboriginal perspectives on indigeneity and ferality in nature

Aboriginal thinking with respect to introduced species appears to encompass a tension across a continuum of attitudes. At one extreme there is an often highly politicized view that introduced species do not ‘belong’ in the continent, and are in fact emblematic and symbolic of the consequences of colonization. Examples can be drawn from artistic expressions, such as the singer Archie Roach’s verses from his song ‘Native born’. Asking whether the listener remembers Joseph Banks, the famous botanist among the first Europeans to arrive in Australia, Roach sings of how this man might have felt when he

'looked around and saw ... trees and plants and animals he'd never seen before'. His chorus expresses the kind of lament that has become common among Aboriginal artists during recent decades:

So bow your head old Eucalypt and Wattle Tree
Australia's bush is losing its identity
While the cities and the parks that they have planned
Look out of place because the spirit's in the land.³

However, the work of Aboriginal artists and writers can also express quite different views. An example is the poetry of Maisie Cavanagh, which includes a piece (1996: 40) praising the colour and glorious sight of the jacaranda tree (*Jacaranda mimosifolia*, introduced from Brazil). This writer illustrates how apparently contesting dispositions can be expressed by individual Aboriginal people (just as among other Australians); for Cavanagh's further poem, titled 'Indigenes' and published in the same volume as 'Jacaranda', parallels singer Archie Roach's sentiments in bemoaning how many introduced trees 'don't belong' – they sing a 'different song' when wind blows through their branches, presumably a 'song' that is 'different' from native flora. Despite praising the exotic jacaranda,⁴ Cavanagh, like Roach, also worries that 'the land's losing its identity' (1996: 36).

The research literature on the subject of Aboriginal views about introduced species is relatively sparse. However, work demonstrating intellectual flexibility within Indigenous culture provides a context in which this question may be addressed. Perhaps the best-known case is the Yolngu people of Arnhem Land. Morphy describes how Yolngu relations with landscape involve a continual re-creation of the significance of the ancestral past, through 'the sedimenting of past and present experiences' (1995: 204); flora and fauna make up the major content of the ancestral 'law' (1995: 193), having been named by the foundational 'ancestral spirits' (1995: 193). Morphy points out that 'the particular species that represents [an ancestral spirit] today ... is determined by the logic of the ecology' (1995: 195). This prompts the (largely unaddressed) question of the extent to which introduced species may become part of this process of reproducing meaningful representation – what happens when the ecology changes?

The Yolngu case famously involves Aboriginal people embracing newly encountered Christian symbols and meanings within traditional religious thought (Berndt 1962). And perhaps more significantly, we have inclusion within Yolngu mythology of the Macassans, visitors from south Sulawesi in Indonesia, who regularly came to the coast of Arnhem Land from the 1700s (Macknight 1976). Morphy thus writes of how Yolngu 'mythology updates itself to take account of contemporary experiences' (1998: 216). While McIntosh comments that the 'founding narratives' of Yolngu beliefs are 'silent on ... worlds beyond north-east Arnhem Land' (2004: 144), he also acknowledges that the historical presence of the Macassans has been incorporated intellectually by the Yolngu. McIntosh suggests that the visitors from the north, together with significant aspects of their material culture and technology, are regarded as having been 'pre-figured' in traditional mythology – implying a process in Aboriginal thought of discovering 'existing but newly revealed and interpreted significances', a form of Aboriginal 'epistemic openness' to new things, as it has been discussed for a region to the west of Yolngu country (Merlan 1997: 8-11; 1998: 72, 209-28).

Against the background of such documented general intellectual flexibility in Aboriginal cultures, there has been some discussion of the particular issue of flora and

fauna. Gaynor's review of sources indicates that during the 1920s Aboriginal people in the west Kimberley, and again in the central desert region in the early 1980s, suggested to researchers that cats were 'native to the area' (2000: 150-1). While scientific and historical evidence (Abbott 2002; Gaynor 2000; Wagner 1997) confirms that cats (*Felis catus*) arrived in Australia with British colonization (or possibly earlier on some Dutch vessels), in the desert study of Aboriginal views (Burbidge, Johnson, Fuller & Southgate 1988) cats were distinguished as having been present much longer than other feral animals such as foxes, rabbits, and camels. Various sources indicate cats and rabbits having been included in the diet of Aboriginal groups. While Gaynor (2000: 151) is cautious about two Arnhem Land myths concerning 'Pussy Cat' (as it is unclear whether this term may in fact refer to the native northern quoll, *Santanelus hallucatus*, or 'native cat', as it is commonly known), she does note a report that a Yolngu man in the early 1990s was the owner of 'feral cat Dreaming'. Other data supporting this proposition include the representation of a feral cat in a wooden sculpture by a Yolngu artist in 1992, complete with totemic designs related to the artist's clan and moiety (Hutcherson 1998: 33).⁵

For an area of the Western Desert known as the traditional country of the 'Spinifex People', Cane (2002: 211) similarly lists both feral cat and rabbit as among principal meat foods, and as with other resources taken from the bush, these are traditionally baked in a hearth 'oven'. Fiona Walsh (pers. comm., 18 Nov. 2005) comments on the substantial feral cat meat intake among the Desert Mardu people, who, while consuming mainly Western foods during her research in the 1980s, were also carrying out hunting activities. Cane (2002: 84, 110) reports that feral cat Dreaming forms part of the totemic landscape, and it is located at what is for the Spinifex People 'a very sacred location'. Peter Sutton (pers. comm., 14 Nov. 2005) has pointed out that in the case of the Wik people of western Cape York Peninsula, dogs introduced following European settlement have been attributed traditional patriclan dog names and regarded as kin, in the same fashion that once pertained to domesticated dingos.⁶

