

Learning to Read Country: Bruce Pascoe's *Earth*, an Indigenous Ecological Allegory

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In this paper I coin the term 'Indigenous ecological allegory' and argue that the 2001 novel, *Earth*, by the Indigenous Australian writer Bruce Pascoe (a Bunurong man) is an example. To come to this term, I first combine Maureen Quilligan's outline of allegorical structure and function with post-colonial theories of allegory and the notion of *interpolation*. Similar to the way in which colonised characters interpolate the dominant discourses of the colonial culture in post-colonial allegory (in what I am calling ecological allegories) Nature, in personified form, interpolates the realist structure of the narrative. So, what I am calling an indigenous ecological allegory is one in which this personified Nature is based upon an Indigenous people's worldview.¹ Pascoe's novel encodes such an indigenous worldview of nature in the word Country.² Debbie Bird Rose explains the term Country:

Country in Aboriginal English is not only a common noun but also a proper noun. People talk about country in the same way they would talk about a person: they speak to country, sing to country, visit country, worry about country, feel sorry for country, and long for country. People say that country knows, hears, smells, takes notice, takes care, is sorry or happy . . . country is a living entity with a yesterday, today and tomorrow, with a consciousness, and a will toward life. Because of this richness, country is home, and peace; nourishment for body, mind, and spirit; heart's ease (7).

Although the novel is set in Wathaurong Country, which is described in the novel as west of Melbourne in the 'Ballarat, Geelong, Airey's Inlet Region' (241), the setting, based on a specific landscape, is not a literal place but a mythological one: a textual landscape based on the oral legends of Wathaurong Country. Furthermore, the time period in which it is set—in the early days of Federation at the turn of the century (at the time of King Edward VII)—is also mythic in the sense that it was a period in Australian literary history when national myths of the Outback and the Bush developed an Australian Tradition in Australian Literature. As readers come to understand the worldview of Country, the narrative events of a colonial war between non-Indigenous and Indigenous people become re-interpreted through this alternative metaphysics. Furthermore, as Country comes to dominate the novel, the English / Australian language is opened up to a polysemy in which the indigenous worldview is encoded. Through this polysemy, the colonial worldview of property laws (signified by the fence), *terra nullius*, and Biblical injunctions are subtly interpolated and transformed. Ultimately though, this transformation involves a re-interpretation, through Country, of Biblical notions of the sacred and the law. As such, I claim the novel to be an indigenous ecological allegory. As I will argue below, this transformation of Biblical narrative is significant from an ecocritical perspective, in which the very language of Australian English and its relation

to the natural environment of the Australian continent is bound up with both Biblical and Enlightenment worldviews.

Allegory as a literary mode of representation of the natural environment is an ideal literary form for writing nature. One of the questions of ecocriticism, which continues to be debated, is that of constructing a literary / linguistic representation of the natural / organic world, which exists outside text and language.³ There are numerous approaches to this question in ecocriticism. One is to analyse the literary / discursive techniques used in the textual construction of 'nature'. For example, while Realism and Naturalism are literary genres that, as MH Abrams writes, purport 'to represent life as it is' (260), the representation is based on literary conventions and codes. Abrams explains that literary critics have

proposed that both the selection of subject matter and the techniques of rendering in a realistic novel depend on their accordance with literary convention and codes which the reader has learned to interpret, or *naturalize*, in a way that makes the text seem a reflection of everyday reality (261).

One method of ecocriticism, then, is to analyse and highlight the constructedness of this representation. Alternatively, philosopher Kate Rigby argues that it is in the moments of revelation of a poem's very inability to represent the outside world that the outside world is made manifest within the text (12). Similarly, ecocritics such as William Howarth suggest that the deictic possibilities (that which refers to something else) of literary texts provide one methodology whereby the natural world is given representation: 'Ecocriticism, instead of taxing science for its use of language to represent (mimesis), examines its ability to point (deixis)' (80). The mode of allegory, however, provides one method whereby a literary text may represent 'nature outside the text' without the use of realism, which purports to be 'a reflection of reality'. As I explain below, the move to allegory from realism incorporates deixis, where that world of 'nature outside the text' is represented in allegorical form; for as Paul de Man writes, the allegorical sign does not refer directly to 'nature outside the text' but to other signs / texts which preceded it: 'it remains necessary, if there is to be allegory, that the allegorical sign refer to another sign that precedes it' (207). This temporal relationship between signs, between text and pretext, is at the heart of allegory and foregrounds the very constructedness of the representation.⁴

In the post-colonial Australian context, competing worldviews operate in relation to land. It is the temporal aspect of the allegorical sign that allows for the representation of these competing worldviews. When the European colonists came to the so-called new land, the worldview they brought with them (and which remains dominant) was vastly different from the one they encountered. Howard and Frances Morphy explain:

Descriptions of Australia by early explorers are 'descriptions' of what it might become. In the process they had to destroy what was there already. The past of the 'new' land had no existence except as it was reflected through the clashes of the moment. But the colonists also brought with them an 'old' past in the form of

distant landscapes experienced elsewhere, and these influenced their conceptualisation of the 'new' land (104).

Thus, in relation to the Australian landscape, the competing worldviews are both textual and temporal. What is currently referred to as indigenous cosmology is a textual account of *oral* stories and 'was there already'. The settler's worldview came from an 'old past' of 'distant landscapes experienced elsewhere', an inflexible mneme formed by time and place. Both these worldviews can be understood as pre-texts, to which Pascoe's allegorical narrative refers.

