

Sovereign Bodies of Feeling—‘Making Sense’ of Country

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What is the meaning of the claim made by many Aboriginal people that their relationship to country is a *vital* one: vital in the sense of a living relation, one that might be said to carry life itself? (Rose) It can be taken to be a claim of sovereignty, not only in relation to the land but, inextricably bound with this, a claim of a sovereign subject, or what Alexis Wright has called a sovereignty of the mind. To speak of sovereignty is always to speak of difference: different claims to land, but claims, too, about differences between the people making those claims. Into considerations of what these differences might be, I would like to install questions of embodiment and different capacities to feel, to sense, the country. This is not to speak of an essential difference, if by ‘essential’ we mean something immutable or fixed, but a difference made in cultural practices. For instance, being an embodied subject made in the context of practices associated with contemporary Anmatyerre culture might make for a differently sensate body than a settler subject made in cultural practices that are significantly different to Anmatyerre ones. In this regard, we could say that the Anmatyerre subject and the settler subject do not live in the same country as each other, even if they are living in the same coordinates of longitude and latitude.

This is to refer to theories of body and matter which suggest that bodies are made, they are substantialised, in cultural practices; there is no universal body, there is no universal body of feeling. There is, then, no universal way of feeling the country. These theories began to be ‘given flesh,’ as it were, in a most personal way when I first began travelling in the Central Desert in and around Utopia, in the extensive Aboriginal-owned lands north east of Alice Springs. (Was it my own body that lent itself to the theories, or the other way around? Is engaging with these theories itself a kind of cultural practice that re-makes a body’s capacity to feel?) I’d like to recount some parts of two visits in particular in the hope of showing a couple of things. One is how my perceptions of the country morphed between these two visits; how in my eyes the country kept shifting between two or more worlds, worlds that I could not reconcile one to the other. In this movement is suggested the impossibility of correspondence, the impossibility of perfectly translating one world into the other. So rather than attempting to bring these differences into alignment, I want to pursue the generative possibilities of allowing a gap between one way of looking and another. And then there’s something else too: not only did I keep seeing the country differently but I think that there were some things I could not see or feel in that country even when local women told me they were there, to be seen and felt—as real, as matter, as material force. What to make of that?

My stories are naïve, a white woman’s traveller’s stories, accounts given by a woman with little experience of the country she was travelling in, and who doesn’t speak any of the languages either. These stories are merely fragments, tiny shards of a story so much wider than I will ever grasp. Yet, the experiences I’ve had were powerful and they disorient me still. My work now, before making the next visit, is to see what ways I can make sense of the experiences, and crucially, where my capacity to make sense stops. And I mean ‘make sense’ in the two meanings of that: to be able to make meaning of something, and to sense it, feel it.

I travelled to Utopia the first time with two friends: Shannon, a Nyoonga woman whom I've known for nearly thirty years, and her friend Paddy, an Anmatyerre woman born at Utopia and who was our host. (Real names have been changed.) We drove out of Alice late one morning, and after about an hour or so, Paddy suggested we make a detour and travel further to Harts Range to see her six-year-old daughter, Lena, whom I'd met on a previous visit to Alice.

Harts Range is a mostly Aboriginal town. As we entered, I saw the unmade roads, shabby houses, broken-down cars with the bonnets up or on jacks, kids in school hours running around with bare feet, a pack of dogs running with them.

Lena lives at Harts Range with Paddy's younger sister. When we arrived at their house we were welcomed onto the back verandah, looking across the expanse of red earth and low-lying bush, mugs of tea with long-life milk were offered, easy smiles, a baby was passed around. Their home is made of grey besser bricks, no plasterwork on the inside walls, just the exposed brick, all stained inevitably by the red dust that marks everything. There was a concrete floor and a kitchen without a fridge or cupboards, with over-sized benches made of steel, the legs bolted into the concrete floor, industrial style. An architecture, an aesthetic, thought up in Darwin not so much to prevent damage to valuable features but with the idea that it is best not to install anything valuable or pleasing in the first place.