The most comprehensive inquiry would seem to be the work of Bruce Rose (1995). In the mid-1990s, he found that Aboriginal people in Central Australia saw all animals as now 'belonging' on the country, partly through their presence over a substantial period of time. Rose's informants did not separate the environmental impacts of feral animals from those of native species, the contemporary ecosystem being regarded as an integrated whole, with no species 'belonging' more so than others. Indeed, Rose reports the Central Australian Aboriginal view as being that the presence of feral creatures, as with other animals, confirms the productivity or healthiness of the land (B. Rose 1995: 128).⁷

Presenting different findings, the work of Deborah Bird Rose (2002: 133-53) suggests that, contrary to any intellectual embracing of exotic species on the part of Aboriginal people, the main response (at least in the Wagait area of the Northern Territory) is painful awareness of their negative environmental impacts. The cases given include an invasive woody shrub known as mimosa (*Mimosa pigra*, introduced as an ornamental from South America), which is shown to be deeply disliked by her MakMak interlocutors, as are the buffalo introduced historically from Southeast Asia. This work presents such feral species as incommensurate with the native quality of landscapes at the heart of Aboriginal culture. Nevertheless, the same Aboriginal people who reject buffalo as 'belonging' on their country also run their own commercial cattle enterprise. Deborah Bird Rose distinguishes introduced domesticated cattle, which she says have been 'a

part of MakMak culture for decades' (2002: 127), as accommodated within the MakMak vision for their traditional country in a fashion unlike less 'controlled' exotic species.

Aboriginal views on introduced species in the Gulf Country

In the case of the Gulf Country straddling the Queensland/Northern Territory border (Fig. 1), I have written previously (Trigger 1992) of a Mission community in the early 1980s where coterminous with a marked separation of everyday life into Blackfella and Whitefella domains, Aboriginal people saw the broad landscape itself as subsumable within this general cultural distinction. While the expanse of bush surrounding the town was known as 'Blackfella country', exotic species of trees appeared to be signifiers of the introduced presence of 'Whitefella' people and culture. Thus, deliberately planted semi-domesticated frangipani (*Plumeria acutifolia*, originating from Central America), poinciana (*Delonix regia*, from Madagascar), and mango (*Mangifera indica*, from Southeast Asia) situated on town streets and in house yards, as well as feral plant species scattered through the bush such as mimosa or bean tree (*Parkinsonia aculeate*), were linked to the domain of Euro-Australians. In contrast to the wide range of flora known to have names and properties describable in the local Aboriginal languages, the introduced species could be termed in Aboriginal English 'Mandagi [Whitefella] trees'. In one sense they were regarded as not *belonging* in the bush in terms of exact spiritual equivalence to the broader expanse of autochthonous nature; however, people had clearly accommodated the presence of these species, appreciating their obvious positive features – thus, the fruit of mango trees or the shade from introduced 'rain trees' (*Koelreuteria formosana*, from Taiwan) were hardly likely to be regarded as insignificant among Aboriginal people, who (while now living largely sedentary lives in townships) continue to spend considerable time camping in the bush.

In regard to introduced animals, as with other Aboriginal people in regions where pastoralism has been historically extensive, many families of the southern Gulf have worked for several generations with domesticated horses, cattle, and dogs. Hence, there has developed a strong sense of familiarity in relation to such species. Indeed, the ubiquitous presence of cattle and horses has over more than 100 years become a predominant feature of the environment. We might say that the culture of pastoralism, with its introduced animals and plants, has become enmeshed with the culture that Aboriginal people have inherited from their forebears – producing what has been described for the nearby Yanyuwa people as 'a cattle identity' and 'a cattle view of the past' (Baker 1999: 217–21). This is evident, for example, when mapping people's cultural knowledge of the bush. In addition to highlighting the significance of spiritual and material properties of topography and native species, my research over many years in the Gulf Country also revealed considerable articulation of an intimate knowledge about which areas are suited to cattle, the significance of waterholes for stock, necessary fence lines, the best places to trap 'brumbies' (feral horses), and so on. The animals known to have established themselves in traditionally significant landscapes through the history of European settlement are understood to be sentient subjects standing in a meaningful relationship with people in ways that overlap with, yet also remain in some respects different from, native animals.

My illustration in support of this interpretation focuses on the animal found by Deborah Bird Rose to be regarded among her research collaborators as not belonging in country. This is the buffalo (*Bubalus bubalis*), introduced into north Australia from Southeast Asia from the early 1820s to the 1860s (Altman 1982: 275; Bowman &

Robinson 2002: 192). Sansom (2001: 30, fn. 10) points out that while Euro-Australians regard buffalo as introduced and feral, Aboriginal people of the Northern Territory differ in considering them 'wild creatures'; buffalo meat is thus regarded as 'bush tucker', not like the 'Whitefella beef' that comes from domesticated cattle. Sansom further comments, though without giving details, that '[t]here is a Buffalo Dreaming with supporting myth, sacred sites, song, ceremony and a spectacular Buffalo dance that has been performed on a regular basis for tourists' (2001: 30, fn. 10). Supportive of this suggestion is Spencer's (1928: 645-8) report during his visit to the Tiwi on Melville Island in the Northern Territory during 1911 that a corroboree 'imitated special incidents such as a buffalo hunt'; the dancing was strenuous, involving a performer pawing the ground, and rushing wildly around with extended arms 'representing the horns of an infuriated bull' (1928: 646). A more recent source (Frawley 2003: 69, fnn. 127, 128) also describes Tiwi dance and song focused on buffalo 'Dreaming' and related performances during traditional ceremony: 'Elements of the buffalo legacy appear as subjects of songs, stories and art' (2003: 64).