The term *allegory* means 'other speech'; that a narrative has within it an 'other' meaning defines it as an allegory. Furthermore, it is this 'otherness' that determines the structure, form and function of allegory. A multiplicity of meaning is opened up as readers become aware that the narrative is not literal. Nevertheless, allegory (through numerous techniques such as narratorial commentary, debate, narrative digressions, and cyclical structure) limits the play of signification that is initially laid bare, thus guiding readers to the possibilities of hidden meaning within the narrative. This hidden meaning is traditionally didactic.

The allegorical intention⁵ in *Earth* is to educate contemporary readers about Country and, in doing so, transform their worldview. As in numerous allegories, the landscape of the novel is enchanted with Other World spirit voices and message-bearing animals. The protagonist Frankie Palmer, however, is an Aboriginal fencer who is blind to the landscape, seeing the land only as property and object due to his education in a church orphanage. (The word *blind* is recurrent in the narrative.) In the Christian Biblical worldview in which Frankie was educated, the Aboriginal cosmology of the land as spirit, sacredness and divinity (i.e. pagan) is anathema. Like the fences he constructs on the land, demarcating property and colonising wilderness, the Biblical worldview banishes Aboriginal cosmology from thought and experience, and from the language of its encoding. Yet during the course of the narrative, Frankie learns, with the help of his grandson Alfie and the Indigenous elders and spirits, to see Country and read its signs. Along with Frankie, readers of Pascoe's allegory must familiarise themselves with aspects of the indigenous culture and worldview in order to decipher the text. Philip Morrissey, in his survey of Aboriginal literature in Australia, writes that: 'the challenge to Aboriginal writing at the present moment lies in the type of reader waiting to receive the book . . . the critical challenge for Aboriginal writers is always to call new readers into existence' (320). Pascoe's novel acts to 'call new readers into existence', tempting new subjectivities that go beyond colonial dualist⁶ relations.

Set in the early days of Federation just after the legendary 1890s in the mythic Outback of the white Australian Tradition, the narrative is centred around a battle between a small settlement of non-Indigenous and Indigenous people fighting over land ownership. At the heart of this battle is the validity of ownership based on a colonial relationship to land. Other bush narratives that are signified by this period are written from the point of view of white settlers such as the squatter, the selector, the swagman, or their respective wives—each of whom has (within the white tradition) socio-historically decreasing

claims upon the land. The discourse of conquest (or its failure) over a mysterious and often harsh land through selection, fencing, clearing, farming and pastoralism informs such narratives. In this discourse, unproductive wild land is transformed through colonial law and labour into economic productivity. This colonial discourse is based on both a Biblical worldview (dominion over land and the sense of sacred as abstract from nature) and an Enlightenment worldview (land as material object). While Pascoe's allegory signals these traditions through the historical period of its setting and Biblical pre-text, an indigenous perspective on nation formation, repressed within national narratives, is the position from which the narrative unfolds. As a result, the dualist organisation of the white Australian worldview is subverted.

Ecological Allegory

Allegory is commonly understood as an extended metaphor or a narrative with two levels of signification 'in which the agents and actions, and sometimes the setting as well, are contrived by the author to make coherent sense on the "literal", or primary, level of signification, and, at the same time to signify a second, correlated order of signification' (Abrams 5). Maureen Quilligan refigures a traditional understanding of 'word said and meaning meant' to a definition of allegory where the Other named by the term *allos* in the word *allegory* 'is not some other hovering above the words of the text, but the possibility of an otherness, a polysemy, inherent in the very words on the page' (26). Thus as both these 'levels' of signification exist concurrently on the page, Quilligan defines allegory as 'the simultaneity of the process of signifying multiple meaning' (26). This multiplicity of meaning in allegory allows for differing worldviews to co-exist. It is out of this possibility that post-colonial allegory emerges.

In post-colonial allegories the language and discourses of a colonised people are situated within those of the dominant colonial culture by the use of the literary technology of interpolation. Post-colonial critic Bill Ashcroft explains that it is through interpolation that post-colonial transformation is made possible: 'the process of insertion, interruption, interjection, which is suggested by the act of interpolation, is the initial (and essential) movement in the process of post-colonial transformation' (34). Interpolation involves the use of a dominant discourse by a colonised subject in a way that alters the meanings made possible by that discourse. It allows the colonised subject to inhabit the colonial discourse without accepting its rules of signification, giving instead new meanings and connotations to the objects of that discourse.

While post-colonial allegories utilise interpolative strategies in relation to the human subjects of coloniser and colonised, what I am calling *ecological allegory* involves a more-than-human subjectivity—personified nature—representing what has come to be understood as an ecological worldview.⁷ (For early works on this topic, see James Lovelock *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* (1979), and Arne Naess *Deep Ecology* (1973)). In such allegories, personified nature inhabits and interpolates the realist narrative; and the realist narrative signifies the dominant Enlightenment and colonial worldview of nature and land.

A Brief Overview of the Allegorical Structure of *Earth*

Pascoe's text follows the architectonics of medieval allegory, which contains a cyclic structure of a threshold scene followed by related scenes and commentary. It is the function of the threshold scene to present to readers the problem of polysemy that the subsequent narrative explores. The threshold scene moves readers from a realist narrative into an allegorical world in which the meanings of words that were taken for granted in the realist context are put into question. Pascoe's text is organised by this structure of a threshold scene followed by subsequent related scenes and commentary, adding narrative nuances to the themes unfolding in the threshold scene. The commentary, coming from the spirit voices in the landscape, interprets these scenes through the Indigenous worldview.

