Reading Indigenous Australian Literature Transnationally: Juxtaposing *Dark Emu* and *Kocharethi*

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When the British East India Company won the Battle of Plassey (1757) against the Nawab of Bengal and his French allies, it marked the beginning of the consolidation of British power over the Indian subcontinent. In the century that followed, key legislation was passed by the British to enable the management and governance of India's land. The colony was considered the jewel in the crown of the British Empire, abundant in resources and not devoid of 'civilisation' even as it lay in wait to be civilised further and modernised by the British rule. The existing caste system which stratified Indian society along the lines of occupation played a pivotal role not only in the mapping of its Indian subjects by the colonial power but also of land. The categorisation of the colonised populace had gone hand-in-hand with the systemic sorting of landscapes into fields and forests, arable and wastelands. Thus, when land laws were enacted, productive plains and fields were generally associated with and assigned to castes, while tribes were relegated to forests and wastelands.

Judy Whitehead in 'John Locke and the Governance of India's Landscapes: The Category of Wasteland in Colonial Revenue and Forest Legislation,' has proposed: 'While all subjects in India were colonised, they were not homogenously governed, but were differentiated in terms of essentialised subject positions. In particular, castes were differentiated from tribes as a foundational binary opposition that influenced policies regarding land-settlement and land-use' (50). The Lockean influence on British colonial policies in the New World is only too well-known. In his *Two Treatises of Government* (1690), Locke records his dismay at the capture of land already inhabited at the time of settlement, but he seeks to circumvent the obstruction such an edict might place in the way of colonisation by classifying land itself dichotomously, into that which has been tilled and fenced and that which hasn't been. Land can only be considered occupied by one who has rightfully laid claim to it by cultivating it and erecting fences to the exclusion of others. 'The transition from holding lands in common to private possessions occurred through the application of labour to land and was visually marked by the spatial enclosure of individually-worked land' (Whitehead 84).

When James Cook, British explorer and navigator often credited with the 'discovery' of Australia, received the letterbook titled *Secret Instructions for Lieutenant James Cook Appointed to Command His Majesty's Bark the Endeavour 30 July 1768*, he found in it directions to chart the coasts of Terra Australis Incognita or the 'unknown land of the south' in the event it was located. He was originally on a voyage to observe Venus moving across the face of the sun from Tahiti. With the letterbook, not only was the existence of a great southern continent presumed but also the possibility of its pre-occupation by Aboriginal inhabitants, for it further instructs Cook to develop cordial relations with the natives and annex in the King's name any trading posts that might be considered convenient. Cook, when he first set foot in Australia in 1770, recognised it to be not an unknown land but New Holland as the Dutch called it, who are recorded to be the first Europeans

to have encountered Australia. During his voyage north from present-day New South Wales to the tip of Queensland, Cook noticed many fires on the mainland and the surrounding islands, signalling the presence of natives. It was against a backdrop of overwhelming evidence to the contrary that Australia was declared terra nullius or 'nobody's land' upon its annexation by early colonial settlers. This was achieved on the pretext that the inhabitants of the newly annexed continent did not exercise territorial sovereignty over its land.

The Indigenous inhabitants of Australia, it was concluded, existed without a unifying structure of authority or a political consciousness. This conclusion was based on the observations of early explorers, including Cook, about the inhabitants, who were described as possessing neither fixed habitation nor a practice of land cultivation; they lived by means of fishing and hunting on par with wild beasts. In a Lockean sense, they existed in a state of nature. At the time of writing *Two Treatises,* Locke's comments were directed at America of the 1600s, which in his characterisation had enough unoccupied land to suffice each settler. He proposed that the vast stretches of land that had not been worked upon by the natives of America existed in a state of nature and were ready to be claimed. Furthermore, the distinction between a state of nature and state of culture directly translated into the difference between savagery and civilisation (Whitehead 85). People living in a state of nature did not form societies, own land, or produce labour indispensable to wealth production. If an Englishman took over the same land and brought it under intensive cultivation, it would benefit not just the Englishman but everyone else around by creating surplus wealth for trade. The same Lockean theory of property was superimposed on various sites of British colonial conquest, including Australia and India.