Altman (1982) has described how Aboriginal people in Arnhem Land have been hunting buffalo for as long as it has existed in the far north of the Northern Territory. While Altman indicates that the species did not (at least in the early 1980s) figure in Gunwinggu ceremonies, he does discuss how buffalo has been integrated for some considerable time into local mythology. Altman (1982: 282) describes how bark painting representations of a particular Dreaming, said to be descended from a rainbow serpent mother and a buffalo father, included ears and horns identified as those of buffalo. He suggests this mythologization of buffalo may have existed in the region for 'at least five generations – say 100 years – especially as the old men talk of the myth from their youth' (1982: 283). Altman's older informants in the early 1980s stressed how buffalo 'has always been here', though 'Europeans have told younger Aborigines that the buffalo is an introduced species' (1982: 284). Bowman and Robinson (2002: 200), some twenty years after Altman's research, corroborate the link in northern Arnhem Land between buffalo and beliefs about the rainbow serpent.⁸

Gulf Country Aboriginal people appear to regard buffalo as an introduced animal. However, data from research in the late 1970s and early 1980s indicate a striking intellectual engagement with this exotic species, through composition of traditional songs and dance sequences. One of several composers at Doomadgee in northwest Queensland (then a man aged in his 50s) said that people in the Gulf heard about buffalo coming from the Darwin area (in the west) and first saw the animal's tracks when he was a younger man. As his people (who identify with Waanyi and Garawa languages and territories) experienced encounters with individual animals over the years, he and others composed a series of buffalo songs and dances. The verses and dance performances reflect how the animal has been regarded as highly distinctive and potentially dangerous, especially if come upon suddenly in the bush; its persona is infused with a mystique that lends itself to characterization as an unusually charismatic creature. Thus, a story involving a buffalo killing two saltwater crocodiles that had attacked it circulated as evidence of this animal's extraordinary strength and fighting prowess. The buffalo was attributed a sensibility appropriate to an exceptional creature; people would comment on its bellow by saying it 'sings out like a man'.

The song verses I recorded during the late 1970s and early 1980s, apparently composed during earlier decades, illustrate such qualities of the animal. English translations⁹ recount the predicament of a travelling being, coming from the west, often as one

or two individuals. Buffalo is represented as being capable of inducing sympathy in humans.

Verse 1 (composer Johnny Watson)

Buffalo walking from the west to Ngumari [on Lawn Hill Station],
White man shot him there, poor fella.

Verse 2 (composer Johnny Watson)

Buffalo walking from the west to Ngurdurri [at Doomadgee],
Young Aboriginal boys shot him there.

Verse 3 (composers Jacko Douglas, Johnny Watson)

Buffalo cut while still alive
South, north, east [locations of arrival, implying origin from the west]
They should not do that.

Relationships among individual animals are construed according to the usual idiom of kinship regulating relations among humans; thus buffalo are represented as sentient and social beings.

Verse 4 (composer Tommy George)

Two buffaloes are watching each other,
They stand as maternal grandfather and grandchild to one another
Walking in the west in scrubby country.

Verse 5 (composer Tommy George)

Buffalo walking from the west through a short-cut
Saying to his uncle that the creek is low [shallow]
Jumping in the water, looking back to the east and being frightened.

In some verses, buffalo is portrayed with an aura of mystery, or at least a quality of memorable (and at times, out-of-the-ordinary) behaviour:

Verse 6 (composers Johnny Watson, Tommy George)

There goes buffalo just now
Not making any noise, going west.

Verse 7 (composer Jacko Douglas)

A group of buffalo in the mud
See them galloping away through scrub to the north.

Verse 8 (composers Johnny Watson, Tommy George)

There is buffalo's footprint [track]
[It was] sneaking up on us during the night.

The composers said that some of these verses recount actual experiences the man had with one or more buffalo either in the bush or in the vicinity of cattle station paddocks. Such encounters were clearly considered sufficiently significant to make them the theme of celebratory traditional songs and dances. Just as the verses attribute sentience to the animal, this is also evident from the associated dance movements, where the lead performer(s) typically mimics a buffalo gait with swaying head and body trunk. The facial expression is surly, often with bottom lip protruding, giving an impression of bad temper that might erupt to confront any who encounter a buffalo. The dancers wear a painted dark ochre body design with horns projecting from the central chest area down

each shoulder to the forearm; additionally, the performances I have witnessed involved one or more lead dancers wearing a cardboard head ornament with protruding horns on each side.