For example, the first chapter is organised into eleven parts, thus illustrating the allegorical structure of a threshold scene followed by related scenes and commentary. The first section establishes the identity of the central protagonist, Frankie, an Indigenous man who works as a fencer for white landowners, and who has denied his cultural heritage. Frankie is contrasted with his grandson Alfie, who is awakening to his indigenous culture. In this threshold scene the significant questions explored throughout the narrative are raised: the authority of colonial property laws and their physical manifestation in fences; the metaphysics of land and the natural environment; the cycles of birth, life and death; indigenous identity, whiteness, as well as the truth and morality upon which these discourses are based.

The following scene involves a dialogue between Frankie's (white) wife Claudie, who is a midwife, and one of the expectant mothers she helps. While establishing Claudie's identity, this scene presents the antinomies of the birth cycle—the pain and beauty and the desire that created it and through which humanity is connected to the cycles of nature. The third section is a discussion between Frankie and Claudie about events occurring in the previous two sections. First, there is the discussion about birth, followed by Alfie's increasing interest in his Aboriginality and the consequent threat this might present to their social standing within the white community in which they live. Finally, they discuss the desire between two lovers, out of which a new star / child and future leader will be born. The im/morality of such sensual desire within the context of Christian discourses of purity is contrasted with the notion of sex as a natural force. Furthermore, this third scene is located within a racist context where love between black and white is forbidden, thereby creating an additional injunction by which sex is uncoupled from natural desire.

The fourth section is a commentary by spirit voices on the previous three sections that addresses the reader directly. The commentary also presents the next event within the narrative: the callous murder of an Indigenous Elder and leader, which initiates the ensuing war between the communities. The section that follows presents the aftermath of this event as Frankie and Claudie take care of the Elder's body; further commentary by the same spirit voices follows. The chapter continues the interleaving of dialogues in which events are portrayed and then discussed. This structure (the interleaving of episodes) allows for an exploration of the central problems and questions presented in the

opening episode. At the centre of the novel (as well as at its conclusion) is the character of Earth, or Da as it is known in the Wathaurong language. Da is a personification of Country and provides commentary upon the whole narrative.

The Threshold Scene

The threshold scene foregrounds thresholds themselves as a central motif of the novel. In this scene, Frankie is constructing a fence while his grandson watches: 'Post holes, Alf, that's what's good' (1). From the outset, the narrative foregrounds the transformation of land into private property through fencing and ownership laws. It is these laws, and the ontological relationship to land that they encode, that are taken to task in the war that ensues later in the novel. On the other hand, while dualist structures are imposed upon the land, the narrative foregrounds their instability. The fence in this threshold scene is unable to maintain its intended function. Here, a spirit voice comments upon the futility of Frankie and Alfie fencing the land:

now look at that. The two a' them workin' the wornolu outa their strides diggin' 'oles an' fillin' 'em up again, an' buildin' a bloody wall a' wire from here ta Werribee. Jus' look at 'em now, workin', workin', tryin' to build up a fence between them an' us. It's not gunna work ya know, Frank, that little Golkawil, he's gunna wait until he's a man, then he's gunna come to us old ones, an' he'll say to us, 'Hey, woorer woorer, what am I?' an' we'll say, 'Hey, you the little hawk man, you Golkawil, you stand up on the sky and see everythin' that moves, you one of us.' So dig ya ol' fence now, Parwung, but it doan keep no one out—even you know that, ol' magpie bird. (21)

The commentary makes it clear that the fence signifies more than material boundaries and the discourse of private property. The fence 'between them an us' serves to encode metaphysical dualisms between physical and spiritual worlds, as well as between indigenous and non-indigenous cultures in the land. For example, Frankie attempts to prevent Alfie from engaging with his Aboriginal heritage because it threatens his own place within the white society. His teaching Alfie how to fence the land is a dramatisation (or allegorising) of the one rule Alfie must obey in order to remain with his grandparents: to ignore his Aboriginal heritage. Furthermore, the fence signifies the dominance of the English language that colonises Aboriginal languages. Nevertheless, as the above commentary reveals, the indigenous language is not effaced. Boundaries between black and white worlds (and words), between physical and spirit worlds, between life and death, are all transcended. In this threshold scene, the actual or phenomenological world is opened up to the spirit world of Country. This scene creates narrative expectation to do with themes of transcendence by foregrounding threshold symbolism.

