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Postcolonial Atmospheres: Recalling Our Shadow Places

Emily Potter

There's a lake in the middle of Federation Square, in Melbourne's CBD – a lake made of Kimberley sandstone. It swirls and flows although its material form is fixed, and it rises uphill, spreading out over the square's undulating surface. Most visitors don't realise the lake's presence even as they walk through its pink stone waters. Nor do they realise that this lake doesn't belong to the banks of the Yarra, or even to Melbourne. *This* lake is Lake Tyrrell, while its salt-watery form is located many hundreds of kilometres away in the Mallee country of north-western Victoria.

In a country that so often suffers a lack of water, a lake made of stone might seem a cruel kind of joke, or at best a mimetic take on the state of many lakes in south-eastern Australia. As salt lakes such as Lake Tyrrell ebb or dry, the retreating waters leave a sparkling bed of pink salt behind. But there are other ways in which to think about the presence of this lake in the heart of Melbourne. One of these ways concerns the ongoing challenge of belonging in a country damaged by years of colonial practices, and another relates to the possibilities

of generating postcolonial ways of thinking about and being in place.

The relevance of these concerns to the question of cultural assets lies in the calculative mode normally applied to the designation of 'asset' – something of value that is transactable; something, essentially, that people want. The 'ruins of colonisation', as Chris Healy phrased it (1997), are generally not this. Damaged environments, like uneasy histories of violence and dispossession, are not familiar touchstones of community wellbeing. Rather, they tend to be excised, both in physical and imaginary terms, and placed beyond the periphery of those things that we designate as valued.

Yet this, like all practices, has its limits. On the other side of value is a shadow reality that continues on, despite its excision from view and cultural significance. What might happen if we turned towards these shadows, if we admitted them into our calculations of a good life, and a good life in place? Lake Tyrrell at Federation Square will be our guide here as we take a tour through some of the shadow realities that come into relief if we interrogate our conventions of value, and bring in from the outside the multidimensions of place. As we do so, this chapter will argue, we may find the emergence of a postcolonial atmosphere within which new conditions of inhabitation unfold.

Lake Tyrrell in the Mallee

In March 2009, Peter Ker reported in the *Age*, authorities came close to declaring that Australia's first climate-change refugees were amongst the communities of the Victorian Mallee country. This semi-arid region in the south-east of Australia has long been associated with drought and hardship. When the surveyors arrived in the mid-nineteenth century, their impression was bleak. Geoff Durham, in *Wyperfeld: Australia's First Mallee National Park* (2001), records the opinion of A. J. Skene: 'this district presents a scrubby,

sandy waste, almost entirely destitute of fresh water and grass, and therefore unavailable to human industry’.

Yet it wasn’t long before the clearing of the Mallee for irrigated agriculture began in earnest, and this continued well into the twentieth century. While rainfall in this area is innately variable, the severity and length of drought periods, linked to widespread deforestation, has intensified. Soil erosion, rising salinity and dust storms are pervasive. The region has been notably warming since 1950, at a rate of 0.1 per cent degree Celsius per decade. It is widely accepted that this is the result of human-induced climate change as, for example, observed by the Victorian Government in its 2008 publication ‘Climate Change in the Mallee’. With its economic base dependent upon these increasingly precarious environmental conditions, Mallee communities are under a great deal of social and economic stress. As the writer Chloe Hooper described in ‘Take Me to the River’ (2007), an article written after visiting the Mallee in 2007, ‘the ground looks blasted, like the site of a battle – which it once was. It was a great battle to clear these lands, one that took heroic labour’. Now the battle has turned. As a farmer interviewed by Hooper explained, ‘the last few years our rainfall has slowly diminished, but the last few have been like murder, like being shot at. Only nature can win’.