Buffalo is a case of an introduced species thus rendered familiar and integrated into Aboriginal cultural traditions that routinely give performance expression to animals and other phenomena of the natural world. While it does not appear that buffalo has been attributed a semi-moiety or subsection category,¹⁰ or incorporated into formal ceremonies such as song cycles used in male initiation or gender-restricted cult rituals, it has been included within the general intellectual universe of sentient beings that constitute 'country' in Aboriginal terms. The genre is similar to what Bradley and Mackinlay describe as 'little history' songs, to use the wording of the Yanyuwa people, whose territory is adjacent to the west – distinct from the subject matter of major rituals, the verses 'stem from the not-too-distant past of human recollections and experiences and are a social repository of a lived reality' (2000: 6). The embracing of this introduced animal within traditional modes of celebratory representation of the natural world is clear from this genre of performance.¹¹

Characteristics of the animal have been observed closely, as indicated by the inventive name seemingly formulated for buffalo, *warnana*, in local languages (Garawa and Waanyi); the term may derive from the verb *warnanamba*, meaning the action of circling around or cutting back behind a person or object.¹² Buffalo are known to be unpredictable and potentially dangerous in just this fashion. As two colleagues familiar with southern Gulf Aboriginal cultures confirm, people regard buffalo as 'rather errant creatures, and perhaps even possessed by *Barribarri*', a Dreaming figure that is highly dangerous and capable of malevolent sorcery (John Bradley, pers. comm., 19 June 2002). They are perceived as 'malevolent', possibly 'devils' or travelling men ('*kurdaitcha*') in disguise, that is, dangerous individuals intent on revenge (John Avery, pers. comm., 24 June 2002).

There is a complex issue here in regard to such introduced species as buffalo being incorporated within Aboriginal customary 'law' (Head 2000: 219). One view, canvassed by Bradley, is that 'there are no introduced species that have Law in the way that the indigenous species do'; thus, recognizing spirituality and sentience in exotic species (and/or noting a relationship of human kinship with domesticated animals such as cattle, horses, dogs, and cats) 'is not necessarily a gateway to having Law that then entails a place on country' (pers. comm., 3 Nov. 2005). In Bradley's view, the definitive expression of Yanyuwa 'Law' involves species being subjects in the ritualized song verses (*kujika*) that recount actions and travels of the founding Dreamings, from which sentient beings now derive their existence. Therefore, 'to have no *kujika* means to have no place, no power, no authority, in Yanyuwa culture and society' (Seton & Bradley 2004: 220). Nevertheless, even with a very recently arrived invasive species (the ecologically destructive cane toad, *Bufo marinus*)¹³ – a species that Seton and Bradley say is regarded as 'beyond connectedness' with country – there would seem to be at least some ambiguity as to whether the exotic animal may find a place in Aboriginal understandings of Australian nature. An old man berates boys for killing many of the toads, pointing out that the animal is linked to native frogs which are a Dreaming connected to him through his mother; his view is presented as not having prevailed in light of the counter-proposition that 'this cane toad is not a frog, it has no Law, it is a stranger to this country' (Seton & Bradley 2004: 214).

However, in the southern Gulf region, there is clearly space in which the presence of introduced animals has been negotiated over time – the cane toad is a new arrival, and it may or may not prove more detrimental to ecosystems than animals such as the buffalo, which has so strikingly been accorded sentient spirituality and an associated recognized place on the land. In my second case study region, the Pilbara area of Western Australia, we similarly find introduced species that have been engaged intellectually by Aboriginal people, in ways that again include the genre of dance and song performance arising out of traditional custom and law.

Aboriginal views of introduced species in the Pilbara region¹⁴

A parallel tension between accommodation and rejection of exotic species is evident from the West Pilbara in Western Australia. As in the Gulf Country, Aboriginal people suggest a routine familiarity (especially among older persons) that has developed with the working horses, sheep, cattle, and dogs of the pastoral industry. Parallel to the buffalo songs and dance sequences in the Gulf, in the Pilbara we have the case of traditional dances seemingly representing such introduced animals as horse, donkey, cattle, and mouse. Masks worn over the face while dancing, and a similar wheel-shaped ceremonial headdress, were an aspect of traditional ceremonial life in parts of this region;¹⁵ and it would seem that Nyangumarta, Yindjibarndi, and other regional language groups adapted an associated song and dance genre in responding to the presence of introduced animals.

While earlier masks had been constructed from bark, hair-string, and other materials (Cubillo 2001: 4), masks made from re-cycled kerosene tins and in some cases galvanized iron were collected in 1953 from a camp just outside the coastal town of Port Hedland. Twenty such masks, deposited in the South Australian Museum, include representations of ‘donkeys, milking cows, mules, ... and new devil spirits’ (Cubillo 2001: 4).¹⁶ Norman Tindale (1953), who obtained these items, notes that they were used in public ceremonies during 1947; Cubillo (2001: 5) interprets Tindale’s notes and other sources to indicate that on such occasions boys and young men would entertain observers and try to impress them with their agility and abilities at impersonating various animals and other spiritually significant beings.

