Improvement in the inland: culture and nature in the Australian rangelands

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Abstract
Few practices were as intimately implicated in effecting the extension of British selves and surfaces to the colonies of Australia, as agricultural and pastoral pursuits. Said Governor Arthur Phillip, soon after the founding of New South Wales: ‘There are few things more pleasing than the contemplation of order and useful arrangement on the land arising gradually out of tumult and confusion; and perhaps this satisfaction cannot anywhere be more fully enjoyed than where a settlement of civilised people is fixing itself upon a newly discovered and savage coast’ (Phillips, 1789, p.122). Over the course of the subsequent century, the enactment of this ideal of settled cultivation, enshrined in John Locke’s influential notion of property rights, discredited and eradicated other, more nomadic modes of relation to land. More than a cultural ideal, however, settled cultivation materialised a specific humanist ontology of human distinction from the nonhuman world, according to which cultivation would not only release the land’s potential, but signal the passage of a universalised human out of a ‘state of nature’ and ultimately into a space of civilised accommodation with other humans and nonhumans Anderson (Forthcoming).

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Many of the pastoralists blame the rabbit for damage for which they themselves are responsible, through their stock (Ratcliffe 1947, p.218).

Tracing Settlement Ideals

Few practices were as intimately implicated in effecting the extension of British selves and surfaces to the colonies of Australia, as agricultural and pastoral pursuits. Said Governor Arthur Phillip, soon after the founding of New South Wales: 'There are few things more pleasing than the contemplation of order and useful arrangement on the land arising gradually out of tumult and confusion; and perhaps this satisfaction cannot anywhere be more fully enjoyed than where a settlement of civilised people is fixing itself upon a newly discovered and savage coast' (Phillips, 1789, p.122). Over the course of the subsequent century, the enactment of this ideal of settled cultivation, enshrined in John Locke's influential notion of property rights, discredited and eradicated other, more nomadic modes of relation to land. More than a cultural ideal, however, settled cultivation materialised a specific humanist ontology of human distinction from the nonhuman world, according to which cultivation would not only release the land's potential, but signal the passage of a universalised human out of a 'state of nature' and ultimately into a space of civilised accommodation with other humans and nonhumans Anderson (Forthcoming).

A number of Australian historical geographers, particularly Les Heathcote, Michael Williams and Joe Powell have richly detailed the transfer of European land and settlement ideals to Australia, noting their uneven uptake and impact on settlement processes, patterns and policies (Heathcote 1965; Heathcote 1987; Powell 1970; Powell 1977; Williams 1974; Williams 1977). Their work is complemented by the influential study of South Australian settlement and the advance and retreat of the wheat frontier into semi-arid lands by Donald Meinig (1988). A key interest of this body of work has been a consideration of how settlement ideals and policy were challenged by the local experiences of pastoralists, farmers, and policy makers across Australia's vast and variably arid continent. In examining the expansion of 'settlement' into less fertile and more arid regions where it became apparent that the ideal of intensive, freehold settlement, characterised by cultivation and smallholders, was unrealistic over large areas, they have highlighted the tenuous character of 'cultural transfer' under colonial conditions more generally. Powell (1977, p.78-80) characterises the process of adaptation to more arid regions as marking, and then 'closing the gap between rhetoric and reality', that is the gap between ideals of land and society imported from Europe, particularly Britain, and the reality of implementing these ideals in Australian environmental and spatial conditions.

This model of cultural transfer and adaptation has tended to fix settlement ideals in relation to particular, cultivated modes of land settlement - ones that across Australia (and other white settler colonies), and as Powell and others have demonstrated, quickly differentiated into hybrid amalgams of intensive and (mostly) extensive land uses and settlement formations. Moreover, ideals of yeoman settlement exceeded any fixed spatial identification with agricultural use, informing land use uptake and especially pastoralism beyond closer settlement. To the extent that pastoralism also endures, as such, to today, further demonstrates how the ideal of settled cultivation exceeded the temporal logic of a classically European and humanist trajectory of human self- and nature domestication – one that envisaged a progressive movement of 'the human' out of nature, through a space of cultivation, and into the space of civilisation in the City. Pastoralism in the Australian context has proven to not necessarily be a precursor to closer settlement; a mere 'holding pattern' before the introduction of land uses of greater virtue and embodying higher states of human development.

