

CHAPTER SEVEN – AFTERWORD

Father Latour judged that, just as it was the white man's way to assert himself in any landscape, to change it, make it over a little (at least to leave some mark of memorial of his sojourn), it was the Indian's way to pass through a country without disturbing anything; to pass and leave no trace, like fish through the water, or birds through the air. It was the Indian manner to vanish into the landscape, not to stand out against it. – Willa Cather, Death Comes for the Archbishop

IN THE CHAMBER

It feels like an inquisition, sitting on hard leather-bound seats, lined up along the edge of the chambers of the Eacham Shire Council. The council building in the heart of Malanda appears to warp space and time – inside the walls are lined with the rainforest timbers of Ngadjon-Jii country. Outside we are greeted by a fibreglass diorama of pioneering achievements and agricultural implements. These icons of European settlement of the district, felled trees and sown pastures, memorialise the present as much as they do the past. For nothing much has really changed, even though everywhere there is a veneer of modern life.



Figure 29: *Djura Djilam* – Mt Bartle Frere, taken from Lamins Hill (Photo: Roger Wilkinson).

This perceptual discordance is also apparent in the chamber. From the throat clearing and seat scraping, it appears that everyone is uncomfortable. Ngadjon-Jii people sit in this administrative gallery as though spectators to the history of their own dispossession. On this

stage, they are about to perform in the latest epoch in the history of Indigenous-Anglo-Australian relations – the era of Native Title. The audience for this spectacle is the body of seven male councillors, many of who are the descendants of the original European settlers. Ngadjon-Jii people and councillors alike awkwardly acknowledge their mutual familiarity and shared histories. Though this doesn't amount to greeting each other by name. They face each other as two cultural categories, divided along racial lines, rather than as individuals.

Instead of tree-climbing and 'painting up' to perform corroboree dances, Ngadjon-Jii people are required to execute a much more difficult task. Somehow, they have to communicate to this body of seven men something of what, for the Ngadjon-Jii people present, amounts to an unreflexive everyday practice – culture. They are required to present to this elected body of respectable citizens a twenty-minute snapshot of who they are and how and why it is they should be acknowledged as the Traditional Owners of the country enclosed by the boundaries of the local government area.

We start with a photograph of Mt Bartle Frere taken from the vantage point of Lamins Hill (Figure 29). Warren Canendo calls the mountain *Djura Djilam* and talks about how it is a "sacred site, this is where the spirits of our old people live and where we go when we die". One of the councillors points out that we are not only looking at Mt Bartle Frere, but in the foreground of the photograph lies his farm. He seems at ease upon recognising a familiar place in the unfolding Indigenous space narrated by Warren and the other Ngadjon-Jii people.

The talk of Ngadjon-Jii people is replete with stories about landed productivity, though not anything immediately recognisable by the farmers present in the chamber. They speak about "living off bush foods", such as *mungara* (bush turkey) and *bumbu* (turkey eggs), the fruits of brown apple, *murrurr* (bumpy satin ash), *gungi* (yellow walnut), *guwa* (black walut), *guyu* (an edible berry from an unidentified vine species), and *yabalam* (edible lawyer cane species).

What is often reduced to a mode of subsistence or spoken of purely in economic terms is a key framing activity for Ngadjon-Jii cultural identity and interests in country. As Elizabeth Povinelli observes, the sweat and speech associated with hunting and gathering in an environment imbued with all form of sentient beings are "seen to make the country 'sweet' and productive and willing to give its produce" (Povinelli 1993: 32). Moreover, these foraging activities provide Ngadjon-Jii people with a way of:

[A]ttending to, reenacting, and ensuring the physical, mythical, and emotional production of the environment, the human body, and the social group in the midst of sometimes horrendous historical upheavals and dislocations (Povinelli 1993: 30).

As Ngadjon-Jii people talk about bush foods and the entities that inhabit their country, *Yamani* and *Gubi*, and name in language places within the rural landscape of Eacham Shire, one wonders how this Ngadjon-Jii performance of knowledge and identity will be assessed by the councillors. The councillors appear mildly curious about the other uses of rainforest species revealed to them in the unfolding Indigenous hunting-gathering discourse. Though it seems that all this talk of foraging in the scrub is an aside to the main game of Native Title.

