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Remotely Australian

Environment, migrancy, sovereignty, nation (re)-building and rim

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Introduction

Remoteness is an at once apt and fuzzy term to apply to conceptualisations of Australia as an imagined space (rather than community, Anderson 1991 [1983]). Remoteness holds a double meaning in an Australian context. As a general metaphor it indicates obscurity and indeterminacy, yet in Australia is also applied prescriptively and descriptively to thinly populated areas far from population centres. In this book, however, I am more interested in the thematic potential of remoteness as a key to unlock Australia as a contentious site of belonging. Belonging in itself can be a normative assertion reflecting power relations that enable some notions of belonging to hold sway, rendering others peripheral or outside the horizon of acceptability or inclusion. This observation leads to a central preoccupation in this book, how those relegated to the periphery or beyond the horizon – the abode of the remote – produce counter narratives of selfhood and make alternative imaginings of the national space available.

Metaphorically, remoteness as an articulation of power relations indicates both a centre's desire to render something or someone as peripheral, but remoteness also ascertains a difficulty in pinpointing. And if remoteness indicates an ill-defined area shrouded in obscurity, but at the same time is relational, remoteness raises questions about the conciseness of the centre's selfhood. In a more prescriptive vein one could pose the dilemma facing the centre's preoccupation with defining (and thus confining) its periphery in a series of geographical questions typically accompanied by a baggage of loaded cultural assumptions: Does the supposed contrast between centre and remote pit metropolitan against regional, city against bush or outback, settled against unsettled, coastal against inland? Or is remoteness a strategy to ostracise select groups from predominant narratives of nationhood? Is remoteness simply defined by the way it escapes determination, or is it that which lies beyond the horizon? Horizon understood from where and through what and whose prism - informed by which agendas? The point in asking these questions is not to seek to provide definitive answers to what remoteness has meant and means in Australia, but instead to use remoteness as a vehicle to explore relations of centre and periphery, selfhood and otherhood, belonging and unbelonging with a view to excavate but also to establish other narratives of belonging.

Alternative visions of what it means to live in Australia come up against naturalised processes of marginalisation driven by the interests of a prolonged settler colonialism that has driven narratives of

national selfhood in Australia since the 1788 invasion. But I argue these mainstream narratives have become exhausted in times of unprecedented crisis, even if some of the crises have been evolving over decades, and have been in the making since the beginning of colonialism. More specifically, the book examines a contemporary Australia trapped in an age of unprecedented crises that have created the perfect storm – of climate change induced disasters, of a collapsed relationship at the political level between non-Indigenous and Indigenous¹ Australia and an entrenched dehumanising migration and refugee policy, now compounded by a pandemic. The same crises haunt other parts of the globe, including Europe from where I am writing, but not observing. All three crises are systemic crises and the result of fundamental global shifts, such as the Global Financial Crisis and 9/11, and as such they are not unique to Australia. But their form of embeddedness in Australia is unique and it is this that preoccupies me here. I inhabit a double position of writing about Australia from Europe, a situation caused also by COVID-19, but observing Australia from within, through the reading, analysis and engagement with Australian texts, sources and voices. The approach I undertake is to explore case illustrations of central events, themes and discourses in contemporary Australia to look for new ways of narrating the nation beyond the stranglehold of settler colonial derived narratives prompted by crises whose solution requires a fundamental shift in how Australia is understood as an imagined space with a community.

My argument is both pessimistic and optimistic: Settler colonialism and colonialism generally and their legacies lead to environmental, Indigenous and migrant/refugee crises. Narratives derived from settler colonialism continue to hold sway over definitions of nationhood, even as they have shown

¹ A note regarding my use of terminology in relation to Indigenous Australians: “Indigenous” has replaced “Aborigine” (or “Aboriginal”) as a preferred term of reference in scholarship and in broader public discourse, even if the words also continue often to be used interchangeably. Both terms are of course generic, externally produced and come with a loaded history. “Aborigine” is a settler colonial term while “Indigene” is a global and current term endorsed by international institutions charged with safeguarding the interests of “the descendants... of those who inhabited a country or a geographical region at the time when people of different cultures or ethnic origins arrived” (https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/5session_factsheet1.pdf). Increasingly, this process is also understood as unrealisable without the informed consent of Indigenous peoples. In Australia, Indigenous has emerged as a generic term referring to all groups predating white settlement in Australia, including Torres Strait Islanders and Tiwi Islanders (who regard themselves as separate peoples to other Indigenous Australians). The terms “Indigenous” and “Aborigine” both suffer from their origins as non-Indigenous categorisations resulting from colonialism, as is clear from the UN’s “common definition” that avoids colonialism, settling instead for the broad non-committal “the new arrivals later became dominant through conquest, occupation, settlement or other means” (https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/5session_factsheet1.pdf). In Australia, “Aborigine” is saddled with a settler colonial derogatory representational history and the preference for other terms reflects a desire to move away from colonialism inspired labelling. Here, Indigenous caters to the institutional frameworks (nationally as well as internationally), whereas local clan names have increasingly come to replace the generic term Aborigine in relation to self-identification. There is no generic self-referential Indigenous term referring to all the peoples in Australia, because of the many languages spoken across Indigenous Australia before colonisation.