Like the buffalo dance, the Pilbara performances were not encompassed within rituals dealing with major and often gender-restricted ceremonies concerning the fecundity and spiritual reproduction of the world (e.g. *Kunapipi* in the Gulf, and *Kurangara* in the Pilbara). However, Tindale’s (1953) notes do suggest that the dances celebrating introduced animals in 1947 were performed as entertaining supplements or adjuncts on the occasion of male initiation (circumcision) ceremonies.¹⁷ While he does not mention such masks, Petri describes this sort of performance in the West Pilbara as ‘animal pantomimes’ involving ‘near perfect animal impersonation’, suggesting the dances typically mimic ‘the movements and peculiarities of a large number of huntable animals’ (1979: 228).¹⁸

Inquiries in 2002 among several Ngarluma people indicate that the masks themselves often represented figures encountered in people’s dreams (a point also made by Cubillo [2001: 5], and more generally for Western Desert Aboriginal culture by Tonkinson [1991: 22, 130-1]), and that some of these figures could have included introduced animals. An anthropologist who has researched native title claims in the region during recent years comments similarly that such ‘corroboree songs’ are said to ‘come to the composer in a dream’, and that this is a ‘classical’ cultural form with ‘obvious scope

for improvisation and individual creativity' (Nick Smith, pers. comm., 8 Nov. 2005). Tindale's (1953) notes mention that the masks 'reflect the creative power of Aboriginal cultures', deriving from 'both old and new style ceremonies'. Cubillo comments that the masks thus indicate 'innovation' (2001: 2), and that Aboriginal people 'found few obstacles to incorporating the encroachments of European society into their forms of cultural expression' (2001: 3).

As with the 'little history' genre of traditional songs and dance forms from the southern Gulf Country, the west Pilbara performances may be understood as presenting in traditional form elements of Aboriginal knowledge regarding introduced sentient animals (alongside species and spiritual phenomena regarded as autochthonous [Petri 1979: 228-9]). At the least, these data would refute any suggestion that introduced animals were excluded from the spiritually meaningful landscapes that are fundamental within Aboriginal intellectual traditions.

As in the southern Gulf Country, contemporary Pilbara Aboriginal people express a strong general awareness of intrusions associated with the historical arrival of non-Aboriginal people, introduced species, and developments on the land. Large-scale mining, for example, changes topography:

Nowadays, you can't see bush tucker much. Because bush tucker and all the things in the bush you got to renew the things all the time.¹⁹ You got this special place to go to. Ask the place, like a spirit [if] you want kangaroo or emu or goanna or anything. Can't [be done now] because the hill is down now [i.e. some hills are being mined for iron ore].²⁰

Nevertheless, such concerns about landscape modifications are also tempered with realistic accommodation. The changes are regarded as 'part of our life now' (Wangka Maya Language Centre 1996: 36-7). And it is in the context of such co-existent apprehensions and adjustments about intrusive disruption to the land that Pilbara interviewees have pondered a response to our inquiries about introduced species of flora and fauna.

Some plants are recognized as not 'belonging' in country: 'A lot of them bushes are strangers'. Examples of plants which are said to fall into this category include ruby dock (*Rumex vesicarius*, from the eastern Mediterranean) – which is becoming ubiquitous in some areas as it spreads rapidly especially along disturbed areas such as road corridors.²¹ According to our interviewee, this plant 'shouldn't be there', though it is now 'growing all over the land'.

Similarly, there is buffel grass (*Cenchrus ciliaris*), described by an Aboriginal interviewee as a species that 'takes over the proper native ones', which are 'dying off'. While conservation agencies tend to agree with this view that buffel grass is an 'environmental weed', in fact it was introduced deliberately as pasture for sheep and cattle herds.²² And, as we might expect, there is also some positive attitude expressed towards the plant among Aboriginal people, whose perspective is the product in part of lengthy work in the pastoral industry.²³ Certainly, our interviewees among Euro-Australian station people in the Pilbara are in no doubt as to the great value of buffel grass for their domesticated herds. One Aboriginal man articulated further values shared in common with non-Aboriginal pastoralists, in commenting on his dislike for spinifex grass, a native species (*Triodia sp.*) with sharp needle-like leaves that can make mustering the country for sheep or cattle quite difficult. Yet the multi-dimensional character of such environmental values is again evident from the fact that spinifex is also well known as

a source of resin for manufacture of Aboriginal artefacts and a number of other traditional uses (Robin Stevens, pers. comm., 10 Nov. 2005).

This complex suite of Aboriginal dispositions towards introduced flora is further illustrated by the self-reported experiences of a female interviewee in her 50s, who reminisced and expressed positive sentiments about how as a child with her friends she would collect buffel grass seeds from along the sides of nearby roads, and sell them to a local shopkeeper. The latter presumably then sold the seeds for growing pasture. The children also collected the soft flowers of another introduced 'weed', the kapok bush (*Aerva javanica*). In this case, the flowers were valued as stuffing material for saddles and other similar items requiring a soft inner core; some interviewees apparently wrongly regard it as a native plant (with an Aboriginalized name probably derived from 'pillow', namely *pilari*) (Michael Robinson, pers. comm., 10 May 2004).

Given that Aboriginal residents of the Pilbara have been surrounded by such introduced plants throughout the course of their lives, in what respects might we expect that they maintain a strong distinction between what belongs in the sense that it is 'native', and species which do not fall into that category? The case of the 'Millstream palms' further illustrates the complexity of this issue and the ways in which somewhat incommensurate views may be held simultaneously. Environmental experts explain how the Millstream wetlands (located within the traditional country of the Yindjibarndi people) have suffered considerable damage from a range of introduced flora. In recent years it has been date palms (*Phoenix dactylifera*, introduced initially as a food source) in particular which have reportedly spread in a 'devastating' fashion.

Through a combination of over-shading, extremely dense germination, aggressive water use and heavy litter fall, the natural vegetation was totally removed from large areas. Most devastating of all were the intense wildfires that were now able to enter the wetlands, fuelled by the dense palm frond litter ... Where palms were well established, fires killed off all the large native trees ... The palms were not affected by these fires. The stags of these large trees are still visible, rising above the canopy of the palms that killed them (Kendrick 2001: 1-2).

