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The Ancestral Present of Oceanic Illusions: Connected and Differentiated in Late Toxic Liberalism

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e-flux journal #112 — october 2020 Elizabeth A. Povinelli
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I had sent him my small book that treats religion as an illusion [*The Future of an Illusion* (1927)], and he answered that he entirely agreed with my judgement upon religion, but that he was sorry I had not properly appreciated the true source of religious sentiments. This, he says, consists in a peculiar feeling, which he himself is never without, which he finds confirmed by many others, and which he may suppose is present in millions of people. It is a feeling which he would like to call a sensation of “eternity,” a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded – as it were, “oceanic.” This feeling, he adds, is a purely subjective fact, not an article of faith; it brings with it no assurance of personal immortality, but it is the source of the religious energy which is seized upon by the various Churches and religious systems, directed by them into particular channels, and doubtless also exhausted by them. One may, he thinks, rightly call oneself religious on the ground of this oceanic feeling alone, even if one rejects every belief and every illusion.
– Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*

1. Neither, Neither

The geontological division of being between Life and Nonlife is beginning to lose its effectiveness in securing privilege for the settler liberal capitalist elite and in governing the hierarchy of human and more-than-human. As this happens, new conceptual figures and axioms are emerging, new moods are being torn from or anchored to older ones. I discussed three of these conceptual figures (the Desert, the Animist, and the Virus) in my last book, *Geontologies*, and elaborate on four newly arising axioms of critical theory in an upcoming book, *Between Gaia and Ground*. These four axioms are: entanglement of existence; the unequal distribution of power to affect the local and transversal terrains of this entanglement; the multiplicity and collapse of the event as the sine qua non of political thought; and the racial and colonial history that has informed modern Western ontologies and epistemologies and the concept of the West as such. As with the figures discussed in *Geontologies*, so the axioms examined in *Between Gaia and Ground*: I am not interested in promoting a new universally applicable frame, but rather in helping to amplify the broader anticolonial struggles from which these figures and axioms have emerged. I also aim to examine a reactionary formation – late liberalism – which has attempted to remold,

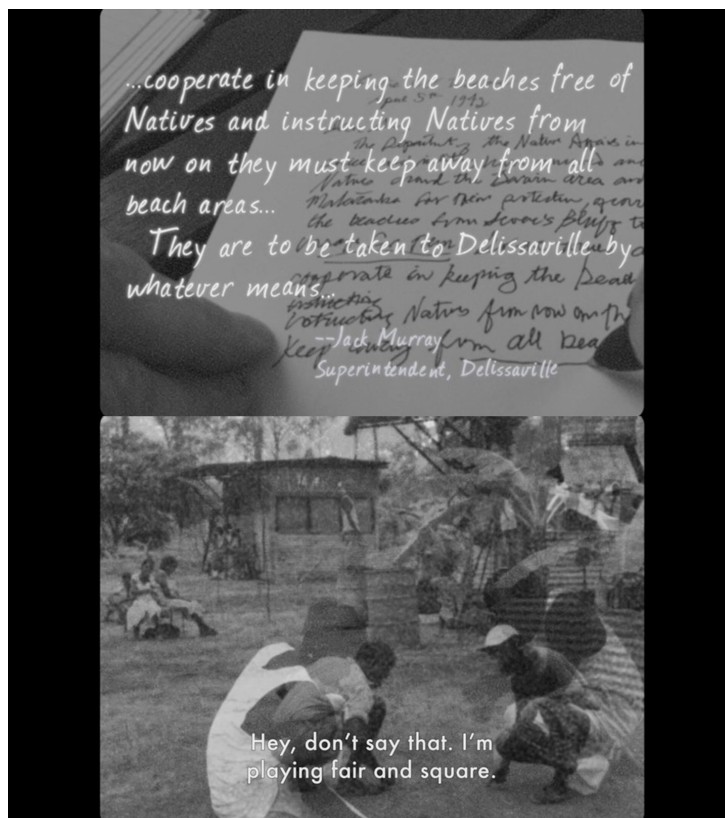
blunt, and redirect these struggles. After all, these figures and axioms are part of much broader discursive surfaces that reflect opposing currents of political thought and action in the wake of geontopower. The way we approach them – including a seemingly casual syntactic arrangement of theoretical statements – results in dramatically differing paradigms for figuring the present both as a coming catastrophe (*la catastrophe à venir*) and as an ancestral one (*la catastrophe ancestral/historique*).

