

Historicising the Metaphor of Mother Earth

LYN MCCREDDEN, DEAKIN UNIVERSITY

In a diverse range of patriarchal, as well as feminist, ecological and postcolonial discourses, the metaphor of mother earth has been invoked. It is used variously to emphasise fecundity, nurture, oneness and even bigness of creation, and—in the case of patriarchal and imperial discourses—plunderability. The all-embracing bigness is picked up on in such phrases as the ‘mother of all wars’, ‘mother of all hurricanes’. The metaphor is still widely appealed to in the selling of various consumer goods, reflecting primarily a kind of cute essentialism: Strawberries: ‘The kiss of mother nature; Aloe Vera: ‘From the Laboratories of Mother Nature’; Blue Cheese salad dressing: ‘From Mother Nature to you’.

In this paper I am interested in reviewing a number of feminist and postcolonial positions over the last two decades regarding the use of this metaphor. Whereas some feminists and ecologists of the 1970s and early eighties were happy with, and indeed promulgated the concept of earth as a mother, her wide lap and fruitfulness, others see such metaphors as ‘essentialist’ and merely stereotyping.

Hesiod tells us that ‘in the beginning there was chaos, vast and dark space; then appeared Gaia, the deep breasted earth.’ (*Theogony* 116 ff.) According to Hesiod, Gaia is the only divinity with well defined features: from her all things issued. She was said to have given birth to the human race. Thus in the Myth of Erichonius she draws him forth from her own bosom and offers him up to Athene. Gaia was venerated at the Oracle of Delphi, the supreme centre of divination in Greece. But we are also told in some versions of Greek mythology that the birth of the world was in this way:

1. Birth of Gaia (Mother Earth)
2. Gaia gives birth to Uranus the Sky god
3. Uranus rapes Gaia.
4. The Hekadoncheries, Cyclopes and the Titans are born from Gaia.
5. The Titans march towards Mount Olympus.
6. Titans fight Uranus and eventually he is defeated by Chronos.
7. Chronos cuts of Uranus’ genitals with a sickle and throws them towards Cyprus. They land in the sea which begins to froth.
8. Aphrodite is born from the sea.

Many 1970s feminists developed this metaphor of mother earth. The widely-influential Susan Griffin in *Women and Nature: The Roaring Within*, published in 1978, wrote her lament for the earth as mother in a stream of consciousness, high lyrical, feminine style, in a section entitled ‘Our Nature: what is still wild in us’:

Now we will let the blood of our mother sink into this earth. This is what we will do with our grieving. We will cover her wounds with mud. We will tear leaves and branches from the trees and together pile them over her body. The sky will no longer see her fallen thus ... And only her bones will remain ... we will cradle her tusks in our trunks ... But though all traces of her vanish, we will not forget ... the scent of her killer is known to us now. We cannot turn our backs at the wrong moment. We must know when to trumpet and charge, when to recede into denser forest, when to turn and track the hunter. We will pass this feeling to our young, to those who follow our footsteps, who walk under our bodies ... And so a death like this death of our mother will not come easily to them ... (Griffin 238).

Here, the metaphor is developed as a lament for the passing of the mother's body—in fact her murder—and any action of mourning that body is constructed in terms of revenge, and the instincts of the hunt, rather than in any traditional political terms.

But by 1988 Kay Schaffer, in the ranks of feminist theorists of more poststructural and semiotic leanings, is publishing *Women and The Bush: Forces of Desire in the Australian Cultural Tradition*—dedicated, by the way, to her mother—writing in a much more analytical, political discourse, interpreting and repudiating what she saw as the imperialist and patriarchal mindsets which discursively constructed the land as feminine. She asks 'How is it that processes of self-representation and identification with the land came to be registered in discourse with reference to a speaking self who is masculine, and an object of discourse, an other (in this case the land) which is feminine?' (77) In a section entitled 'The "Bush Mum" Revisited' (70–3) Schaffer writes a radical extension of the 'liberal humanist and socialist-feminist frameworks' of earlier feminists Ann Summers (*Damned Whores and God's Police*) and Miriam Dixson (*The Real Matilda*). Manning Clark's *History of Australia* Clark has been describing life in the bush in these words:

... out of such squalor and hardship, which drove the menfolk into erratic, unsteady ways in the primitive huts of the gentry, a *matriarch* quietly took over the central position in the family, and in the huts of the servants a 'Mum' came into her own. (Schaffer 71)

While Summers had challenged Clark's passage as an idealisation of women and an eclipsing of the real hardships they underwent, Schaffer moves methodologically into the area of discourse analysis, examining 'how men and women are constituted through the phallogocentric systems of reference' (71). For Schaffer, the mum in this Clark passage is distinguished from the matriarch of the gentry, someone who 'took over' the power. She is 'mum', the peasant who 'comes into' it, and holds everything together for the seriously wobbly male. What Schaffer is after, rather than these mums and matriarchs who are still versions of the phallic mother and still 'subjects within patriarchy', is woman 'in her absolute difference from man ... not a revision of the second term: male/female (rediscovered)' (73).