As is typical of allegory, wordplay is a significant feature through which the meanings of words are problematised, resulting in the emergence of polysemy. The threshold scene begins the problematisation of words and the exploration of their meaning. *Good*, *rich*, *law*, *black* and *white* enter such wordplay as Frankie and Alfie begin to explore their meaning within the colonial society in which they live. The loaded morality of the word *good*, one of the ambiguous concepts explored in the allegory, is foregrounded in the

opening sentence: ‘Post holes, Alf, that’s what’s good’. Or, in dualistic, colonial discourse: fenced land is good, unfenced land is bad. Furthermore, the so-called good that Frankie is imparting to his grandson is to disconnect from his Aboriginal identity and the Aboriginal land around them. Alfie’s work (skilled labour in a white community) is classified as an apprenticeship under the child protection laws of the time—and as such allows Alfie to stay with his grandparents rather than being taken away under questionably good or bad ‘child protection’ laws as stipulated by the Aborigines Protection Board (established 1883).⁸ Yet, as stated above, the fence—an inert object—cannot serve its intended function of privatising land, nor can it separate indigenous people from the powerful forces of the land. It is important to remember though that despite the questionable morality of erecting fences on the land from the indigenous perspective, Frankie remains a fencer and his position is celebrated by the Indigenous people: ‘You plenny good fence man, Frank’ (239). And while at the outset of this threshold scene, Frankie’s lesson for Alfie appears futile, his position as a fencer complicates his insider / outsider status, and raises ambiguity regarding whether a fence—real or metaphoric—can be both a good and a bad thing.

In the allegory, the permeable fence comes to be a symbol of co-existence with, and transformation of, the colonial law. At the end of the novel, Uncle Too Roo Rer suggests that Frankie build a gate for the town’s new priest: ‘That new Godfella he be needin’ new gate’ (239). The gate, the place of egress through the fence, becomes the new symbol replacing the symbol of the fence, suggesting an alternative ontology to land. Rather than functioning to keep the other out, the gate allows the other to enter and be made welcome. This welcoming of the other, from the perspective of those on both sides of the fence, emerges in the narrative through Da’s allegorical commentary.

Other words problematised in the threshold scene include *king*:

‘Listen, Alf, yer as white as snow. Look at yer. Ya can see that, can’t ya? White as the bloody King.’

‘But the King’s rich, Grandpa.’

‘Yeah, but he’s a white king.’

‘Wurrun(djerri) Wurrun reckons he’s a king, he showed me—’

‘But that stupid old Billy is black, Alf, black as the ace a’ spades, an’ I tell you now he’ll never live under anythin’ better than a bit of bark and he’ll always have the arse out of his strides.’ (3)

Billy Wurrun(djerri), a leader of the local Aboriginal people, is the king of his people. Such a king is unthinkable, however, within the settler discourse out of which a king is defined. The king (Edward VII) resided in England, and although geographically disconnected, is the figurehead of a government that rules the settlements and people in this far-away land. The alternative reading of the word *king* implicates and problematises the word *law*. The black king, Billy Wurrun, is *in situ*, the embodiment of the Aboriginal

lore that binds the Indigenous people to their land out of which their culture and identity are built.

The story returns repeatedly to the notions of British law and Aboriginal lore. In the commentary, the spirits explain the notions of king, law and lore in indigenous culture. While in the settler culture, a human is king, in indigenous culture, it is the land itself that is king. Indigenous Law and lore are all based on Earth's laws and ways: 'White fellas want a king 'cos they wanna deal with the boss, but who's boss? We all boss, but true way the dirt is boss, the place, all this country boss of us peoples' (11). Throughout the narrative, Country is figured as a living entity with its own rules and ways and with which the Indigenous people are in dialogical communication. Through this communication over time, indigenous law and lore have been developed. This law / lore is contrasted with the settler law, which is based upon the lie, the pre-text, of *terra nullius*, 'land belonging to no one'. This 'inauthentic' law becomes the basis of an emerging crisis in the society that the narrative explores, the possibilities of a resolution to the crisis coming through Earth and its law.

Ultimately, the wordplay around *king* and *law* relates (owing to the missionary context at the time) to Biblical notions of Christ and the sacred. Thus, as we shall see, Pascoe's novel is based upon the traditional function of allegory: to interpret the Bible as the pre-text to the allegory.

The Book of Ezra: Biblical Pre-Text to Pascoe's Allegory

In the first chapter of *Earth*, the Book of Ezra is read aloud as a Christian death rite over the body of an Aboriginal 'king' who was callously run over in the street by wealthy settlers in their horse and buggy. I argue that the narrative, among other things, is an allegory of the Old Testament Book of Ezra, re-interpreting it within the context of the indigenous Australian sacred, and positing an alternative outcome for it. Quilligan states that medieval allegories re-enacted Biblical texts with the didactic intention of teaching and interpreting a Biblical story for the readers: 'the proper way to read it' (122). Moreover, Edwin Honig suggests that allegory emerged out of a crisis in authority of the Biblical text and sees the emergence of allegory 'pre-eminently as the need to recreate authority' (qtd. in Quilligan 100). Pascoe's allegory portrays this loss of Biblical authority within the early Australian settler society as a result of Old World Biblical laws being applied to the new land. In this new context, where Old World knowledge is challenged by a landscape of unknowns, truth and meaning are challenged, even lost.

Furthermore, the Book of Ezra itself describes a period when truth is lost and the law is corrupted, but both are subsequently reinstated. This is the period that describes the return of the Israelites from exile / captivity to Jerusalem, and preparing to rebuild their Temple under the colonial Persian king, Cyrus. The Israelites, however, are met with deceit by their adversaries who attempt to defeat them, to stop the building of the Temple, and to turn the subsequent Persian kings against them. Eventually, a new king, Darius, emerges and the Israelites are allowed to build the Temple in order to reconnect with their traditions, their own language, and create a sacred space. Truth and law are

restored, and then Ezra (holding intermarriage to be grievous) sets about cleansing the city of miscegenation. These motifs (reconnecting with traditions, language, sacred space, miscegenation and child protection laws) are taken up in Pascoe's novel and refigured.