Nowhere is this point more important, I think, than in how we approach oceanic feelings, forces, and ancestral presents. From Aimé and Suzanne Césaire, C. L. R. James, Claudia Jones, Édouard Glissant, through Sylvia Wynter, Christina Sharpe, and so many others, critical anticolonial and race theory has been written from the specific histories that marked the Black Atlantic. Glissant opens his reflections in *Poetics of Relation* on a boat in the middle of the Atlantic, in the midst of the radical exploitation and dispossession of the West African men, women, and children “who lived through the experience of deportation to the Americas.”¹ Three abysses unfurl on this turbulent sea: the abyss of the belly of the boat, the abyss of the depths of the sea, and the abyss of all that has

been severed and left behind. The stakes of what existence is – essence or event – shrinks to a vanishing point relative to, on the one hand, how the world became entangled in these sadistic practices and, on the other hand, how the Relation that opened in this specific scene continues to entangle existence. By anchoring his concept-building in the horror of the slave boat, Glissant does not, however, merely seek, as “every great philosopher,” to “lay out a new plane of immanence, introduce a new substance of being and draw up a new image of thought.”² Nor does he only seek to initiate and provide a new course for old affects and discourses. He does both of these things, yes; but he also does something else, something slightly errant to the obsession of his friends Deleuze and Guattari: he asks whether any concept matters outside the worlds from which they come, and toward which they intend to do work. What do we ultimately care about: The ontological status of existence, or the modes of being and substance that a specific commercial engorgement of humans and lands produced and continues to engage?

In other words, by commencing from this specific abyss, Glissant reminds us, firstly, that the liberal politics of empathy, of putting oneself into another – acting as if anyone can experience

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Karrabing Film Collective,
Delissaville Internment Camp,
2017. Film stills. Courtesy of the
author.

and everyone should act as if they could experience this cavity of being in Relation – is not merely wrongheaded, but a continuation of the devastating political relations that opened in the Black Atlantic. This does not suggest that those who were, and are, in a different relation to the Abyss – those who benefit from the three abysses – should shove wax in their ears and force others to paddle them forward. Instead, the questions are how specifically one has emerged in relation to the ancestral present of this abyss; how the entanglement of existence is not some abstract starting point, but the social situations that different persons are given in the present in a world structured to care for the existence of some and not others; and how one can change the given relations that have sedimented into existence from the depths of these seas and severed shores. Glissant also reminds us, secondly, of how cunning the absorptive powers of late liberal capitalism are – how quickly specific relations are remade as relations-erasing universal abstractions. “An abyss opened here for them” is reformulated as “we all live in the abyss.” This absorptive, relations-erasing universalism is especially apparent in some contemporary discourses of toxic late liberalism and climate collapse – what some call the

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Anthropocene – especially those that anchor the crisis in a general Human calamity which, as Sylvia Wynter has noted, is merely the name of an overdetermined and specific European man.³ Like geontopower, the toxicity of colonialism and its spawn, liberal capitalism, operated in the open in large swaths of the earth where European diasporas stripped and drained away what they saw as valuable and left behind the toxic processed remains that condensed value. Longstanding ecological enmeshments, species relations, and analytics of existence were approached with a genocidal rage or, no less rancid, a callous disregard.

In *The Future of an Illusion*, Freud rehearses the primitivist trope by which man becomes man as such insofar as he is differentiated from animals. Here he is just one of many Western thinkers stretched across numerous disciplinary formations who assert the human difference as a difference of worldedness. Another is Heidegger, with his famous three theses of world distribution: the stone is world-less; the animal is world-poor; and man is world-forming because man’s very being (Dasein) is always attuned to the world where being is by being irreducibly being-there. We hear this mood lurking behind Hannah Arendt’s logic for differentiating



Karrabing Film Collective, *The Jealous One*, 2017. Film stills. Courtesy of the author.

colonialism and imperialism. According to Arendt, unlike imperialism, “Colonization took place in America and Australia, the two continents that, without culture and a history of their own, had fallen into the hands of the Europeans.”⁴ European imperialism occurred much later in Africa and Asia (1884–1914), by which time the earth had become a thing and capitalism had emerged from the engorgement of human and material value in the triangular trade that defined the Atlantic from circa 1500 through the 1800s. No desire to create new forms of human pluralities defined European “adventures” in imperial worlds. Imperial territories were considered solely in relation to what they could provide for the further enlargement of wealth in the metropole. John Adams was not Cecil Rhodes, so Arendt’s argument goes, because Adams sought a “complete change of society” in his consideration of “the settlement of America as the opening of a grand scheme and design in Providence for the illumination of the ignorant and the emancipation of the slavish part of mankind all over the earth.”⁵ Rhodes simply thought of his Rabelaisian body.