By 1986, there were 'thousands of mature palms dropping millions of seeds each year'. What is required is 'a long term commitment to hunting down and killing the last of the palms' (Kendrick 2001: 4). However, this ecologist also acknowledges that by the 1970s, the Millstream national park was known as a 'palmy oasis', and 'walking under the dark shady canopy next to gurgling streams was an enormous attraction for travellers in the dry and dusty Pilbara' (Kendrick 2001: 1). Indeed, the introduced palms had become a feature of the wetland area, promoted on brochures and postcards advertising the positive qualities of a visit there.

Aboriginal people largely appear to have shared this positive view of the introduced palms, although there is some confusion over whether the trees are recognized as exotic, with several Aboriginal interviewees saying they thought the tree was native to the area. This possibly derives from the fact that there is a different species, also known by the English common name of 'palm', which is native (*Livistona sp.*, Kendrick 2001: 1). However, like other plants that were introduced but have now been present throughout the lifetimes of living people, the exotic palm itself has likely been accepted as part of the landscape. Certain Aboriginal interviewees commented on how the palms contributed to the area's 'beauty', with some remembering how they had played and swum in the presence of the shady trees as children. One middle-aged woman mentioned how

she had not visited the place for some time due to her disappointment on the last occasion because of the clearing and burning of the palms by government environmental agencies.

The same woman is clear that the presence of this introduced plant is not incommensurate with the continuing high spiritual significance of the Millstream area in Yindjibarndi traditions. The wetlands encompass the location from where originating Dreaming figures are believed to have begun the process of forming the features of the landscape 'when the world was soft'.²⁴ To quote this woman:

Millstream is very heavy in mythological and stories ... a spiritual sort of place ... very rich in stories ... a very beautiful place. Before they started taking away the date palms ... I mean they just grew everywhere, it was just a real big forest almost, you know. And it was just beautiful. Very dense but it was beautiful.

Indeed, this interviewee was saddened by the removal of the shady palms; she finds it difficult to regard the trees as a 'weed'. Along with others, her view is that the palms now grow there naturally – 'they belong to Millstream', as one man put it.

Aboriginal landscapes, species that 'belong' and Australian identity

It is of course possible for Aboriginal people, along with others, to maintain an attitude of familiar acceptance towards introduced species while simultaneously reflecting upon how it would be better if the environmental damage they cause could be reversed. This embrace of many introduced animals and plants as culturally meaningful is probably a common enough approach among Australians in general.²⁵ However, this issue takes on particular significance in regard to those identifying as 'Indigenous' persons. Must an 'Indigenous' cultural identity (albeit one that is often enough asserted by people with both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal ancestry) be linked fundamentally to the idea of a 'native' landscape? The material from two case study regions depicts an active intellectual incorporation of some species into Aboriginal cultural traditions. The matter of why certain species may be embraced more fulsomely than others must remain to be addressed in subsequent research; however, my conclusion is that while the general notion of indigeneity (or nativeness) is central to Aboriginal worldviews, the significance of cultural landscapes can be constituted through the presence of 'non-indigenous' species within the broader context of autochthonous Australian nature.

Buffalo, cattle, horses, and cats, among many other animals, and a host of introduced species of flora, have been incorporated as legitimate and meaningful aspects of 'country' in Aboriginal terms. While there is evidence of a continuum of attitudes, including a strategically articulated politicized hostility in recent decades to landscape changes seen as symbolic of European colonization, in general terms Aboriginal people have adapted and modified their customary law such that introduced species may come to be regarded as 'belonging' on 'country'. This disposition can coexist with awareness of an animal's or plant's 'Whitefella' (or, more precisely, non-Aboriginal) provenance, or in other cases with a blurring over time as to whether particular species are 'native'. Such a finding is consistent with research reporting both intellectual flexibility and a relatively shallow form of historical memory in traditional Aboriginal culture. In terms of the logic of the 'Dreaming', phenomena are encountered not so much as new, but rather as emerging from 'an ontologically prior set of events' (Myers 1986: 54). To this extent, if introduced species are regarded as having their own spiritual provenance,

their presence may gradually become an aspect of 'the historic past' that is 'transformed into myth' (Sutton 1988: 261) – the material presented for cats constituting an apt example. In such intellectual incorporation, if not in some cases eventual mythologization, we see Aboriginal people seeking to 'domesticate' what was initially 'alien' (Maddock 1988: 13).

While recognizing multiple views on this matter, this article seeks to challenge overly simplistic dichotomies between an unchanging traditional culture and the everyday phenomena of contemporary Australia. As with a range of emergent studies across the world, indigeneity in this view is not confined to 'preestablished, "natural" boundaries of any sort' (de la Cadena & Starn 2007b: 5) – as the 'land alters', new forms of indigenous attachment to habitats and place emerge (Clifford 2001: 482). Rather than any simple one-dimensional cultural narrative built around a supposed authentic nativeness in society and/or nature, this study finds Aboriginal people constructing complex senses of identity encompassing flexible visions of what 'belongs'. I have sought to address the question of a conceptual space for acceptance of exotic species in traditional Aboriginal intellectuality. The article thereby reflects on the sense in which Indigenous people's thinking about species and the land is connected with how they conceive the material and symbolic constituents of their cultural identity. And while the idea of 'nativeness' is fundamental among those asserting an inheritance of 'indigeneity', the material presented demonstrates that this identity is commensurate with an embracing of introduced ecological forms.

