

# The Cosmopolitan Pastoral: the paddock, the novel, and the nation

ROBERT BEARDWOOD  
University of Melbourne

With each step the landscape unfolded and named itself. The man's voice could be heard singing out-of-tune songs. It all belonged to him.  
(Murray Bail, *Eucalyptus*)

## Introduction: belonging to the unsettled nation

In the last decade – certainly since the Mabo High Court decision and the subsequent Native Title Act in 1993 – non-Aboriginal Australian claims-to-place have been increasingly expressed in terms of what is felt to be lacking: a feeling of belonging to a legitimate place within the nation, which transcends material or legal property relations. The notion of belonging has come to occupy a central position in discussions of place and identity, generating a cluster of anxieties and contradictions within them. Belonging is typically taken to apply to Aboriginal people in an uncomplicated fashion, as if Aboriginal people have no more work to do on their relationship with Australian land (as opposed to the work they still have to do with the Australian government or law courts). On the other hand, non-Aboriginal belonging typically takes the form of a complex and often insoluble problem. The most important contemporary commentator on non-Aboriginal belonging is Australian National University historian Peter Read, whose 2000 monograph *Belonging: Australians, Place and Aboriginal Ownership* is now the text around which other discussions of belonging are positioned.<sup>1</sup>

The non-fictional forms in which discourses of belonging circulate – the fields of Australian studies, cultural studies, historical studies and so on – repeatedly invoke and valorise a sophisticated and self-reflective subjectivity which historically has had its most fully elaborated instance in literary fiction and criticism. Australian literature, however, does not play a significant part in texts which examine and

critique the themes of national identity and citizenship, and their contemporary governmental and ideological instantiations.<sup>2</sup> This paper seeks to work the field of the literary into contemporary debates about Australian national identity and culture. I consider two significant novels of the 1990s, Nick Jose's *The Custodians* and Murray Bail's prize-winning *Eucalyptus*, which represent pastoralism as being residual in the outback or rural spaces of the nation. The literary genre of the pastoral is conventionally concerned with emplacement and settlement, a metropolitan expression of desire for the rural as a space in which relationships between people and place might be, or once have been, authentic and legitimate. At the end of the twentieth century, however, the spaces of rural and outback Australia are sites of contested and evolving claims to place and culture, including Native Title claims and white pastoralists' claims to be dispossessed of land. *Eucalyptus* and *The Custodians* each takes the pastoral, and notions of 'belonging' to the land, in a different direction. In both novels, though, the paddock remains a critical site for the negotiations of property and identity, negotiations which harness what is peculiarly local to a place with more global or cosmopolitan intrusions.

### The nation and/in the cosmopolitan

The centrality of 'belonging' in discourses about place and identity, especially academic and high-cultural discourses, requires that the nation retains a significant presence despite the dominance of globalisation as explanation for historical and cultural trajectories. The national is not, then, inevitably transcended by the global or cosmopolitan; these spheres continue to co-exist, and not always contradictorily. American academic Bruce Robbins introduces *Cosmopolitics: thinking and feeling beyond the nation* by immediately qualifying the degree to which cosmopolitanism actually is 'beyond the nation', but rather is inextricably tied to and dependent on the nation:

[l]ike nations, cosmopolitanisms are now plural and particular... cosmopolitanism sometimes works together with nationalism rather than in opposition to it. (Robbins, 'Introduction' 2)

One of the particular things that Robbins wants to recuperate for a cosmopolitics is a form of social bonding between people, a *feeling*, which American commentators on the right such as Benedict Anderson and Richard Rorty have appealed to in the defence of nationalism. Robbins's notion of 'collectivities of belonging and responsibility' (9) gives the cosmopolitan a more social orientation, and allows the nation a persistent space for negotiation and exchange.