To support this claim, Whitehead uses as examples the two chief land revenue systems—the Permanent Settlement of Bengal and the Ryotwari system—introduced by the British in India to demonstrate the implications of Locke's theory. The Permanent Settlement of Bengal, brought into effect in 1793, vested in a class of native landowners called zamindars the power to fix revenue to be collected from local farmers, above all upholding the right of private property in land. As an act of law, it remained in force for 160 years over Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa, constituting extensive regions of eastern India (Guha 11). In *A Rule of Property for Bengal*, Ranajit Guha stresses that even though the principal architects of the revenue system did not see eye to eye on the reasoning behind the policy or every detail laid down in it, 'the recognition of property as the basic principle of government was the greatest common measure of their agreement' (18).

Retaining the principle of private property ownership but eliminating the intermediary function served by the zamindars, the Ryotwari system was introduced in 1820 in western and southern India. Ownership of the land was handed over to peasants by the state, and revenue was to be collected directly from them. Unlike the system of Permanent Settlement, Whitehead adds: '… land revenue was not to be permanently fixed but was to be raised periodically given differential capital investments in land, differences in soil fertility and even differences in the castes who cultivated the land' (87). Specific castes who were believed to possess inherent skills that lend themselves to settled agriculture were enabled in this process. People of lower castes and tribal peoples whose traditional occupations did not include farming on enclosed lands were thus essentialised as non-productive, and any land they maintained became wasteland and vulnerable to state appropriation.

While the zamindari and ryotwari systems were predominantly concerned with agricultural lands, forest laws were drafted with a view to ensure a sustainable supply of timber such as for the railways and the navy (Whitehead 88). Tribes that inhabited forests and hilly areas, and there were several of them, were targeted by these forest laws. Whitehead explains that when the first India Forest Act was passed in 1865, one of the most important propositions was that to keep the misuse of forests in check, it was crucial to curtail the rights of customary forest users. Thus, traditional means of living for hill and forest tribes (which sometimes involved techniques evolved over thousands of years such as slash-and-burn farming and at other times activities as absolutely necessary as collection of leaves for medicines, fallen branches for bedding or huts, firewood for cooking) were rendered illegal by the state. As a sign of the severity of these measures, even entry into forests was strictly regulated or prohibited. Forests became reserved or protected and forest officers were installed to oversee their administration. The successor of the 1865 Act passed in 1878 (amended in 1890, 1894, 1904, 1927) reinforced the categories of reserved and protected forests, intensifying state monopoly over forest management.[i]

Prominent historian Prathama Banerjee has noted that in India, 'those who came to be classified as tribes in modern times were precisely communities who were not fully identifiable as sedentary cultivators, though many communities were indeed agriculturists of various sorts, and therefore could not be mobilised simply in the name of labour and productivity' (11–12). In Australia, as explained earlier, the Indigenous peoples were en masse labelled as hunter-gatherers or nomads as opposed to the colonial settlers who laid claim to the land. This paper is an inquiry into literary subversions of the colonial myth that civilisation began with recognisable forms of labour practised under sedentary agriculture and that land rights rest with those who built complex systems of farming on fixed territory year after year. In a revisionist mode, Bunurong, Yuin, Tasmanian historian and author Bruce Pascoe has unveiled *Dark Emu* (2014) and Malayarayar writer Narayan has written *Kocharethi* (2011), which urge us to rethink concepts of land-right, ownership, wasteland versus agricultural land, and human labour. This essay argues that *Dark Emu* and *Kocharethi* are grounded in descriptions of Indigenous farming practices and technologies—their productiveness and antiquity—to controvert the colonial myth that forms of agricultural labour practiced by Indigenous communities were non-productive.

