

[Review] Contesting ‘Wilderness’: Two Settler Perspectives on Wilderness Discourse

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Introduction

How, as scholars in the environmental humanities, should we approach the fraught concept of wilderness? The following reflections on wilderness discourse are written from our positions as settler scholars in the environmental humanities and as co-convenors of the ASLEC-ANZ Postgraduate and ECR Reading Group. This group was formed in 2021 in response to the ASLEC-ANZ 2021 conference theme, Ngā Tohu o te Huarere: Conversations Beyond Human Scales. Our meetings continued post-conference and we began 2022 with a discussion on ‘Contesting Wilderness’, with readings from Marcia Langton and Malcom Ferdinand. This article stems from that conversation, bringing some of our resulting thoughts to bear on our own experiences as settler scholars living in colonised place.

Langton’s influential paper, ‘What Do We Mean by Wilderness? Wilderness and *Terra Nullius* in Australian Art’ challenges settler notions of wilderness via an engagement with settler-Australian art as just one of many examples of settler cultural expression that relies on an exclusionary and oppressive conceptualisation of ‘protected’ natural areas in Australia. Langton’s overarching argument is that ‘[t]here is no wilderness, but there are cultural landscapes’ (30). It is these landscapes that she interrogates in her paper. Central to Langton’s argument is the fact that wilderness—as a concept and as physical space—is a direct outcome of the dispossession and genocide of First Nations people worldwide.

Ferdinand’s piece presents a similar argument in his contestation of the settler concept of wilderness through an exploration of marronage: ‘the practice by which Maroons—fugitive slaves—created communities in remote spaces, including secluded hills, mountains, and swamps, as refuges from where different struggles for their liberation were launched’ (184). Ferdinand’s paper is a direct response to a 2018 paper by Andreas Malm titled ‘In Wilderness Lies the Liberation of the World: On Maroon Ecology and Partisan Nature’. Ferdinand argues that Malm effectively silences ‘racialized others’, such as the Maroons, through his Marxist framing and promotion of wilderness as the space in which true freedom lies (184). In light of this silencing, Ferdinand challenges ‘the ability of wilderness discourses to critically confront their colonial foundations’ and their othering of Indigenous and Black peoples, which in turn ignores, for example, the Maroons’ unique understandings and connections with Earth (184).

Langton's and Ferdinand's detailed acknowledgements of the connections between settler colonialism and the concept of wilderness spoke well to our reading group's previous discussions. They spoke to us personally, as readers, too. This article is oriented to our personal responses to these readings. We do not provide a detailed review or discussion of the relevant scholarship here but rather draw on ideas from these readings, together with other influential works discussed by the reading group such as readings by William Cronon and Robin Wall Kimmerer, as we reflect on our own experiences with wilderness discourse.

Jessica

In October of 2019, I travelled—via four cars, two aeroplanes, and two buses—from my then-home in Iowa City, in the American Midwest, to Te Rerenga Wairua, also called Cape Reinga, at the northern tip of the North Island in Aotearoa. The cape, which holds great spiritual significance for Māori people, also marks the northern terminus of Te Araroa, the nation's 3,000-kilometre long-distance walking trail. After many years of dreaming, I'd uprooted my life to come here to walk that trail, and I knew before I set out that I wanted to write about the journey afterward. Standing at the Cape Reinga lighthouse, looking out over the foaming tidal race where the turquoise Tasman meets the wide cobalt Pacific—with miles upon miles of beach unspooling behind me, and forests and mountains beyond—I felt nearly undone. I could not encompass it: the unbounded beauty around me, the unknown awaiting me, the privilege of being there at all. But even then—and as the walk progressed—my profound gratitude existed in tandem with a lurking uneasiness. That perhaps the joy I took in such places stemmed from an internalised colonial view of what wilderness was and what it meant; that, moreover, there was something inherently suspect in any American flying blithely to a remote Pacific island nation half a world away and pronouncing herself to feel any meaningful connection with that land.

I carried these tensions with me to the township of Bluff at the bottom of the South Island, and indeed was still holding them two years after the walk, when I found myself trying to write a book about it. My hesitations crystallised when I joined a postgraduate environmental humanities reading group. If the readings we shared with one another, and the conversations that emerged from those readings, did not precisely resolve these tensions for me (can such tensions ever be fully resolved?), they did open up my understandings of them in new ways.