I was invited into the house and shown one very beautiful thing, though, a whole interior wall covered with photographs of family, a monument to love and significance, a kind of photo album, a record of relationship. Looking back, I suspect that I was shown this as something that as a white woman I might be expected to understand. To be literate at least in *this* representation of relationship and recognition, although in fact I might not understand those lines of connection. They will have fallen in different places to the ones I might expect from my own experience. They will have overlapped, too, unpredictably; they will have marked as significant some relationships that I might never have even imagined. Lena, I know, has two mothers. So does my own daughter but what that signifier 'mother' means to Paddy and to Paddy's sister might be very different to what it means to me.

Harts Range, in the north-western edge of the Simpson Desert, is on East Arrente land and it is an important ceremonial area for the Arrente, and more widely. Again, what that means I don't know except to say that there's something culturally rich here, something going on, and it's out of my lines of sight. What I am struck by is that when we first entered Harts Range my visual field was arranged around the rubbish, the discarded vehicles, the dogs—things I read as signs of poverty and lack. But being in that home, so very briefly, shifted the scene. Perhaps I could say that Harts Range became briefly, partially, visible to me as *Atitjere*, the Arrente word for this place, or that at the very least the fact of a culturally rich world became a possibility, rearranging the scene.

This makes me think back to listening to Deborah Bird Rose speak about litter in Aboriginal country. She reads litter not with the moral standard implied by words like rubbish but as a part of a signifying system where beer bottles and cans mark places of memories; they are like another photograph album. Her work produces an anamorphic shift: what was taken for granted as waste, rubbish—stuff of no value—becomes something quite other.

Paddy, Shannon and I have to leave Harts Range if we are going to reach Utopia before dark. In fact, as it is, we'll arrive just on dusk. Not yet too late to travel to a particular house I'm

looking for, the person I've come to Utopia to visit, a house down a small and to my eyes unmarked track I would never have found on my own, to a house with a big verandah. There are no other houses here; this one sits among large trees and long blonde grass. We stopped the car at the gate, and Paddy insisted that I follow the protocols of visiting. I must stand and wait until I am invited to approach. I stand beside the car and then when nothing happens, step further away from the car where the residents of the house will be able to see me more clearly, looking out from behind venetians. When nothing happens, Paddy joins me.

Eventually a door of the house slides open and a young girl runs across the grass with a message: 'Mama says to tell you that she's on her own tonight.' And as the girl turns to run back I call out to her who I am, that I've come from Melbourne to see her grandmother, she's expecting me. The girl then runs between house and gate carrying a sequence of messages between her mother and the visitors until it is agreed that we can come in. The gate is opened for us, and we drive up to the house.

It's Rosalie Kunoth Monks I've come to visit, famous for her starring role in *Jedda*, the first full-length, full-colour Australian-made film but more recently for her eloquence and power in speaking out publicly against the NT Interventions. My own connection with her goes back to my childhood, but that is another story. But Rosalie Kunoth Monks wasn't there that night, she had been delayed in her travels back to Utopia from Wave Hill, and we were invited back the next day to see her.

So we turned our minds to finding a place to camp for the night and Paddy took us down to the Sandover, the vast river bed of deep coarse sand that offered its comfort against the freezing temperatures of the desert night. The river bed still held the day's heat. That first night on the Sandover, Shannon and Paddy made a big fire with remarkable speed and efficiency, pulling kindling and then whole tree branches into the fire, and then, before making a meal, placed their swags with feet towards the fire and a space of perhaps one and a half metres between each of their swags. I thought that gap was the one these two women meant to maintain from each other and so I pulled my swag a metre or so away—on their side of the fire but now further out from both of them, on the outside rim as it were of our little camp.

I had been afraid of visitors, or rather intruders, whom I imagined as drunk or stoned young men who would see the big white Toyota, or be drawn to us by the light of the fire that would have been visible for many kilometres around. And in the night I awoke and looked up into the white branches of trees above me, almost as visible in the night as in the day because of the full moon in a cloudless sky, and I was suddenly very frightened. Not frightened now of a carload of men but of something more terrifying. What if what Paddy and Shannon and so many other Aboriginal people claim were true, that there is a materiality, presences, physical forces in this country that my body could not discern but which could do me harm anyway? That is, what if I took seriously the claims of Indigenous men and women that there were forces in the country that although unknown and unfelt by me were there?