Around this time, between 2006 and 2008, I undertook several trips with my then research collaborator Paul Carter to parts of the Mallee country and the adjacent Wimmera. We were following the biographic trail of the Mallee lyric poet John Shaw Neilson, who lived much of his working life in the region, initially farming selections and then, when these endeavours failed, taking on labouring work such as land clearing and fencing. Neilson was critical of the impacts of the physical work he was engaged in and could see in the regular dust storms already visiting the Mallee that the environmental consequences of non-Indigenous settlement were significant.

In following Neilson, we visited many of the Mallee’s significant towns, most of which still welcome visitors with

gracious nineteenth-century-designed main streets. Upon arrival, these places don't necessarily make obvious the troubles that environmental change has brought. This begins to become apparent in small ways: a shop window sign in Wedderburn that invites local men to a 'support group'; a cascade of pamphlets in the Sea Lake local council offices offering advice and services on matters such as income management, re-skilling and suicide prevention. In the promisingly named Hopetoun, a boat ramp runs down to the dry lake bed of Lake Lascelles. The picnic tables that surround this now empty lake sit baking in the sun.

Neilson was born in the Coonawarra region of South Australia in 1872, a place now golden-coloured with infrequent rain. One hundred years ago, however, there were wetlands here, pocked with swamps and teeming with birdlife. The land still remembers this history, and inclines down to the low swampland, while trees still stand clumped together in their wetland poses. Even water grasses grow on the shores of the ghostly swamps. But the water has gone, and with it the birds and the entire water and soil ecology that the swamps were part of. Water is palpably absent across this region; it shadows the drying realities of an environment that has been transformed since Neilson once knew it.

Neilson's Mallee labours took him to another watery environment: Lake Tyrrell near the small town of Sea Lake. Once part of an inland sea, as its adjacent township suggests, the innately salty waters of Lake Tyrrell have become a barometer of wider environmental conditions in the region. While in Neilson's day this lake held water and its creek system flowed, it is now substantially dry. As its surrounding land has been cleared, salt levels have risen, destroying the riparian vegetation that hugs its shores. Anecdotally, we heard that in summer the heat coming off the dry surface of the lake is so fierce that clouds will part as they roll overhead, causing the lake – and surrounding farmland – to miss out on rain.

When Paul and I visited the lake, I was struck by the sound of silence. It pressed close on my ears. In the sunlight, the salt

crust of the lake glittered like a field of stars. At first the salt crust didn't – wouldn't – register our presence. We seemingly skated across it. Eventually it cracked, splintering through with soft wet sand. The *Collected Verse of John Shaw Neilson* (2012) contains some of the many poems Neilson wrote while working near the lake. One is called 'The Dive', which evokes the histories located within the seemingly flat surface of the lake. 'I who go diving/Talk with dead men', Neilson writes, 'At the sunrise I come up/To the fields again'. Standing on the lake bed, we couldn't help but be struck by the discordance of this title. Who, Paul asked out loud, would think of diving here? The idea of diving into this lake now, of course, could only ever be metaphoric – much like taking a boat trip on the dry lake bed of Lake Lascelles. But even in Neilson's day, the possibility was striking for the contrast it suggests with the culture of land practice dominant at the time. Neilson himself was uprooting trees and laying fences. The land was being transformed into a two-dimensional plane, a series of agricultural squares, mapped and ploughed, with its surface sewn.

Neilson's dive evokes a forgotten third dimension to this environment: not just a fall into water but a movement through air – the density, that is, of a living, breathing place, redolent with histories. There is a certain thickness to the air of the Mallee, even on a day of clear blue skies. Perhaps it was the pressing silence and the refraction of light. But it felt like air with depth, air out of which things can materialise – different forms, different rhythms. The air makes a new zone for relations, a multidimensional atmosphere. It gives shape to a place as it becomes. This is the problem with our colonial history of place-making. As it closes out this dimension it shuts down possibilities for dynamic exchanges across time and space. And yet, as Neilson knew, even as he participated in the environmental transformation of the Mallee, this other dimension is never entirely erased. The multidimensionality of place, even the most damaged of places, is always there to be recalled.