I had long loved hiking and paddling in remote mountains and waterways, from childhood summers spent kayaking the broads of Lake Winnepesaukee, or plunging into the icy North Atlantic surf off Cape Cod, to—in my early twenties—an eleven-hundred-mile trek up the southern half of the Appalachian Trail. The joy I took thereby felt visceral and, in a

sense, incontestable. Yet I was not new to the idea of thinking critically about wilderness discourses, nor to the notion that such discourses, in the West, have tended to perpetuate systems of disenfranchisement alienating Indigenous peoples worldwide from their lands. I had been profoundly influenced by William Cronon's seminal essay 'The Trouble with Wilderness' and had, I believed, some solid grasp on the insidious effects of constructing wild places as necessarily unpeopled. What I had not quite realised was how deeply Americanised the discourse was to which I had until then been exposed. Langton and Ferdinand—in particular in their discussions of *terra nullius* (a legal concept not specifically historically used in the continental US) and of the need to look to Indigenous and Black peoples' cultural understandings of place—helped shift those framings for me.

From Cape Reinga, Te Araroa proceeds down what settlers call Ninety Mile Beach, then bends eastward through the Northland forests until it reaches the Bay of Islands. There, it passes through Waitangi—the place where the Treaty of Waitangi, Aotearoa New Zealand's founding document, was signed, and accordingly a place that obliges one to confront both the promises of that document (partnership and protection between Māori and British settlers) and the myriad historical breaches of those promises. I spent a day visiting the Treaty grounds and the museum there, while also letting a strained ankle tendon heal—and again I grappled with the question of what my walk meant. Such journeys are often, within a Western wilderness paradigm, framed as epic and Romantic hero-journeys; I loved this notion as equally as I was sceptical of it. Aotearoa New Zealand's landscapes had their own densely complex histories, existing entirely apart from any individual's own quest, for one thing, and could not be reduced to mere set dressing. For another, as a white descendant of European settlers in the New World—enabled in fundamental ways to be in Aotearoa New Zealand at all by the same sweeping historical forces of Empire—I was acutely aware that I was doubly an outsider to this place. Later, Langton's and Ferdinand's work would help underscore these understandings.

The entirety of Te Waipounamu, Aotearoa New Zealand's South Island, was in 1840 declared *terra nullius*—jaw-droppingly, in the same year and by the same British official who spearheaded the Treaty of Waitangi. Somehow, promising partnership at one end of the country did not preclude him from effectively legally erasing people at the other end. As I meandered the high passes of the Tasman region, wound through the Nelson Lakes, and climbed the grassy alpine peaks of Otago, I thought about Kāi Tahu, the people who had come to this place when it was truly uninhabited by humans; who had explored and named it and come to know it deeply. Much as Ferdinand calls for an understanding of the Maroons and their lands that centres their own words and understandings, I wondered whether Māori stories and culture might offer me a different way of understanding connection to place, one that might elide the more destructive aspects of the Western, Americanised discourse with which I had grown up. I also wondered whether seeking such an understanding would play out as merely appropriative, a white outsider claiming

to have naturalised herself in some way—and thereby reproducing precisely the appropriative harm she meant to confront. When our reading group engaged with Potawatomi writer and scholar Robin Wall Kimmerer's work, I was grateful to encounter a perspective that argued for the possibility of meaningful settler connection with land—one that relies upon work, and time, and listening, and cultivating a sense of mutual responsibility; one that is not identical to that of Indigenous peoples, but one that is nevertheless possible.

Kimmerer emphasises that achieving connection with a particular land is an ongoing process; like any decolonisation effort, it cannot be reduced to a checklist of particular actions to be ticked off and tidied away: connection achieved, restitution accomplished. Writers Nic Low and Kennedy Warne both echo this framing in an Aotearoa New Zealand context; moreover, they suggest that walking, as a practice, may be a key means of achieving such connection. Low (who is Māori) cites Warne (who is Pākehā) as an advocate for the notion that 'beyond individual recreation, walking is politically and spiritually significant: it's how we belong to this land' (151). Warne agrees: to experience place relationally, rather than transactionally, he argues, by 'turning away from objectification and towards subjective engagement, from resource to relationship,' is the challenge set to every settler community. In other words, the move from wilderness to landscape requires patience and vulnerability; it proceeds 'one step at a time.'

