Westerly
Volume 63 Number 1, 2018

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Westerly's office, at the University of Western Australia, is located on Whadjak Noongar land. We recognise the Noongar people as the spiritual and cultural custodians of this land.

Publisher
Westerly Centre, The University of Western Australia, Australia

Production
Design: Chil3
Typesetting: Lasertype
Print: UniPrint, The University of Western Australia

Front cover: Robert Cleworth, *Arm and Seascape*, 2017, oil on linen, 60 × 50 cm (h, w), The University of Western Australia Art Collection, Leah Jane Cohen Bequest, 2017. © Robert Cleworth. Photography Dean Beletich.

Westerly is published biannually with assistance from the State Government of WA by an investment in this project through the Culture and the Arts (WA) division of the Dapartment of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries, and from the Australia Council for the Arts. The opinions expressed in *Westerly* are those of individual contributors and not of the Editors or Editorial Advisors.

This project has also been assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council for the Arts, its arts funding and advisory body.

Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries

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Sovereign Peoples, Sovereign Stories: Welcomes and Acknowledgements of Country in Aboriginal Worldviews

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Dougie Nelson is currently studying the Juris Doctor at the University of Western Australia. He comes from Njaki-Njaki Country located in the central Wheatbelt of Western Australia, and also has ties to Ballardong, Whadjuk and Yued Country. He has worked in various industries such as mining, construction and the public sector and has completed a summer placement at a law firm.

The protocols of Acknowledgement and Welcome to Country have become a common practice at the commencement of official or public events across Australia. However, there are profound differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous understandings of what these protocols mean. At the core of these differences are contrasting notions of sovereignty. Historically, Western legal traditions allowed colonising nations to claim ownership of land without forming sustainable relationships with the life of that land. But Aboriginal concepts of belonging always required that we looked after all the life forms that made up our homelands and that we respected the right of other peoples to be 'boss' in their own Countries. A better understanding of Welcome and Acknowledgement protocols by non-Indigenous peoples can lead to more respectful relationships with Indigenous peoples and with our homelands.

My Perspective

I am an Aboriginal (Njaki-Njaki) man, with ties to the Whadjuk, Ballardong and Yued Noongar nations. In writing this paper I have drawn upon the work of Indigenous critical thinkers, but I am not attempting to create a definite default view. It is important to recognise that amongst the many Indigenous nations of Australia, there is no singular understanding or 'one size fits all' approach to acknowledging Country and conducting Welcomes to Country. Each and every Welcome to Country that is carried out by a particular First Nation is substantially different to any other because each is a demonstration and a product of belonging to that particular Country. My perspective does not, in any way, shape, or form, repudiate or invalidate the localised and profound knowledge held by First Nations peoples across Australia.

Appropriate Terminology

Throughout this paper, the terms Indigenous peoples, First Nations and Indigenous Australians are used interchangeably to refer to the Indigenous peoples of Australia. I acknowledge that the term 'Indigenous peoples' can give a false sense of a homogeneous Indigenous culture that does not exist. In order to represent the diversity among Indigenous peoples, when possible, I will refer to the specific affiliation and identity of an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander nation of an Indigenous person if it is able to be ascertained; if not, a more general term will be used, such as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person.

Country and Aboriginal Worldviews

A Welcome to Country is a protocol that is intrinsically connected with the holistic worldviews of Aboriginal peoples. It is not a separate or isolated concept, but a product and expression of these worldviews. These worldviews also shape our understanding of our sovereignties. I say 'sovereignties' because each Aboriginal nation is sovereign in its own homeland. While every Aboriginal homeland is different, all our sovereignties are founded in holistic relationships, and, in this sense, to be sovereign is to be part of a collective. When I speak of my sovereignty as a Njaki-Njaki man, I speak of my connectedness to my homeland and all the life within it.

Country

It is of paramount importance not to misinterpret the meaning and the powerful essence of the word 'Country' as it is used by Aboriginal people. Country is not a differentiation between urban and rural or remote areas. It does not simply consist of an open area or location of land. It is not an inanimate, tangible object or concept to be seen as a picturesque for its natural beauty or a wilderness for admiration of its landscape. Country is not a product for economic utilisation as a commodity to be sectioned off as pieces of land, to be on sale, bought and sold. As Palyku woman Ambelin Kwaymullina writes: 'For Aboriginal peoples, country is much more than a place. Rock, tree, river, hill, animal, human—all were formed of the same substance by the Ancestors who continue to live in land, water, sky' ('Light' 12). Country is the embodiment of all living entities situated within Country. This includes the people, land, sky, wind, tree, rock, kangaroo, honey ants, rivers, and everything else. All that Country contains is alive and to speak of Country, is to speak of all that Country involves.