The Book of Ezra (which is both myth-building and historical) relates how the colonised, remaining under colonial rule, revive their sacred space / landscape, language and culture. Pascoe postulates, through allegorical re-enactment of this Biblical event, a possibility of revival for the Aboriginal people and their land as sacred within colonised Australia. He offers a different outcome from the Ezra story, however, through the combination of a new symbol and motif, that of the birth of a new leader / Christ. With the introduction in the novel of the symbol of the gate—the gap in the fence—the allegory advances the possibility of a coming together of Biblical lore and the indigenous sacred, out of which a new authority and language might emerge. Furthermore, while mixed marriages are forbidden in the settler society (as in the Book of Ezra), the novel centres on the loving relationship between the protagonists, Frankie and Claudie, an Aboriginal man and a white woman. The embodiment of this emerging possibility is Frankie's and Claudie's newborn 'star' baby, Cecily / Toortna, who is named for both cultures. (The Anglo name 'Cecily', from *coccus*, means 'blind'; 'Toortna, means 'star'.)

In combining the Book of Ezra's story of the Jews' return from exile and enslavement with the Christian motif of the birth of a star or Christ figure, Pascoe follows a Christian typological tradition of understanding the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. In this tradition, the Old Testament presents a revelation of salvation for humanity, which is fulfilled in the New Testament in the figure of Jesus Christ. Thus, the Old Testament stories are seen as containing *types*, events, persons or statements, which either pre-figure, or are superseded by *antitypes* of events or aspects of Christ in the New Testament. In other words, typology is itself an allegorical tradition, where the Old Testament is understood as an allegorical pre-text for the New Testament.

The opening chapter of the novel portrays a serious crisis of truth and stability of meaning regarding the language and law that colonised the land. Billy Wurrun, the Indigenous king, is deliberately run over and killed by Mrs Flyans, the wife of a wealthy landlord. The act dramatises how oblivious settlers can be to the Indigenous population around them. In addition, Billy Wurrun's death is the first of a number of killings that go unpunished. The inability of settler law to effect justice opens up a crisis of authority in the British law. It is crimes such as these that lead to retaliation and an increasingly bitter war between black and white.

The corruption of British law (withholding justice for crimes such as murder and theft) reveals the hypocrisy behind the Biblical traditions of the society (such as the interpretation or ignoring of Commandments to suit its own ends). The consequences of the erosion of faith are made clear throughout the narrative. For example, Alwyn Hope (one of the more principled characters) confronts her husband, William Angliss, during her marriage break-up. She tells her wealthy landholder husband: 'This country, this society is doomed . . . built on murder and lies. Civilisation is destroyed by such things, not made' (108). Hope, in accordance with her name, is an allegorical figure through

which a Christian sense of justice may be revived. In the following scene set in England, she seeks permission for a divorce from Angliss, meanwhile telling the Archbishop exactly what the Church is 'turning a blind eye to' (110):

'I have come to see you in the hope you'll bring our church to understand that something must be done to protect the Christian faith and the good name of the King from the depredations of a couple of hundred sheep farmers and rude men who make fortunes by picking up stones . . . we're talking about humanity and the ability of English men and women to uphold the very commandments of Christ himself.' (111–12)

As previously noted, the word *blind* occurs throughout the novel, and with good reason. While the Christian church, as personified by the Archbishop, is complicit in crimes enacted against Indigenous people, Alwyn Hope articulates clearly the conjunction between the foundational laws of the Church and colonial law. The question of just who *is* the king within the colonial context, and upon what his authority and law are based, is fundamental to the allegory. The indigenous king is run over by an uncaring fellow human being; the geographically distant British king is complicit in base crimes against humanity, and the teachings of the Biblical king—Old Testament God, or New Testament Christ—are spiritually distant from the settlers and the indigenous people.

The Bible is explicitly referred to (i.e., is a pre-text) in the opening crisis scene. After Billy Wurrun's death, Frankie and Claudie read the Bible over his corpse. Claudie reads from Ezra 4:1:

Now when the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the children of the captivity builded the temple unto the Lord God of Israel; then they came to Zerubbabel and to the chief of the fathers and said unto them, Let us build with you; for we seek your God as you do. (15)

In this passage, the 'adversaries' (the Samaritans) approach the 'children of the captivity' as friends, seeking to work together to build the temple to a common god. The Children of Israel however reject their adversaries' offer as disingenuous: 'Ye have nothing to do with us to build an house unto our God: but we ourselves together will build unto the Lord God of Israel, as king Cyrus the king of Persia hath commanded us' (Ezra 4:3). The result of this rejection is further war and treachery against the 'children of the captivity'.

After a libellous letter from the Samaritan governor accusing the Jews of being dangerous to the Persian empire, the Persian king, Artaxerxes I, stops the rebuilding of the Temple fearing insurrection: 'Then ceased the work of the house of God which *is* at Jerusalem. So it ceased unto the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia' (Ezra 4:24). The Israelites recommenced building the Second Temple, a way of reconnecting with their tradition, religion, and language. During this time, peace ensues between the Israelites and the Persians: intermarriage occurs and division is overturned. Unity indeed reigns. This blending of cultures through intermarriage comes to a halt, however, with the reintroduction of division when intermarriage between Israelites and their 'strange wives' and children (non-Israelites) is retrospectively outlawed by Ezra (Ezra 10:3).