As Elizabeth Povinelli suggests in her analysis of the legal hearing for the Kenbi land claim in the Northern Territory, assessments of Aboriginal people and culture are often "tied to their varying degrees of association with Anglo culture and economy" (Povinelli 1993: 55). Embedded in these evaluations is a taxonomy of racial typologies, "is the Aboriginal narrator of 'full blood' or 'mixed' parentage" (loc. cit.), and a history of race relations. This became apparent in the chamber when, towards the end of the presentation, one of the councillors turns to Yvonne Canendo, her mother, Emma Johnston, and the other members of their

immediate family, and states that, “when I was a kid growing up in the Malanda area, we were always scared to go near the Aborigines out at Glen Allyn”.

It is here, on the sharp edge of fear, that Ngadjon-Jii people’s aboriginality and cultural difference is given local form and meaning. There is no suggestion here that the Ngadjon-Jii people who now live on the edge of the built environment of the township have lifestyles or histories that look anything like those of the Anglo-Australian residents of this district. Indeed, there is no suggestion that there are any similarities at all. This one comment succinctly gathers up the history of the past one hundred years. This is the fear that the pioneers wrote about in the recollections of the ‘early days’ in Malanda. It is as much a cultural memory for the European population of the district as it is a reality for Ngadjon-Jii people. On a rainy morning in the main street of Malanda in 2005, this one statement appears to establish without further discussion the very basis of white society’s fear – a prior and on-going Aboriginal presence in the remaining rainforests of the Atherton Tableland.

A LANDSCAPE OF HISTORICAL LEFT-OVERS

Throughout the Atherton Tableland, a new landscape is emerging. On maps it appears as a series of irregular polygons strewn haphazardly across the plateau. Often coloured red, as if to warn of some impending danger, these disparate pockets of unallocated state land (USL), national park, state forest, and reserve land are the tenure remains of a century or more of European exploration, settlement, and industry on the Tableland. For a range of reasons, these areas were not alienated as ‘agricultural farms’ and other forms of freehold land when the region was originally surveyed and cut up into selections, or in later waves of ‘land opening’ (see Frawley 2000). Some of this land was set aside for ‘camping’ and ‘scenic purposes’, other parcels were identified as water reserves, while the vast majority of the remaining area was crown-owned forestry land (Gould 2000; Holzworth 2000). Today, these patches of variously designated state land provide the contours for, and geographical content of, Aboriginal Native Title claims on the Tableland.

In the Malanda district, the leftovers from the colonial project of settlement and development amount to a handful of residual rainforest pockets – the Malanda Falls National Park, a disused and overgrown ‘quarry’ reserve near Peeramon, and the Topaz Road National Park²⁹. Further away from Malanda, a portion of Wooroonooran National Park and an ephemeral island in the middle of the Russell River are also part of the Native Title claim lodged by Ngadjon-Jii people³⁰. As the encounter in the council chamber highlights, these colonial discards form the physical, as well as symbolic, sites for on-going legal negotiations and political contestations about the nature and culture of Malanda’s spatial history. These contestations alert us to the fact that landscapes are also disputed and, at times, denied. In this sense, the idea of landscape can be regarded as a ‘concept of high tension’ (Inglis 1977), often enacted at the interstices of history, society and culture. Emerging from this crucible, the era of Native Title challenges the pervasive culture of forgetting and the environmental amnesia associated with the historical production of the landscapes of the Atherton Tableland. Yet somehow, in this unfolding view of fields and farmhouses, rainforest pockets, and rural townships, the contours and coils of *Yamani Country* can still be glimpsed.

²⁹ Barely 400 metres at its widest point, and measuring only 1,200 metres in length, this park largely consists of a section of a steep-sided, rain-forested creek. In other words, a gully. This parcel of land, abutting the Lamins Hill to Topaz Road, was declared a reserve for ‘scenic purposes’ in 1935 and a national park in 1977.

³⁰ A portion of what is today Wooroonooran National Park was first declared a national park in 1921. In 1960, additional areas were added to the national park. In 1994, the current area of the national park was declared a protected area.