Juxtaposing *Dark Emu* and *Kocharethi*

A generalist non-fiction book, *Dark Emu* has been praised since its publication for exploding the widespread notion that the original inhabitants of Australia were solely hunter-gatherers of nomadic and semi-nomadic existence. Pascoe argues that Indigenous Australians before colonial settlement possessed technologies for farming and housing, which enabled them to thrive in some of the most extreme environments in the world. The evidence Pascoe relies on to make his argument are the records and journals of early European settlers—sources he consciously turned to because of the epistemological virtue granted to them by the dominant White settler society. The result has been, as Pascoe often calls it, a 'truer history' of pre-colonial Australia (Allam). In terms of reception, *Dark Emu* has met with resounding success and critical acclaim, winning the Book of the Year prize in the NSW Premier's Literary Awards in 2016. It has taken many forms, such as the 2016 dance adaptation by Bangarra, the prominent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dance company, and the 2019 children's book, *Young Dark Emu.* To introduce the ideas elaborated in the book, an e-book titled *Bruce Pascoe: Aboriginal Agriculture, Technology and Ingenuity* comprising short videos has also been produced by Tim Purdie for ABC Education. In his

interviews, Pascoe has acknowledged that he might be writing about the past from the position of an Indigenous writer, but his focus is determinedly on the future and a country that is inclusive. Symptomatically, his book *Dark Emu* is dedicated to 'the Australians.' Pascoe, having seen *Dark Emu* criticised by many and received well by many more, believes at present, more than ever before, all Australians want to hear what Indigenous peoples have to say, and this to him is a tremendously positive development (Guilliatt).

In contrast, Malayarayar writer Narayan's *Kocharethi,* reflecting the author's disposition, which has been shaped by bitter life experiences, does not spring from hope. When Narayan wrote the novel in early 1990s, arguably the first by a tribal writer in India, he did so provoked by the misrepresentations of Adivasis by non-Adivasi writers. He says in an interview, 'When I started writing it was a reflexive action' (Sherrif). It took Narayan a decade to have *Kocharethi* published in Malayalam in 1998 and more than a decade had passed again when the English translation by Catherine Thankamma appeared in 2011, published by Oxford University Press. In the Introduction to the English translation titled *Kocharethi: the araya woman*, G.S. Jayashree has noted, 'the novel maps the adivasi's changing perceptions of land and its ownership' (xvi). When I met Narayan in November 2019 at Kochi, India, for an interview, the writer who stood before me was acutely conscious of the double standards of mainstream society. He has been made a member of several prominent literary organisations such as the Kerala Sahitya Akademi and awarded literary prizes. This has, however, seldom translated into any physical, material change in his circumstances. As a matter of fact, his identity has been tokenised and exploited by parties with vested interests. In one case, a prominent publishing outfit did not declare that his novel had entered its sixth edition, thus keeping his author's royalty payments from him. The matter was settled out of court, with Narayan demanding one rupee as compensatory damages. It was as much a symbolic statement as Narayan's ethical stance on matters of injustice.

Narayan has written over 250 short stories and six novels, of which only *Kocharethi* and *Nissahayante Nilavili* (2006) have been translated into English. The latter, a collection of short stories, is titled *Cries in the Wilderness* (2009) in translation. When I requested him to speak about his most prominent work *Kocharethi*, which has been translated into Assamese, Hindi, Kannada, Telugu, and Tamil in addition to English, the conversation naturally veered towards the Malayarayar. The Malayarayar, the community to which he belongs, are a hill tribe. As Narayan described to me, 'We did not build houses next to each other like in a residential colony. The houses were far apart and might be separated by acres of land. Everything that was needed for sustenance was taken care of by ourselves' (Narayan, Personal Interview). When transactions of an economic nature took place with the outside world, they were through merchants who would come from afar to buy crops such as pepper and coffee from the Malayarayar and sell in exchange clay pots, dried fish, cloth and other articles for everyday consumption. The value involved in each of these exchanges would more often than not be decided by the merchants and had no relation to the actual price of these products. The title of the novel derives from a generic term used by these merchants to address the Malayarayar women. If a merchant happened to greet a younger Malayarayar woman, she would be called kocharethi. 'Kochu' is the Malayalam equivalent of the word 'young.' Narayan's mother who passed away at the age of 24 was a 'kocharethi.'