Drawing on research in Central Australia, it is from this point that this paper will examine the fate of agrarian ideals as the gap between rhetoric and reality closed in the arid and semi-arid regions of Australia. Far from melting away or from being manifest only in association with agriculture, these ideals have persisted beyond the cultivated regions and remain significant in debates over land tenure, land ownership, land use and land management. They were strongly in evidence, for example, in debates over native title and pastoral leases in the late 1990s when supporters and opponents alike of native title rights drew on positive and negative stereotypes of farmers/pastoralists to advance their arguments (for a discussion of the two sides of the agrarian 'coin' see Creed and Ching 1997; Gill In Press).

Settled Cultivation in Critical Perspective

The work of humanistic historians of settlement is valuable for making clear the sense in which land settlement is a social process deeply...
imbeded with values, interests and human experience. Frameworks from this body of work remain important in interpreting environmental and resource management in Australia (Frawley 1999; Powell 2002), and remain relevant to debates over arid land use (Heathcote 1994). As foreshadowed above, however, there are several possible lines of argument for extending the critique of the tenuous cultural transfer of British landscape ideals to the Australian continent. The path to that extension comes through a refusal, in posthumanist perspective, of the ontological distinction of human/nonhuman that turns nature into an object for 'improvement' (Anderson 2003; Glendinning 2000). And while elsewhere a story of 'the human' as an essentialised and unified category, interwoven with the historical ontologies of 'race' and nature, is elaborated in detail (Anderson forthcoming), here we deploy posthumanism's (increasingly disparate and disputed) interrogations of 'the human' to further unsettle the narrative triumph surrounding 'improvement' in inland Australia. The framework we use here to develop this argument revolves around a critical interpretation of nature's domestication, historically interconnected as a process 'with ideas of human uniqueness and dominion, savagery and civilization that became woven into the structuring of … human-animal-plant relationships' (Anderson 1997, p.470).

Certainly in western stories of the human transformation of the earth, one can note the significance attached to nature's domestication. The rise some 11,000 years ago of cultivation – that is, of bringing select plants and animals into the human 'domus' to secure subsistence and comfort – has long been read as a decisive moment in that transformation (Anderson 1997; 2003; Sorabji 1993). Whereas animals merely foraged on the surface of the earth, humans planted it, built on it, transformed it. Greek writings on husbandry for example, especially agricultural manuals such as Virgil's Bucolics and Georgics, cast the human, in transforming the nonhuman world with the arts of animal and plant domestication, as history's defining agent (Cosgrove 1993). With tools, crafts, arts, machines, humans made good the deficiencies of nature. And still in the recent past and today, a number of world historians see agriculture as the developmental threshold that provided the basis for the emergence of the great regional traditions of human civilisation (eg. Clark 1969; Smith 1995). Cultivation is scripted (normatively) as the turning point that launched humanity on its diverse 'civilising' paths.

The humanist ideas and conceits buried within these ontologies of human distinction and development were mapped onto European colonies where they variously shaped the transformation of 'New World' land, animals (and, as would be the subject of its own complex discussion - indigenous people) (Merchant, 1996). These acts of transformation entailed no confident assertion of cultural superiority (Lines 1995), and instead were fraught with all the uncertainties and ambiguities surrounding the human place in/out of nature. Here we use a critical (posthumanist) interpretation of domestication to briefly trace some expressions of the processes by which an imagining and enactment of 'order' was brought to inland landscapes among pastoralists in the southern Northern Territory (Central Australia). We will draw first on selected pastoralists' perspectives on setting and transforming Central Australia into a home. This material not only illustrates the manner in which a 'settlement' ontology exceeded the spatial and temporal boundaries of cultivation (agrarian) practice and progresses, but also demonstrates the co-production of (certain) natures and cultures in Central Australian settlement narratives by humans, animals, and other non-humans including events such as rainfall. In this regard, other scholars of ecology and empire have attended closely to the natural ecosystems that provided the context for colonial institutions, so extending in their work the boundaries of colonialism's historiography beyond human agencies (eg. Cronon 1983; Griffiths and Robin 1997).