To allow for the possibility of connection with a landscape—and even to work to create such a connection—is not, of course, sufficient to undo one's participation in injustice. I was, and remain, wary of the risk of engaging in performative guilt—the 'white women's tears' trope that gets justifiably raised when people who look like me wring their hands over their own complicity in the colonialist machine. I am still searching for ways to make more tangible, justice-oriented change in the communities and lands that now surround me. Yet if anxiety is not useful as an end point, it may be useful as a starting one. Drawing on Homi Bhabha's work on cultural shared-space—which identifies 'anxiety as essential to the emergence of new modes of cultural expression,' the Australian scholar Ailsa Blackwood considers 'the potential present in spaces of anxiety' and explores the possibility that 'journeying this anxiety, in corporeal ways, may contribute to discussions around conciliation' (5–6).

Works by Blackwood and by Ourania Emmanouil—on the Caterpillar and Lurujarri Dreaming tracks in Australia respectively—specifically investigate not only long trails as shaped by colonial histories and tensions, but long walks as a possible locus for resolution of those tensions: places, and practices, by which Indigenous and non-Indigenous people might develop co-cultural and conciliatory shared spaces and a paradigm for uniting to protect and care for the land. I am, therefore, hopeful that the act of walking Te Araroa,

in and of itself, may have served meaningfully to catalyze the process of deeper and continuing work.

If the terra nullius of wilderness is one kind of faulty construct, the terra nullius of scholarly or artistic terrain is another: whatever passions or ideas drive us, however idiosyncratic or particular we may imagine them to be, they almost certainly dovetail or overlap in scope with the passions and ideas of others. I have had several such epiphanies of community over the course of my artistic and academic life: that it was possible to get a degree in writing literary essays, for one; that there was such a thing as the environmental humanities (and these people held conferences!), for another. To read in community, to connect meaningfully in conversation with texts that speak in their own way to each of us, to release the notion of worthwhile work as emerging primarily from the lone genius—surely these actions, too, are a kind of reconception of wilderness. They call upon us to see ourselves and each other as collectively creating new ways of understanding the cultural landscapes we share. And in this way surely they, too, are part of a larger movement away from colonial silos and forced hierarchies, toward each other and the nonhuman and the world to which we all belong.

Rachel

For many in Australia, bush and wilderness are one and the same. Once, after giving an online lecture to North American students on Australian climate fiction, I was asked what the bush actually is. I felt woefully unprepared to answer this, and largely still feel this way. ‘I can see it from my window,’ I told them, a little clumsily, and then attempted to define it across the various contexts in which the term is commonly used—as representative of a variety of habitats and ecosystems; as a place for outdoor recreational pursuits; and, not least of all, as a defining part of Indigenous Australian cultures and, more recently, Australian settler culture, albeit in vastly different ways. I was also aware that I was providing this definition as a settler teacher and scholar myself.

The definition of what makes up the ‘true’ Australian bush is of course highly contestable. It is a cultural concept even more so than it is a physical place. When I tell people where I live, I say that it’s a bush block on Dja Dja Wurrung Country, in Central Victoria. I identify as someone who loves the bush but by many people’s standards, I’ve probably spent precious little time there. I’m perhaps not really living in the ‘true bush’ on my bush block, being a mere 10-minute drive from the nearest country town and being surrounded by farmland and regularly used roads. Most of my early experiences of what I thought was the bush occurred in national parks and, later, through the artworks of painters like Frederick McCubbin—a print of his iconic work *Lost* hung in my grandfather’s house, and the same print now hangs in mine. It took me some years to properly reflect on the problematics behind such works, such as the centralisation of the white settler, the

pastoral evocation of the Australian bush, and the disavowal of Indigenous peoples and cultures through such an evocation. Learning more about Australia's colonisation as I grew older, I began to feel deeply uncomfortable with the premise of such works, while still confusingly experiencing a sense of connection to them. Reading Langton's critique of such artwork in her contestation of wilderness broadened my perspective much further and provided an opportunity to reflect on whether it was possible to still appreciate these depictions of the Australian wilderness given their violent historical context. The possibility was deeply unsettling but seemed to speak to some kind of need to feel a connection to the bush as a settler.

Our bush block, existing in contrast to the surrounding farmland, also contains a garden of built-up beds, lawn and raised veggie boxes. One might therefore glimpse farmland, garden, or the bush when traversing the area—or all three at once, depending on where you stand. These three landscapes feel so disparate, with the 'wild' bush on our block seemingly containing much more of the 'wonder' that Cronon describes as 'the state of mind that today defines wilderness' (23). Really, though, there is wonder to be found across all of these spaces, but I often feel ill-equipped to see this—and of course finding wonder in vast agricultural landscapes is tantamount to enjoying McCubbin's work: it has its own kind of pastoral beauty, but it is a beauty that masks the enduring colonial destruction of Indigenous land.