themselves to be disastrous in dealing with the crises that have now become deeply entrenched systemic crises. This is unsurprising given the ways of dealing with the crises continue to be underpinned by entrenched settler colonial logic. Yet Australia is clearly also facing a watershed moment that is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore, even for those who have internalised the settler colonial logic: Climate change and environmental damage will hit Australia harder than any other “developed” nation. Indigenous agency has in recent decades dramatically shifted and is now calling for fundamental change in Indigenous non-Indigenous relations, even if the havoc wreaked by settler colonialism also continues to take its toll. And the crisis over migration has raised unavoidable, uncomfortable questions about what kind of society Australia wants to be. Thus rather than engaging in a gloom and doom vision that accepts settler colonialism’s stranglehold, or naively suggesting a victory lap in the wake of the imminent collapse of settler colonialism, I propose a balanced reading of contemporary Australia that takes account of both narratives to adopt a cautiously optimistic tone. When fundamental challenges to society are rendered of remote concern, not only does it mean that somebody produces them as such. It also means something foundational is at stake in how the nation and particularly its stakeholders conceptualise national selfhood. And it means there is the recognition that settler colonialism is becoming structurally unhinged by the mobilisation of counter narratives and the systemic crises caused by the contradictions inherent to settler colonialism.

Remoteness and settler colonialism

Seeing imagined space as independent of time – also when that space is rendered as remote – is a skewed view. Imagined space is conditioned by the temporality of the viewer. To put it bluntly there is no such thing as a remote space. The perceived infinite distance conditioning remoteness is the mirror image of a cultural-historical view and experience. Remoteness suggests a space beyond the grasp of history and spatial determination, characterised by intrinsic difference, but that is the view of the outsider. Thus Indigenous “settlement” is perceived by non-Indigenous society as temporally remote, contemporary Indigenous connectivity² with land as geographically remote. Indigenous arrangements of their relationship with land are regarded as remote, as exotically alien, as culturally unfathomable. But this is the view of a derived colonial settler mentality eager to promote its own

² I use the term “connectivity” here not to signal there is no land management involved, but to avoid settlement terminology that inevitably suggests land management in some form recognisable to settler discourse parameters of relationship, belonging and recognition.

Eurocentricity driven, chronologically conceived and ordered society, as the exclusive but also exclusionary organising principle. As such the casting of Indigenous community as outside and beyond primarily betrays a vested interest in projecting Indigenous society as “out of order” and “epically different” thus justifying its replacement with white settlement and its narrative of expanding occupation over time. Settler colonial Australia cannot coexist with Indigenous Australia because settler colonialism is predicated on the erasure of Indigenous connectivity. Yet this violent erasure cannot operate as a narrative justification of settlement because it betrays the fundamental unbelonging of settler society and the illicit nature of settler colonialism. Hence settler colonialism is recast and reiterated as (peaceful) settlement and (violent) settler colonialism reduced to aberrant incidents – projected as spatially and temporally remote. As if settler colonialism is not structurally premised on a violent displacement. What people, Indigenous or otherwise, leave their homes voluntarily, and to go where? The reiteration of peaceful settlement, however, blocks the evolution of a proper, mutually recognised, coexistence after more than 230 years of white settlement. The underpinning ideology of settler colonialism is revealed by the equally reiterated reluctance to move beyond rhetorically addressing what it would take to coexist, as revealed by the brazen dismissal of the Uluru Statement from the Heart in 2017, by the Prime Minister who had even asked for it. It is cold comfort that this was just another instalment in a catalogue of settler colonial disastrous management of intercultural relations. If this was also the usual dish served up of irresponsible Canberra political game playing, one could ask where were the non-Indigenous and particularly the Anglo-Australian not-in-my-name protests against the moral bankruptcy displayed in all its white self-contended glory?

So, how can a genuine renegotiated process of coexistence begin? By recognising coexistence can only be genuine and only become legitimate if defined by Indigenous Australians and taking place on Indigenous terms. Such a process entails revisiting how, currently, Australia continues to be cast as the chronologically and spatially unfolding ordering of settlement leading to contemporary Australia. European Australian beginning(s) are rarely cast as a process of dismantling - of unsettling - the meanings of Australia already settled by First Nations, yet how could it be otherwise? The recasting of colonial settler narrative would thus require not adding to an already existing settlement narrative, but rather understanding and recognising the fundamental reality of settlement as a sustained attack on Indigenous sovereignty. This recasting would entail recognising European settlement as a permanently illegitimate occupation, not reducible to an original (regrettable and irreversible) invasion, but invasion as a permanent feature that cannot be the acceptable foundation

of a contemporary Australia to anyone. What is often missed in these debates is the fact that preventing Indigenous ways of belonging from unfolding actually blocks the emancipation of non-Indigenous Australia from its history of illegitimate occupation and as such prolongs the sense of haunted presence on somebody else's land. This partly explains the syndrome of white anxiety, or even paranoia (Hage 1999, 2017), indicated by the long lasting paranoia over Asian invasion as such an invasion would merely show Asians repeating what Europeans had done before them.