The questions and ethics of national 'belongings' and 'responsibilities' are especially pertinent to the postcolonial nation, and they also generate a quite fissile kind of 'collectivity'. In *Uncanny Australia* (1998), University of Melbourne academics Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs argue that the unsettledness of modern Australia is largely due to 'what a claim for Aboriginal sacredness puts into motion'

(xiv), and they analyse this state or 'predicament' by deploying their term 'postcolonial uncanny':

[w]e often speak of Australia as a 'settler' nation, but the 'uncanny' can remind us that a condition of unsettledness folds into this taken-for-granted mode of occupation. (24)

As Native Title claims appear more frequently in courts, or sometimes a court itself travels to the site of the claim, Aboriginal claims to place are more modern and worldly than otherworldly and premodern. They depend, however problematically for people for whom official records of names, places and dates are so often nonexistent, not so much on stories of Dreamtime ancestors as on chronologies of births, deaths and marriages. In this sense, the dynamic relationship between the Aboriginal sacred and modernity may be less unstable or uncanny at present, but this is not to say that the relation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australia is any more settled. As Gelder and Jacobs argue, 'reconciliation is never a fully realisable category; it can never be completely settled' (xvi).

### The out-back: the national past, pastoral, and the international future

One of the characteristic spaces in which the nation's unsettledness appears self-evident, which in fact is *saturated* with unsettledness, is the outback. The issue in this paper is in how recent Australian fiction represents this space as being productive, or, more particularly, as once having been productive. According to these fictional narratives, in the past this space was able to be farmed profitably, but in the present pastoralism is residual, a sign of something the nation has lost (and simultaneously of the nation's capacity for 'reinvention'). The outback, in this guise, is more than ever the space in which the nation is registered affectively, in which the issue of belonging is made to appear remote from the apparatuses of government, but fundamentally, and ultimately quite privately, dependent on one's affections and capacities for varieties of deep and profound experience.

The literary mode which, more than any other, looks to non-metropolitan spaces for positive signs of the nation's past, is the pastoral. But even in the past of the pastoral the nation's identity is not entirely untroubled, although the characteristic reading of the pastoral's worrying over the past is that, as William Empson puts it: 'the reader is put into a mood in which one would not try to alter it' (4). Raymond Williams' account of pastoral in *The Country and the City* draws attention to the way in which the genre does not *only* provide reassurance or conciliation in order to cover over the 'truth' of history, but also provokes an unsettled attitude. Across a very wide range of historical periods and forms of writing, but especially for English literature of the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries, the pastoral genre places 'tones and images of an ideal kind ... almost invariably [in] tension with other kinds of experience' (18). This tension ties reflective and retrospective experience to the

anticipation of the future and of imminent social *change*. In a settler colony like Australia, writers working within the frame of the pastoral represent these tensions with 'other kinds of experience' as having a particular relationship with their realisation of the extent of the violence with which land was transformed into paddocks, not in antiquity but within comparatively recent historical times. Ivor Indyk considers Australian versions of the pastoral in the work of such poets as David Campbell and Judith Wright, and notes that: 'Australian nature or landscape poetry, which we might otherwise call pastoral ... [has] estrangement, isolation, and the fear of passing time among its most compelling features' (353).

In turning to Australian literature as a way of thinking through whether the nation's identity is too isolated or enclosed, it is interesting to note that recent critical commentaries have turned, albeit guardedly, to the *international* for the promise of revival. David Carter retains the nation against the inclination to think *only* in terms of global and local interactions: 'we should probably be sceptical of any notion that manages ... to combine two favourite intellectual fantasies, the rootless cosmopolitan and the rooted community' (150).<sup>3</sup> This scepticism also inhabits a significant amount of recent Australian literature, but the result is a sense of belonging to the nation which occupies an unstable ground, in between an unfettered movement which can access any point in the world, and a local attachment which manifests as enclosure and entrapment. When the cosmopolitan subject – at home in the world, rather than merely within the nation – comes to visit the local, especially the locale of the pastoral, this estrangement or unsettledness has its temporal gaze shifted from the past into the future. Questions about ancestral or original inhabitants or modes of settlement turn into questions of descendants and property inheritance. In what I term the cosmopolitan pastoral, the paddock on one hand becomes more mobile, more adaptable and inclusive; but on the other hand, its fences are vulnerable to all kinds of interests and mobilities – as if its enclosures are not protective or isolating *enough*, and its past securities have turned into reasons to leave, or into ghosts that haunt the future.