This issue is of considerable significance, not only for understanding the dynamics of cultural identity from the perspective of Aboriginal people, but also in terms of broad societal assumptions about Aboriginal tradition and cultural change – assumptions which can be central to outcomes such as contested 'native title' cases, where claimant groups must provide evidence that their 'traditional law and custom' has operated continuously since the establishment of British sovereignty (Sutton 2003). Indeed, the selective embracing of introduced species into traditional law and custom could be regarded as an exemplar as to how the reproduction of traditional rights and interests in land accommodates cultural change.

As outlined in introducing this study, these issues hold further significance for our understanding of discourses of national identity, as they may be read across the broader Australian society. In light of Aboriginal creative responses to introduced species, how should Australians define who and what 'belongs' in the landscapes of their society? If 'Indigenous Australians' make intellectual room for non-native species, recognizing their capacity to achieve a place in the environment and the nation, does this confound (or at the least complicate) scientific or eco-nationalist messages that position introduced species as 'alien'? It certainly complicates any broad society-wide assumptions that symbolically link 'Indigenous people' with an exclusively 'native' ecology, and any related view that simplistically equates things 'natural' with things 'native'.

This article seeks to facilitate a sociologically sophisticated discussion about the implications of a language of indigeneity that risks an overly simplistic set of assumptions concerning the idea of nativeness in both society and nature. While ecological concerns about invasive species must be considered seriously, on a case-by-case basis, this matter is conceptually separable from the issue of what is 'native' or 'alien'. Just as there are cases where a native plant can be invasive in ecological terms (Head & Muir 2004), exotic species cannot be considered, in principle, forever destined not to 'belong'. This is a matter of cultural judgement as much as scientific findings. And the

complexity of Aboriginal people's responses to exotic plants and animals surely prompts us towards caution in framing too narrowly the notion of environmental 'belonging'.

The research has documented what I understand to be a form of intellectual generosity evident in Aboriginal acknowledgement of the sentience of exotic species, a generosity that allows cultural space for recognition of what we may understand as an 'emergent autochthony' among these plants and animals. In the Australian case, this form of creative cultural resilience is a significant aspect of the reproduction of Aboriginal 'indigeneity' over time. It is also highly instructive, in regard to the forms of nature that Australians generally may come to understand as 'belonging' across the continent, and thereby achieving an intellectual place in the articulation of the national identity.

In broader theoretical terms, this research deflates any inflexible definition of cultural 'nativeness' as a quality somehow locked into the rejection of new ecological forms. If the idea of 'aboriginality' is commonly burdened 'with an authenticity that is about the past' (Paine 2000: 79), anthropological scholarship arguably has a role in challenging such thinking. Thus, in light of this study, the logic of autochthony underlying the Indigenous rights movement is not understood as tied to what some argue is a (morally dangerous) version of strategic essentialism – whereby aboriginal cultures across the world are romanticized as necessarily committed to preserving an unchanging ecology (Kuper 2003: 390-1).

If there is a risk that the latter view may be promulgated by those seeking to further what they understand to be the cause of 'Indigenous peoples', substantive case study inquiries will likely complicate (at the least) such assertions. While the issue of 'native peoples' as linked to 'natural' ecologies can be quite heavily loaded with moral values and expectations, our challenge is clearly to reflect thoroughly the complexity of aboriginal people's intellectual negotiation of the new phenomena and ideas that are the legacy of colonial histories. In doing so, our work simultaneously addresses how negotiation of concepts of nativeness, autochthony, and indigeneity has implications for broad understandings of culture, nature, and identity across the wider societies within which aboriginal minorities are located.

NOTES

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¹ Landscape Health maps available at: <http://anra.gov.au/topics/vegetation/health/index.html#intro>, accessed 19 May 2008.

² Throughout this article, I use the standard definition of 'native' species to mean the plants and animals present in the landscape prior to European arrival.

³ From the song 'Native born', 1990, written and sung by Archie Roach. Reproduced by kind permission of Mushroom Music Publishing.

⁴ Though it is unclear whether this author may actually know that the jacaranda is not a native species.

⁵ While the English translation of the name of the animal represented in the carving is given as 'wild cat', the Yolngu term (*marurrumburr*) is clearly translated as 'cat' (not 'native cat') in Zorc's (1986) dictionary of this language; indeed, a synonym for the term is given as *butjikat*, an Aboriginal pronunciation of 'pussy cat'.

⁶ Sutton also comments on the linguistic distinction between domesticated and wild dingo found in many Aboriginal languages. While only selected dingos were 'quasi-domesticated' (Meggitt 1965), their distinct niche as a form of pet was clearly filled and expanded by the introduced 'European' dog. Cane's (2002) suggestion that the dingo itself should be regarded as an 'introduced' species would seem contentious as it joined the continental fauna of Australia some 4,500 years ago. However, given the significance of the dingo in traditional Aboriginal mythology, we might recognize here an early case of intellectual embracing (making autochthonous) of a newly encountered species.

⁷ Similarly, Lee Sackett (pers. comm., 13 July 2002) quotes a desert man referring to introduced camels as a positive feature of the environment – indeed, the man used the possessive pronoun ('*ngayuku* [my] camel'), as he would for native animals in his 'country'. As Smith puts it, '[T]he distinction between feral and wild is meaningless to many Aboriginal people (as one might perhaps expect in a biocentric cosmos)' (2000: 159).