Non-indigenous Australia has had little appetite for rewriting settlement, even if the disruptions of the mainstream narrative of Australia as peaceful settlement are becoming more pronounced and assertive, and thus harder to dismiss. They come up against settler Australia stakeholders seeking refuge in the “modernness” of occupation, that is, the invasion (recast as settlement) unfolding in a time recognisably familiar to the contemporary and thus a narrative to be shared by all Australians. This reading projects and implicitly justifies colonisation in terms of intimate familiarity and establishes settlement as a continuous, hegemonic and monolithic national narrative. It justifies either explicitly or implicitly invasion and occupation while to Indigenous Australia it can only signify defamiliarisation and alienation not only historically but also contemporarily. But settlement cannot be peaceful to some and violent to others. Whether the preferred term is settlement, colonisation, colonialism or colonality, the process these terms refer to consists of invasion(s) and settler colonialism's continuous onslaught(s) on Indigenous Australia (from Sydney Cove to Juukan Gorge and beyond). Similarly, Indigenous counter narratives of “survival” are manifestations of a continuity against the onslaught of settler colonial violence (from Sydney Cove to Juukan Gorge and beyond) and demonstrate settlement as an unattainable project. There will always be Indigenous Australians standing in its way.

Remoteness in the context of these dichotomous narratives occupies a pivotal role. To Indigenous Australians remoteness has both been a circumscribed sanctuary, a space of living beyond the “pales”, but also a beyond the horizon space where settler colonial violence has been unfolding with relative impunity (from Sydney Cove to Juukan Gorge and beyond). To settler narratives, remoteness has operated as a distancing from the centre, an “otherworld” beyond the reach of then established civilisation centres and now (as then) a world inhabited by people dissociated from the requirements of the present, because settlement is premised on the unconditional displacement of other narratives of belonging. Thus what has for long been referred to as frontier violence is typically cast by settler colonial accounts as remote – as always a different time, always a different space. Hence the oddly

combined palpable white anxiety and wilful ignorance/blindness when acts of violence against Indigenous people are “uncovered” as more recent, widespread and entrenched, because it threatens the narrative of a segregated then and now, here and there, revealing racism as structural rather than reducible to acts of deplorable individuals.³ Rio Tinto’s blowing up of Juukan Gorge, a sacred site dating back 46,000 years, is thus cast as a remote event in an ahistorical geographical sense, disconnected from the routine repetition of violence against Indigenous people, their culture and their environment that could otherwise so easily be established.⁴ The repeated reference to it and its ongoing repercussions reveal what happens when the shield of remoteness erected around sites structurally organised for extractivism is removed, even if only temporarily.

Remoteness as a horizon of desire and rejection also characterises some of the earliest European narratives about Australia’s environment. They demonstrate a raw – also because of the precariousness of the early settlements – bafflement over the environment coupled with equally paradoxical moments of recognition and familiarity. The oft-cited early accounts of the open, woodland landscapes as resembling “a gentleman’s park”⁵ exemplify the desire to domesticate (Hage 2017) or de-scribe (Tiffin and Lawson 1994) colonial periphery through the prism of metropolitan imperial cultural values – to replace the remote with the familiar. The desires informing approaches to the remote changed according to the understanding of the specific requirements of “settled Australia”, as Australia’s European history unfolded across the continent (Robin 2007), but also remained remarkably consistent in terms of its premise. Nature remains a site of extraction, at times tempered, but never seriously rivalled, by a more romanticised view of nature as virgin and preferably left alone. Hence Australia’s European settlement derived history is overwhelmingly about the spread of settlement, introduced farming practices and towns, the evolution of extractive industries and the displacing, dispersal and at times annihilation of the Indigenous population and suppression of its cultures accompanied by the fear of its “resurrection”.

Remoteness as a defining characteristic of Indigenous-non-Indigenous relations has undergone significant change in recent years, from a tug-of-war approach between cultural historians pointing to the frontier as accommodating and the frontier as violent. Settler colonial discourse, following the work of Patrick Wolfe (Wolfe 1999; Wolfe 2006; Veracini 2015; Maddison and Nakata 2020) shifted

³ See also Slater 2018 on white settler anxiety.

⁴ See also Tout 2020.