### The (stale) National Landscape

The most critically well-received Australian novel in recent years, both locally and internationally, is Murray Bail's *Eucalyptus* (1998). Here, the contest over the identity of the modern nation, and the national landscape, is – in classic modernist fashion – played out over a woman. Ellen Holland, enclosed on an old sheep farming property in western New South Wales, comes under the scrutiny of two suitors. One is Roy Cave, who travels under the sign of the nation, remote from the world but familiar with the nation's traditional landscape; he 'grew up with the gum trees' (68), and his very name signals his affinity with the male national character's stereotyped tendency towards isolation and enclosure. Cave's only overseas visit has been to the Kew Gardens to examine its eucalypts, while the other suitor, who remains nameless but ultimately wins Ellen's affection, mimics the rootless cosmopolitan: he has travelled the world, '[b]eginning in the easy countries above the equator he ended

up in difficult countries below the equator ... he was asking for experience' (248).

Roy Cave, like Ellen's father, is a cataloguer, whose deficiency is merely to name things. Ellen notes how, in their talking easily to each other, '[i]t was odd how the two men repeatedly put down blocks of matter and left it at that' (78). The two men are as awkward and comradely in each other's company as any two mates in the national literature: the father who will give his daughter away to any man who will name every eucalypt on his property, and the suitor who has the names of all the eucalypts, but little else, at his disposal. The name of the nation, however, is almost entirely absent from *Eucalyptus*, as though even the name 'Australia' would mark the novel as too insular or parochial. Instead the narrator speaks *ironically* of myths of the nation's – *our* nation's – inclusiveness:

the trouble with our National Landscape is that it produced a certain type of behaviour which has been given shape in story-telling, all those laconic hard-luck stories ... (24)

If the land 'produced a certain type of behaviour', then this is less a reflection on the formation of the national character than the means by which the narrative problematises itself, since the novel has already declared that the landscape is produced by its representations:

[the] National Landscape ... is of course an interior landscape, fitted out with blue sky and the obligatory tremendous gum tree, perhaps some merinos chewing on the bleached-out grass in the foreground ... (23)

In turn, *Eucalyptus* paints an interior landscape of its own, in which stories, especially ones that are laconic and about 'hard-luck', exert real forces on the affections and experiences of their tellers and hearers. Within the frame of the novel, these stories also produce a 'certain type of behaviour' which is figured in terms of a progression from the inside (of the father's property, of the bedroom and the diary) to the outside (of the world, of the suitor who tells stories aloud).

In this sense, the contest between the national and the cosmopolitan in *Eucalyptus* corresponds with the way in which Bruce Robbins reads Michael Ondaatje's 1992 novel *The English Patient*, as 'cast[ing] the cosmopolitan [Almasy] as the successful lover' (Robbins, *Feeling Global* 165). The story-teller in *Eucalyptus* owes his success to the plenitude of story. Narratives exceed acts of naming, just as the enclosure acts and representations of Australian history and culture are transcended by the overflowing excesses of landscape – what the narrator terms 'nature's unruly endlessness'. In explicating this cultural logic, the novel often takes on a didactic tone: '[a] paragraph is not so different from a paddock – similar shape, similar function' (32), and '[a] paragraph is supposed to fence off wandering thoughts' (34). This last is a single sentence, which forms its own paragraph, ending all too quickly and thereby provoking thoughts, which wander off from it. The 'sentence' is both limiting and provocative in other ways too: Holland's decision about how

Ellen's husband will be chosen is itself a sentence for her; the list of names the successful suitor will need to provide will *not* be a sentence, let alone a story, since it will consist only of nouns.