Just like my early impressions of McCubbin, the first impressions of many settler-colonisers of wilderness in the flesh are rarely reflective of the Indigenous cultures or violent colonial histories of these places. We, as settlers, are not simply ignorant of these histories, though—we are often complicit in furthering the problematic binaries of nature/culture, human/nonhuman that cement the notion of wilderness so firmly in Western culture. I'm guilty of this in the way I separate my Australian urban experience (over most of my life) from my Australian bush experience (over the past three years, in Central Victoria). My time in nature has been made possible through privilege—to be able to travel as a child to national parks both near and far to my home; to 'visit' nature recreationally and then return home to a comfortable, relatively safe suburban existence. Now, my time in nature is defined by the privilege of buying and living on a piece of bush as an adult.

As Langton writes, any deeper connection settlers feel with wilderness masks the reality that 'wild places' have long been used by capitalist-colonisers for material gain. Like the United States, many Australian 'protected areas' lie at the heart of the country's national identity and tourist appeal, such as the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park, Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park and Daintree National Park. The forcible removal of First Nations peoples from such areas, and the coloniser's subsequent exploitation of Indigenous imagery in artworks and tourism campaigns as described by Langton, speak volumes about the

problematic discourse of wilderness. The national park ‘commodifies “nature,”’ creating a culturally constructed ideal of wilderness in the process (Langton 24) that both removes and exploits Indigenous peoples and heritage. As Langton argues, ‘the valorisation of “wilderness” has accompanied an amnesia of the fate of indigenous peoples’ (19).

Even though I felt like my perception of wilderness and national parks had become more nuanced and informed since my time visiting these places as a child and young adult, our reading group discussion revealed how I still reinforce some of the above Western binaries in my home life on the bush block. This is despite my feeling that I was fulfilling some kind of sustainable, off-grid existence that was more closely aligned with nature—an existence that still involves very little if any enactment of decolonising processes. The term ‘bush block’ itself enforces Western perceptions of bush—the term suggests that it is not ‘true bush’ but simply a residential block with bush on it, constrained by straight lines and right angles and determined by council planning and property laws.

There is no remnant vegetation on the block where I live; instead, it is made up of trees that were likely replanted about 100 years ago in an effort to revegetate farmland. Despite attempts to ‘bring back’ the bush, the forest is punctuated by non-native succulents, precious few older trees, with little low-lying scrub due to the neighbour’s wandering sheep who long ago escaped the confines of his farm. What I see as wilderness on my bush block was no doubt vastly different centuries ago. It was once colonial farmland, surrounded by more farmland and possibly bustling mine sites during the Victorian Gold Rush of the 1800s, and before that, box-ironbark forest—older and far more of it than exists today. While the young box-ironbark bush has now replaced some colonial farmland, there has so far been no proper resolution of Dja Dja Wurrung sovereignty by colonialist powers, and so this is still colonised space.

Three years living on our bush block, and the bush seems to be creeping into our constructed human spaces. Native grasses grow closer to our carport and new wattle seedlings sprout along the fenceline. So-called weeds (dandelions, various non-native grasses, and creeping oxalis, amongst others) also dominate our garden as we struggle to keep up with outdoor chores in the wake of the extreme wet weather events of late 2022. In reality, though, some of the ‘weeds’ are edible and nothing creeps or encroaches. It’s already there—just separated by the loose wire and cylindrical posts of our lopsided garden fence, and divided mentally by preconceptions of ‘controlled’ and ‘wild’ outdoor spaces. I tell interested people that our mudbrick house is set within an ‘inner garden’ that’s fenced in from the outer bush. Despite my knowledge of wilderness discourse, I find it difficult to do away with this view. I usually don’t perceive the garden as in any way similar to the bush, despite efforts to plant native and indigenous plant species in our reworking of the space.