Kathryn Gines, Fred Moten, and others have written trenchant critiques of Arendt’s account of race and colonialism. Moten, for instance, agrees that the advent of settler and slave colonialism in the “Americas” did usher “another way of being” into the world, but the condition of creating this new common European world was the destruction of a multitude of existing black and brown worlds.⁶ The tsunami of colonialism was not seen as affecting humanity, but only these specific people. They were specific – what happened to them may have been necessary, regrettable, intentional, accidental – but it is always *them*. It is only when these ancestral histories became present for some, for those who had long benefited from the dispossession of other people’s labor, thought, and lands, that suddenly the problem is all of *us*, as human catastrophe. The phrase “all of us” is heard only after *some of us* feel the effects of these actions, experience the specific toxicities within which they have entangled the world. Let’s not have critical oceanic studies be taken by this con – not have an oceanic feeling be that which annihilates the specificity of how entanglements produce difference in order to erase the specific ancestral present.

The following moves the longstanding insights emerging from the Black Atlantic to late liberal oceanic feelings in the Indigenous Pacific. On the surface, the following might seem ethnographic in the sense of a translation project – lots of words, concepts, and analytics that characterize Karrabing understandings of the

relations that exist among themselves and their more-than-human worlds. But, as might be apparent very quickly, the purpose is in keeping with Karrabing strategies for how to face the governing forces of settler late liberalism and capitalism without giving away everything in the process. The idea is to provide just enough to know, but no more, since it’s not really yours to know – remembering that how you know the world, the moods of the world, and your relationship to it may or may not be part and parcel of the forces of late liberal geontopower.

2. Seaside Conversations

It’s March 1985 at a little coastal area called Madpil, in the Northern Territory of Australia. Marjorie Bilbil, Ruby Yarrowin, Alice Wainbirri, some of their children and grandchildren, and I are sitting on the beach at the edge of a mangrove talking over a meal of rice, sea snails, mud crabs, and sweet tea. The city of Darwin is shimmering across the harbor. I met these women, ranging in age from late forties to early sixties, soon after arriving in the Northern Territory in 1984, straight out of my BA in philosophy. Since 1975 they had observed and participated in a contentious land claim over the Cox Peninsula, where Madpil is located. At the center of the peninsula was the community in which they lived, and, for the most part, had grown up and had children. Their parents and grandparents had traveled up and down the coast we were sitting on, dodging and taking advantage of a new virulent pestilence called settler colonialism while they maintained the connective practices undergirding the stability of people’s different lands stretching along the coast to Anson Bay some two hundred miles south. These practices included formal rituals that reenacted the ancestral travels of specific *durlg* (in the Batjemalh language; “*therrawin*” in the Emmiyengal language; “totems” in Anthropological English; “Dreamings” in public English) that created the topology of the region; formal rituals that acknowledged and reflected the *durlg*-infused landscape’s response to the new conditions of the settler pestilence; and ordinary ways of looking out for and caring for land, such as our day spent sweating in the mangrove.

In the 1930s, the Northern Territory government doubled down on the forcible internment of indigenous groups. Bilbil, Yarrowin, and Wainbirri’s parents were forced into the Delissaville Settlement at the center of Cox Peninsula. (With the passage of the Aboriginal Land Rights Act in 1976, the settlement was renamed “Belyuen,” after its waterhole.) From then on, all movement would be strictly monitored by settler superintendents as

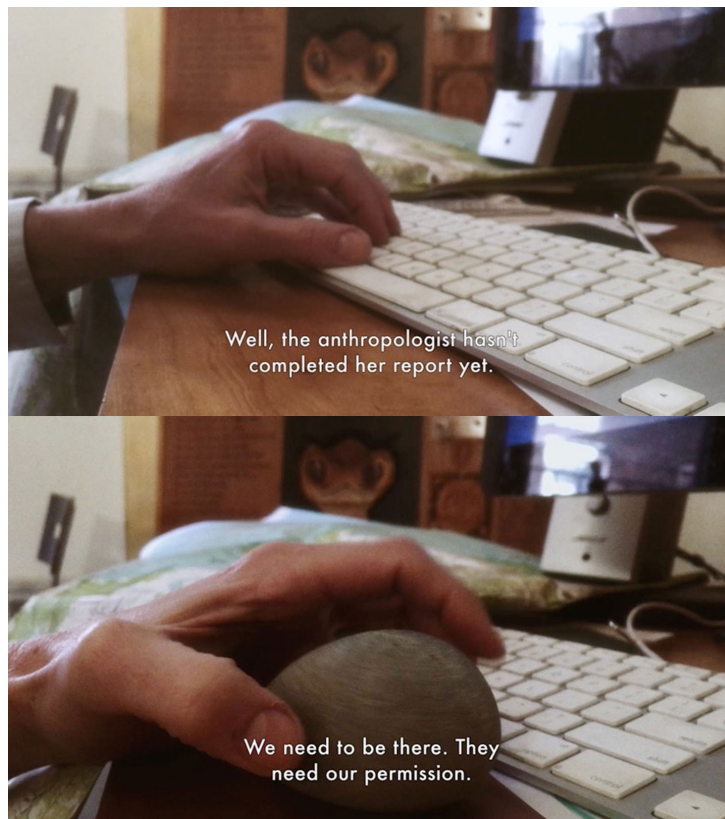
part of the federal state's new tactic to eliminate the indigenous otherwise (than through murder and violence), through forced containment and assimilation. But the land and its peoples at Delissaville refused the authority of settler law. They came together around the Belyuen waterhole and its underground aquatic tunnels stretching to the seaside around the Cox Peninsula and down to Anson Bay. Belyuen was a *maroi* (Batjemalh; "mirrhe," Emmiyengal; "conception totem," Anthropological English) site (a place of dynamic interplay between the spirits of the deceased and the spirits of yet-to-be-born children). Belyuen would keep alive the connective tissue of dispersed places – the ways in which the land was specifically entangled – so that each place could stay alive.