⁵ See Gammage 2012; and see also Pascoe’s 2016 counter-narrative. The debate continues with Sutton and Walshe’s (2021a and <https://soundcloud.com/experienceanu/in-conversation-with-peter-sutton-and-keryn-walshe>), attack on both Pascoe and Gammage, and Gammage’s (2021) response, alongside a number of other reviews.

the focus to settler colonialism as a displacement strategy. Wolfe's Foucauldian conceptualisation of power relations and biopolitics in particular has inspired work understanding Indigenous-non-Indigenous relations primarily through governmentality (Morgensen 2011; Moses 2011; Strakosch 2019). Yet, simultaneously with this discourse, a rapidly growing Indigenous scholarship has produced a spectrum of readings from reconciliatory to polarised accounts both in relation to historical contact zone(s) (Pratt 1992) and in contemporary Australia (Behrendt 2003; Moreton-Robinson 2007 and 2015; Pascoe 2016). Both governmentality based and Indigenous accounts, which of course at times intersect,⁶ raise the disconcerting question whether relations have "improved" - a notion central to the narration of nationhood as progressive discourse and as implicit defence of contemporary Australia. But they also ask the disconcerting question whether the encroachment on Indigenous identity formation and Indigenous spaces has decreased, intensified or been transformed.

The uneasiness about post-invasion Australia's violent history is intrinsic to prevalent forms of nation narration in Australia: settlement as the process of setting up a British peripheral-imperial centre, or a dumping ground for a British-Irish surplus population, or/and getting rid of recalcitrant/rebellious elements. Regardless of the preferred narrative, remoteness and the subsequent settler bifurcating ambition to either embrace remoteness or annihilate the domestic "tyranny of distance" (Blainey 1966) has characterised not only the historical evolution of Australian society post-invasion, but also the framework for narrating this history. My concerns in this book lie with the latter. Yet, just as my gaze reflects my priorities, my analyses suggest cultural historical conclusions to be drawn. Thus this book is not about "settling the historical record", a continuous battleground of historians and others. My concern is with how remoteness as a continuing prism, through which Australia has been seen nationally as a space, helps us understand the interconnections between a number of central debates (some would say discourses) that are typically treated as separate (some would say deliberately segregated). I name these initially as environment, Indigenous-non-Indigenous relations, Australia's geopolitical position and migration, and return to them in detail later. What interests me about these broad themes is their sustained influence as national community shaping discourses – even as they also represent extremely divisive and marginalising topics – precisely because they lie at the core of defining what it means to subscribe to selective and hence exclusionary notions of nationhood. They are at the coalface of national identity battles in Australia and can be traced back to the beginnings of European Australia.

⁶ See Somerville 2021.

From nation narration to geopolitics

Settler discourse and its critiques have focused on the national terrain as a finite space. Shifting to a geopolitical perspective and addressing Australia's place in the region and beyond, however, is not necessarily so different a focus, as it immediately appears. Nations' conceptualisations of their position in the world are after all projections of the same selfhood. Understanding Australia's geopolitical position as remote comes with easily recognisable imperial underpinnings – as did settlement. The British reasons for embarking on the colonisation of Australia, a project completed after Australia gained white dominion status in 1901, were premised on Australia's remoteness, as a new British outpost signalling the empire's rising status as the world's indisputable leading power. The white dominion decades (-1939) turned the imperial discourse into a nationalist preoccupation evolving in an era of declining British imperial power culminating after the Second World War.

Australian geopolitics are about the country finding its place in the world, and here the Japanese attacks during the Second World War foisted on Australia the reality of its non-Western location. The “yellow peril” discourse dating back to colonial Australia (Broinowski 1992; Walker 1999) had already showed that Australia's rude awakening owed much to a denialism covering over white anxiety and paranoia (Hage 1999). While the “moat attitude” (Dupont 2003) to Asia was resurrected post-1945, now with the United States replacing Britain as the imperial bulwark, Australia engaged in a string of military conflicts in its Southeast Asian neighbourhood from the end of the Second World War, culminating with the ill-advised participation in the Vietnam War. In its more recent configuration, Australia's engagement with its neighbourhood “rim” has been increasingly marked as a projection of Australia's own interests, as the pursuits of a regional economic power, ready to apply military might in relation to its “arc of instability” (Rumley et al 2006).⁷ In this context, remoteness may be read as yet another arduous process of Australia embracing its non-Western location, or living with the curse of its dislocation that has for extended periods characterised its relationship with Indonesia and China in particular.