Stories

It is impossible to speak of Country without also speaking of stories. Aboriginal creation stories tell the story of how life began, how life was created, and the purpose of creating this life on Country. In so doing, the creative Ancestors established general and specific knowledges. As Tanganekald and Meintangk woman Irene Watson comments: 'While there are universal principles shared by Aboriginal peoples, our knowledges themselves are not universal but consist of a diverse range of differentiated and localised knowledge' (511).

Creation stories tell of a time in which the world was without life and the universe was featureless, formless and shapeless. There was nothing within the universe, no substance of life to sustain and balance Country, until the creative Ancestors came. As Warraimay woman Vicki Grieves states: 'These ancestors created order out of chaos, form out of formlessness, life out of lifelessness, as they did so, they established the ways in which all things should live in interconnectedness so as to maintain order and stability' (7). With this creation of life on Country, the Ancestors also established the knowledge that is necessary to sustain and balance life itself, the knowledge of law.

Law was handed down by the Ancestors to balance life, and it stipulates the responsibilities, rights and relationships of all living entities within the web of life on Country. All living entities have law and a place within the pattern of life created by the Ancestors. Thus: 'the law ensures that each person knows his or her connectedness and responsibilities for other people (their kin), for country, and for their ongoing relationship with the ancestor spirit themselves' (Grieves 7).

Throughout the many and diverse First Nations across Country, stories within each and every Nation vary to and from each other. Each story is imbued with the essence of life and is a representation of Country, and the knowledge that each story holds is a product of Country itself. In this way, 'traditional Indigenous stories are the heart of Indigenous identity' (Janke 1). They exemplify belonging to Country, identity, culture, relationships and spirituality of Aboriginal peoples. As such, stories are a cultural Indigenous right that inherently establishes the ontological relationship to one's Country. As Wuthathi and Meriam woman Terri Janke states: 'Stories [...] are the title deeds to a culture [...] The right to tell stories and to link into that history, to that land, and that connection is an Indigenous cultural right' (1). Welcomes and Acknowledgements are a continuing expression of the cultural rights and responsibilities that were born in story, giving expression both to our right to belong to our homelands and the responsibility to care for it. As such it is also an embodiment of our

connection that includes the holistic spirituality of Aboriginal peoples and it is the heart of that knowledge, that relationship within a story, that constitutes the ancestral tie to one's Country. Thus, it is an embodiment of Indigenous sovereignty. For, as is explained by the 'Uluru Statement from the Heart': '[Our] sovereignty is a spiritual notion: the ancestral tie between the land, or "mother nature", and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who were born therefrom, remain attached thereto, and must one day return thither to be united with our ancestors'.

Acknowledgements of Country within Aboriginal Worldviews

Each Aboriginal person has a relationship with our own Country, and we carry that with us into other Aboriginal Countries. As Koori woman Wendy Brady writes: 'When Indigenous Australians are removed from, or choose to leave, the land of their nation, we do not locate it outside ourselves, but in contrast carry that connection within our being' (148). We are sovereign beings carrying the law of our Country with us into another Country.

As a Njaki-Njaki man, my Country lies in the Wheatbelt region of Western Australia. It was once a place of trees. My people looked after those trees; we knew they cleaned the earth. But generations of farmers cleared the trees and now the land drowns in salt. My people couldn't live our law and look after our Country because we were subject to other laws, Western laws, that stopped us from doing what we knew was best for the health of the Country and the people in it. In a colonised land, to carry our sovereignty—our connectedness—with us means we carry both our joy born of our love for Country and our sadness in not being able to care for Country. This is what I bring with me as I journey from my Country into the lands of others.

When Aboriginal people travel from one homeland to another we are subject to the laws of the other Country, as each Country has primacy in its own space. Thus, when Aboriginal people acknowledge a Country that we do not belong to, it is acknowledging that we are a stranger within another Country. It is vital to know what your place is within the relationships of another Country, its web of life, so that you can respect, recognise and uphold the laws of that Country. This is acknowledged among Aboriginal people in moments when we meet and greet another Indigenous person, who is either not known to us on our own Country, or when we are in another Country. In the words of Wiradjuri man Stan Grant: 'We have a place and sense of place. It is what we ask each other when we meet another Indigenous person. We don't ask who are you? We ask, where are you from? Where is your country?' (14).