Shadow places

This third dimension is a 'shadow place' in the sense developed by Val Plumwood, in her 2008 critique of contemporary environmental theory, 'Shadow Places and the Politics of Dwelling'. In particular, Plumwood takes issue with the singularisation of place in accounts of what it means to belong and to be in one's place. What she means by this is that dominant understandings of being meaningfully in place, in mutually sustaining ways, rely on uncomplicated and romantic views of what place is – generally, a bordered locale with its own internal logic that bears no relation to a broader world outside (evident, for instance, in self-sufficiency discourse). 'One's place', in these terms, is where meaning is made. In this singular version of place, she argues, a 'suppressed alternative' to how we might imagine ourselves lurks. This alternative is to recognise what Plumwood calls the 'multiple disregarded places' that 'provide our material and ecological support'.

Plumwood's account suggests that these shadow places are the externalities of capitalist process – the outside of value. Such places support the high material status of many lives around the world, particularly in the West: 'the places that take our pollution and dangerous waste, that are exhausted by extraction or cleared for industrial production'. She draws upon Barbara Ehrenreich's critique of capitalist practice and the 'illusion of dematerialisation' that capitalism cultivates – the excision from view and cultural memory of the real, placed and embodied labours and impacts that the world's wealth relies upon.

These places are not just physical, they are psychic too. They are places detached from dominant imaginings of national identity and cultural value. Australian scholars have pointed to the origins of this practice in the act of colonisation itself: as the land is appropriated by settlement and white sovereignty claimed, the country's history as Aboriginal land is rendered *past*, as over. The edict of *terra nullius* went one step further and denied Indigenous presence, even as past. In both the physical and discursive practices

of colonisation, the concept of 'year zero', as Deborah Bird Rose calls it in *Reports From a Wild Country* (2004), erased prior presence with the arrival of the frontier of colonisation, and was mobilised as the predicate of the Australian nation.

Even when the impacts of colonisation on Indigenous people and country are admitted in these practices, they are commonly framed as a problem in need of fixing – as something to repair, get over, and move on from. Australian political discourse over the twenty years since the *Mabo* decision and subsequent landmark reports on Indigenous disadvantage and governmental practice – such as the *Bringing Them Home: The 'Stolen Generations' Report* (1997) – has advanced the sentiment that Australia needs to 'get over' and clean up its unsettling pasts in order to progress as a nation. Former Prime Minister Howard's attack on 'black armband history', for example, is indicative of this, as is the claim of Justices Deane and Gaudron. In their *Mabo* judgement, quoted in Frank Brennan, *One Land, One Nation* (1995), they stated that '[t]he nation as a whole must remain diminished unless and until there is an acknowledgement of, and *retreat* from, those past injustices' (emphasis added).

Yet as cultural historians continually remind us, the past cannot be put so easily aside. It continues its effects in untimely ways. Ross Gibson articulates this powerfully in his book *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland* (2002), where he writes that 'history lives as a presence in the landscape, a presence generated as a forceful outcome of countless actions, wishes and wills...People upon people, land upon landscape. Past upon present and future'. The 'badlands' in Gibson's account spatialise our cultural tendency to put 'outside' those histories that do not suit our vision of ourselves: these are places 'where evil can be banished so that goodness can be credited, by contrast, in the regions all around'.

This returns us to Plumwood's article and the capitalist fantasy Ehrenreich captures: 'to be cleaned up after...to achieve a certain magical weightlessness and immateriality' – to be untethered by history. While remediation or the address of injustice may be the

goal of a discourse that seeks to 'move on' from the past, the problem with desiring historical distance from damage implicitly removes that damage from a proximity that would mean an ongoing engagement with its significance. It would assert that those things that unsettle us can be singularly addressed and put aside and that they have no place in the present.