A trans-Indigenous reading of *Kocharethi* and *Dark Emu* might begin by noting that the texts share a similar passion and responsibility towards representing and/or reclaiming Indigenous ways of living. They provide lively accounts of Indigenous farming processes and technologies at work—

preparation of the land, sowing of seeds, harvesting of the crops, and storing the produce—within contexts of ongoing discrimination against Indian Adivasi/tribal and Indigenous Australian communities. In his book *Trans-Indigenous*, Chadwick Allen (Chickasaw) has highlighted the use of Indigenous technologies as the common framework that enables the juxtaposition of Maori poet Robert Sullivan's *Star Waka* (1999) and American Indian poet Allison Hedge Coke's *Blood Run* (2006). He demonstrates in chapter five of the book, 'Siting Earthworks, Navigating Waka,' how Sullivan and Hedge Coke employ Indigenous technologies of Waka (meaning canoe) and earthworks or mounds 'as central dramatic features of their work and as central sustaining logics for defining Indigenous identities, survivals, and resurgence in the contemporary world' (195).

Waka, the sea-faring vessels on which the first Polynesians set sail for Aotearoa New Zealand to become known as Maori, are a symbol of the technological prowess and navigational abilities of the makers and users of these vessels. The largest of them, called waka taua or war canoes, can be 40m in length accommodating 80 paddlers at a time. They are also a powerful medium for telling visual stories through carvings that encapsulate the cultural heritage of the iwi/tribe making the waka. Guided by a deep knowledge of the stars, Maori made grand journeys across the Pacific Ocean as well as day-to-day fishing trips on the waka for sustenance. It is thus a technology that is inseparable from the Maori way of life, and Allen argues Sullivan utilises it in *Star Waka* to emphasise 'themes of ancient, ongoing, and possible future histories of Polynesian exploration and migration' (195). Similarly, earthworks, a technological creation of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas underpin the composition of *Blood Run*, which has been named after a site situated on the border of the US states of Iowa and South Dakota. Centuries ago, at the location of Blood Run, mounds or earthwork structures were built 'to mirror significant patterns and celestial movements in the sky,' and through the text *Blood Run*, Hedge Coke underscores 'themes of ancient, ongoing, and possible future histories of Native American construction and trade' (Allen 195). Not only thematically but also—and perhaps more remarkably—structurally, *Star Waka* and *Blood Run*, which are both book-length collections of poems, are organised around the Indigenous technologies of waka and earthworks. Allen suggests:

> In this way, both texts disrupt the typical coding of these activities in dominant discourses as demarcating superior, fully human European or U.S. 'settlers' from inferior, less than fully human 'Natives.' Moreover, the focus in each poetic text on Indigenous tenacity, survival, and endurance in the face of settler colonialisms complicates the concept of the historical settlement of 'new' lands with implications of activism, legal battles and public acts of moral suasion in the contemporary cause of political settlement.

Drawing from Allen's trans-Indigenous strategies for reading *Star Waka* and *Blood Run*, it can be argued that Indigenous farming practices and technologies feature both as literary devices and as metonymic markers for Indigenous knowledge systems in *Dark Emu* and *Kocharethi* (194). As Allen argues, 'Indigenous juxtapositions place diverse texts close together across genre and media, aesthetic systems and worldviews, technologies and practices, tribes and nations, Indigenous-settler binary, and historical periods, and geographical regions' (xviii).

Kocharethi's plot revolves around the characters Kunjipennu and Kochuraman from the Malayarayar tribe. Kunjipennu is the daughter of Ittyadi, an elder of the tribe who possesses shamanic powers. He also has a son Kunjadichan. In the novel, when the time arrives to choose a

suitable boy for Kunjipennu, Ittyadi speaks of the clans within the tribe—Valayillam, Poothaniyillam, Modalakkattillam, Nellipullillam. He explains, 'Someone belonging to Modalakkattu can marry from either Valayaillam or Nellipulli illam. Poothani and Nellipulli can marry from Vala' (15). The social custom thus described did not sanction the marriage of Kunjippenu and Kochuraman, who were romantically attracted to each other but did not belong to clans customarily compatible for marriage. In the novel, they marry, disregarding the age-old customs, signifying a society in transition. As individuals joined in affinal kinship, Kunjipennu and Kochuraman act as the central characters through which we experience the worldview of the Malayarayar community. The personal becomes the collective.