As we rested from a long sweaty slog through the mangrove, Bilbil, Yarrowin, and Wainbirri described struggling to explain to the anthropologists and lawyers working on their behalf to have the lands around Madpil returned to their families how they could at one and the same time have and hold specific coastal lands that hugged the coast of Anson Bay, much further south, and still be irreducibly connected to the lands around Belyuen as well. The creole phrasing that they used to describe the situation

was "Mebela got roan roan country, yeah, but they imjoinedupbet got that Belyuen waterhole. Belyuen, im now been make mebela properly bla dis country." (We have our own lands, but they are joined to others in an original and ongoing way through the Belyuen waterhole. Belyuen made us properly from here.) Their "roan roan" countries were within Marritjaben-, Marriamu-, Menthayengal-, Emmiyengal-, Wadjigiyn-, and Kiyuk-speaking countries, and included nearly twenty therrawin (Emmiyengal; "durlg," Batjemalh; "totems," Anthropological English). Yes, some of the connective tissue was derived from the topologically formative effects of ancestral durlg who moved across the region, but the effects were not done and dead. They were present and dynamic.

Bilbil used her eldest daughter, AA, as an example. AA was a Murrumurru (Long Yam therrawin) Emmiyengal woman through her father. From notes, Bilbil told me,

Your edge, im picks up that murrumurru from Mabaluk from im father, though im also think back la my Redjerung (Red Kangaroo therrawin), Marritjaben side. But im got ingaraiyn maroi (Batjemalh; "mirrhe," Emmiyengal; "conception totem,"



Karrabing Film Collective, *The Jealous One*, 2017. Film stills. Courtesy of the author.

Anthropological English) from Belyuen, and must be here langa other side, Imaluk. That Belyuen waterhole been smellim sweat when me I ben bogey there, and im think, “yeah, gonna send baby spirit into that sea turtle.” So when that old man got that ingaraiyn langa Milik, imself been look and think, “im different this turtle. Too many seaweed tangled up lei im back.” Then AA been come out gamenawerra. Too many hair lei im back. We sebe. Im sign.

She gestured east toward where an Ingaraiyn therrawin sat in the tidal zone as the likely source of the turtle spirit Belyuen sent into an actual sea turtle, which acted as a material conduit into her husband and then her and then her child. As she did so, AA’s body stretched and extended (*ex-tendēre*) into and across the topological shapings of the ancestral present, folding and pushing inward (*in-tendēre*) an immanent spacing.

Leave aside hoary anthropological debates about totems and animistic cultures for a moment.⁷ Note instead the porosity of modes of embodiment (water, organic bodies) and the multiplicity of connectivities posited as potentially codetermining them substantially. Some are actual, some immanent, all to a more-than-human world that is constantly signing to its human co-participants, who must weigh what is and isn’t a sign of a manifestation. A Long Yam site, located at Mabaluk some 150 kilometers as the crow flies from where we are sitting, passed to AA through her father’s body (“What this word? What they say, perragut for this kindabet? Here look, Beth, ‘patrilineal.’” [What is this word? What do white people say for this kind of connection to land? Here, look at this, Beth. “Patrilineal.”]) A sea turtle mirrhe passed into AA from a saltwater encounter between a human, a sea turtle, and a waterhole during a hunting event, creating a connection to a Sea Turtle site proximate to where she was born, did the ceremony, and hunted (all sweat). And a waterhole inside the community acts as a material communication. It is a site through which ancestral beings travel across aquatic underground tunnels to nearby and far-afeld places.