The consequences of this kind of spatial and psychic quarantining is the continued marginalisation of the already socially marginal and disadvantaged, and the perpetuation of a national identity that continues a colonial vision of passive land, linear time and certain claim to place, and with it the colonising practices that lay waste to so much. It endorses the refusal to take responsibility for what is consigned to the badlands; it erases the shadows from our places.

Plumwood's message is that we cannot pick and choose the places that are meaningful to us. Every place has in its composition the imprint of other places. Just as the impact of events radiate, so too, with places. Let's return to the Mallee. In Plumwood's account, we can see the drought-plagued, deforested Mallee as a shadow place of the well-watered and strongly built city of Melbourne. The wealth in its architecture and its ever-burgeoning boundaries speak silently of the other places that fuelled and sustained its development.

This kind of foundational account of place, however – putting the Mallee/Melbourne relationship within an account of cause and effect, for instance – doesn't really capture the dynamism with which places shadow and entangle in the other. To recover this multidimensionality, we need to look to the fluid, rather than determined, nature of this relationship, to its constant enactment. And we need to look to the atmosphere.

Even as I type, smoke from regional bushfires blankets Melbourne's CBD and its inner suburbs. These fires have been burning in the Latrobe Valley and East Gippsland, and in outer suburbs to the north of the city. Our atmosphere is full of these minglings that are temporal, material and not always visible. They

are minglings that disturb the fixed locations of place on a map; they bring different happenings, weathers and environments into relationship with each other. Here, in my Melbourne home, with the light differently refracted through a hazy sky, and the smell of burnt vegetation, animals and homes around me, I am in a place that is not just here, but somewhere else, too. It is a place that refuses to ignore or excise the experiences and histories that have produced this atmosphere.

Lake Tyrrell in Melbourne: Postcolonial atmospheres

Melbourne's air is always host to different minglings, some more toxic than others. In October 1956, for instance, a radioactive cloud passed across the city, having already moved through the air of Adelaide on its way from Maralinga, the site of the secret British atomic testing program. Given the unpredictable nature of radiation, which is elastic and non-linear in its dispersal and effects, what invisible traces of this cloud remain left behind in the wake of history? A different sort of cloud that has repeatedly visited Melbourne is the topsoil blown south from the dry Mallee and adjacent Wimmera lands, which turn the air brown and at times have moved with such force that the earth from these places has travelled as far as Tasmania.

Such minglings matter because they are the basis of what I call a 'postcolonial atmosphere'. This is an opportunity to recover diverse terrains of value, and in so doing, imagine our selves differently, through an always-negotiated relationship with place. An atmosphere is a condition of possibility. It is an air of emergence. It is also, as Peter Sloterdijk writes in 'Atmospheric Politics' (2005), a 'shared climate', something fundamental to democratic process and the extension of political franchise and the decentralisation of value. For me, a *postcolonial* atmosphere is one in which the divisions and repressions of colonial practice are challenged by the entanglements of a place always open to elsewhere, where the

past constantly solicits us in the present, and we are continually proximate to the experiences of others.

In such an atmosphere, damage and the 'wastes' of colonialisation and its ongoing iteration become points of relation rather than disconnection. They open up place rather than closing it off, and highlight the webs of responsibility and connection that lace through the shadow network of lives and environments in our shiny modern cities. But an atmosphere is not all about the air, it is about the ground too; it is about the multidimensions of habitation. This returns us to Federation Square and the presence of Lake Tyrrell in swirls of pink sandstone.

Nearamnew, by my fellow Mallee traveller Paul Carter, is an artwork that comprises the plaza floor of Federation Square. It depicts the whorling form of a flooding Lake Tyrrell – an unlikely event now – in a large-scale ground design of 7,500 square metres that references the different histories of the lake and its Mallee environs. Different hues and patterns of stone trace out Lake Tyrrell in an image derived by Carter from a nineteenth-century Wergaia (an Indigenous language group whose country took in the Lake Tyrrell area) bark etching now housed in the National Gallery of Victoria.