Second, we will look at some more recent Landcare activities to show how the pastoral landscape continues to exert a symbolic force within contemporary ecological discourses and practices. In contrast to the previous section, conflicts over rabbit (vs. cattle) management reveal precisely the anxieties and difficulties framing humanist claims to a nature-civilising path. These two vignettes are from a region commonly taken to be beyond the 'domus', a place where cultivation has failed and frontiers remain. They show, however, that 'improvement' retains its normative hold on inland settlers, even in the absence of the physical transformations normally associated with cultivation.

**Knowing and Transforming the Land**

In a range of narratives, including autobiographies and biographies, Central Australian pastoralists trace the development of a pastoral community and a pastoral landscape. In the discourse that surrounds this development to the present, bough sheds are said to give way to homesteads and families grow. The landscape is symbolically and materially (at least at the margins) transformed and the presence of both native and introduced stock animals is naturalised in the land. The cast of this story includes people as well as their and other animals, who in conjunction with a dynamic nature, are scripted as co-producing the Central Australian pastoral landscape.

Pearl Powell's description of a 1920s childhood visit to the Bloomfields Loves' Creek station east of Alice Springs, evokes this domesticated landscape. Powell weaves European stock seamlessly into the landscape. They were visiting Atnarpa on Love's Creek in order to purchase horses. There was 'lush and plentiful grass. We saw kangaroos everywhere…there were quite a few joey's…we also saw a flock of seven emus and several wedge tail eagles'. The horses at Atnarpa 'were all such beautiful animals' that it was hard to make a selection. As the unwanted horses were released and galloped off 'they made a fine sight' (Powell and McRae 1996, p.54-55). In this account Central Australia is a richly productively land where native flora and fauna seemed to fold into the European world of yards, stock skills, and fine horses. Such childhood memories describe an abundant Central Australia. This is not a barren and difficult landscape, but one in which settlers' animals and enterprises are thriving, at home in a landscape that is rewarding their efforts.

The material agency of domestic stock in transforming the land is a key part of these accounts. Judy Robinson's biography of her family's settlement north of Alice Springs from around 1914 provides a clear account that links the actions of stock with the ideals of settlers. She describes her grandmother's observations from the homestead verandah at Ryan's Well, writing that she saw:

> … an improvement in grasses and a slow but steady greening and developing density of shrubbery. Because she was a gardener at
heart, she believed the cattle were responsible. Their hooves broke up the topsoil and their bodily waste nourished the soil. Where they foraged on low bush branches, the canopy grew taller and shaded more grasses and infant trees. Moving away from their watering places, they distributed grass and heritage which better anchored what already grew. Every hoof left a cradle for new seeds to develop, protected from wind on the open plains and held little pockets of water when it rained (Robinson 1999, p.43; Figure One).

This belief in the 'gardening' effect of stock remains significant among pastoralists today (Gill 2003). For example, in 1996 during fieldwork in Central Australia, a pastoralist told one of us (Nicholas) 'a lot of country in Central Australia is no good until its stocked... its just like ploughing the land'. Not only have cattle changed the landscape; they are seen as at least partially responsible for creating what exists today, and as serving as agents of improvement. The pastoral presence is thus written onto the surface of the land itself, not only through the visibility of homesteads, bores, fences and other pastoral infrastructure. Furthermore, stories about these environmental changes circulate within the pastoral community and remain part of their culture (J. Robinson, pers. comm. 8/99).

The land, too, features significantly in pastoral histories. The focus however, is not the land per se, but the evolution of pastoral society and landscapes. In this development, the pastoral body and land permeate each other through physical co-presence and labour. In a complex and arid biophysical environment that is highly variable in time and space (Friedel, Foran et al. 1990) and greatly variable in its ability to support stock, pastoralists require an intimate knowledge of their land in order to be successful. For example, to control their herds, particularly prior to widespread fencing and establishment of sub-artesian bores, pastoralists needed considerable knowledge of the limited natural waters and of where cattle were likely to congregate. In many cases, pastoralists were often dependent on local Aboriginal people in these regards, at least initially.