But remoteness can also be seen as yet another process of producing Australia as centre, while volatile, fledgling nation-states make up the (remote) periphery. Thus Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste

⁷ In contrast to its regional engagement, Australia's involvement in the now apparent catastrophic American military adventurism in Western Asia and the Middle East has been characterised by an eagerness to please.

and other “far-flung” island states constitute a beyond-the-horizon rim of sites characterised by a lack of the recognisable or similar/familiar as defined by Australian self-interest. The constructed nature, rather than reality, of being remote is clear from the geographical nonsense of viewing such island states as remote while Singapore is clearly not cast in those terms. Two cases may serve as shorthand illustrations of external remoteness produced through a national (self-)interest discourse - the Timor Gap Treaty saga (see chapter 5) and the excising of Australian territory and paradoxical inclusion of Nauru and Manus Island as (non-)processing places for asylum seekers (see chapter 2).

Australia’s geopolitical perception of its position can also be seen in the contrasting views of migration and settlement/settler colonialism (see chapter 2). It is a pertinent reminder of the artificial distinction between migrants and settlers that without migrants, Australia would be an Indigenous continent. The insistence on separating migrants from settlers, even though there are persuasive arguments for addressing the specificities of settler colonialism, remains inherently contradictory. What is a migrant, when does a migrant cease to be a migrant and after that what does s/he become? Innocuous questions, whose answers verge on the impossible. “The migrant” also occupies a contradictory position in two other ways: Vis-à-vis the Indigene and the “refugee”. The migrant can be understood as discursively produced and one can unpack the racialised structuring surrounding the migrant, but here I am going to conceive of the migrant in relation to remoteness. This entails positioning the migrant beyond the horizon until s/he is invited in. It produces the centre inviting the migrant as dynamic, engaging and accommodating, while the migrant (who can also be a refugee) remains unseen and perceived as static until the invitation is issued. An invitation that then comes with a number of caveats couched in the umbrella formulation of displaying a willingness to integrate - translating as assimilation (as is clear from the rhetoric of subscribing to “Australian values” whatever they might be). Remoteness can refer to the global labour pool from which migrants are recruited, but where their origins are obscured at the moment of acceptance. This may initially appear as a contradictory reading given Australia’s long-term embracement of multiculturalism (though the backlash against multiculturalism has existed much longer than multiculturalism without backlash as I discuss in chapter 2). Yet, multiculturalism, even when it was promoted more unequivocally than currently, always remained a cordoned off zone of recognised cultural diversity. Cultural difference, that is, the problematisation of the power relations between a majoritarian white predominantly Anglo-(Irish)-Australian society and “migrant” communities was never entertained outside the “multicultural zone”. This is most clearly brought home in the resurrected “Anzac worshipping” following the death of the last Anzac veteran (Beaumont 2016). The subsequent rise and rise of the

myth of Anzac for decades now cannot be separated from the urgency to maintain core narratives of national belonging premised on the unbelonging of those seen as entering Australia later, when the country had become multicultural (Drozdewski 2016).⁸ Thus settlers are always already there (as compatriots of the Anzacs) whereas migrants are permanently suspended from arriving.⁹ Of course, Australia is and has been multicultural, even when white politicians prided themselves on the purity of (British derived) whiteness in Australia, from Alfred Deakin (Kendall 2007) and Billy Hughes (Cochrane 2018) to Robert Menzies (Bolger 2016).

Remoteness as a chapter prism

Ironically, remoteness conceived as vast swathes of thinly populated land has occupied an uninterrupted central space in the settler imaginary (Bell 2014), both domestically and in terms of how Australia has projected itself to the rest of the world. Ironically, because a national imaginary is assumed to operate at a collective identification level, even if it remains also unequivocally a construction. Given this, how can a national imaginary operate as a reflection of its unsuccessful occupation of its space – how can lived place be different from national space while the latter is seen to reflect the former? Nation-building in a settler colonial context is premised on the unfinished, or, in a more critical vein, haunted by its unfinishable conquest of space on the one hand, while on the other hand nation-building pledges the remaining “empty space” to the nation through eventual occupation. By contrast, nation branding rests on the notion that the nation is fully formed and its characteristics can thus be placed in a ready-to-use formula for external and internal projection.¹⁰ Here, the “empty spaces” reflect the nation’s self-assured identity. Thus while to nation-building “empty spaces” are potentially disturbing evidence of uncompleted conquest, to nation branding “empty spaces” are inherent to the nation and they are simply commodified as such. The tensions between nation-building and nation branding become manifest in Australia’s mutually exclusive ways of projecting itself – exalted prospects of further exploitation versus unique, because untouched, spaces set aside for National Parks and leisure activities and industries. In practical terms, these

⁸ Just as it is worth remembering the critique, not of the soldiers, but of the premises of their sacrifice that as a national discourse can be traced back to Alan Seymour’s play, *The One Day of the Year* (1958) (see Gilbert 2015; and podcast https://abcmedia.akamaized.net/rn/podcast/2007/08/vim_20070802.mp3), Peter Weir’s film, *Gallipoli* (1981) and Albert B. Facey’s autobiography, *A Fortunate Life* (1981).

⁹ And in recent years attention has been drawn to the “multicultural enlistment” in the First World War, <https://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/resources/ancestry-stories-multicultural-anzacs>.