I reminded myself that it was the middle of the night, that the unconscious is opportunistic, and that my fears were irrational, nonsense. And so I tried to push the fear away, forcing myself out of the swag, stoking up the fire to trick myself into the illusion of security and assurance, and then pulling my head inside my two sleeping bags inside the swag (and even in all my clothes, still cold) I very deliberately fell asleep.

In the morning, Shannon told me that during the night she had heard me call out to her: 'I am being prowled on.' She was very surprised by my insistence that I didn't speak at all.

Paddy had walked a little way off, walked south along the river bed, and when she returned she said something I couldn't quite grasp: we were visited, she said, in the night, visited by the little men. In the light of day my mind forgot about the feelings of the night and I presumed that she was speaking of humanly embodied, fleshy and very much alive men. 'Little men,' I heard, as merely men of small stature who'd come to see who was camping there. But then I understood the arrangement of our camp. Paddy and Shannon had set their swags apart with the idea that mine would be laid down between theirs, to protect me from these night visitors who are known to sit on the edges of beds at night, or lean into the prostrate sleeping bodies of women.

We pack up and head off again. We don't get to see Rosalie Kunoth Monks; that turns out to be for another time, and we travel for days in this extraordinarily beautiful country. Over the next few days we travelled 1500 kilometres, much of it off-road or following tracks that were scarcely discernible to me. One of the reasons we travelled so far was that there was sorry business at Utopia and it was prohibited for Paddy to intersect with this business as it traversed the country, between different sites. Paddy kept cutting into the bush and taking long ways around to avoid breaking the law.

Casually, Paddy would point to a spot where, say, she used to sit with Emily Kame Kngwarreye while Emily and other women painted, a spot that to me looked so nondescript, just there by the side of a barbed-wire fence and across the cattle grid, next to the sign reminding the traveller that alcohol was prohibited in Utopia. This was a place that in my eyes held no significance, it was almost ugly in its banality of dirt road and fencing wire, and yet so significant to Emily that she returned again and again to paint what was there. What was it she saw, felt, knew?

Early one afternoon we drove to Red Gum Store, perhaps 80 kilometres from Utopia, to fill the car with diesel and to pick up a little extra food. I was very surprised to see Paddy and Shannon coming out with several baguettes wrapped in cellophane. It was my turn to be the backseat passenger and so I was passed the sticks to hold but I was surprised how cold they were. They were hard and frozen. I looked, looked some more. What was this? Then suddenly I realised it was kangaroo tails I was holding across my lap. We set up camp again, another fire in another river bed, this time for Paddy to cook the tails. Different country now, white river rocks, smaller delicately limbed trees and bushes from which we will snap the leafy branches for medicine, spending hours stashing it away in big bags we've brought from Alice especially for this. Paddy cooks the kangaroo tails, charring each first on the fire and then scraping off the singed hair before wrapping it in tinfoil to cook among the embers.

The wind gets up; I turn my back to it for protection and move that way among the bushes but I keep turning and looking over my shoulder in the direction of the wind, and of our little camp. I feel a bit spooked. Paddy is out of sorts and I can't quite place what it is that is unbalancing her previously strong, calm mood: I've only seen Paddy forthright, calm, assured. And then all at once there is urgency. We have to leave; we can't camp in this place tonight but more than that we have to pack up, right now. At that moment in that place, Paddy finds herself ambiguously placed in relation to the law. She can make a claim on this country but it's not as strong as other places and she feels herself chastised, threatened even, by a

presence here. I don't know whether she was concerned for herself for having brought us there or for us, for having no right to be in that country.

Paddy starts to get very sick. So we make a camp that night at Arlparra, where the store is, the school, the public telephone, football field, softball stadium. We sleep now on red earth, just off the road, there are floodlights here that stay on all night, and we are close to the power station that provides power to all the homelands and outstations, and which never ceases its throbbing. Once more we build our fire—every stop produces a fire and a billyful of tea—and we prepare a meal. Here, I am most frightened. There's a camp on the other side of the power station; I can't see it, and see no one moving around, but I am afraid we might be approached in the night, or that someone might not know where we are sleeping and run us over. None of this happens. All that happens is a beautiful camp dog, a bitch with long teats and the softest roundest face you've ever seen, tucks herself between our feet and the fire and in the morning politely enquires about breakfast. Camp dogs are treated with great tenderness and are tender to humans in return.

