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No place like home: staying well in a too sovereign country

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i) In Australia we do a lot of thinking about home. Or so it would seem from all the talk about belonging, home, being at home (see Read). A sure sign of displacement, some might say. In his recent memoir, John Hughes writes:

It is a particularly Australian experience that our personal heritage and sense of identity includes a place and a history not really our own, not really accessible to us. The fact that our sense of self-discovery and self-realisation takes place in foreign lands is one of the rich and complex ironies of being Australian. (24-25)

My sense of self-discovery did not occur in a foreign land. However, my personal heritage and sense of identity includes places and histories that are not really my own. Unlike Hughes I don’t have what is often portrayed as an exotic heritage; I am plainly white Australian. I grew up on the Far North Coast of New South Wales, on farms that every year knew drought and flood. My place in this country – both local and national – seemingly was beyond question. I am after all a white, settler Australian. But I left Kyogle twenty years ago and since then much has changed.

My project is very different than Hughes’. However, reading his memoir led me to reflect upon my sense of belonging. What is my home made from? Like Hughes I want to deploy memories from my childhood and youth to unpack my idea of home. White settler Australians’ sense of belonging is often expressed as a profound feeling of attachment; imagined as unmediated (Moreton-Robinson 31). It is a connection somehow untroubled by the worldliness of the world: it is an oasis of plentitude. For Indigenous Australians, Aileen Moreton-Robinson argues, non-Indigenous Australians sense of belonging is tied to migrancy, while the Indigenous subject has an ontological relationship to land and these modes are incommensurable (31). Since colonisation the nation state has attempted through an array of social, legal, economic and cultural practices to break Indigenous people’s ontological connections to land, and to cast them as homeless in the ‘modern’ world. The expression of belonging as a profound sense of attachment – beyond the material – denies not only the racialised power relations of belonging and dispossession, but also the history of this sentiment. This is why I want to stay right here and take up Moreton-Robinson’s challenge to further theorise (and reflect) upon how non-Indigenous subjects are positioned in relation to the original owners not through migrancy but through possession (37).

ii) Australia has changed a lot. Now most understand Australia to be comprised of a plurality of contradictory memories, imaginaries and histories, generated from different cultural identities and social bodies. Indigenous Australians, who have been previously spoken for, written about, categorised and critiqued by non-Indigenous people, have in the last three decades begun to be heard by mainstream Australia. In a diversity of mediums and avenues Indigenous stories, in all their multiplicity, penetrated the field of Australian culture and society. In so doing, they enter into a dialogue about Australia’s past, present and future. The students I teach at university arrive from school with an awareness that Australia was colonised, not discovered as I was taught.

Recent critical historiography, by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous writers and
academics, calls for and creates a new Australian memory (Hage 80). A memory, or memories, which the reconciliation movement not only want acknowledged by mainstream Australia but also integrated into national consciousness. Over the last twenty years, many Australian historians have reinforced the truths of fictional and autobiographical accounts of colonial violence against Indigenous people. The benign and peaceful settlement of Australia, which was portrayed in school history lessons and public discourse, began to be replaced by empirical historical evidence of the brutal subjugation of Indigenous people and the violent appropriation of Indigenous land. Indigenous struggles for recognition and sovereignty and revisionist history have created a cultural transformation. However, for all the big changes there has been limited investigation into white Australians’ sense of belonging continuing to be informed and shaped by settler colonial desire.

Indigenous memories not only contest and contradict other memories, but they are also derived from different cultural bodies and social and historical contexts. My memory of our farm carved out of Toonumbah State Forest is of a peaceful place, without history; a memory which is sure to contradict Bundjalung memories. To me Kyogle was a town with only a few racial problems; except for the silences and all those questions left unasked. Ghassan Hage argues that a national memory or non-contradictory plurality of memories of colonisation in Australia is impossible because although there has been a cultural war, the two opposing sides have not assimilated to become one (92). There remain within Australia, ‘two communal subjects with two wills over one land; two sovereignties of unequal strength’ (Hage 93). The will of one is not the will of the other. I would argue that there is barely recognition of Indigenous sovereignty by non-Indigenous Australians; for so many there is only one will, one way. Furthermore, Hage maintains that:

For a long time to come, Australia is destined to become an unfinished Western colonial project as well as a land in a permanent state of decolonisation. A nation inhabited by both the will of the coloniser and the will of the colonised, each with their identity based on their specific understanding, and memory, of the colonial encounter: what was before it and what is after it. Any national project of reconciliation that fails to fully accept the existence of a distinct Indigenous will, a distinct Indigenous conatus, whose striving is bound to make the settlers experience ‘sadness’, is destined to be a momentary cover-up of the reality of the forces that made Australia what it is. (94)

Why must Indigenous will make settlers experience sad passions? Perhaps this is a naïve question. I am not dismissing Hage’s concerns, and agree with his critique of the failure of the project of reconciliation. However, if we are to understand the forces that made Australia what it is – to know our place – then as Hage writes we need not only to acknowledge these opposing forces, but understand how they made us who we are. The narrative of benign settlement might have resulted in a cultural amnesia, but I’m not convinced that settler Australians didn’t know about colonial violence and its aftermath. Unlike Henry Reynolds who asked ‘why didn’t we know?’ I think the question should be, as Fiona Nicoll asks, ‘what is it we know but refuse to tell?’ (7). Or how did I get here? In asking what makes home, one needs to question what is excluded to enable one to stay in place.