Bilbil, Yarowin, Wainbirri, and the other Belyuen elder men and women were right. They faced a state law that only recognized (i.e., that *demand*ed, as the basis for the return of stolen property) a singular form of human-land relations – some form of a “local descent group” (Anthropological English for “socially inflected biology such as patrilineality and matrilineality”). They also faced the theoretically conservative consultant anthropologists who wrote reports

adjudicating their claim, and the lawyers who read the reports. Both the anthropologists and the lawyers remained puzzled, if not downright skeptical, in the face of questions like: How could these women, and the men of the community, say that their therrawin were always where they were, and were continuing to engage in the same events? How could the unchanging be dynamic, the permanent alterable, and the persistent eventful? Not all anthropologists were confused in this way. Barbara Glowczewski describes a similar reality among her Yuendumu colleagues, in which ceremony pulls into actuality the immanent cartographies that transverse human and more-than-human worlds.⁸ These actualizations are the consequences of previous sedimentations that remain beneath and across the overlay of the settler state.

What troubled Bilbil, Yarowin, Wainbirri, and other older men and women was that anthropologists and lawyers saw all forms of dynamic permanence as somehow less important than the frozen framework of a settler law that recognized only one kind of relation – the descent of man. This was a biological reduction by which their thick relations to the more-than-human were nothing more than a question of what man birthed what person. It was like trying to maneuver across an endless series of funhouse mirrors. As these women described a durlg-determined but dynamic relation to their country, the state and its anthropologists would attempt to re-determine the dynamic by reducing its complexity to a stunningly hermeneutically stupid biology lesson that cut the ties across people and place to produce an enclosed mini nation-state. The land claim dragged on for twenty-plus years; forests were plundered to produce all the law and consultant reports and formal evidence. But under the guise of liberal recognition, no conversation was actually allowed to occur. As Aimé Césaire wrote in his *Discourse on Colonialism*:

I admit that it is a good thing to place different civilizations in contact with each other; that it is an excellent thing to blend different worlds; that whatever its own particular genius may be, a civilization that withdraws into itself atrophies; that for civilizations, exchange is oxygen ... But then I ask the following question: has colonization really placed civilizations in contact? Or, if you prefer, of all the ways of establishing contact, was it the best? I answer no.⁹

Some twenty-five years after our conversation at

Madpil, I am sitting near a tent camp with many of the now-adult children of Yarrowin and Wainbirri, their partners, and their children. We had grown up side by side as I commuted back and forth from the US two or three times a year. They are living at the edge of the northern coast of Anson Bay, having decided to leave Belyuen. Belyuen had been engulfed by violence, caused in large part by the aftereffects of the same land claim that kicked off the conversation among Bilbil, Yarrowin, Wainbirri, and me in 1985. A piece of federal legislation celebrated as recognizing indigenous law refused to acknowledge one side of the dynamic that the older women struggled to explain. The Land Rights Commission found one small section of the community to be the legally recognized “traditional Aboriginal owners,” even while stating that the entire community had the same rights to the area through indigenous cultural and ceremonial law. Indigenous law could be recognized as existing but would not be allowed to determine the operation of the state. The divisions settler law sliced into the community had enormous social and economic consequences. All decisions about how the surrounding lands would be developed were made by only a small group, which also reaped

all the benefits flowing from such decisions. The tensions that the state created did not affect the state; they went inward and then exploded.

Told they were strangers in their own land, the fifty odd men, women, children, and I were discussing how to keep from sliding into destitution but also refuse to open their land to mining. Mining is like a phalanx of circulating capitalist scavenger birds, promising to separate and extract while preserving and enhancing – science fiction inversions of ancestral durlg. Everyone had seen the consequences of such promises: gaping holes from previous mines, poisoned rivers, and unexplained cancers. Liam Grealy and Kirsty Howey describe “the politico-bureaucratic edifice of uniform drinking water governance and service provision across the NT [Northern Territory]” as “a state-curated fiction” that “produces a racialised ‘archipelago’ of differentiated islands of drinking water governance.”¹⁰

A couple of people suggested running a green tourist outfit and creating a corporation for it through the Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations.¹¹ Very quickly, everyone struggled with the state-set trap inherent to this plan. If they selected a place name, say Mabaluk, then the state would immediately consider other



Karrabing Film Collective, *The Jealous One*, 2017. Film stills. Courtesy of the author.

family members from adjacent countries and languages as outside, or subsidiary. “Karrabing” was proposed as much as for its semantic content as its conceptual pragmatics. “Karrabing” is an Emmiyengal word referring to when the vast regional tides are at their lowest. Karrabing opens possibilities as it connects distinct places – it opens fishing, crabbing, and clamming as it shows and makes available the reefs, mangroves, and shore banks connecting (“joining up”) the countries of the indigenous inhabitants of the shoreline. “Karrabing” was not merely a referential term. It was intended as a concept, foregrounding the dynamic process of emerging and submerging connections across places. For the people who would become the Karrabing, “karrabing” signals how families best strengthen their relationship to, and the health of, their “roan roan” country by keeping robust the connective tissue between them (*joinedupbet*). They learned this from their parents, who had learned from theirs. This learning is a practice.