This is the moment of poststructural *difference*. In such a moment the unificatory impulses of, for example, much ecofeminism or new age quests for oneness with primitive cultural knowledges is registered as deeply problematic. Jane Jacobs, in her scholarly essay 'Earth Honouring: Western Desires and Indigenous Knowledges' writes: 'such ecospiritual recovery of the planet' often 'conflates difference and denies history' (180); and 'boundaries of difference are breached in this quest' (181). Discussing this use by such eco-questers of the Aboriginal as land as mother, Jacobs quotes a range of feminist, aboriginal and ecological bodies and individuals who work with a version of this equation. Burnam Burnam, for instance, is quoted:

it will be the female peace-keeping which will save the planet from destruction by old males. Females make up three-quarters of the Green movement ... and it is Aboriginal women who possess an indisputable connection with our mother the Earth ... (Jacobs 182).

Jacobs is troubled by this kind of synthesising of approaches.

Ecospiritualists evoke the possibility of an ultimate invasive colonial moment in which all Australians are able to claim an Aboriginality by way of an appropriated and reimagined Wilderness Dreaming ... within the ecological discourse ... primitivist essentialism adjudicates on what is authentically Aboriginal.' (Jacobs 181)

At this point in her argument, Jacobs places such moments of unity as ultimately invasive and colonial, rejecting such Western desires 'to possess indigenous knowledges (as) held within a primitivist stereotype of the environmentally 'valid' and 'useful' indigene' (190).

I believe the work of David Tacey would also come within Jacobs's category of neo-colonial desire. On the cover of Tacey's much-discussed volume *Edge of the Sacred: Transformation in Australia*, Les Murray is quoted: 'This is much more than politics: it is the sort of book that framers of any future Australian republic should be reading.' The phrase 'much more than politics' indicates a methodology, indeed an ideology, which would challenge the political in the name of something above 'mere politics', a kind of spirituality. It sets alarm bells ringing for a number of more political and historical critical approaches. Within his particular Jungian framework, Tacey writes:

It seems to me that Aboriginal people are experiencing a psychocultural development that is virtually the reverse of what Euro-Australians are going through. The Western psyche has overdosed on patriarchal spirit (the Logos, or Word) and now needs to make an urgent turn toward maternal nature and the mysteries of the earth. The Aboriginal people, on the other hand, have long been children of the Earth Mother and have been nourished and contained by the archetypal field of nature for millennia. (138–9)

But lest we think Tacey is going to sit with this spiritualised Earth mother, or allow Aboriginal people to remain with her, he continues:

The earth mother encloses everything within her cosmic embrace: she is mistress of life, death, rebirth, and the natural mysteries. In this condition, there is a sense of spiritual harmony between humanity and nature; there is an almost Edenic relationship between all living beings. (139)

Sounds good, maybe, but thank goodness Tacey is there to inform us that all is not so cosy. This Jungian earth mother can be vicious. She wants to 'maintain her sovereignty above all else ... by keeping humanity dependent upon her.' Tacey concludes that 'The price to be paid ... for such primal harmony and perfection, is psychological rigidity and life-style prescribed by a whole series of collectivist and religious taboos' (140). Tacey's major concern here is not with appropriate political methods of action, but with the ways in which development of the individual self is hampered in this 'maternal circle'. Romantic whites are in danger of idealising this circle, and Aboriginal artists are nostalgic when they invoke it as a golden age to be replicated in the future.

While Tacey claims that 'no-one would want to underestimate the devastating impact that European colonisation has had upon the Aboriginal people'—a naive assertion at best—he goes on to argue that 'it may be possible to see something potentially creative and transformative in this tragic clash of cultures ... there could be a meaningful synchronicity to the clash of white and black in Australia.' (Tacey 141) Tacey's argument sits badly at odds with more overtly political arguments about the effects of colonisation by such critics as, for example, Suvendi Perera. Perera, in her review article of David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon*, uses the dismissive term 'happy hybridisation' to describe what she sees as a too easy, too comfortable uniting of differences which need to be kept apart, to be accentuated in *their difference*, for political reasons. For Perera, the two terms are never as archetypally simple as Tacey claims. Her argument is against the critics who would run the politically oppositional terms together in a cosy hybridity, all the children brought together with one mum (the latter is my terminology, extrapolated from Perera). She writes:

With its reliance on the willed combination of two prior, given components, hybridity seems an easy answer to the troubled questions of identity posed by settler societies, and one that erases the complexities of the process for its indigenous subjects. Rather than taking into account negotiations of an Aboriginality that must be—and here she is quoting from Aboriginal academic and writer Marcia Langton—must be ‘remade over and over again in a process of dialogue, of imagination, of representation and interpretation’, the discourse of hybridity often reproduces colonial constructs of Aboriginality; its narratives of union or reconciliation either simply substitute coloniser for colonised ... As such ... these strategies remain trapped within an essentialising, oppositional economy. (19–20)

Perera is here distinguishing between Langton’s politically imaginative making and remaking, dialogue and imagination, and the kinds of hybridity which she reads in *Remembering Babylon*, centering on the figure of Gemmy the white boy who has grown up amongst Aboriginals, and the figure of the settler’s child, Janet, whose entranced, menstrual femininity, according to Perera’s reading, is given spurious ‘transfiguration into a sign of emergent Australian citizenship’ (19).