That night we pressed all three swags closely, side by side; Shannon and I got Paddy into her swag and made her hot tea. I couldn't decide, still can't, whether Paddy was ill because of having brought visitors to that place where we collected bush medicine, or whether it was something to do with the brother whom she's spoken to on the telephone earlier in the afternoon and with whom she's had a disagreement. There was something to be feared, each of us felt afraid, but I'm no longer sure what register any of us were in.

The Body Made Sensate

As a white Australian must I continue to relegate Paddy and Shannon's experience of this force in the country to mere superstition, where they have belief and I have knowledge, or can I undercut that by seeing knowledge, including the capacity to gather evidence from the senses, as always made in cultural practices, cultural practices in which the sensate body is formed?

What is the body? In ethnographic discourses, the body tends to be universalised so that embodiment can be understood as the same *thing* across cultures. As Vicki Kirby puts it, 'this same body reappears, its naked truth culturally clothed' (156). In the place of a universal body—the body—Vicki Kirby instead installs a body made in cultural practices: substantiated in these practices, as distinct from merely being given different meanings. In the terms of this kind of approach to embodiment, rituals for instance are productive in a visceral sense: entering and constituting the delicate blood vessels and nerves, perhaps, the bones and the heart and other organs as well as the skin, the ears, the senses. This is not to speak of genetics; it is not essentialist. It is to speak of a body made in practices.

Kirby looks to the example of the profoundly deaf percussionist Evelyn Glennie to suggest that bodies are differently sensate, in this case differently attuned to sound: 'Glennie,' Kirby says, 'explains that she hears certain notes through her jaws, while others sound through parts of her face or certain parts of her feet and so on.' As Kirby continues: 'Sound is thus intricately scored and played through the staff of her body, recorded and performed in the very tissue of skin, blood and bone' (63). This music is not only made from the sounds that issue from Glennie's kettle drum but it is made in the bones and other tissue of her own body. This then is rhythm, or vibration, a kind of force that is read and rewritten in her body,

differently than mine, for instance. If there is no universal body, there is no universal body of feeling.

Then there are those of us who call ourselves ‘hearing’ and whose bones and skin are also presumably set to rhythm or vibration by the sounding of a drum yet we do not hear this as sound in our tissues, we do not feel this force in bone and skin because our bodies, unlike Glennie’s do not know how to read and write its music. In this sense it is we who are deaf.

So what of the accounts Indigenous men and women give of the Dreaming as a rhythm, a push, a force, as material as Glennie’s sounding drum and bone? W.E.H. Stanner reported an impressive experience common among white anthropologists such as himself when speaking with Indigenous men and women about their dreaming places, which they speak of in terms of such a force, a push, something they feel. They grow impatient with men like Stanner who can’t feel it. There is a struggle to find words, Stanner says, perhaps a lapse into English: ‘Like engine like power, plenty of power it does hard work; it pushes’ (166).

So if I go back to the atmosphere in those river beds at Utopia, I want to ask: what if we take it seriously, not as belief but as knowledge? Might it be that there was some physical or material force there that these women felt, a force that can only be felt by bodies attuned to it, as it were, like Glennie, attuned as a result of cultural practices? That one body-subject can feel what is insensible to another. This is one way I suggest non-Indigenous Australians could think through what Indigenous Australians tell us about the vital, life-giving relationship between land, culture and what it is to be human.

Before going on to describe my second visit and the peculiar shifts in vision that I experienced, I want to speak briefly about sitting in the women’s camps at Utopia. We visited two camps, Homestead and Camel camp. As at Rosalie Kunoth Monk’s house where we waited to be called, here too we waited until one of the old ladies approached Paddy, offering her hand for Paddy to take in hers, a handshake that seemed to gesture to the respect and love in which Paddy is held. Shannon and I wait our turn, which does come, and we sit with the old women in the sand, while Paddy talks to them in language. There is no concession made to my ignorance; no English is spoken, no translation is made.