Karrabing would become the framework through which a set of land-oriented filmic practices would embody an ongoing resistance to the state’s effort to divide and pit indigenous people and their lands against each other. In other words, making films would not only represent the Karrabing members’ views about the irreducible condition of connectivity among the different countries. It would also practice this counter-discourse intergenerationally.

3. Property Relations, Oceanic Feelings

The frustrations that the older women described to me in 1985 when trying to explain to *perragut* (white people as a general category for settlers) how they had their own distinct countries – even while these countries could not be separated into small sovereign fiefdoms – have been mirrored by the surprise many Karrabing members have expressed after encountering audiences for their films inside and outside Australia. No one expresses anger, nor even the anguish of Bilbil, Yarrowin, and Wainbirri. But the problem remains, persisting across time and space – the struggle some *perragut* have in comprehending these simultaneous statements: “Each of us got our roan roan country from our fathers. Places can’t be made separate separate.” Two general responses to this kind of statement suggest what is still at stake as critical theory continues to try and break with the concept of sovereign objects. On the one hand, when they describe their durlg relations to their land, Karrabing members are often taken to mean that they own that land. On the other hand, when they discuss the undergirding connectivity between them and the more-than-human world,

they are heard to be describing an undifferentiated oceanic feeling, sometimes compared to a colloquial understanding of the Buddhist falling away of all difference.

The first misunderstanding has been under constant pressure in critical theory and indigenous theory. Aileen Moreton-Robinson has powerfully critiqued the “white possessive” whereby the settler state’s gift of self-determination is a demand that indigenous people mimic the psychosis at the heart of Western liberalism: namely, the fantasy of a sovereign body that determines itself, has final say over its use and the use of things within it – that speaks on the basis of its own sovereign self-possession. When Karrabing members describe being a group with multiple lands and durlg stretching across the coasts of Anson Bay and beyond, they see audiences hearing them as saying something like: “I” have a country that is different from his or her country, much as a citizen would say his or her country was distinct from another, or capitalists would say they owned what was theirs. That is, some in the audience hear members evoking a liberal property relation. I often use Mikhail Bakhtin as a counter to this misunderstanding. For him, all words, including “I,” are mere rejoinders to a world within us, because it formed us, before we were us. We can quote him at length from his “The Problem of Speech Genres”:

The very boundaries of the utterance are determined by a change of speech subjects. Utterances are not indifferent to one another, and are not self-sufficient; they are aware of and mutually reflect one another. These mutual reflections determine their character. Each utterance is filled with echoes and reverberations of other utterances to which it is related by the communality of the sphere of speech communication. Every utterance must be regarded primarily as a response to preceding utterances of the given sphere (we understand the word “response” here in the broadest sense). Each utterance refutes, affirms, supplements, and relies on the others, presupposes them to be known, and somehow takes them into account.¹²

But often at such film screenings I don’t get into long Bakhtin quotes, since Karrabing members, like Cecilia Lewis, powerfully describe their form of belonging to their own lands as an ethical position irreducibly stretched through the other more-than-human worlds of other Karrabing members. In a conversation upending the Judeo-Christian narrative about Babel, Cecilia and

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other Karrabing members describe not merely an original linguistic multiplicity, but an original ethical relation to the other's language:

Yeah but here where you talk to det person le you joinimupbet det tubela – and det nuther language where you speak le, that other person dem inside you again. You think bla det person.

(Yeah, but here we think that when you speak to that person in this way, you connect or articulate, you and him – when you speak their language to them the other person comes inside you and you go inside of them. You are thinking of/with/through that other person.)¹³

The land claim legislation clipped all the connecting tissue that provided conditions for holding lands. Karrabing would work to restore this tissue. For Karrabing member Rex Edmunds, this is the connective tissue without which proper caring-for cannot be done. It is materially analogous to how ceremonies must be held:

Well, you need your uncle or aunt or cousin,

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in our way it's a cousin, like your mum's brother's kids or your dad's sister's kids to do the burning of the clothes. Because they are your aunt (father's sister) or uncle (mother's brother), they are always from another clan, so another country. Best if the uncle, aunt or cousins are close, but as long as it's connected in this way it's okay. How could I burn my mum's or sister's or father's clothes myself: no one who is in my totem group can touch those things during the ceremony. I am boss of them, but I cannot do it myself. I need my relations from that other totem or country.¹⁴

Ironically, in the lead-up to the establishment of the land rights law in 1976, the Land Rights Commission noted how this principle fucked with Western notions of property without negating the fact that people knew which lands belong with and to them. One can say that "religious rites [are] owned by a clan," but the rites "could not be held without the assistance of the managers whose essential task it was to prepare the ritual paraphernalia, decorate the celebrants and conduct the rite."¹⁵ And lest readers reduce the importance of these managers to something analogous to hired labor, the Commission notes



Karrabing Film Collective, *The Jealous One*, 2017. Film stills. Courtesy of the author.

that the “agreement of managers had to be secured for the exploitation of specialised local resources such as ochre and flint deposits and for visits by the clan owners to their own sacred sites.”¹⁶ Rex Edmunds understands this as a strategy by which recognition is a trick severing the relations between groups in order to create hostilities across them.