⁸ The incorporation of this species into Gunwinggu, Tiwi and other Northern Territory Aboriginal mythology is further evident from art forms held at the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory. See, for example, two buffalo-headed *pukumani* (mourning ceremony) poles, and a bark painting of Ngalyod the rainbow serpent with buffalo horns (Museum references: Abeth 1463, 1482, Abart 1187). A colleague carrying out anthropological research at Daly River, to the west of Arnhem Land, was told by a woman that her birthmark resulted from where she had been horned by a buffalo in the Dreamtime, and hence this animal was her spiritual conception Dreaming (Peter Sutton, pers. comm., 14 May 2002).

⁹ The verses were translated by composers of the songs and from my limited knowledge of Waanyi and Garawa languages.

¹⁰ See Trigger (1992: 127) regarding this system of traditional 'class' categories in the southern Gulf Country.

¹¹ The 'little history' genre in the Gulf Country similarly recounts memorable events such as the attempts during the Second World War to find the survivors of a United States Air Force plane which had crashed (Bradley 1994: 5–21). Newly encountered animals and plants are to this extent embraced intellectually in similar fashion to other significant themes in the history of Aboriginal engagements with the wider world.

¹² This likely etymology has been suggested by John Bradley (pers. comm., 19 June 2002). Furby & Furby (1985: 124) list in a Garawa dictionary this meaning for the verb.

¹³ While this animal, native to South and Central America, was introduced into the sugar cane plantations of eastern Queensland in 1935–6, it has only reached the southern Gulf Country region during the last decade.

¹⁴ Ethnographic research from this area is available to me via a skilled and culturally aware research assistant, Robin Stevens, who carried out interviews (twenty-four persons) and fieldwork in 2000.

¹⁵ For the Yindjibarndi language, Wordick (1982: 331) gives the term *pangkuna* for the traditional headdress. John Wilson's photograph (in Kean, Alberts & Giles n.d.: 5) of a performance near Port Hedland in 1960 shows dancers wearing them.

¹⁶ See <http://www.samuseum.sa.gov.au/aacg/speakingland.htm> (accessed 16 May 2008).

¹⁷ The word used in Tindale's (1953) notes is 'buckley', an Anglicized version of '*pakali*', the term for male circumcision ritual (Michael Robonson, pers. comm., 10 May 2004).

¹⁸ Petri's photographs taken in 1938 in the northwest Kimberley region, to the north of the Pilbara, show men decorated for dances representing cattle-mustering – most performers appear to be mimicking the behaviour of bullocks (Petri 1954; Tafel XIIa and b, p. XXII; Berndt Museum of Anthropology Frobenius Collection WU/P 7827–32). An approximate translation from German of the caption is: 'Game-corroboree, showing mustering of a mob of cattle. Note the horns that characterize the head decoration. To a large degree, these *junba* (travelling game corroborees) represent, through theatrical dance, experiences Indigenous persons have with White civilization.'

¹⁹ That is, ensure their reproduction through appropriate ritual behaviour (Daniel 1990).

²⁰ Quoted from an interview conducted in 2001.

²¹ *Environmental weeds of the Pilbara*, poster produced by Agriculture Western Australia. Copy in possession of the author.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ A parallel Aboriginal acceptance of introduced pasture grass is evident in the Gulf Country. Seton and Bradley comment for Yanyuwa people that 'introduced grasses for cattle feeding appear to be naturalised as they do not rate mention as being problematic' (2004: 219). Similarly, Walsh (1990: 34) notes Western Desert Mardu people deliberately spreading the seed of buffel grass.

²⁴ See the film *Exile and the Kingdom* (1992, Film Australia, written by F. Rijavec & R. Solomon).

²⁵ Head and Muir find a mix of views among urban Australians, with the majority preferring 'a combination of natives and exotics in their gardens' (2004: 206).

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Autochtonie, retour à l'état sauvage et appartenance dans le bush australien : réponses aborigène aux animaux et végétaux « introduits » dans une société de descendants de colons

Résumé

L'auteur étudie l'attitude des peuples aborigènes d'Australie face aux animaux et végétaux introduits au cours de la colonisation britannique. Bien qu'un certain rejet se manifeste vis-à-vis des espèces exotiques perçues comme emblématiques de la dépossession par les Européens, l'article explore des situations dans lesquelles certains éléments de la faune et de la flore ont été adoptés intellectuellement dans les traditions culturelles aborigènes. Le champ élargi de la discussion tisse des liens entre les notions d'« autochtonie » dans la société et la nature en Australie. Si les Aborigènes ont intégré des espèces non natives, quelles en sont les implications pour l'identité australienne, définie pour une bonne part en termes de paysages natifs ? L'auteur examine la signification de la nature non autochtone dans les constructions flexibles de l'appartenance culturelle chez les peuples aborigènes dans une société postcoloniale, et propose le concept d'« autochtonie émergente ».

David S. Trigger is Professor of Anthropology at the University of Queensland. The author of *Whitefella comin': Aboriginal responses to colonialism in northern Australia* (1992) and co-editor of *Disputed territories: land, culture and identity in settler societies* (2003), his current work is focused on cultural identity and belonging in relation to environmental issues.

University of Queensland, School of Social Science, St Lucia, Qld 4067, Brisbane, Australia. d.trigger@uq.edu.au