Within *Nearamnew*'s Lake Tyrrell waters are more local histories of water, with the flowing stones incorporating nine 'rents' or boxes of carved text, which network together, recalling the system of local creeks and waterholes that, before colonial intervention, once fed into what is now the Yarra River flowing alongside Federation Square. Within these boxes are poetic texts composed by Carter that are drawn from an assemblage of stories in the margins of the historical archive. These include stories of Indigenous peoples and ecologies, and postcolonial meetings; stories of workers, of women and of children; stories of other places, of visitors and of migrants. These poetic texts are written into the marbled sandstone and are only partially legible, meaning that those who pass through the Square will always encounter the artwork differently, and incompletely, in snatches of variant

words and shapes. These fleeting encounters between the artwork and its visitors take place via both the eye and the feet; they are embodied and poetic. They are also more than a single moment of meeting in a particular place and time. The histories that lace through here lead us elsewhere, to other spaces and happenings that we can never wholly know or access, but to which we always bear some relation. *Nearamnew* reminds us of, while it also enacts, this profoundly postcolonial condition.

On 13 February 2008, thousands of people gathered across the whorls of Lake Tyrrell in Federation Square to hear Prime Minister Rudd make an apology on behalf of the Parliament of Australia to the many victims of the country's stolen generations. Satellites beamed the centre of Australian political power into Federation Square, and linked its crowd to similar gatherings in many locations across the country. Rudd's speech called on non-Indigenous Australians to connect through their imaginations to the experience of Indigenous Australians injured in multiple ways by colonial practices: to empathically engage with the experiences of its victims. Yet it is not simply a matter of choosing to connect. The dynamic contact between feet and ground on that day – as on others – at Federation Square asks us to register a fundamental aspect of an atmosphere: its inescapability. We can tell neither where it begins nor ends. We are always swept up in its unfolding.

Non-Indigenous Australians do not stand outside colonial atmospheres, they are always and already within them absolutely, and the presence of Lake Tyrrell at Federation Square enacts this fact. Here is more than a representational form of the lake and its Mallee surrounds. It is an iteration of the Lake in its various histories. It is part of its existence and its coming into being. The Mallee dust that sometimes settles over the form of Lake Tyrrell at Federation Square re-performs this relation, reminding us that rural histories are also urban histories – the practices that have eroded environments in south-eastern Australia's agricultural lands reach far into the city spaces, with their linear grids and urban planning frameworks.

If we are always caught up in colonial atmospheres, though, how to transform them, how to become postcolonial? I return to the Mallee poet John Shaw Neilson, who guided our Mallee trip. He wrote the poem 'Stony Town' when he visited Melbourne, and it offers a lament for the loss of ecology as Melbourne sought to transform itself into a modern metropolis. Neilson's picture of Stony Town is one of 'straight line[s]' and 'square[s]' and hard, unforgiving surfaces. The city's reality is blunt, we are told – 'It buys and sells and buys'. And yet even here there is a third dimension, located in the shadow place of dreams: 'The bells will laugh and the men will laugh, and the girl shall shine so fair/With the scent of love and cinnamon dust shaken out of her hair/Her skirts shall be of the gossamer, full thirty inches high/And her lips shall move as the flowers move to see the wind go by'. Within these stony urban surrounds Neilson could still discern the other histories to remember. The mobile air, mutable and full of the possible, remains.

Postcolonial atmospheres intersect as possibilities with the disconnecting, alienating enactments of colonial power that continue to damage our environments and peoples. They blow in from our shadow places and engulf our daily movements around spatial, social and economic boundaries. In a context of community stress, and the connected challenges of environments that cannot sustain the lives we would like to lead, a shift in perspective is needed wherein the 'waste' of progress is reconsidered rather than rejected. Histories are our resources: these shadow realities brought into the realm of daily encounter are our assets. Opening our selves and our places up to this reorientation expands the range of value by which we assess and know what matters, and within this, negotiate an ethical footing in place: a belonging that doesn't degrade but revitalises our communities and environments.