¹⁰ See discussion of nation-building and nation branding in Jensen and Loftsdóttir 2022.

projections overlap as tourism converts “empty spaces” into places for tourist consumption, and as such represents a different register of exploitation rather than an absence of exploitation. Two illustrations at either end of the spectrum of outback tourism are Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park/Yulara Resort (complete with airport, a range of accommodation and elevated lookout platforms, sealed roads, massive number of tourists in all kinds of vehicles) and Purnululu National Park (with one very limited glamping safari accommodation, a couple of camping grounds and an extremely slow and bumpy 53 km track over inland fossil coral reefs from the main road). The massive commercialisation at Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park has led to a number of conflicts not least over the question of access to climb Uluru (now closed), while the isolation of Purnululu - because of limited road access and the distance from local towns let alone the distance to the cities and the expenses associated with that - has so far protected it from major tourism development. The predictable result is continuous damage control at Uluru and concerted efforts at Purnululu not to embrace tourism infrastructure development.

What situates locations within and outside the horizon of the remote is what drives the discussion in chapter 1 on environment, where the case illustrations are the Great Barrier Reef and the Adani coal mine. The chapter on migrancy posits remoteness both as a prism through which select groups of people are viewed, where their implied “exoticness” serves as evidence of their remoteness as in unbelonging to the “familiar” (settler colonial, white, Anglo-Australian-centric narrative of selfhood). Similarly, the chapter on Indigenous sovereignty points immediately to the contradiction in labelling the outback as “empty spaces”. These spaces are locations of affiliation, of home and of Indigenous sovereignty exercised for tens of thousands of years, for example through the rules of passage governing inter-tribal relations. After the invasion, the same remote spaces become sites of settler exploitation (such as mining and cattle industries) unfolding over many decades with dramatic detrimental effects on the environment and Indigenous land management. The chapter on nation-(re)building takes departure in the disastrous bushfires of 2019-2020 as an emerging reversal of remoteness and familiarity. Where the (settler) familiar is beginning to be seen as inevitably destructive and representing unsustainability, (settler) defamiliarised ways of dealing with and adapting to climate change induced monstrous bushfires are gaining traction. This emerging discourse of reversal suggests a cautious step towards a reversal of the roles of familiar (settler discourse) and remote (Indigenous knowledge based discourse). Chapter 5 addresses how Australia geopolitically reenacts a process of centre and periphery creation, through a classification of its neighbourhood as remote yet also as a region to be contained and marshalled to Australia’s interests. This can be seen

as a process of creating a regional hub with its own periphery of remote, fledgling nations. But also here, the case illustration, Australia's intervention history in Timor-Leste, reveals the remote does not accept its labelling as rim, and is prepared to fight against the containment strategy of a regional bully.

Five conceptual frames

The following five chapters are not chronological accounts of environment, migrancy, Indigenous sovereignty, nation-(re)building and rim. Each of these topics merits a book-length study in its own right. In this book, they are more productively seen as five interwoven tropes – or thematically geared concepts - through which remoteness and how it signifies in an Australian context can be narrated. They are all central concepts to mainstream discussions over Australia's place in the world, so there is little immediate novelty in singling them out as chapter titles. But there is novelty in starting each chapter by defining the concept, because while their recognised register might seemingly render them self-explanatory, this book seeks to unpack their normativised register through the prism of remoteness. Hence environment speaks not about nature as much as about how Australian society relates to the natural environment. Thus environment is simultaneously what defines any society but also operates as a form of categorisation, where environment becomes limited in its discursive range (for example reduced to a utilitarian discourse), and consequently seen as one of a number of societal interests that can be prioritised or not, depending on what is at stake. For settler colonial Australia this amounts to attempting to perpetuate its post-1788 self-instituted monopoly on defining how and what Australia can be.

The same process of initially defamiliarising, or questioning the settler colonial derived logic of rendering concepts as transparent or settled, operates in chapters 2-5. Thus migrancy is chosen as a term that can remove its discursive register from customary forms of categorisation that again, similar to environment, produce and reproduce normative narratives about migrants as non-settlers (when in fact everyone except Indigenous Australians are migrants). It is also discussed with a view to dissociate migrants from a particular discourse around multiculturalism reducible to its choice as a policy instrument - or not. Migrancy is less about the lack of equality in Australian society based around where you came from. It is more about reformulating the narrative of post-1788 Australian history as the history of different groups of migrants, placed in a hierarchy protected by notions of

cultural difference accompanied by powers to discriminate between belonging and unbelonging. Removing hierarchical notions of cultural difference derived from settler colonialism will unsettle the patterns of hierarchical distinctions between belonging and unbelonging, between deserving settler selves and undeserving migrant (and Indigenous) others.