The novel draws attention to the inadequacy of representation, but just as it problematises relations between language and place, its self-reflexivity also reproduces and valorises an exemplary literary aesthetic, constantly self-problematizing and anxious about identity. Here, Ian Hunter's genealogical work on the role of aesthetics in producing certain kinds of subjects provides a useful intervention. Arguing that the aesthetics of literary criticism and appreciation 'belong to the ethical domain', Hunter formulates a history of the literary aesthetic since the late eighteenth-century not as a set of evolving *representations* of 'man' or even of social relations, but as 'a history of forms of ethical problematization and "practices of the self"' (350). In particular, two features of this ethic relevant to contemporary desires to belong to the nation and their literary instantiations are, first, the means by which 'individuals problematise themselves as potential subjects of aesthetic experience' (350) and, second, an 'ethical telos' the goals of which are 'unreachable' and which therefore generates 'a practice that ... moves on only by problematizing its current state and promises only the problematization of its next state' (354).

Returning to *Eucalyptus*, Hunter's work reorientates a question about identity and representation, so that the critical gaze falls on the kind of subjects produced through reading, as well as on the kinds of subjects that the text represents. When Bail's narrator declares that 'with each step the landscape unfolded and named itself, the man's voice could be heard singing out-of-tune songs. It all belonged to him' (4), the implied reading position is not one of sympathy or agreement with this mode of belonging. The property owner might be complacent, walking comfortably about his property, but the narrative always gives complacency a nudge. Instead, the novel carries an implicit critique of this act of settlement which at the same time aestheticises it, not simply because the man is singing, but because the processes of 'naming' and 'belonging' are continually interrogated in this self-reflexive and parodic fashion.

The National Landscape thus becomes more self-aware, and more worldly, when the paddock gestures not just outwards towards the nation but towards the whole world. In the end, the completion of the story-teller's experience – and the daughter's departure from the father's property *into* the world – depends on the discovery of something enclosed within the property: Ellen, or rather not Ellen as such but her *beauty*.

As she sat up one of her shoulders became exposed ... So much for all his worldly travels: never then had he seen anyone as beautiful. (254)

Perhaps this beauty which exceeds 'all his worldly travels' is not so much that of the shoulder which 'became exposed', as of the concealment of the rest of Ellen's body, in comparison to which travelling the world is an experience of continuous revelation. What the world lacks, then, is the amount of beauty one can find trapped

in remote locations – *locally* confined, as in a paragraph or sentence. This lack is tied to the desire for plenitude: the traveller's desire to undress Ellen *fully*. If the story-teller speaks ironically of the 'obsession' of modernity with names and facts, it is precisely their inadequacy which is tied to the mystical excessive quality of 'story' which simultaneously guarantees *his* success at the end of the story. The cosmopolitan is recast, and rendered full of interest, by what it has never seen so much of but which was in the nation's own backyard the whole time.

The novel's aesthetic, at the finish, is tied to an ethics of the never-finished, since the story teller is – the last words of the novel – 'interested at a point where he felt his story beginning all over again' (255). It is this simultaneity of the excessive and the affective – the *feeling* of 'beginning all over again' even, and especially, just when you arrive at the end – which allows *Eucalyptus* implicitly to configure a national mode of belonging. In between the place of the woman who clearly needs to get out more, and the man whose travels have left him fatigued, is an identity which is perpetually unsettled, desiring to reflect on and tell its stories 'all over again'.

### Custody

In comparison with *Eucalyptus*, Nick Jose's *The Custodians* (1997) received only moderate critical acclaim and publicity. Andrew Reimer, for instance, found that 'Jose's ethical and perhaps political commitments ... prevent[ed] this fine and important work from being exceptional' (33). Jose takes the contested space of the paddock, its inhabitants' desires to belong (and also to move away), and anxieties about the national as well as private identities, and entangles and unfolds them all in a far more worldly manner than *Eucalyptus*. In contradistinction to Reimer, I suggest that the success of *The Custodians* lies in its *foregrounding* of the ways in which ethics and politics are utterly inseparable from questions of 'literary' or aesthetic quality.