Pastoralists saw themselves as gaining this knowledge through work and experience. They came to gain not only knowledge of the physical features and layout of the land, but also to develop a way of knowing that provided them a place within it. This knowing is specific to their mode of land use and occupation, and arises in part from the variability of the land. Early experiences of pastoralists with rainfall variability and stock losses provide a starting point to discuss the development of pastoral knowledge. Three families who started stations between 1914 and 1925 in Central Australia, the Chalmers, Price and Nicker families, had sheep. Whereas cattle could be largely left to their own devices much of the time, sheep required shepherding. For this reason, they had largely disappeared from Central Australia by the 1960s. Shepherding sheep forced the Chalmers to engage in some desperate searches for water that almost cost the lives of family members. New to Central Australia and to arid zone pastoralism, the Chalmers were reassured by rainfall records that indicated regular summer rainfall and by assurances from 'old timers in the district, that in at least twenty years of history there had never failed to be a rain before Christmas' (Ford 1978, p. 95).2 They did not realise that twenty years is inadequate in assessing the highly variable rainfall pattern of Central Australia. According to Ford, in 1926, the Chalmers and their stock were forced to their limits when summer rains failed to materialise. Ford paints a picture of despair as the previously welcoming land dried out and stock began to die and as hopes for the future turned to dust.

From such disasters, however, was forged the mythic stoicism of the outback. In the Chalmers' case, rain finally came in March, when the country flooded and brought forth an 'unbelievable carpet of vitality and fertility' where stock had been dying in their thousands. The Chalmers sheep flourished and the region 'had become a land flowing with milk and honey, and the pastoral scene breathed serenity, prosperity and contentment' as 'once again the remarkable recuperative powers of the country had been proved' (Ford 1978, p.118-119). This experience provided the Chalmers with a steep learning curve about Central Australia, but it also had a more significant effect. As noted above, Ford is evidently told of another observation, that the country can recuperate and bloom, when it is apparently ruined, and the pastoralists' labour and commitment destroyed with it. From this perspective, for those who are there to see it, the country shows it true nature, its true productivity. This is a productivity that is felt or known for those who have seen the cycles and seen their families and stations survive; there to see for those who wait, for those who persist and place their faith in the land. Seventy years later Rose Chalmers told one of us (Nicholas) of the recovery this country flooded and brought forth an 'unbelievable carpet of vitality and fertility' where stock had been dying in their thousands. The Chalmers provided the Chalmers with a steep learning curve about Central Australia, but it also had a more significant effect. As noted above, Ford is evidently told of another observation, that the country can recuperate and bloom, when it is apparently ruined, and the pastoralists' labour and commitment destroyed with it. From this perspective, for those who are there to see it, the country shows it true nature, its true productivity. This is a productivity that is felt or known for those who have seen the cycles and seen their families and stations survive; there to see for those who wait, for those who persist and place their faith in the land. Seventy years later Rose Chalmers told one of us (Nicholas) of the recovery after seven years of drought in the 1960s:

But you don't know, you get the right rain and there it all is! Even that beautiful button grass which is the best grass of all. And that [sic] was just miles of it (interview 16/11/96).

