

Cover Essay

Lucky Country, Broken Land

“Australia is a lucky country, run by second-rate people who share its luck.” (Horne, 1964).

When journalist and academic Donald Horne first wrote these words, he was describing the irony of 1960s Australia. It was a country that, to him, had not bothered with the technological advances sweeping the globe and relied instead on its endless supply of natural resources: minerals, grazing, and land. His irony, missed by many, points out the dangers of relying blindly on nature’s bounty. Now, nearly 50 years on, the “Lucky Country” is a broken land.

To the outsider, Australia is a land of sharp contrasts. It is a desert land ringed by rain forests, pastures, wetlands, and wineries. As species struggle against each other and battle with the environment, this leads to some harsh, yet refreshing scenes for the traveler: square-tailed kites circling on the edge of a bushfire, picking off lizards; blood red sand beneath a sea of painfully sharp *Spinifex*; the thud of a club and the twist of vertebrae as this land’s original inhabitants grab a piece of bush tucker; the splosh of a magpie goose as it disappears down the throat of a saltwater crocodile—*Ginga*, the subject of this issue’s cover art by indigenous artist Murrwurrwurr (Dennis McCarthy). In Arnhemland, Northern Territory—the place this painting depicts—the tranquility of a billabong in the Dry season gives way to the drama of the Wet. Thunderstorms boom, roads wash away, and saltwater crocodiles follow the rising waters to establish their breeding territories and fight for dominance. Woe betide the witless tourist who lingers at this time of year.

Indeed, *Ginga* is an animal that demands respect. Its size, its power. The way it hunts, dipping into the murky water as we approach the billabong’s edge, silently taking up position to lunge, snap, drown, and rip apart. Little wonder that the *Kunwinjku*, Murrwurrwurr’s Arnhemland people, have so many stories and ceremonies about these magnificent animals. This traditional *rarrk* picture,

painted with the stem of a freshwater reed, is imbued with history, culture, and land. Only four ochre colors are used: red, for mother earth, who bleeds for you at birth and at death; the white of Aboriginal ceremonial body paint; black, with meaning known only through oral history, but the same color as charcoal rubbed into cuts to create cicatrices for tribal marking; and above all, yellow, for the sun that brings life and death.

The Australian dichotomy of Wet and Dry, abundance and emptiness, water and sun, is repeated across this broken continent. Sip a glass of Margaret River Shiraz, stunningly rich and complex, but grown in land that has visibly subsided through over-irrigation. Travel east to Australia’s wheatbelt, where deforestation and intensive cultivation has led not only to dryland salinity, but also to a rise in the mosquitoes that harbor Ross River fever virus (Carver et al., 2009).

Or, stand on the edge of the Simpson Desert, and watch the cattle roam over the red sand dunes in search of grazing. This phenomenon, repeated across the bone-dry semi-desert scrub of outback Queensland, is only made possible by relentless tapping of ancient subterranean aquifers and dragging chains across the land to remove the native scrub—giving these bags of bones a rough feed of mulga and a chance of just about surviving in a good year. In a country poised to supply the growing Asian market with its heightened demand for animal protein, these problems are not just hard to solve, they also strike at the heart of the Australian economy and the Australian culture.

Again, to the outsider, this obvious overuse of a dwindling water supply seems odd. But it is a product, perhaps, of something deep in the psyche of Australian colonists, both European and Aboriginal. The admirable stubbornness of nineteenth century explorers searching for the Great Inland Sea. The tragedy of Ludwig Leuchhardt,

whose whole team disappeared in the bush without trace. The heroism of Ernest Giles, who twice crossed the Gibson Desert on foot. The often criticized Burke and Wills, who faded away in the dust and pebbles of Coopers Creek, famously rebuffing Aboriginal assistance.

What of Aboriginal colonization? Has Aboriginal life always been at one with the ebb and flow of the Wet and the Dry? Surely, during the first few thousand years of this original colony, similar ventures occurred, in search of mythical pools of crystal purity that led to a lingering death on a dry river bed? Has not there been repeated inter-tribal conflict over billabong access? In fact, is not the whole history of Aboriginal life one of constantly striving to survive in this harsh, dry land; a land modified, burned, and hunted by these first colonists?

In this issue of *EcoHealth*, our lead Forum piece (Mikhailovich, 2010) focuses on a hot debate over how to deal with Australia's ongoing thirst, amplified by a 40-year drought. It describes the process of a population coming to terms with plans to recycle wastewater to supply the faucets of Australia's growing population. Here, modern Australia has moved on since Horne (1964). Fights over dams, logging rights, aboriginal rights, and listing of endangered species have made Australia a leader in conservation and cultural development, even as it continues to rely on its mineral wealth and primary production. Perhaps this dichotomy forces the solution. How else can a country that cycles on the edge of a continual drought, in an era of climate change, expect to deliver a growing cattle industry to a hungry Asian market? These harsh realities will surely drive technological, cultural, and agricultural innovation.

In the sanctity of the Northern Territory billabong depicted in our cover art, a similar dramatic tapestry has unfurled. All is not well here. Introduced buffalo and wild boar rip up the landscape. Subfossil bones of the thylacine remind us of a fauna that existed before the introduced dingo wiped them out. Billabongs choke with invasive weeds. The golden-shouldered parakeet flits along the edge of extinction in the face of overgrazing and the pet trade. Even *Ginga*—descended from dinosaurs—was driven close to extinction by colonialists who could not accept its role in the land as ultimate predators, and blasted our would-be assassin into oblivion.

But not quite. Controversially, crocodiles were protected, and their populations are now booming. Ecotourism brings new funds directly to Aboriginal communities on the edge of Australian society. Cattle stations on

marginal land are increasingly closed and signed over to form national parks. And finally, the land begins to heal.

THE ARTIST

Dennis McCarthy, or Murrwurrururr to use his Bininj or Aboriginal name, was born on January 7, 1961, in hut number 56 at Winnellie Camp, near Darwin. His family's story reflects the hardships of Aboriginal life. Dennis's mother was born to a young girl (about 11 years old) from the Murrumburr Clan in Kakadu. Her father was a white policeman who never claimed his child. She was taken away at 3 years old and never saw her mother again, being moved among a series of camps until she reached Winellie Camp during World War II.

Dennis lived in several state homes when he was young and received little formal education. He never knew his father, but managed to reestablish contact with his mother's Aboriginal relatives and absorb his indigenous culture. Dennis takes great pride in his art. Sitting and painting with the other indigenous artists became his way of learning about his culture, and reconnecting with his heritage. Dennis and his family started a gallery, owned and operated by Aboriginal people, at Humpty Doo in rural Darwin in the Northern Territory (<http://www.didgeridoohut.com.au>). Sadly, he has suffered from a failing heart and had to temporarily relocate to Victoria in recent years. He had a mechanical heart (LVAD) inserted in April 2008, and had a heart transplant on Christmas Eve 2008. Due to complications, he is now awaiting another heart transplant.

As with all the traditional painters from Arnhemland, Dennis paints with "grass"—the stem of a freshwater reed that has many fibers inside. Each artist paints with a reed pared to the thickness required for his Skin group. The thickness of the lines, and the way they are applied, carry strong significance. In addition to the artist's Skin group, the lines also identify the Clan and Country of the artist.

Cover Art

"*Ginga & Lilies*" (2006) by Dennis McCarthy, charcoal and indigenous pigments on canvas, 36 × 20 in.

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