Karrabing foreground the connective or joint nature of themselves and their lands as they fight against the reduction of their sense to a contractual logic which presupposes the very thing they are fighting against, the irreducibility of the sovereign subject. The contractual imaginary may be explicit, as in a monetary or compensatory debt between two subjects. It can also be affective, such as the feeling of what one owes a mother or a nation. The contractual subject can be a mass subject, such as a nation-state connected to other nation-states by treaties. And it can be an abstract person, as in a corporation. Everyone acknowledges that the realities of such sovereign bodies are messy, and hardly sealed. Human bodies leak inside out and absorb the outside in. State borders become distended, their organs laying on foreign grounds, as governments stretch hearings offshore. How did Australian migration enforcement end up on Christmas Island, on Nauru? How did Haitian interdiction become a maritime affair?¹⁷ How did existential desperation result in the ideology of the political treaty? Moreover, mass subjects bear all the traces of the racial and class logics that compose the proper subject. But whichever way you look at the contractual subject, it has nothing to do with the heart of what Karrabing are saying.

In a video commissioned by the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Cecilia Lewis, her daughter Natasha Bigfoot Lewis, and Rex put it this way:

CL: Like we have Suntu group wuliya Kiyuk and wuliya roan. They got their roan place and roan story le they roan country. We got Trevor mob. They got their own country, roan language, roan story. Bwudjut mob, they got their own story. Emmi mob got their roan story here la Mabaluk. Methnayengal got their roan story la Kugan mob. But we’re still one mob. We different language group.

RE: ... but we’re one mob.

CL: All one big family down the coast. Married family relations.

NL: Because we’re connected by the coastline.

RE: And by those stories (ancestral paths crisscrossing countries).

This position of interdependent respect extends to the more-than-human world. In a part that didn’t make it into the broadcast, Cecilia, Natasha, and Rex discuss some of the ancestral dynamics that demand human attention and commitment. Natasha notes that if Karrabing do not continue to care for ancestral lands by coming and being with them (in the concept of “sweat”) then the “land dies; it shuts itself up.” Note the qualification of death – the divergence from a geontological understanding. Karrabing understand the “dying” of the more-than-human world as an active withdrawing, a going under, a withholding that in turn can catastrophically transform the human world. Karrabing understand that like they themselves, durlg persist in an ancestrally past, frozen, but ancestral present. Durlg are responsive to the forces torquing topology and ecology, now especially the pestilence of extractive consumptive capitalism.

If Karrabing must continually correct those who might unwittingly collapse their understanding of “roan country” into the Western concept of property, they also must combat a second, perhaps stranger, evacuation of all specificity between various human and more-than-human worlds. Addressed through the imaginary of People-at-One-with-Nature, Karrabing find themselves cast into an undifferentiated sea, heard to be saying that they are connected to everything, rather than to specific multilayered territories and relations. This is somewhat along the lines of Romain Rolland’s 1927 idea of religion as an affective intuition of being not merely connected to the whole of the universe but also being diffused across it, distinct from any specific creedal proposition or theological content. For Rolland, the distinct ground of religion, what distinguishes it from a mere psychic projection, is felt as “an oceanic feeling.” Freud responds directly to Rolland in *Civilization and Its Discontents*. At this point, Freud had turned from the technical aspects of his theory to rewriting anthropological and sociological debates from a psychoanalytic perspective. The question of how one accounts for the sources of this oceanic feeling was prompted by Freud’s earlier text, *The Future of an Illusion*. There he recast the origins and functions of religion as a recapitulation and projection (“an infantile prototype”) of the son’s

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relationship to the father. Man's relation to nature was one of helplessness; as a child, one was helpless yet thoroughly dependent on one's parents, longing for protection from the very people that had the power to destroy you. As Freud put it, "One had reason to fear them, and especially one's father; and yet one was sure of his protection against the dangers one knew."¹⁸