In Central Australia's pastoral culture, experiences such as the Chalmers etch the families into the land. Those who endure such events in Central Australia come to embody them within their presence. Indeed, among pastoralists the shared embodiment of these experiences is an important part of collective identity and memory, marking them off from newcomers whom they assume have no understanding of Central Australia (Gill, 1997). It is a culture of faith that persists strongly to this day. This was exemplified by pastoralist Bernie Kilgariff's assertion to a 1996 Landcare meeting that 'we [pastoralists] know the good of Central Australia'. The 'good' appeals to shared understandings and meanings about the nature of the land between pastoralists and to the value of their occupation of it. It is a singular and specific 'good', one that takes its logical and normative stance from the humanist (and colonialist) idea of nature as an inert mass whose actuality could only be realized through the purposeful action of people. The brief account above shows how certain nonhuman players, especially cattle, are drawn into a peculiarly Australian inflection of this normative paradigm of settled life. Moreover, while the idea of the 'good' of Central Australia carries a trace of nostalgia, it is central to the fabric and maintenance of the contemporary pastoral landscape. It is a concept that embodies reciprocity between land and pastoralist, a state more commonly associated with the transformative labour of cultivation rather than the merely 'extractive' practice of pastoralism (Olwig 1984). On this point, however, even as pastoralists claim the mantle of 'improvement', we can discern complexity that is glossed in these linear narratives of possession and settlement. A disjunction is found in the disappearance of sheep from Central Australia by
the late 1960s (Figure Two) and, by contrast, the success of cattle. Sheep and cattle landscapes are not neatly equivalent in terms of the idealised trajectory of co-development of humans and land with which this article engages. Sheep require shepherding and other husbandry and greater capital investment in infrastructure such as watering points and shearing sheds. Relative to inland cattle landscapes, landscapes of sheep-raising embody more closely the ideal of settled and cultivated landscapes. In the 1920s and 1930s there were estimates of potential Central Australian sheep flocks ranging from fourteen million from the federal member of the NT (Northern Territory Times 13/9/29), to a more modest but still optimistic 300 000 (Payne and Fletcher, 1937). More optimistic forecasts yet came from those who predicted extensive agriculture and horticulture in the southern NT (Steffanson, 1924) 3.

Historically at least, cattle grazing was open range and required relatively little capital investment beyond the stock themselves; inland cattle country was seen as 'wild' country, an ambiguous landscape at the margins of the European ecumene. Both nineteenth and twentieth century visions of the inland have reflected these distinctions (Gill, In Press; for example see Payne and Fletcher, 1937). As Povinelli (1995; see also Williams, 1975) discusses, extensive cattle grazing on largely unimproved properties has consistently been interpreted in Australian culture as lacking the transformative qualities of other land uses and therefore being akin to 'mere' hunting and gathering (for a twentieth century example that echoes this view and interprets open range pastoral practices as a waste of land resources, see Kelly, 1966). Nonetheless, in contrast to this, and, at least, as articulated by the Central Australian pastoralists interviewed for this research, cattle-raising has come to stand for success and settlement by the end of the twentieth century rather than as failure to realise earlier visions of the inland. This disjuncture is in keeping with broader tensions over the place of the inland in Australian origin stories (Gill, In Press). The key process by which this is achieved is through ordering Central Australia's landscape by the labour of pastoralists and their stock, and through processes of remembering that entwine settlers, stock, land, soil, rainfall and plants to produce civilised landscapes. Wild nature, and with it, the indigene, are displaced, or at least accommodated, as what is imagined to be the true potential, the good, of the land is realised through the labour of the settlers. In this way a Lockean sense of property is reproduced even as the physical transformation of land occurs only at the margins of pastoral practice. That this 'good' continues to be normatively associated with a European humanist developmentalism is made even clearer by pastoralists' comments in interviews in 1996 and 1997 that pastoral land now in Aboriginal hands was now 'unproductive', is reverting to 'wild country', and is 'virgin'. This 'backwards' trajectory highlights an important issue; it emphasises that for pastoralists, land can remain largely physically unmodified, yet is nonetheless always at risk of reverting to a state of nature without their presence. In relation to the backwards move, the key appears to be the absence of what counts as productive labour and of the valued lifeways of settler families; in this schema Aboriginal use and occupation of land remains mired in nature. In contrast, pastoralism stands as progress with a legitimacy of possession that remains grounded in the ideals of land use articulated by Governor Phillip in 1789.

Rabbits and Landcare

If Central Australia's 'state of nature' was brought into an ordered fold of human endeavour and accommodation by pastoralism, then feral rabbits represent a destabilisation of order (Clark, 1999). In the process of controlling rabbits, pastoralists reveal much about the boundaries they draw to delineate what belongs and what doesn't in Central Australia. In particular, they articulate a stewardship role for pastoralism that further naturalises the presence of cattle and which strengthens the naturalness and the morality of the pastoral landscape.