Hybridity, at least in many of its textual forms, has been questioned by critics who resist the kinds of postmodernity of, for example, a Homi Bhaba or a Salman Rushdie, refusing in the name of a postcolonialism which strategically seeks to hold such ‘happy hybridisation’ at bay in the name of difference, otherness and the need to maintain rage against imperial atrocities.

For Perera, Malouf’s novel is ‘a narrative [which] easily absorbs the discourse of hybridisation: all its members learning and yearning to thrive industriously at the end in one happy hive’ (22). This critic certainly wants to keep at bay such ‘oneness’, as she continues to point to the effects of narratives which obliterate the atrocities, obscuring the body of the real, historical, other—the aboriginal. I would agree with Perera’s argument against easy, happy, learning and yearning hybridity when and if it obliterates the harsh political and material realities of colonisation. It can be argued that the features she repudiates—hybridity, oneness, onebody, harmony—are the very features of the maternal we’ve seen in its various manifestations. Here, these features have been deflected on to the activity of some critics and authors, and away from the unassimilable Aboriginal. With Tacey, the Aboriginal was the original locus of the maternal, mistakenly idealised and made nostalgic by white and black alike. For Schaffer the phallic mother must be dispensed with, along with all those mums and matriarchs of colonial literature, in order that the ‘absolute difference’ of male and female can be established. In Schaffer’s psychoanalytic criticism, the phallic mother is the smothering, all-embracing killer of such difference. In this way she would be at one with Perera, and with other feminists who find ‘essentialism’ to be the dirtiest word possible. But to return to Jane Jacobs’ arguments about such essentialism. She writes in the conclusion to ‘Earth Honouring’:

It has been commonplace for postcolonial critiques to attack essentialism like those in the primitivist or womanist subtexts of ecocentric and ecofeminist positions. Part of the presumption of this critique is that these essentialist idealizations are the constructions of colonial and neocolonial formations and may work to contain indigenous identities within a nonexistent premodern identity. (190).

Yet Jacobs offers a large, if cautious, ‘But’ to these longstanding objections about essentialism. In her case study of the Northern Territory Arrernte women’s struggle to save their sacred sites from being dammed, Jacobs is not altogether condemnatory of

the allegiances of sometimes universalising and essentialising groups—ecofeminists, black and white— as the forces of modernity and pre-modernity engage. She writes:

It is the ambiguity of these sites, their ability to slip into and out of the universal issues of patriarchy and environmentalism, as well as an elusive premodern ecosensibility, which made them the loci of broader political coalitions. (For the Arrernte women) These sites contained a memory of universal oppression and exploitation as well as an unknowable hope of an alternative world. These sites became objects of desire for those who seek ecological salvation in the wisdom of the elders. (191)

It is important to acknowledge the existence of Western desires for Aboriginal knowledges. But to acknowledge them is not to discount them. There is a universalising and essentialising aspect to the struggle to maintain the sacred (pre-modern? maternal? Dreaming?) knowledges of the Arrernte, the Arrernte desire to maintain their sacred secrets, just as there are universalising, essentialising aspects to white desires to be involved in Aboriginal knowledge and the sacred. There is a need to acknowledge and then to discriminate between the various essentialising moves of those involved in understanding the land and human relations to it. Some moves will fall inevitably into the neocolonialist category. Others are modes of seeking to remember and to reconcile equally.

Mother Earth is an ancient, constructed myth, a trope into whose lap the endless struggles of pre-modernity and now of postmodernity have been poured. One moment in the history of feminist use of this trope sees mother earth as an endlessly fruitful antedote to patriarchal logic. Another moment sees it as the obliterator of difference, the phallic mother who remains a tool of patriarchal discourses. Current struggles are more strategically ambiguous – mother earth both at home and on the hustings.

Works cited

- Griffin, Susan. *Women and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her*. New York: Harper and Row, 1978.
- Jacobs, Jane. 'Earth Honouring: Western Desires and Indigenous Knowledges' in Alison Blunt and Gillian Rose. *Writing Women and Space: Colonial and Postcolonial Geographies*. New York and London: Guildford Press, 1994. pp. 169–196.
- Malouf, David. *Remembering Babylon*. London: Vintage, 1994. (First published Chatto & Windus, 1993).
- Perera, Suvendrini. 'Unspeakable Bodies: Representing the Aboriginal in Australian Critical Discourse'. *Meridian*. Vol.13, no.1, May 1994: 15–26.
- Schaffer, Kay. *Women and the Bush: Forces of Desire in the Australian Cultural Tradition*. New York, Melbourne: Cambridge UP, 1988.
- Tacey, David. *Edge of the Sacred: Transformation in Australia*. Melbourne: Harper Collins, 1995.