Whereas when I entered Harts Range I saw at first only dereliction, by the time we visited the women’s camps I had begun to arrange the Utopian scene differently. I saw the women first, not the rubbish and not the rags they wore as clothes; I registered their calmness, their subtlety of gesture, their alertness, their humour, the delicacy of their touch; their fondness for the camp dogs they called ‘puppies’ (these women spoke no English in my presence, save for that word). I no longer saw what had been there before—randomly arranged corrugated-iron lean-tos with their dark masses of rags that were the bedding—but saw instead different camps arranged according to highly defined social orders and obligations, and elderly women who were among the greatest artists in the country.

These women left empty a big house on the road, despite its bathroom and electricity and cooking facilities—they turned their back on it and lived here instead. These are rich ways of living for these women; they’re old ways and what’s changed is the building materials. Corrugated iron replaces branches for shelter. The lean-tos and the windbreaks are made as they would have always been done, small trees propping up a roof, sometimes it’s sheets of corrugated iron on top, sometimes it’s leafy branches.

The thing that I'm most surprised about is that in one moment, I have arranged the scene around my idea of rubbish and rags, a scene of lack, of deficit. And then in another moment, these disappear and what I am aware of instead is being in the presence of something huge, energetic, so very alive. I can't hold the two together. When I'm in one scene I can't believe in the other; it's just an image in my memory and I doubt its veracity. But then the scene flips and I only believe now in the other one, which only a moment ago refused to be summonsed. What is most destabilising is that I can't *see* both scenes at once. They belong to two different stories altogether.

Last year I went to Alice Springs with the idea of going back again to Utopia with Paddy but Paddy was unwell and unable to travel, and so I set off on another kind of road trip—this time hosted by whites. And I found myself revisiting the same places, in one sense, but entirely different in another. I travelled again across corrugated roads with no training in driving under these conditions and in an SUV which requires some specialised knowledge even to change a tyre because of the sheer size of it. I didn't even think to ask where the jack was. I was offered a radio by the car hire company but declined. There is no mobile coverage outside Alice. Travelling with Paddy and Shannon I'd felt assured of their skills, with good reason. I didn't think through the consequences of travelling without them. I thought my precaution of phoning ahead and letting people know where I was and when I might be expected to arrive would be sufficient. I discovered how thoroughly limited this was as a safety plan but I'll come back to that in a minute.

First I went again to Harts Range but now in my sights it wasn't *Atitjere*, Arrente country. I couldn't recapture this sense of it. From my visual field, I'd lost that place—without Paddy I couldn't retrieve this scene. The country I was in now was in many ways Harts Range as it is usually located, not on Arrente country but on Riddock Station. Two Harts Ranges (and many more), each occupying the same space but in two very different countries, two very different scenes.

I'd come to Harts Range to meet Sonja Chalmers, the granddaughter of Charles Chalmers, one of the first men to graze cattle and sheep in this central Australian area. The Chalmers own working cattle stations at Mt Swan and MacDonald Downs slightly to the north of Harts Range, but the family also owned the lease on Utopia, until the early 1970s when the lease was sold back to the Federal Government and returned to the Alyawarre and Anmatyerre in 1975. Because of Sonya's association with this history, being with her at Harts Range caused the whole scene at Harts Range to arrange itself differently, now around the cattle industry. I couldn't, though, bring the two images together into one, Harts Range as *Atitjere* and Harts Range as Riddock Station were too distinct for me.

Sonya and I met at Harts Range so that I could visit a school called the Plenty Way Project that is aimed at young local men, teenagers, who are interested in working on the cattle stations, mustering, breaking in horses, and so on. In the classroom a fourth-generation member of the Chalmers family, Kate McMaster, is teaching a dozen or so teenage boys, dressed in crimson embroidered western shirts and riding boots. Kate McMaster is teaching them about cattle—Drought Master, Brahman, Chorolais, Brahford, Hereford, Short Horn, Santa Gertrudis—and the boundaries of the local cattle stations, and which cattle breed is run on which station. She's making a cattle yard where the boys will learn about riding and the breaking-in of horses. She's teaching them about land management and literacy at the same time. In fact she's teaching them literacy *through* the boys' desire to know about cattle. Alan Paton's poem *Cry, the Beloved Country* (from the 1948 novel) is written on the board and the

students are asked to interpret it line by line. My impression is that the boys take the poem, written in the context of South African apartheid, to be about Australia, and in many ways they're right.