In the journey of my life, I have travelled from Njaki-Njaki land to Whadjuk Noongar land, where I currently live and study. But I am not a stranger here because I have family connections to Whadjuk Noongar people. It is through understanding these connections that I can situate myself in Whadjuk Noongar land. If I travelled somewhere where I was a stranger, it would be important for me to respect the boundaries that position would place on my behaviour. For example, Aboriginal people are well aware that we cannot tell the stories of another Country. We can only tell stories that are a product of and that we have a relationship with in our own Country (or Countries if we have a connection to more than one). As written by Palyku woman Ambelin Kwaymullina: 'It is [...] a fundamental rule, common to all Aboriginal legal systems of Australia, that you cannot "speak for someone else's Country", and in this sense you cannot tell someone else's story' ('Nations' 13).

Welcome to Country

A Welcome to Country is not just a mere performance, it is a performative act. It might also be viewed as a political act, but 'political' is a label that will often be applied to expressions of Aboriginal connection to our homelands, regardless of whether we as Aboriginal people think an action is 'political' or not. This is because when we express our ancient, enduring, complex cultures, we are challenging the lie that gave rise to the Anglo-Australian nation-state; the idea that this land belonged to no-one because we were not 'advanced' enough for our presence to be considered meaningful.

A Welcome to Country might also be viewed as a 'quaint' cultural expression. But it is not some romantic or exotic picturesque of the 'traditional' ways of Aboriginal culture. It exemplifies the sovereignty of the original owners to their country and their belonging of place through songs, dance, stories, and the markings or patterns on their body. As non-Indigenous scholar Alessandro Pelizzon and Yuin scholar Jade Kennedy write: 'The performers often do not perceive the Welcome to be a mere performance but rather an active engagement with a sense of belonging to one's Country that predates the colonial event and that other Australians—as well as other Aboriginals not of that country—do not, and cannot share' (62). In this way, stories told through patterns exemplify the embodied spiritual knowledges of Aboriginal Australia. The patterns that are visibly displayed on the body are the patterns of life that flow through Country, which is why the use of colour, design or patterns differs significantly throughout Australia.

The purpose of a Welcome to Country is not just simply to be welcomed by the original owners with visitors being granted their blessing and safe

passage when travelling through their Country. When one is Welcomed to Country, one is intrinsically immersed into those relationships on Country, and has the responsibility to uphold life by maintaining and balancing it. There is an obligation on the visitor to respect, and abide by, the laws of that Country. A failure to do this is not just a transgression against law alone, it is a destruction of life and hence, of the core humanity itself.

However, many non-Indigenous people do not understand the responsibility that comes with being Welcomed to Country. Nor do they understand an Acknowledgement to be an expression of their understanding that they are a stranger to Country and must be guided by the wisdom of the people of Country. The impact of this lack of understanding ripples out to affect not just human beings but all life in Country. If, for example, the colonists who came into Njaki-Njaki land had understood what it meant to be a stranger to my Country, they would not have imposed their own knowledge on someone else's Country and tried to change our story. Instead, they would have sat down with the Elders and learned of the connections that hold everything together. The trees would have been cared for instead of cut down, and there would not be widespread land degradation throughout the Wheatbelt due to salinity.

Applying this to the present day, what might happen if, when non-Indigenous people were Welcomed to Country, they understood that they had the responsibility to uphold life by maintaining and balancing it? An understanding of a Welcome to Country in this way could transform it from an event in which non-Indigenous peoples are passive participants, into an ongoing act in which they seek to actively express their respect for Aboriginal peoples and all other life in Aboriginal Countries. This would open the way to new dialogues between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples that could in turn lead to the building of improved and more sustainable relationships.

Concluding Thoughts

When non-Indigenous people acknowledge Country, they are not generally suggesting that they are subject to the sovereign laws of a particular Aboriginal nation. Similarly, non-Indigenous people do not generally interpret a Welcome to Country as entering into a relationship with Country which requires respect for First Nations laws and for all the life in Country. I suggest, however, that a better understanding of the Aboriginal worldviews that found Acknowledgements of and Welcomes to Country could also open up a pathway for non-Indigenous people to more sustainably relate to First Peoples and to our Countries. When non-Indigenous peoples acknowledge Country—locating themselves as strangers to Country in a true understanding of what that means—they also acknowledge the need to respect Aboriginal cultures and stories, rather than imposing their own cultures and stories on Aboriginal peoples and lands. Similarly, when non-Indigenous peoples gain a better understanding of the layers of meaning contained in a Welcome to Country, they begin to grasp their own responsibility to uphold and sustain relationships as an ongoing act of engagement.

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