Told in the style of a realist novel, *Kocharethi* is a straightforward attempt at describing the reality of the Malayarayar life. In Narayan's words, 'I began to write the novel, drawing on my childhood memories, my grandfather's stories, and the rituals that he performed … the title came much later' (Jayasree xvii). As previously mentioned, he was provoked by the rampant misrepresentation of his community by the upper classes. Outraged by a novel serialised in a magazine which hasn't been named in *Kocharethi*, he along with a few members of his community sought a legal resolution to their grievance. While the publication of the novel was stalled, Narayan knew that legal venues could only do so much. He felt compelled to write back. In the interview that features in *Kocharethi*, he explains his motive: 'So this enemy—who thought they had the exclusive right to read and write literature, whose forefathers advocated pouring molten metal into the ears of the *avarna* (lower caste) who hears the Vedas being recited—this powerful enemy had to be tackled some other way. I thought why not use the same weapon they use—writing?' (209).

The timeframe of *Kocharethi* is not established clearly but the strongest indications rest on the early twentieth century to sometime after India becomes an independent country in 1947. The setting of the novel is the Malayarayar village located on the slopes of high mountain ranges. The first half of the novel is, as the Introduction claims, 'an ethnohistorian's delight': the various social and cultural codes are detailed minutely (Jayasree xvii). In the second half of the novel, readers are told that the forests of the Malayarayar have become reserved forests, under colonial policies introduced by the Travancore Government, a princely state of the British empire. For the Malayarayar, a tribal group in administrative parlance, right over land could not be claimed. 'They were tenants on land customarily owned by the king. They were required to pay heavy rent for the right to cultivate' (Jayasree xxiv). The Forest Act carried out against the backdrop of a rising demand for timber most harshly affected the livelihood strategies of India's forest-dwelling tribes, including Malayarayars. The chapter 'In the Name of the King' speaks of the rampant logging of trees in the forests where the Malayarayars live. The forest officials declare in reference to the trees, 'All these belong to the government. They'll be cut down.' In the novel it is shown that as access to natural capital comes under threat, the ability of the Malayarayars to work together for common purposes in groups and organisations also suffers.

Systemic displacement comes with systemic acculturation. In the novel, Christian evangelism and Hindu orthodoxy knock at the doors of the Malayarayar homes with the promise of a better life so long as they give up on their own belief systems. Soon, the written word supplants the long-standing tribal oral culture in the novel, and, in conjunction, a cash economy is introduced. The fundamental conflict that arises from the subordination of tradition that nonetheless continues to exert its influence over the modern present is built into the novel. Kochuraman and Kunjipennu's daughter Parvathi, who finds a job in the city to live an independent life, marries a man she likes

without informing her parents, signifying a cessation of the transgenerational passage of the distinctive Adivasi way of life. *Kocharethi* ends with Kochuraman and Kunjipennu fleeing from a government hospital, symbolic of the changes that have passed them by, into the bewildering sights of a city. A deep sense of loss and powerlessness resulting from Kochuraman and Kunjipennu being thrown into a matrix whose reality does not resonate with theirs pervades the conclusion presented to the reader.

In contrast, *Dark Emu* as a non-fiction book does not contain a plot but imitates a narrative told from a first-person point of view. The most striking aspect of the text is the voice of the narrator, in this case also its author, which speaks with authority and agency from an Indigenous perspective on pre-colonial Aboriginal Australia. The writing style is expository and persuasive, and the tone laced with irony and suffused with a rare simplicity that succeeds in emphasising the urgency of the matter at hand. Heavily influenced by historical works *Australia and the Origins of Agriculture* (2008) by Rupert Gerritsen and *The Biggest Estate on Earth* (2011) by Bill Gammage, the popularity of *Dark Emu* sets it apart from similar books. Pascoe has acknowledged his debt to Gerritsen and Gammage's scholarship with much earnestness in *Dark Emu* without underestimating the power of his narratorial voice. As a Bunurong, Yuin, Tasmanian man, Pascoe persuades his readers to acknowledge the importance of keeping Indigenous culture and story alive, but he also does not stop short of explaining the use and relevance of Indigenous land management practices in economic terms. In the age of climate crisis, sustainability is not only a worthwhile but a marketable enterprise.