In the late 1980s Central Australian pastoralists formed a Landcare group, the Centralian Land Management Association (CLMA), which operates to the present day. While in recent years the CLMA has expanded into projects that theoretically at least ask pastoralists to critically reflect on their own practices, rabbit control projects have been and are a key part of the CLMA operations, and have dominated their budgets and often their public profile for much of the group's life (Gill 2004). Rabbit control projects with which the CLMA has been involved have included warren destruction, release of the fatal Rabbit Calicivirus Disease (RCD) 4, and monitoring of the effects of rabbit control on native fauna.

In a CLMA biennial report (CLMA 1997) the section on rabbit control lists five environmental impacts of rabbits:

- Competition with native animals (militates against reintroductions).
- Loss of trees and shrubs;
- Threat to rare plants;
- Poor quality species composition;
- Erosion due to denudation;

Such a list of impacts can scarcely be argued with, and rabbit control is certainly an important environmental and resource issue. What is of interest here is that these same impacts, to varying degrees, can also be attributed to cattle (and sheep) grazing, although on this matter there is a relative silence in pastoral discourses (Gill 2000; Gill 2003). While cattle are thought to transform nature (as discussed earlier), they are represented by the CLMA as nonetheless treading lightly relative to the interventions of rabbits. While cattle are theoretically at least subject to pastoralists' control, rabbits are not so readily managed.

The distinctions made here reflect delineation between what pastoralists consider feral and wild, and what they consider natural and domesticated. As the previous section showed, pastoral nature incorporates cattle and pastoral activity, history and labour. Nature, in this frame
is domesticated, even if not fully controllable. In fact, the great variablity of Central Australian nature is itself domesticated for pastoralists through their experience and knowledge of it, often so proudly declared as to barely conceal its own vulnerability. Rabbits stand outside domestication. They remain wild because they are unmanageable and threaten the pastoral version of the 'natural' landscape. The rabbits' 'uncontrollability' is however, distinct from the 'uncontrollability' of the Central Australian floods and droughts. While the extremely variable Central Australian environment has been more or less accommodated within pastoral culture, experience, and stoicism, the rabbit cannot be brought within pastoral nature as cattle, equally introduced, can be. Rabbits are in fact antithetical to pastoral nature; they threaten to destroy it, even as they are instrumental in maintaining a cultural hierarchy of landscapes that conceives of pastoral landscapes as ordered, in contrast to the chaos and uncontrollability of those landscapes inhabited by the rabbit (and other feral animals and weeds). For pastoralists, cattle belong to an authentic nature, they are part of an authentic Central Australian nature; that which was proto-pastoral and which is now fully pastoral. 

When questioned on the role of rabbits as a food source for Aboriginal people in 1994 by a Senate committee, Waudby suggested that Primary Industries and Fisheries injected the virus into rabbits at seven non-infected sites (CLMA 1997). 

grounds it was not native and caused land degradation, then cattle, with 'bigger mouths than rabbits' (Rose 1995, p.116) should also be food source but that many Aboriginal people saw the rabbit as now 'belonging' to country, in a way similar to native animals. Most Aboriginal 

In his survey of Aboriginal people's attitudes towards land management issues, Rose (1995) found that not only was the rabbit an important food source but that many Aboriginal people saw the rabbit as now 'belonging' to country, in a way similar to native animals. Most Aboriginal 

Rabbits illustrate the specificity of 'environment' as conjured in pastoral Landcare. Certainly rabbits are destructive to pastoral nature. In this sense they are a problem for the 'environment'. However, the issue of rabbits and their control highlights some points of conflict between pastoralists and many Aboriginal people, for whom the rabbit has become an important food source in some areas of Central Australia. This became a particular issue in 1996 when the lethal RCD escaped from quarantine in South Australia and reached the NT in June. Pastoralists 

Although introduced as part of settlement and attempts to recreate Australia in Europe's image, rabbits are 'non-authentic'. Moreover, as a threat to the order of settlement in the outback, rabbits threaten not only Central Australian pastoral nature, but also a 'national' nature. According to the former administrator of the CLMA 'rabbits are national problem, no matter from whose angle you look' (Millington 1992, p.183). For pastoralists, dealing with rabbits is not simply a matter of managing their properties; it is a national problem that all Australians are seen to share.