When I think of my childhood home there is one particular farm that comes to mind. From my birth to when I left home at eighteen I lived in about six different homes; all but one where on farms. The longest was for about eight years, on a farm only a few kilometres from town; conveniently close for a teenager wanting all the ‘action’ of town life. It was just up the road from my grandparents’ place, whose fridge I would raid most afternoons while my grandmother lovingly listened to my triumphs and woes (at least those I thought appropriate for her ears). Our house was set back just a little from the road. On this farm, my brother and I floated paper boats down flooded gullies; there, my sisters, brother and I formed a secret society on the banks of the picturesque creek, which was too quickly torn apart by factional infighting. In this home, my older sisters received nightly phone calls from boys, and I cried to my mother, ‘When will it be my turn’. She comforted me with, ‘Don’t worry, they will soon’. And sure enough they did. There I hung out with my first boyfriend, who would ride out on his motor bike, then later his car. We lolled around on our oddly sloping front lawn and talked for hours about nothing.

But this isn’t the place which readily comes to mind when I think of a childhood home. Afterlee Rd, as we called it, never felt like home. Behind the house, over the other
The doctrine of *terra nullius* cleared the country not only of people, but also of the specifics of Indigenous place, in an attempt to recreate another place inspired by the economic and strategic needs of the colonisers. Indigenous people were further exposed as strangers in the ‘new’ country by not participating in the colonial economy and systems of exchange. Indigenous people’s movement to visit family, to perform ceremony or maintain connections with country were largely dismissed by the colonial culture and little understood as maintaining and re-making sovereignty. European forms of commerce made the settlers sovereign – held them in place. And in turn, this exchange continues to bind settler Australians to ways of being that de-limit connections to place and people. It created a sense of order that still constrains ideas of home. Colonial logic dominates *Australian* ideas of sovereignty, thus of being at home or belonging in this country. Indeed, I would argue that it enforces a strange attachment: clinging fast as if to a too absent parent or romancing it, wooing a desired but permissive lover.

We don’t know, as Fiona Nicoll questions, what Indigenous sovereignty might look like. Discussions of sovereignty are on Western terms. If Indigenous sovereignty is recognised at all, it is largely figured as impractical, impossible or dangerous (Nicoll 9). The fear and forgetting of the long history of Indigenous struggles for sovereignty, Nicoll writes, conceals the everydayness of the contestation (1). Indigenous sovereignty is both unknown and too familiar, thus it continues to be the stranger which must be expelled to enable belonging. Yet without it we cannot know the country.
I carry around a map of Australia. It is a simple image, a crude outline of the giant landmass; like what you find on cheap souvenir tea-towels. To be honest it's just the continent – an islandless island – even Tasmania has dropped off my map. My map is not in my pocket but my head. It comes to mind so regularly I think of it as the shape of my idea of home. It is a place shared by many, yet singularly mine. I want to say that it is not the nation, but the country itself, but of course this isn't true. My sense of Australia as my home is forged from an imaginary nation. However, I have problems calling Australia home – as if being at home in the nation is like being in an idealised family home. What is too often sentimentalised and fetishised as closed and secure: a place of comfort and seamless belonging (Fortier 119). Making home an infantile place where everything is there for me. But we understand that nations are beyond us and all that they are composed of we cannot know. Even putting aside the romantic notions, nations aren't very much like home. They are, however, relational. Like bower birds, we collect sticks, stones, shells and coloured things, building connections with the outside world to create something a bit like home in the imaginary nation. I fill my rough map with ‘things’ that hold me in place.

We might ask, is a home a home if we don’t go outside? My idea of home borrows from Meaghan Morris. In Ecstasy and Economics, she is attempting to create what Deleuze and Guattari call home. She writes:

In their sense of the term, "home does not pre-exist"; it is the product of an effort to "organize a limited space", and the limit involved is not a figure of containment but of provisional (or "working") definition. This kind of home is always made of mixed components, and the interior space it creates is a filter or a sieve rather than a sealed-in consistency; it is not a place of origin, but an “aspect” of a process which it enables (“as though the circle tended on its own to open into a future, as a function of the working forces it shelters”) but does not precede – and so it is not an enclosure, but a way of going outside. (92)

If home is a way of going outside then we need to know something about outside. Belonging is a desire and we make home from the desire to belong. In desiring belonging we should not forsake the worldliness of the world. What is configured as outside home are often the legal, political, economic and cultural conditions that have produced contemporary Australia. However, by refusing to engage with how colonialism and Indigenous sovereignty have made Australia one might not be able to go outside; risk imprisoning oneself in a too comfortable space. By letting in some of the elements which are strange and unhomely, one might begin to build connections which aid the reimagining of the self and the social, which in turn enables one to not only live in postcolonial Australia but participate in creating it (Probyn). A strange place: unsettled by other desires, histories, knowledge and memories, but a place more like home.

I am arguing that we need to know our place. But knowing our place cannot be taken for granted. We need many hearts and minds to allow us to see what is here. The childhood home I write of is not my home, nor do I want it to be. However, the remembering or rather investigation of my idea of home is important. Where has it come from? There has been a lot of discussion about non-Indigenous Australians being unsettled by revisionist historiography and Indigenous demands for recognition and this is true, but the unsettlement has been enabling. Given that settler Australians are afforded so much sovereignty then there seems plenty of room for uncertainty. We don't need to despair, or if we do, it could be used productively to remake our idea of home. If someone were to ask that tired question, 'Generations of my family have lived here, where am I going to go? ' The answer is no where. You’re going no where, but here. The question isn’t of leaving, but of staying well.

References


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