In *Dark Emu*, there is extensive discussion of the food management system of the Aboriginal people of Australia that adopted a long-term approach, meaning annual crops came second to perennials. These perennial varieties of crops could be grown without the use of chemicals and with limited water supplies, causing little damage to the environment. Pascoe cites Ian Chivers, who has recently published *Australian Native Grasses* (2015), to note that the perennial grain cropping-system of the Aboriginal people translated into 'a permanent pasture' that extended across regions (*Dark Emu* 44). Other staple food items of the Aboriginal people such as the yam daisy are duly regarded in the book. Pascoe is, in short, calling for a modern-day renewal of Aboriginal farming and diet practices that were shaped potentially over 60,000–80,000 years, keeping in mind the climate and terrain of Australia (*Dark Emu* 61).

A literary analysis of Pascoe's *Dark Emu* must recognise that it is effectively situated in a large body of critical work that contests historical generalisations derived from how the non-West is represented by the West. In *Dark Emu*, Pascoe draws on the early records of European occupation to trace the imaginative geography constructed in them of Aboriginal Australia. These early representations were shaped by the exchanges between individual settlers and explorers and the larger political concerns of the colonial empire. Pascoe considers what was said in colonial accounts of Australia, in order to reveal what was omitted—that the early explorers and settlers had chanced upon 'not a wilderness, not a land peopled by wanderers, but a managed landscape created by the enormous labour of a people intent on creating the best possible conditions for food production' (Pascoe, *Young* 74). Speaking to this grave omission, his book opens with the image of dark emu, a shape traced in the dark areas between the stars of the Milky Way by Aboriginal people. When *Dark Emu* is read alongside *Kocharethi*, there is a clear contextual and thematic congruence to be found, giving rise to what Allen terms 'provocative intersections' between the texts (*Trans-Indigenous* 227).

The wider context created by the Lockean theory of property rendered the Indigenous peoples of Australia and the Adivasis/tribal people of India unable to assert their right to land. The value accorded to sedentary agriculture meant that other forms of land and food management systems were either not recognised or elided. Reflecting on the discriminating criterion of land-that-is-tilled-and-fenced, Pascoe says, 'Fencing is one of the greatest differences between Aboriginal and European land use ...' (Pascoe, *Dark Emu* 180). In *Kocharethi*, too, boundaries are erected at the command of officers recruited under the forest legislation. The overseer of the forests inhabited by the Arayar announces, 'Hear me all of you, the lords have come to mark the boundary' (88). Along with the boundary wall instituted and validated by the state come other limitations. The officers command the Arayar, 'You should collect the forest produce and bring them to the range office regularly. We are the ones who have been deputed by the maharaja to safeguard the forests' (87). Brute force and coercion are used to subjugate the Arayar into obeying the new laws, as seen in the threats of the officers: 'Tell all those who have escaped into the hills that we have come. We have orders to capture them. We will burn their houses and beat them up' (88).

If one looks up the Index of *Dark Emu*, one finds entries on 'violence and dispossession' on pages eight, ten, 80, 113–14, 117, 156, 183, 186, 223–24, 228—a staggering number for a text whose body amounts to 229 pages. *Dark Emu* and *Kocharethi* are born of historical contexts of violent, systemic displacement and acculturation. In resistance, the texts anchor themselves thematically in representations of Indigenous technologies of land cultivation and feats of engineering from Indigenous perspectives. The technologies and systems that Pascoe enlists as those signifying an advanced society, such as domestication of plants, harvesting of the crop, aquaculture, housing, storage of the surpluses, trade and economy, underpin the narrative of both *Dark Emu* and *Kocharethi*. When *Dark Emu* is juxtaposed alongside *Kocharethi*, one sees that the representation of Indigenous technologies and systems is an Indigenous strategy to deconstruct the official rhetoric that enabled the dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their land and continues to do so under neo-colonial regimes.