The oceanic feeling was, Freud claimed, similarly situated within the dynamics of the psyche, though dynamics that moved one from discussions of the Oedipus complex per se into the formations of the ego. In *Ego and Id*, his earlier text, the notions of Cs. (conscious), Pcs. (preconscious), and Ucs. (unconscious) were supplanted by the dynamics of id, ego, and superego. The ego is an immanent encrustation, a scab, that develops as a membrane differentiated from but sunk within the id's pleasure principle and the superego. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud emphasizes less the ego as a compromise formation, and more the original perennial dynamism that sinks and expands: "An infant at the breast does not as yet distinguish his ego from the external world as the source of the sensations flowing in upon him."¹⁹ Our oceanic feelings come from a time when "the ego includes everything, later it separates off an external world from itself. Our present ego-feeling is, therefore, only a shrunken residue of a much more inclusive – indeed, an all-embracing – feeling which corresponded to a more intimate bond between the ego and the world about it."²⁰ Using something like Schrödinger's cat, the rest of *Civilization and Its Discontents* tries to suggest how an ancient psychic architecture, unlike the ruins of imperial Rome, are there and not there: "The same space cannot have two different contents."²¹

Not only are we only experiencing the infant ego when we experience oceanic feelings. We are not even *feeling* something the infant ego actually felt at the time that her ego had yet differentiated itself as a space between an inside and an outside. Lacan draws on this strange material temporality even as he alters it in "The Mirror Stage," where he begins to overlay, or excavate, the structural logics of Freud's psychoanalysis.²² Here is the first glimpse of the retrospective projections that preserve and distort the entrance into subjectivity. Each progression of the Lacanian psyche, its entrance into the Imaginary, into the Symbolic, reactively reconstitutes the content of the previous. Whatever the phenomenological experience of the Imaginary is has been dynamically foreclosed by the Symbolic. The same is true for how entrance into the Imaginary dynamically foreclosed the Real. As Lacan famously put it,

the Real isn't reality. Far from it. The Real is a feeling of the undifferentiated absolute, of infinity, of being in without having difference, something horrifically compelling and unfathomable because mediated by the Imaginary and the Symbolic. Here we see a similarity to Freud's idea that the infant ego remains, changing to a remainder that cannot remain.

Freud might have swapped the child's psychic development for the truth of a supernatural or metaphysical being. We might wonder whether the reduction of such nuanced specificities that Karrabing describe to a spiritual embrace of some undifferentiated all reflects some other unconscious. It is important to emphasize the difference between what someone like Rex Edmunds is saying when he speaks about his specific *mudi durlg* – how it resides at a specific place; how it reacts to him and him to it because of their ancestrally present relationship; how it is inside and outside of him, passing through the reef and specific fish he encounters; how it is connected to another site to the east, Bandawarrangalgen; and how he and it must struggle to persist together against the ongoing pressures of settler extractive capitalism – and a spiritual quest to experience an undifferentiated emptiness, or a psychological stage surging up and cracking the crust of the ego. Both sovereign possessiveness and the undifferentiated whole are the unconscious of geontopower. They are two sides of what Luce Irigaray called "the other of the same"; oceanic feeling that seeks to stop being attuned to our specific and different immanent and ancestrally present entanglements is an ideological fantasy, a desire not to face and hold actions and consequences.²³ This kind of oceanic feeling exemplifies the contrasting analytics between toxic colonial liberalism and the Karrabing and others who have long borne the changing moods of colonizing capitalism.

When Natasha Bigfoot Lewis noted the consequence of neglecting one's ongoing relationship with the more-than-human worlds of Karrabing lands, she referenced Karrabing's film *The Mermaids, or Aiden in Wonderland*. *The Mermaids* is an exploration of Western toxic contamination, capitalism, and human and nonhuman life. Set in a land and seascape poisoned by capitalism where only Aboriginals can survive long periods outdoors, the film tells the story of a young indigenous man, Aiden, taken away when he was just a baby to be a part of a medical experiment to save the white race. He is then released back into the world to his family. As he travels with his father and brother across the landscape, he confronts two possible futures and pasts embodied by his own tale and

the timely narratives of multinational chemical and extractive industries. Natasha also knows that the contaminations of colonialism can secrete and sediment below human perceptibility. In a three-channel video work commissioned by Natasha Ginwala for the 2017 Contour Biennale, Natasha and others describe how, in making our second film, *Windjarrameru, The Stealing C*nt\$*, Karrabing learned that lands they had long hunted and camped were contaminated by the toxic remains of an abandoned military radio installation. The nearby perragut community had been informed years before, but not the members of Belyuen. As the older women, their children and grandchildren, and I sat eating our hard-won crabs and sea snails at Madpil, we – but they more than I because I didn't arrive until 1984, and then came and went – were ingesting in these coastal foods the sedimentations of toxic colonialism. Oceanic tides bring in and out these toxicities in all too predictably distributed patterns – the world poor continue to act as the kidneys of the world rich.

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