What is at stake in this novel is the potential for the future of the national landscape to be revived when the paddock harnesses a portfolio of local and international interests. An old sheep property in western New South Wales, 'Whitepeeper', is the landscape that finally draws all the major characters together, and also exposes their contestatory relations to each other. Coinciding with the end of the pastoral leasehold, Elspeth Findlay agrees to Whitepeeper's return to Aboriginal possession – '[t]hree old women, representing three nations adjacent ... had agreed to act as the traditional custodians' (469). The first matter for these custodians to settle is the reburial of previously excavated Aboriginal bones 'in a ritual of inclusion' (471), at what becomes an internationally significant archaeological site, Lake Moorna. Simultaneously, a Chinese delegation arrives to finalise arrangements to lease the land for sheep farming, thus increasing profits by 'sourc[ing] Australian wool for their cloth mills directly' (462). This transnational flow of capital is folded over a colonial Australian history in which Chinese people have been exemplary diasporic citizens, always 'belonging' somewhere else and simultaneously 'investing' in international locations.

Cleve Gordon, *The Custodians'* main Aboriginal character, is instrumental in Whitepeeper's return to Aboriginal ownership. His own personal claim to have come from '[m]aybe round here' (274) is made with a degree of uncertainty not because he wants to keep his knowledge secret, out of the public domain, but because this knowledge is simply not available in any certain form:

[a]s the whispering about Lake Moorna grew louder and more public, Cleve was disturbed that no one knew what the site meant, no one who really belonged to it. (269)

This 'disturbance' is exceeded by Elspeth's much more bodily reactions to national and international investments in Whitepeeper, reactions which encode and value the property, more intensely than for any other character in the novel, as a place of deep *fæling*. Non-Aboriginal belonging to this property is figured in terms of alienation and loss, turning narratives of origins and settlement into questions about destinations and ghosts. Elspeth is told by the archaeologist Ralph Kincaid that there is 'no end of interest in Lake Moorna ... from people all over the world', which causes Elspeth 'greater doubt than ever' (272): 'she could not help thinking that she and this country belonged to each other. Which was no longer quite true' (336).

Elspeth's claim to belong to the property in one sense lacks the force of Cleve's, since the return of Aboriginal property to Aboriginal people carries all the official weight of Aboriginal reconciliation: Cleve's claim to place is, above all, a *just* claim. On the other hand, Elspeth's more detailed knowledge about her origins, her experience of the place which is intimate and bodily in a way Cleve's is not, and her affection for Cleve, make her claim to belong full of longing in a way Cleve's never is: 'she could have thrown herself into his arms and wept... He was like a water-diviner who could find the fertility in this dry salty country' (274-5). 'Fertility' metaphorically signifies not only the land's lack of water but also its lack of profitability as a sheep farm. Moreover, it enables Elspeth, who is unable to have children, to function metonymically, so that she stands in for as well as standing in the landscape, with the Aboriginal man offering nothing less than the promise of reconciliation. When Elspeth imagines how the future might be different, she imagines not herself as acting politically but her *self* in a form which is outside of history or government altogether: as 'an empty ghostly presence that crossed the land leaving no trace' (274), and her 'ancestors [as] greedy oppressive ghosts' (483). As Gelder and Jacobs suggest, the goal of reconciling the nation with itself is to lay those ghosts to rest; whereas as in the postcolonial uncanny, activated by the modern nation's engagement with the Aboriginal sacred, those ghosts flourish, producing 'a sense of (dis)possession for both Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people alike' (Gelder and Jacobs 42). In *The Custodians*, non-Aboriginal people are even more disposed to haunting, and being haunted by, the landscape, than Aboriginal people. It is precisely this haunting which generates, aesthetically, a form of 'depth' which authenticates (even as it simultaneously problematises) non-Aboriginal belonging to place.