Both *Dark Emu* and *Kocharethi* make the case that there were periods of abundance among the communities they represent. The litany of food items served at the ceremonial feast after the harvest among the Malayarayar is prodigious: 'The meal consisted of gruel made from the new rice, followed by cooked rice, pumpkin *erisherry*, long beans shredded and fried ...' (28). At the very opening of *Dark Emu*, Pascoe invites us to imagine ourselves walking beside early explorer and surveyor Sir Thomas Mitchell, who records his experience of seeing miles and miles of piled-up hay or hay-cocks along his path; he recognised that the seeds from this grass would be made into a paste or bread by the Indigenous people of the region (15). In describing the permanent fisheries built across Aboriginal Australia, once again the natural wealth of the country and the ability of Indigenous people to harness it is emphasised by Pascoe (89). If there was plenty of food, it meant that the surplus had to be stored and preserved. In *Kocharethi*, it is explained that the harvest grain is stored in the house and dried meat preserved in baskets made of areca spathe with mouths covered with coconut shells. In *Dark Emu*, Pascoe writes an entire chapter on the subject of storage and Aboriginal storage devices, to emphasise the immense fecundity of Indigenous food management systems. Pascoe cites Gerritsen who suggests three types of food storage could be found: caching, implying smaller stores in protected locations, stockpiling, meaning large stores usually kept for ceremonies when hundreds would gather, and direct storage, comprising kilos of grains, seeds, tubers in chambers made of clay and straw (147).

With surplus production, trade and economy flourished. Seeds were especially traded across regions or offered as gifts. Parcels of grains were distributed too. Over a long period of time, seed and grain exchanges resulted in changes in the morphology of plants, and they began to display qualities usually derived from domestication of plants (Pascoe 30). In *Kocharethi*, trade appears as a significant motif. The trading merchants from the plains, depicted as Christians and Muslims, consider pepper, the predominant produce of the Malayarayar, a valuable commodity. In exchange, articles such as pots or cloth are offered to the Malayarayar. The episodes in the novel that narrate such contacts convey the exploitative attitude of the merchants who took advantage of the Malayarayars because they did not possess a written culture or a numeric system. Over time, however, the Malayarayars are shown to become prudent in their exchange with the merchants. Housing is another technology that is elaborately described in *Dark Emu* and *Kocharethi*. The construction of a house by Kochuraman and Kunjipennu is described in detail:

> Various materials were gathered to be used as required: pieces of soft wood, perfectly straight, peeled and polished to a shine; thick bamboo poles that had their branches chopped off; cane sticks as well as strips; and potha grass cut and stacked in neat heaps for thatching the roof. ... The bamboo poles that would serve as girders to support the roof were put up and firmly bound with strips of cane. The roof was thatched, the floor beaten and made firm, and then smeared with a mixture of cow dung and charcoal powder. … Kochuraman made a frame of vertical and horizontal rows of bamboo below the roof. It was covered with thaithal—crushed and split bamboo—closely packed and tied with strips of cane to form a loft where grain and tapioca could be stored. A long and broad ledge was built above the stove. Bamboo poles were split and arranged parallel to the roof with wooden stumps for support. Pieces of cane without any bends and covered by dried thaithal were inserted through the split bamboo pieces to make doors for air and light to enter. The house with two rooms and a kitchen was ready. (31)