Pascoe's allegory re-enacts crucial aspects of the Book of Ezra: the crushing of sacred place (be it land or stones and mortar) by a dominant power, and the ban on intermarriage. It also demonstrates the different legal status accorded the Jews as slaves in the Bible, and the indigenes under colonial rule. There is a symbolic parallel between the oppression of the Jews in the Book of Ezra and the oppression of the Aboriginal Australians. The Indigenous people's metaphoric temple, their lore, language, sacred space, and culture of connection with Country, is broken by the colonial regime, although the possibility of re-building this metaphoric temple is explored in the narrative. As in the pre-text, mixed marriages are forbidden—the 1959 case of Gladys Namagu and her white fiancé Mick Daly who were refused permission to marry by the Darwin Protector of Aborigines, demonstrates the meddling power of the bureaucrat, be he Ezra or a civil servant. The novel humanises the loving relationship between the protagonists, Frankie and Claudie, an Aboriginal man and a white woman. But the negative power of allegiances is demonstrated with the novel ending in the re-installment of division when Frankie's house is destroyed by fire, his wife Claudie dies, and the family is ostracised from the white community. The narrative, however, explores further possibilities of overcoming divisions.

Land as Law, Lore, and Language

The indigenous worldview that dominates the novel is one in which the land is figured as sentient, and through which people and land communicate. This worldview is explored through the characters Earth / Da, and the indigenous message-bearing animals that help the Aboriginal characters of their totem; in addition, there is the interaction between indigenes and the land and the spirit voices that interject throughout the narrative.

These spirit voices directly address the reader when remarking on the episodes. They include Earth / Da, commenting on the narrative as a whole, and guiding the reader's interpretation. One of the central messages of Earth is of welcome to non-Indigenous people. Neither Indigenous nor non-Indigenous people are in a privileged relationship with Earth / Da: 'Blackfella, whitefella, what's the difference?' (133). As the novel shows, there's a world of difference, but when it comes to the Earth, it matters little. However, Earth / Da asserts its central message to readers to 'be prepared to listen' (134). Here, Da speaks directly to the reader in the time frame of the novel's publication, the beginning of the twenty-first century:

'Bankcard be buggered . . . So you're working on amendments to the GST, native title, same sex superannuation, school milk, artificial aortas—do you think that's important?' (134)

The shift to the present time suggests that the account of events set in the early days of Federation, upon which Da is commenting, contains an allegory for the contemporary reader. This historical disruption is a narrative device making readers consider the significance of the historical account against the contemporary situation. Da's comments suggest that the narrative of territorialism is symptomatic of the inability to listen to the land, or to read Country, which is symptomatic of a crisis in contemporary language. Such a temporal shift, as Paul de Man writes in *Blindness and Insight: The Rhetoric of*

Temporality (1983), is at the heart of allegory where allegorical signs refer to preceding signs (pre-text). Although Pascoe's work is an historical narrative set during the period of mythologised national identity formation, the novel is a contemporaneous allegory with contemporaneous politics.

Along with the overt anthropomorphism through the character of Da, the Earth is affirmed as a living entity that communicates its subjectivity with some of the characters through ecological functions. Early in the story, Billy Wurrun says that 'the dirt is boss, the place, all this country boss of us peoples' (11). Billy utters the Law of the Land; its rules are encompassed in Aboriginal Lore. Here, the land speaks not in words but in its needs, which the Aboriginal people have been looking after for tens of thousands of years: 'Nowhere to go, this our land, this our mother, this tree where we born, this water where baby swim, this our law. Our law say we not *allowed*, hear that whitefella word, my brother, we not *allowed* to go, our land call us to stay, who look after land if we go? Whitefella?' (77). The spirit voices explain to the reader (while instructing them in Bunurong language of the names of flora and fauna) that the Aboriginal people have an intimate relationship with the land, and are interconnected with its ecology through the satisfaction of their needs:

We remember country. That river there, that one Barwarn, alright. Down she come over them plains into big duck swamp, big place boonea [eel], big place tolum [duck], then there she comes windin' all over place an' out to korraiyn [sea]. Now, see that liddle bit grass there, forget them sheepies, forget white fella house, forget them fence, look back now an' see all them waurn [house] made a' stone an' bark an' blocks a' earth, see them cookin' oven, oh we cook up good there, tolum [duck], goim [kangaroo], barrabool [mussel], moorabool [oyster], kooderoo [abalone], wiidji [crayfish], plenny warrigal [bower spinach], myrniong [yam daisy], plenny jonny cake, plenny fat baby playin' by river, chuckin' liddle spear, chasin' kaarming kaal [dog], nice place you reckon, lookit them fella now, comin' back home with nice fat goim, coupla them porcupine, look at women basket, full, full crayfish, abalone, mussel, oyster, an' here look, these young fella, what they got? Six fat black duck, basket eels, oh what you reckon 'bout this place? Plenny good I tell ya, an' look there, ol' fell makin' axe, young fell smokin' bark for canoe . . . can you see it?' (79–80)

Satisfying their own needs requires the Aboriginal people to listen to Da, to seek where the food and water is rather than exercising control over the food and water (as the Whitefella society does through farming, irrigation, chemical control and, in the world outside the novel, genetic modification). 'No respect, no love, that what wrong with you mob. You gotta be boss, hate anythin' tell you what to do. But us peoples we listen to Da, we listen to river, we listen to hill, we waitin' for earth to tell us what we eat, where we cook our food, where we have baby' (80). Through an understanding of the ecological interconnections of the different aspects of the land, things become meaningful and seem to take on a voice. Towards the end of the novel, Alfie's uncle warns him about messing up the messages in the land:

‘Alright you listen, now. Bird sing, fish swim, wind blow, tree speak, you watch, you listen, alright, not just fish, not just food, alright, not just ol’ tree for fire, not just nuisance wind, Golkawil, he tellin’ you, we whisper you alright, we send fish, we send goim, we tell ngarbulmum, you lookit our liddle Golkawil. Unerstan’ my wanung?’ (197)

When initiated into the Aboriginal way of seeing, the landscape is not just matter, but mind, and therefore metaphysical. ‘You, see where you are? Look up. See you got spirit all ’roun’ you now. All ol’ spirit, all ‘roun’ (196). While mourning the death of his mother, Alfie is initiated into this understanding through his Aunt Adpin ‘Pongeetch Nubiyt proper way’. Auntie Adpin is one of the Elders: ‘you sit down and listen your aunt, alright, aunt tell you story ’bout you mamma, ’bout country all ’roun’, ’bout your cousin upriver, ’bout how this country talkin’ to you’ (214). By seeing the world as alive, Alfie learns that he is not alone, that he is looked after by the land, and must, in return, look after the land: ‘see, your country, ’e know you alright, ’e be lookin’ after you, Alfie, ’e be proud of brave guli fella’ (215). The resurgence of Aboriginality then, through help from the spirit voices and from the old people in the face of war, death, and injustice, is this understanding of subjectivity and the world as spirit.

The character Da can be understood in the narrative as a personification of a responsive environment, one that communicates with people through interaction and feedback signals. It is also embodied within the Wathaurong language in the novel. The indigenous words for Country become central to the text and are the medium through which Indigenous characters interact with their environment. Each character has a totemic name: Parwung (magpie) is Frankie, Golkawil (little hawk) is Alfie. Other characters include Gabadj (black cockatoo), Moorabool (oyster), Kaarwin Kunawarn (hissing swan) and Woorer Woorer (sky). Totemic names literally embed the indigenous characters into the landscape. The indigenous oral language corresponds to Northrop Frye’s ‘metaphoric’ mode of language outlined in the General Introduction to the thesis. Its vocabulary (given in a glossary at the end of the novel) encodes flora and fauna names, place names, and processes of ecological interaction. It also encodes extended family structures and relationships and extends these to the spirit world, thus transcending the material environment.

Love: the Deep Structure of Nature

Dualism is the catalyst behind the plot’s events—pitting a materialistic worldview and the concept of *terra nullius* against stewardship of the Earth, and resulting in a war with the Indigenous people. Despite Pascoe’s novel being set within the context of war, an erotic attitude of desire for intersubjective contact with others, including nature, dominates. Earth / Da is consistently desirous to interact with the characters. It is through such interaction that Earth strengthens the loving relationship between Frankie and Claudie, as well as the desire of some people in the community to end the war and reconcile with each other.

It is communication with Earth that rejuvenates Frankie’s, and his nephew Alfie’s, sense of indigenous culture. At the beginning of the narrative, Frankie is *blind* to Country, as he

erects a fence over the land. By the end, having lost his home and his wife, he begins to see Country. When Earth speaks, Frankie retorts:

‘You laughin’ at me too? I remember your name now, you’re Earth.’

‘Don’t you scoff. Don’t be too proud to listen to the Earth, Frank, that’s what you people are like, reckon the reality of the world originates in your own precious head.’

‘You have no voice . . . it’s only the trees, only the wind in the trees.’

‘That’s right, Frank, exactly, moon moon meet. I’m the water too, Yallock, hear me over the rocks? I’m the rocks too, toll here me talkin’ to nubiyt. You’re tryin’ to laugh at everything in your grief, tryin’ to blame everyone for taking your Claudie, but it’s no one’s fault’ (237).

While death and war and loss are the circumstances of Frankie’s story (a microcosm of the Indigenous people’s story) the Earth’s message to Frankie is that he has known real love:

People come and go, I’ve seen it all, but how many of ‘em lie under a rug with another one and know in their heart that there is no other? I’ve seen the ones who have done that, Frank, I’ve seen what becomes of them, and I can tell you they’re the lucky ones, even if it doesn’t last forever, they’re the lucky ones (237).

While death and violence are part of Earth’s ways, loving another and being loved, ‘even if it doesn’t last forever’, is the gift of the *fortunate*. In the allegory, Earth’s message is one of connection and love for the people who abide on it. Although the novel begins with the death of the Indigenous leader, Billy Wurrundjerri, and continues with increasing violence resulting in further deaths, the narrative traces the emergence of a new indigenous leadership, one which combines pride and knowledge in traditional culture with competence and skill in interactions with settler society. Alfie / Golkawil, Frankie’s and Claudie’s grandson, as well as their new born daughter, Cecily / Toortna, are figured as the future leaders for their people: ‘True way. Star send that baby you an’ Missus Claud, that baby be big one our mob, all ol’ Aunty been come longa camp an’ talk that baby, oh, you Toortna, they say’ (233).