Indigenous sovereignty similarly questions the settler colonial derived claim that reconciliation and sovereignty (where this is even entertained as an idea) is for majoritarian (white) society to dispense, to grant, to acknowledge.¹¹ To Indigenous Australians sovereignty is an inalienable, Indigenous defined and determined concept, and reconciliation with its settler colonial and Christian bias a concept of questionable value. The inalienable dimension of sovereignty stems from the fact that Indigenous Australians have never ceded or surrendered their land. Thus sovereignty needs to be defined as something that allows for a negotiated inclusivity of non-Indigenous Australia into the sovereign nationhood of Indigenous Australia. If sovereignty within a Eurocentric settler colonial perspective is something that can be granted, then this raises the question when Indigenous Australia granted sovereignty to non-Indigenous Australia. If within the same logic it can be taken, or usurped, then reconciliation that remains the unfulfillable object of Anglo-Australian society is meaningless. To dismiss the uncompromising position of Indigenous Australians regarding sovereignty with reference to the difficult circumstances facing many Indigenous communities on a number of fronts, or by referring the obvious settler colonial derived resistance to such a position, is to miss the fundamental point that Indigenous sovereignty cannot be determined by those who have illegitimately acquired it.

The questions surrounding sovereignty in chapter 3 are connected to chapter 4, also conceptually, through its title nation-(re)building. Whose nation needs rebuilding, whose nation is rebuilt? Using the term (re)building signals nations are continuously rebuilt, rather than the customary perception suggesting nation-building as the pending completion of an already existing edifice. Nation-(re)building also refers to the fact that even from a non-Indigenous perspective, the current form of nation-building is compromised by its settler colonial origins and continued pursuits that from an Indigenous perspective may be more justly seen as continuous (Indigenous) nation dismantling. The bushfires that are the case illustration of this also refer to the necessity of re-building the nation differently because the bushfires will come again and they will be worse. Also here the self-destructive settler colonial logic constitutes its own paradoxical nation dismantling in spite of its

¹¹ For a critique of limited conceptualisation of white sovereignty in Australia, see Prokhovnik 2015.

nation-building claim. Thus nation-(re)building is also about constructing the nation as an imagined communal space that dismantles the current settler colonial derived nationhood conceptualisation that no longer holds together the nation, because it offers no future.

Chapter 5's conceptual title, rim, has been picked with reference to how remoteness is not only a domestic pursuit but also operates in a geopolitical international space. The overlaps with the other chapters should be obvious, for example, asylum seekers placed on Nauru and Manus Island were put on the rim - beyond the horizon of visibility but never beyond the horizon of control. Similarly, Australia's relations with Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea and the illustrative case Timor-Leste have been placed beyond a horizon of scrutiny and in the case of Timor-Leste the lengths to which Australian governments have gone to prevent scrutiny are extraordinary, as will be detailed. Rim of course also suggests a monopolising gaze from a centre that can be challenged by the contrasting gaze from the rim. Thus Timor-Leste made use of its international allies to put pressure on an otherwise overwhelmingly powerful Australia.

Chapter outlines

Had this book been a more conventional chronologically ordered cultural history of contemporary Australia, it could be presented as five chapters examining primarily the last 50 years of Australian society through a number of thematically grounded chapters. While developments in Australian society over the last 50 years and the debates over them have certainly influenced this book, I am less concerned with tracing development and more interested in discussing case examples illustrating - even crystallising - the broader theme. One of the benefits, and drawbacks, of being a long-term observer of and participant in debates over Australian society, is the realisation that specific events, moments in Australian cultural history and touchstones in Australian narratives of national selfhood appear to be infinitely rehearsed. This happens overtly in the public revisiting of Australia's contentious "national days", January 26 and April 25. The infinite rehearsal (see Jensen 2005) also pertains to the way in which debates resulting from the revisiting in themselves involve a rehearsal of positions, even if marked shifts are also detectable. Thus the debate over shifting, abolishing or re-commemorating Australia Day goes over the same terrain, but has been raised far more openly - and radically - in recent years. It is important to note that such shifts do not in themselves reflect the idea of an ever more progressive society coming to terms with its past - as anyone with Indigenous or

“migrant” background will have experienced. Rather such shifts can be said to be marked by a continuously shifting landscape of meaning creation. When January 26 is suggested moved, abolished, or solely/primarily to be marked on Indigenous terms, this obviously marks a progressive step towards a more inclusive society, and one that is prepared to recognise the wrongdoings of its past and their legacy in the present. However, when the Royal Commission into Indigenous Australian deaths in custody failed to prompt material change in the subsequent three decades (including implementation of its recommendations), Australian society appears as a stalemate society trapped in the unwillingness of a majoritarian society to recognise the wrongdoings of its past and their legacy in the present. It also makes contemporary society complicit sheerly by its failure to push for change. As such it is a blemish on a society insufficiently concerned with the continuous ranking of Indigenous Australians as de facto second-class citizens. When Indigenous land claims on land eyeballed by extractive industries are actively fought against by Australian governments, it represents a continuity of a majoritarian society pursuing its self-interest over and against the will of Indigenous Australians. It also represents a fundamental injustice and indictment of Australian society. And when Anzac Day is marked as a day of honouring soldiers unnecessarily dying in a pointless war and this taps into a newfound bipartisan Australian militant defence and foreign policy post-2001, this cannot by any stretch of anyone’s imagination be seen as a progressive step. Rather it ties up too neatly with an Australian assertive whiteness that may have elements of the introspective and retrospective, but nonetheless remains a comment on Australia’s Indigenous and multicultural history. And that comment is silence.