The passage above speaks of not just the aesthetics of a Malayarayar house but also its other features such as strength and comfort, which are given equal weight. Similarly, in the chapter 'Population and Housing' in *Dark Emu,* the materials used for construction, design, capacity of typical housing structures seen across Aboriginal Australia in large numbers are recounted in detail. These details have been handed down to the present from observations made by early settlers such as Charles Sturt and Thomas Mitchell who couldn't contain their fascination at the feats of engineering they witnessed all around them, however much they tried. Pascoe cites Sturt: "'[The houses] were made of strong boughs fixed in a circle in the ground, so as to meet in a common centre; on these there was ... a thick seam of grass and leaves and over this a compact coating of clay. They were eight to ten feet in diameter, and about four and a half feet high, the opening into them not being larger than to allow a man to creep in"' (106). Pascoe asserts that pre-colonial Aboriginal houses and buildings, which were sometimes in groups large enough to be recognised as village sites, were built to withstand harsh weather, accommodate thirty to forty people, and offer ease and comfort through their design (101, 104, 106–107). Visual representations of these structures are also reproduced in the texts.

The antiquity of Indigenous technologies has been thoroughly emphasised in *Dark Emu* by repeated use of temporal pointers: 'a very long time' (16), 'over long periods of time' (43), 'over such a vast time' (193), 'age-old relationship' (206) 'thousands of years' (10–11, 21, 39). Pascoe

also provides us approximate dates that situate the antiquity of some of the sites built by Indigenous peoples, such as the fish traps at Lake Condah and Brewarrina. Some have claimed that the fish traps on the Darling River at Brewarrina could be the oldest manmade structure on earth. In *Kocharethi*, the same sense of antiquity is articulated at the beginning when we are introduced to the characters, starting from a much earlier generation. It is also presented through the abiding nature of the rituals and customs portrayed in the novel.

A trans-Indigenous reading alongside *Dark Emu* is especially enabling for *Kocharethi*, which some scholars have decried for its lack of resolution at the end. For example, Tom Thomas argues that '*Kocharethi* is a giving in, passive surrender to the larger history of the nation-state' (229). I would argue against such an interpretation. *Kocharethi* embodies an implicit proposition that recommends a revision of several presuppositions, including what makes a text literary or non-literary. Thus, a trans-Indigenous reading of *Dark Emu* and *Kocharethi* can also launch an investigation into the unstable frontiers between fictional narratives and those based on fact. In the essay 'No place for a book? Fiction in Australia to 1890,' Tanya Dalziell has described 'the organisation of knowledge and writing into [history and fiction] categories by which the (colonial) world is then attempted to be ordered and known' as an undertaking of 19th century colonial Australia (101–03). On several occasions, Indigenous scholars have pointed to the often-problematic divide between fiction and non-fiction. Wiradjuri writer and academic Jeanine Leane in 'Subjects of the Imagination: On Dropping the Settler Pen,' challenges the notion that fiction is 'benign' because it is not non-fiction. In 'Politics of Writing,' Waanyi writer Alexis Wright argues that literature, the work of fiction, is a very good tool for presenting a truth (13).

Guided by interrogations on the fiction/non-fiction divide, this essay reads *Dark Emu*, categorised as a work of popular history, and *Kocharethi*, considered a realist novel, alongside each other. As one can see, *Dark Emu* and *Kocharethi* challenge certain assumptions and truth claims that were made regarding Indigenous peoples of Australia and Adivasi/tribal peoples of India, respectively, despite their classification as different types of texts. However, this essay does not wish to bring *Dark Emu* and *Kocharethi* into relations of forced equivalence. The conditions of publication and contexts of reception for *Dark Emu* and *Kocharethi* are agreeably different. In 'Decolonizing Comparison: Toward a Literary Studies,' Allen argues that a trans-Indigenous literary criticism is not about reaching 'the singular conclusion that all Indigenous self-representation is the "same"'; it is about 'creating new networks of Indigenous interactions as yet unimagined' (394). This essay hopes to have created such a pathway of interaction between *Dark Emu* and *Kocharethi* by explaining the wider context created by the Lockean theory of property which rendered the Indigenous peoples of Australia and the Adivasis/tribal people of India unable to assert their right to land and by demonstrating that the texts anchor themselves thematically in representations of Indigenous technologies of land cultivation and feats of engineering in resistance to the damaging legacies of Locke's theory of property.

NOTES

[i] It was not until 2006 when the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act was enacted that the rights of forest dwelling tribal communities in India were legally recognised for the first time.

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