The presentation of rabbit control and of Landcare as an inherently good undertaking obscures the economic, social and political processes and ideas that drive pastoral Landcare in Central Australia. This is not unique to Central Australia. Lockie (1997), notes that debates over just what Landcare is are a defining feature of the discussions and evaluation attempts surrounding Landcare. Lockie argues that the 'discourse of participation', that 'Landcare is for everybody' (1997, p.32) masks relations of power in the way Landcare operates. The warm haze of apparent consensus over Landcare obscures inclusions and exclusions along lines such as class, race, and gender. Lockie (1997) suggests that by 'riding the groundswell of environmental concern' (p.33) Landcare, as a signifier of environmental benefits and concern, and of unity around shared environmental issues, is used as a discursive tool to pursue the interests of particular groups' (p.32).

The words of a former CLMA president are a good example of how pastoral Landcare in Central Australia employs the discursive strategies of participation and shared environmental meanings: 

This is one of the pluses that Landcare has achieved, the fact that it has everyone up and out and does not discriminate on culture, creed or barrier and we are focussing on a single point, which is environment (R. Waudby, evidence to Senate Standing Committee on Rural and Regional Affairs 15 August 1994, p.1469).

Waudby denies any contested meanings of 'environment' and posits it as a point around which various groups can readily come together and act in concert. However, while Waudby invokes the notion of a 'single' environment, in the broader context of his statement it is clear that he is attempting to render universal a specifically pastoral sense of environment and, through that, a pastoral sense of environmental stewardship to guide practice. Pastoral Landcare is not for 'everybody', it is thoroughly implicated in maintaining Central Australia within a pastoral frame of reference, and maintaining the pastoral story of land, people, history and destiny.

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In his survey of Aboriginal people's attitudes towards land management issues, Rose (1995) found that not only was the rabbit an important food source but that many Aboriginal people saw the rabbit as now 'belonging' to country, in a way similar to native animals. Most Aboriginal 

people interviewed did not perceive that the rabbit caused damage to land, one respondent saying if the rabbit was to be eradicated on the grounds it was not native and caused land degradation, then cattle, with 'bigger mouths than rabbits' (Rose 1995, p.116) should also be removed. Pastoralists have largely ignored such ironies. Indeed in an effort to spread the virus further, the CLMA and the Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries injected the virus into rabbits at seven non-infected sites (CLMA 1997).

When questioned on the role of rabbits as a food source for Aboriginal people in 1994 by a Senate committee, Waudby suggested that Aboriginal people themselves can see that, despite their concerns, it is right that production be prioritised: 

The Aboriginal people see that as a need for food, but they can also see that, down there, there is a greater need to get rid of the rabbits so as to be more productive...they are starting to understand it (R. Waudby, President. CLMA, evidence to Senate Standing Committee on Rural and Regional Affairs 15 August 1994, p.1468).

Through Landcare and rabbit control, pastoralists articulate an attitude and practice of modern stewardship of land in such a way as to continue a narrative of cattle belonging to country. While pastoralists and the CLMA promote rabbits as a threat and as destructive, implicit in the narrative and practice of rabbit control is a productive tension for pastoralists and their landscape. The corollary of the chaos and threat of rabbits is the order of the pastoral landscapes; in this scheme, chaos and order are binary conditions that assume and require each other. Pastoral environmental stewardship is produced precisely through this productive tension as rabbit control folds discourses of ecological care and
restoration and those of bringing order to wild nature into one another. This produces an apparently seamless story of stewardship that elides its double character and its colonising foundations. These practices of environmental 'care' are implicated in the ongoing process by which hierarchies of landscape progression privilege a 'productive' pastoral landscape over indigenous interests. By aligning pastoral stewardship, articulated in a manner that resonates with ecological agendas, with normative ontologies of settlement and improvement, pastoral Landcare opens itself up to critical inspection in the posthumanist terms that we here offer to augment the, by now, many persuasive post-colonial unsettlements of European presences in Australia (For example Head 2000; Jacobs and Gelder 1998; Rose, 2004).