The chapter on the environment, though drawing on a much longer history of nature in Australia, could be said to begin with the environmental turn in the 1970s combined with an increasingly Indigenous focused approach to understand the environment. Which is one way of understanding the success of Pascoe’s *Dark Emu* (2016) regardless of its detractors and their motives – disciplinary and otherwise. Similarly, the chapter on migrancy speaks to multiculturalism not only as the belated recognition of a much older multicultural reality, but also as an idea that has underpinned Australian societal debate both within and outside academia since it began life as a policy instrument in the 1970s (Hage 2010).

Chapter 3 might be said to constitute the core of the book – as the chapter deals specifically with how a view of Australia grounded in Indigenous experience, knowledge and politics can be imagined – and executed. The chapter is core because all the other chapters concern themselves more with

deconstructing the centre's naturalised perspective on the remote. In chapter 3 the remote is the point of origin. Implicit in all the chapters is the idea that Australia can only really come of age as a nation by ceasing to imagine itself as “young and free” (let alone “one and free”) and “girt by sea” and instead build its identity around the experience of the people inhabiting the continent for 60,000 years, though time immemorial is a more appropriate assessment.

Chapter 4 discusses the perhaps most ingrained idea in Australian nationhood narration – nation-building. It has operated continuously in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as the grand narrative of Australia's continental development. Even as the non-Indigenous population continues to cling to the fringes of the continent, rather than move inland. I look specifically at one hugely destructive structural event, the bushfires that continuously threatened communities for months on end, while toxic smoke billowed over cities. The chapter's title of nation-(re)building itself signals a need to reimagine Australia away from narratives of fossil fuel extraction as the saviour of the Australian economy, when it is so evidently its bane. Climate change may be cast as a particularly acute moment of reckoning, of accepting that the way societies are organised has to be dramatically altered, yet the fossil fuel industry (from mine to car), introduced European farming practices and relentless consumption were always environmental time-bombs waiting to detonate. The Black Saturday bushfires of 2009 were a precursor of climate change induced weather changes. The 2019-2020 bushfires were not a precursor, they were a manifestation of climate change in full swing.

Chapter 5 concerns itself with how remoteness operates also as an extraterritorial perspective on Australia's island neighbourhood. The chapter title refers to how geopolitically Australia has cast itself as both a centre in its own right, but also as a regional representative of wider Global North and Western interests that economically overlap, but where Australia's militant-socio-economic-cultural interests are aligned with the (cultural) West. The illustrative case is Australia's relationship with Timor-Leste that has undergone a number of transformations since the Second World War. But never any changes that have sidelined Australia's pursuit of its narrow national interests. Even so, as I argue, the asymmetrical relationship between the region's richest and poorest is not reducible to a repeated Australian thrashing of Timor-Lestian resistance. It is also the story about how even the smallest most impoverished nation-state can play the game of internationalism and force “the protector” to the renegotiation table.

Following on from chapter 5, the final summarising chapter 6 takes its departure in the COVID-19 pandemic to ask what the thematically geared chapters collectively may help elucidate in connection

with how Australia has (so far) dealt with the pandemic. As with climate change COVID-19 is a crisis produced by humans pursuing an ultimately self-destructive relationship with nature. My concern with COVID-19 is less overtly with the global dimension of the event and more directly with how COVID-19 has reshaped Australia's national landscape, in stark contrast to the preceding years where states and territories saw their fields of influence diminishing as federal governments sought to monopolise power. The pandemic so far has generated the impression of six states and two territories in search of a federal government. The reversal of power relations between state and federal level owes much to the jurisdiction distribution between state, territory and federal level regarding health issues. This has been exacerbated, however, by a prime minister eager to insure his dissociation from any responsibility for decision making that entails negative consequences – and publicity. The federal government was, however, in charge of the vaccine rollout that was botched on a number of fronts and a national quarantine system that eighteen months into the pandemic was nowhere to be seen – except in states that began to push for a better solution than bussing international arrivals with potential COVID-19 exposure into the CBDs of Australian cities. Remoteness here primarily seems to operate as a federal government distancing itself from the responsibility of handling the pandemic that was largely a bad news serial on endless repeat. As in a fire that constantly gets out of control, the federal government had no desire to be associated with holding the hose.

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