Kate has all their attention. These are boys who might have refused the local high school, but attend the Plenty Way project with pride. She is a natural teacher, her voice wraps around the boys, without shouting. Part of their interest in her, and in Sonya too, is that she is a Chalmers: the granddaughter of a famous cattleman. Later, out near the cattle yards, the boys demand that I take a photograph of them with Sonya near the wonderful giant representation of a cowboy they've made out of sheets of corrugated iron, and another one, again with Sonya, playing around on the horse they'd made of the same materials.

There's another story to be told here about these white men and women, third and fourth generations of the family to live in this country. They can't leave, it seems to me. The world that whites live in here is much more complex than I'd understood. This is a world I don't know either, a world formed in another set of cultural practices, bonds and obligations.

From Harts Range I followed Sonja's car north to her home at MacDonald Downs where I stayed with her for the night before driving to Red Gum Store, which is on MacDonald Downs Station, and then on to Utopia. For quite a while I looked upon the coincidences in the two visits as mere chance. Harts Range, Red Gum Store, Utopia. But gradually I have come to recognise that between my two different contacts in the region—Paddy and Sonja—are lives that cross and cross again, and have done so for generations, back to the 1920s, and will continue to do so into the future; two women, same longitude and latitude, living in different countries.

It is on the leg of the trip between Red Gum Store and Utopia that I became lost. The manager at Red Gum had given me instructions in the form of a mud map which I checked and double checked, even turning around once when the road petered out into a sandy track and driving back to the store to check again. Perhaps the fellow, who was European and didn't speak much English, mistook 'right' for 'left,' but a road that should have taken 40 minutes to Utopia took me into sand dunes where for four hours I followed the faint tracks of other vehicles until they dwindled out as the ground grew rockier and I found myself on the top of a ridge. And there, on that stony ridge, in a place which to me seemed to be so very remote and with no signs of other lives, was a discarded child's bike, a girl's bike, all pink and silver.

Not long afterwards, I drove through a paddock of hundreds of rusted cars, as well-ordered as any cemetery, and then into a small town overshadowed by the giant form of a water tower. There were several small roads, but which one will take me out and back on to the highway I'm looking for? But there was no one to ask for directions because the town was entirely deserted. And then the eerie appearance of a donkey, a lonely and forlorn-looking donkey that suddenly became animated at the sight of my car and trotted forward and then ran alongside the car, looking in at me with a most unsettling urgency.

As I discovered over the next few days, this is the town, this is the water tower, where a young man whom I will call Jacob took his life. The town is deserted because of sorry business at Soapy Bore.

Finally, I arrived at Arlparra, Utopia, and I was overcome by the dereliction of the place, the grass now black stubble all strewn with broken glass, the rubbish, the pure ugliness. This

wasn't Utopia, this was Dystopia. This was hell. My capacities to see this country, Utopia, had shifted once more. Over the next few days Utopia would continue to shift before my eyes. For a while it appeared as a place of inspirational energy—a place jumping with life, with music, laughter, talk—until something cut into that and it flipped into another world again. It was the death of Jacob that kept puncturing the scene, depleting it of energy and vitality. The effects of his death and the sorry business going on would be hidden from my view and then engulf it.

But it might be a mistake to think that there are two sides to Utopia and if one were patient enough this movement between them could be steadied until it settled into an integrated whole. Instead, it might be more generative to consider the truth to be undecidable. If I allow the undecidability to remain—if I suspend my western tendency to positivism—another position opens up. It allows the possibility that in any scene there is always something, perhaps something vital, that escapes one's seeing, knowing, sensing.

For my Nyoonga friend, the appearance of the donkey in the deserted town where Jacob had died was not merely coincidental. The donkey was speaking to me, but I was deaf to its speech. My own logic resists hers, as it did in the daylight after our first night on the Sandover when she claimed that I spoken out in the dark: 'I am being prowled on.' In the dark of that night I was as much astonished as afraid: astonished by the sense that I was in the presence of something alive and threatening but invisible to me. These fears, but we might also say this knowledge, dissolved in the light of day, when my thinking attempted to flip back into its old habitus. But doubt now lives in the place of some of my old certainties and I am forced to wonder: what if, in some enigmatic way that I can't (yet) comprehend, she is right?

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