This problematic separation of green spaces is famously described by William Cronon using the image of the tree:

In the wilderness, we need no reminder that a tree has its own reasons for being, quite apart from us. The same is less true in the gardens we plant and tend ourselves: there it is far easier to forget the otherness of the tree. (23)

Something that has helped me navigate this complexity is a confrontation with ‘the edge’: an idea we explored in another of our reading group meetings on permaculture, with readings by Alexandra Crosby and colleagues, and Randolph Haluza-DeLay and Ron Berezan. We discussed how this principle has already been teased out and enacted in many non-Western cultures. Kimmerer, whose work was read alongside the above permaculture readings, explores the concept of the edge in *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Speaking about the gift of wild strawberries, Kimmerer describes the fields where her family picked them as ‘miles of hay fields divided by stone walls, long abandoned from farming but not yet grown up to forest’ (22). There are no wild strawberries on our bush block, just potted ones in my greenhouse, the fruits stolen by rats and antechinus as soon as they turn red. But this description resonates with me—a place that was once farmland, not yet ‘grown up’ enough to be forest, a complex mishmash of plant, fungi and animal species, both native and non-native—and yet can it still be ‘bush’? Perhaps yes, it can be—a bush that is free from the constraints of wilderness discourse.

Kimmerer’s teachings have affected my perception of the edges and borders I create myself in our garden, set in the cleared circle of land that contains our house, sheds, and chicken coop, in the middle of the surrounding forest. I delight in the wattle spreading its seeds both within and outside of the garden. We’ve taken down some of our inner fences, opening up the garden to the bush in what feels like a more receptive way. Golden Everlastings are flowering more in the surrounding bush than we’ve seen in previous years and I have plans to plant some of these and other native flowers in my veggie patch. It’s not that I wouldn’t have done these things before, but a renewed, multifaceted perception of the bush brings a new flavour to these ideas, highlighting how menial decisions in practices of gardening and landscaping actually speak to an espousal of the edge and a contestation of wilderness.

Such interrogations of how one conceptualises green space are certainly important from my perspective as a humanities scholar, but they are not a solid enactment of decolonisation. Living here, I have largely failed to engage in real decolonising work, perhaps because I am hesitant to try and decolonise in ways that appear tokenistic or inadequate, but also because I am so often caught up in academic posturing that I neglect to act in a more tangible way. I am also aware of the irony of doing further posturing here in this article while lamenting my lack of decolonising actions.

I find myself wondering how gardening might help. I don't think my green thumb is developed enough to contribute in any meaningful way just yet, but land management more broadly might provide some opportunity for decolonising practices. Given that most of the trees on our block are relatively young, First Nations cultural burning practices would help to sustain and prepare them for extreme bushfires in the future, as Victor Steffensen—Tagalaka man and co-founder of Firesticks Alliance—explains in his book *Fire Country*:

The frequency of seasonal burns helps to nurture the young trees until they grow high enough to get out of reach of fires that are too hot for them... The aim is to re-establish the trees over many years until there is canopy back to provide shade. Trees also help provide the right conditions for many native plants, and some won't grow unless the trees are there. (186)

While at face value there is plenty of bush on the block, there is very little canopy—too many young trees shooting straight up to compete for sunlight rather than creating the wide canopy which might provide the conditions that Steffensen speaks of.

Cultural burning on private property is an opportunity not just for better land management, but for settler-colonisers to re-learn human-land relations, albeit carefully, without appropriating Indigenous epistemologies of these relations. In an article for *Arena* co-authored by Indigenous and non-Indigenous fire and health experts, Danielle Couch and colleagues describe how cultural burning is an important part of 'reasserting [Aboriginal] sovereignty through a manifest agency and authority with respect to Country.' Simultaneously, Indigenous fire practitioners are sharing their insights with non-Indigenous Australians about 'how better to manage, work, live with, and heal our relationship with the environment' (Couch et al.). DJAARA, the Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation, recently announced the re-establishment of Djandak Wi (Country Fire) on Dja Dja Wurrung Country: a cultural fire practice which 'involves seasonal burning and careful stewardship over a long period of time' that can lead to the 'reduction of weeds and re-emergence of native species' (DJAARA). Making payment to Dja Dja Wurrung people for cultural burning services is something that I hope to do but have failed to do so far. This is because I have not prioritised proper land management, let alone prioritised tangible decolonising actions beyond the pages of scholarly thought pieces. Further, in a time where larger tracts of land are a priority, my small plot of land is unlikely to be of interest to already overburdened Dja Dja Wurrung community members involved in this work of cultural resurgence.

Shifting beyond Western wilderness discourse is something that needs to happen externally to theory—it is a change that must be materially lived and actioned. This is not

something that we spoke about explicitly during our reading group discussion, but it is an idea that has concerned me since. At this point, I'm not sure what the answer is, but a focus on material decolonising practices in my own life is perhaps one way forward in this respect. Steadily, I hope, the creeping edge will continue to complicate my settler perceptions of the lands and waters that make up my home.

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