Conclusion

European land use ideals of settled cultivation falterered in the inland, and what would have been regarded as 'lesser' forms of land use, largely prevailed in Central Australia. Yet 'improvement' was also inscribed as a discourse and practice on the surface of the continent's inland. Pastoralists reigned in wildness by naturalising their cattle within the landscape and giving them a status of belonging on par with native fauna. In addition, transformation figured in a materially marginal, but symbolically significant, way via the 'gardening' work attributed to cattle. In such processes of improvement, pastoralists marked out their 'domus' and established reciprocity with the land; they came to both know and bestow its 'good'. Although apparently distinct from these processes, rabbit control through Landcare makes clearer the existence and boundaries of the pastoral 'domus' by clearly dividing off a realm of 'agrios', in the sense of something that remains wild and threatening but which is nonetheless subject to attempts at control. By comparison, Landcare's relative silence regarding the role and impact of cattle in the landscape highlights their naturalisation by pastoralists and the persistence of 'improvement' ideals in contemporary ecological stewardship projects. Landcare stewardship discourses also play a role in reproducing landscape hierarchies that have been handed down not only by European colonisation, but by a still older tradition of classical humanism. According to discourses of human development out of a state of nature, 'productive' uses of land in the sense of use for market-oriented commodity production, remain dominant vis-à-vis indigenous landscapes. However, the discourse of production is now carried on within the practice and language of ecology, thereby acquiring a morality of purpose even as it perpetuates the hegemony of settler landscapes.

For all that nature's domestication has entailed a complex set of impulses of mastery and domination, paternalism and even affection, it has also always been accompanied by ambiguity, anxiety and confusion about the human place in/out of nature. This uncertainty was evident early in the settlement project in Australia in the encounter with indigenous people, who (putatively) did not cultivate plants and animals and appeared to demonstrate only the barest knowledge of nature cultivation. Non-indigenous anxiety about the human placement in/out of nature increasingly figures in Central Australia (and indeed more extensively across the country), where Aboriginal land ownership challenges the pastoral landscape. Aboriginal involvement in pastoralism, itself no new feature of the industry, poses further questions still however – what characterises an Aboriginal pastoral landscape? We should also be mindful that the pastoral narratives used here are derived from pastoralists who have survived challenges such as drought and have largely remained in Central Australia. Many, however, have not prospered and have left. The stories of these departures are not to be found in the biographies for sale in Alice Springs bookshops. We might also inquire into the relative fate of the pastoral enterprises and the work of men and women. Such stories, we suspect, would reveal much about how settlers have made and lost homes in the Centre, and the fraught claims to belong, in all their contingency, in the name of nature's improvement.

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NOTES

1. Much of the empirical material in this paper is drawn from Nicholas Gill's PhD thesis conducted with the supervision of Kay Anderson.

2. Although Ford's book was not written by a family member, at the time of fieldwork, a number of pastoralists, including members of the Chalmers family, directed Nicholas to it as an account of the family and of pastoral settlement in the Sandover River and Bundey Rivers area that they saw as consistent with their views.

3. Limited horticulture is now practised in Central Australia, largely at Ti Tree north of Alice Springs. This production is limited (430 ha of grapes planted in 2003) but growing in area and depends on groundwater. The NT Department of Business, Industry and Resource Development continues to conduct research on horticultural crops for Central Australia and has trialled date production at its research farm and on pastoral stations. Other crops that have been trialled include citrus, grapes and stone fruit. Table grapes in particular have been a commercial success. The department is also seeking to develop horticulture on Aboriginal lands where the soil and water are suitable.
4. The RCD is the latest agent in the long search for a biological control for feral rabbits in Australia.

Figure One: ‘Every hoof indent left a cradle’ (Robinson 1999, p.43)


Figure Two: Shearing shed remains, Delny Station


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