As dualistic prejudices break down, Frankie’s offspring are figured as future leaders of *all* the people of the land not just indigenous people: ‘She be big one all people. She come longa all us people, she be grow up, she be tellin’ plenny big story all us people: you people, my people, black people, white people’ (233). As she is perceived to have been sent by the Star, Cecily / Toortna could (with caution) be seen as a re-gendered Christ figure or Messiah; however, I suggest that the feminist allegory of the birth of new leadership in the nation is also a symbol of the emergence of a new readership, one which is able to read Country as well as texts and laws of the settler society. That is to say that by encouraging readers to learn about indigenous languages and cultures, and not just about settler cultures, the allegory is actively doing what Philip Morrissey describes as, ‘calling new readers into existence’. Such readers might in turn become writers and so, a new ‘big story all us people’ becomes possible.

Conclusion

The novel takes the form of a traditional allegory and utilises medieval allegorical techniques and strategies in order to expose Australian English language speakers to the Other, the language of indigenous Country and the Wathaurong language that expresses a particular worldview. Maureen Quilligan writes that ‘the only “other” which allegory aims to lead [the reader] to [is] a sense of the sacred’ (29). Ultimately, Pascoe’s allegory leads readers to respect the sacredness of Country. At the heart of the allegory is a crisis of truth and authority in language, law, ecology and identity stemming from the *aporia* of *terra nullius*. The allegory emerges from out of this historical and cultural crisis and attempts to correct and resituate notions of truth and authority.

Earth is a generous and warm novel, offered in a spirit of reconciliation by a leading contemporary Aboriginal writer. It suggests the possibility of a rejuvenation—both of Aboriginal cultures and of settler cultures—through embracing and listening to each other and to the land in which all Australian people live. Dualism is replaced by the embrace and love of the other and the land itself. While the colonial perspective figures the land as empty, the perspective of these *fin de siecle* characters places the coloniser on the land and *in* the land, by embracing Country—a word encapsulating a spiritual and responsive landscape—Pascoe envisages a way to go beyond dualistic and patriarchal hierarchies and power structures, while retaining and celebrating difference. That is to say that there is opportunity to resituate laws and language within the context of Country, by listening to Country. I suggest the symbol of the gate at the end of the novel represents this alternative possibility of being on the threshold of mutual exchange. The gate that Frankie is told to build for the new priest, the ‘new Godfella’, by the Aboriginal leader Too Roo Rer can be read as a symbolic spiritual and linguistic gate onto an indigenous worldview that is the allegory itself. In this way, the allegory presents a contemporary alternative to the pre-text it re-writes: the building of the Temple, from the Book of Ezra.

Notes

¹ In the context of fiction by Australian Indigenous writers, *Earth* can be compared with Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* (2006) and Kim Scott's *That Deadman Dance* (2010).

² Australian indigenous worldviews can be understood through ecological discourse describing a system of interrelated parts (the Many) working together to form a larger living system (the One). Freya Mathews argues: 'I believe something of this nature is involved in the Australian Aboriginal practice of 'singing up' the land. By acknowledging the subjectivity of the One through the Many (to use again, if I might, the present terms of reference), traditional Aboriginal peoples enable the One to respond to them via a poetic order that is forever unfolding at the level of the Many. The land speaks' (158).

³ While post-structuralism goes so far as to argue that such a natural world outside of text and language does not exist, it can be argued that ecocriticism emerged in literary studies to counter this claim in order to affirm and protect the natural world from consequential dis-regard.

⁴ It is possible that ecocriticism's lack of engagement with allegory is a result of the Romantic Era's injunction against allegory. Coleridge was against the intentionality of allegory, which invites the reader to search for a single, definite meaning; instead he favoured symbolism as presenting a polysemy of possibility, or simply refusing definite interpretation.

⁵ Allegorical intentionality differs from what Wimsatt and Beardsley famously describe as the 'intentional fallacy'. Allegorical intention is a feature of the text itself rather than residing in the author's biography or psychology. Gay Clifford explains that: 'Allegory, like myth, presupposes an audience who will respond to it in specific ways: to consider its authors' conception of this response is not necessarily to indulge in the 'intentional fallacy' (36). Reading an allegory, then, requires both a focus on and respect for the authorial interventions into the reading process in order to uncover the allegory within the text.

⁶ My use of the term dualism follows ecophilosopher, Val Plumwood, who explains that dualism 'is the process by which contrasting concepts (for example masculine and feminine gender identities) are formed by domination and subordination and constructed as oppositional and exclusive' (31). That is to say, it does not simply represent a distinction of difference, but involves a construction of exclusive or radical otherness as well as a hierarchy of the domination of one side of the dualism over the other.

⁷ This notion of an ecological worldview emerged out of the James Lovelock's Gaia Hypothesis, formulated in journal papers in 1972, positing that the Earth is a living organism. This theory can be seen as the basis of what is known as Deep Ecology, the founding principles of which were set out by Arne Naess in 1973. While Gaia posits a living Earth, Deep Ecology seeks to explore humanity's relationship to such a living entity, resulting in what has come to be termed Ecopsychology: humanity's deep interrelationship with the ecosystem. Gregory Bateson's *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (1973a 1972) is an early text of Ecopsychology.

⁸ The Victorian Half-Caste Act (1886), which was an extension of the Aboriginal Protection Act of 1869, 'initiated a policy of removing Aboriginal people of mixed descent from the Aboriginal stations or reserves to merge with white society.' See <http://foundingdocs.gov.au/item-did-86.htm>

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