The reconciliations and (inter)national consensus which effect the narrative closure of *The Custodians* are managed under the rubric of 'custodianship'. The politics of custodianship are nested in the tension between how benign and conciliatory it seems – how it seems to be produced by sharing, flowing naturally out of a fair exchange of interests and investments – and the amount of power that must be brought to bear in order for questions of custody to be settled. In the novel, Aboriginal land owners are differentiated from the non-Aboriginal lease-holders and government representatives who invite them in, by the term 'traditional custodians'. A more 'modern' custodian, it seems, is Elspeth, who moves with the ease of familiarity between city and country, between government policy and private imaginings. The 'custodians' of a place – a place within the nation, or the place of the nation itself – represent the possibility of shared possession and habitation. But they also signal irreconcilable differences, the need for ongoing management and the right to *restrict* access in the case of competing claims for possession.

This unevenness of 'inclusion' places pressure on other readings of the novel. Cathy Greenfield and Peter Williams draw on Ian Hunter in advocating a 'post-representational view of the relations between literature and social realities' (38). They conclude, however, with a view of the novel in which it represents, if not the way the world actually is, then the way the world ought to be: 'in *The Custodians*, negotiation over land is central to the narrative causality that separates, but finally and more decisively, connects characters' (40). In this reading, *The Custodians* enfolds its readers smoothly into a national imaginary which is ultimately reconciled with itself, in which internal divisions are healed by a 'narrative causality' and all ghosts are laid to rest. However, the connections which readers in turn have with the characters' negotiations depend on a far more private and less worldly set of imaginative acts: the readerly experience of inhabiting 'other' experiences of subjectivity, of feeling sympathy and feeling estranged. These private, felt relationships between people and place remain, in the literary context, quite disengaged from worldly, bureaucratic actions. In this sense, a post-representational view of *The Custodians* regards its representations of negotiations over the possession of places within the nation as yielding to the aesthetic intensification of experience, to feelings of estrangement and of being haunted, to an experience of being private and disconnected rather than well-connected and worldly.

## Conclusion

Despite their manifest desires for a happy marriage (in *Eucalyptus*), or for black and white Australia to 'have a go at it together' (as Cleve whispers in Elspeth's ear at the end of *The Custodians*), both of these novels find non-Aboriginal belonging to be fraught and unsettling, especially in spaces where non-Aboriginal Australia has identified some of its most powerful images of settlement. In one way this is a good thing: negotiations over who legitimately possesses and who might be properly settled into various places within the nation look like continuing indefinitely, so literature's recognition that competing claims to place carry some irreconcilable

interests, as well as a degree of optimism about reconciliation, is entirely apt. Literature also risks turning questions of possession into questions of self-possession, however, as if the work the nation has to do on its identity is ultimately the work we all have to do on ourselves. Australian literature remains, then, a complex and significant set of representations and an ethical field in which unsettled, contested claims to place unfold the intersections between longing and belonging, between Australian place and Australian identity at the turn of the twenty-first century.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> For instance, Read is '[c]redited with inspiring' the theme of the exhibition *Belonging: A Century Celebrated*, on display at state libraries and museums throughout 2001. Like Read, the exhibition's curator, Roslyn Russell, emphasises the contradictory and difficult nature of non-Aboriginal belonging to the nation: '[a] sense of belonging is what ties us together or tears us apart' (Laurie 22).
- <sup>2</sup> Although a detailed consideration of these broader cultural issues is not possible here, a number of recent publications in the fields of Australian studies and cultural studies focus on national identity by representing it as being in crisis. For instance, Jon Stratton's *Race Baze: Australia in Identity Crisis* and Ghassan Hage's, *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society* (both 1998) critique governmental versions of national identity as being too restrictive and homogeneous; conversely, Miriam Dixon's *The Imaginary Australian: Anglo-Celts and Identity – 1788 to the Present* (1999) argues for the nation to become yet more unified around an 'Anglo Celtic core'.
- <sup>3</sup> On this, see also Dale. Dale's position with regard to international contexts for publishing Australian literary criticism has a similar fusion of enthusiasm and scepticism about the future of the 'national'.

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