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## **Aboriginal Cosmopolitanism**

Nigel Clark  
Faculty of Social Sciences: Geography  
The Open University  
Milton Keynes MK7 6AA  
[n.h.clark@open.ac.uk](mailto:n.h.clark@open.ac.uk)

### **Abstract**

The current drought in Australia raises questions about the extent to which urban life depends on physical forces which come with their own dynamics and eccentric rhythms. I suggest that currently deepening understandings of the inherent volatility of earth processes might help us appreciate the accomplishments of those who have stayed in place for hundreds or thousands of years: peoples whose 'nomadic' journeys through deep time have taken them through major bio-or geo-physical transformations in their environments. In this way, we might learn to recognise how most urban or settled life inherits terrains whose irregularities and extremes have been softened by the efforts of these prior inhabitants. In a world where we can expect major environmental changes to induce new waves of estrangement and displacement, I ask whether a sense of the immeasurable debt which we owe to those people who came before us might help inspire the kind of cosmopolitan sensibilities we would hope for.

### **Key words**

Cosmopolitanism, nomadism, estrangement, deterritorialization, deep time, environmental change

When the sunset was a deep and angry red my parents would tell us it was because, over the sea, the big country was on fire. My brothers and I climbed the cliffs on the west coast, eager eyes hoping for a glimpse of smoke and flame, but seeing only the blue horizon. Though sometimes ash, and even dust fell from the sky. We felt sorry for people whose country had fierce deserts and unstoppable fires. Sorry, but also excited and a little envious.

According to the more apocalyptic scripting of the climate change story, it was the green and pleasant lands of the Global North which were going to have to be on their guard against 'floods' of environmental refugees from the always already volatile South (see Myers, 2001, Lazarus, 1990). Over recent decades, Australia - seemingly 'northern' in most regards other than the accident of its geographical positioning - has begun to worry about new environmentally-driven pressures for undocumented immigration, while also wondering whether it might take some responsibility for small island neighbours threatened by rising seas. But then, events took the climate change storyline down a new avenue.

In truth, the driest inhabited continent on the planet, Australia just got drier. After several years of drought, acute water shortage is now raising questions not only about the sustainability of irrigation-dependent agriculture, but about the viability of numerous settlements - including some large urban centres (Ayre, 2007, Byrnes, 2005). With drought comes heightened risk of fire, and Australia is also the most fire-prone of continents (Pyne, 1991). And with the prospect of intensifying drought, bush fires and a host of related environmental threats come rumour and speculation that plans are afoot to evacuate a considerable proportion of the 'lucky' country's 21 million people to friendly and more climatically clement nations (Bell, 2007, cf Schulz, 2007).

Expiring from thirst has not featured prominently amongst the promises and perils associated with urban existence. But then, the imagining of the city has for several centuries taken the western metropolis as its model. Theorists of the modern city, Jenny Robinson has noted, have tended to take the raw, the savage, the primitive as their counterpoint, in order to

accentuate a certain image of civility and dynamism (2006: 13). It is time to acknowledge what is provincial or parochial about such urban templates, she argues, time to broaden the horizons of what constitutes an 'ordinary city' - and what counts as vibrancy and vitality in urban life.

There are various approaches we might take to the provincialization of Europe and its cities, and a range of ways we might account for the otherness and singularity of cities elsewhere. One way, which is gradually gaining popularity in critical circles, is to stress the different physical conditions under which, or through which, city life unfolds.

Some important work in environmental history points the way. A number of studies have prompted us to view the Eurasian landmass as the site where a particular microbial ecology emerged out of the proximity of human populations and their domesticated animals, resulting in an ebb and flow of contagious diseases moving between interconnected urban centres over many millennia (McNeill, 1998; Arnold, 1996: 74-7). Some writers have noted how the plants and animals that populated post-glacial Europe often have very different competitive and dispersive capacities from biota which had evolved in other ecosystems (Crosby, 1986; Flannery, 1994: 304), while others have pointed out that the scarcity of wildfire in European woodlands and grasslands is rather exceptional in relation to the regimes of fire that pulse through many other landscapes (Pyne, 1997). Then there is the question of the specificity of climate. While Europe and the rest of the North Atlantic experiences considerable seasonal variability in temperature and rainfall, these northern temperate regions tend to be fairly consistent from one year to the next. In the tropics and across much of the southern hemisphere, by contrast, there are great irregular oscillations which can result in extreme inter-annual variation, such that whole 'seasons' may be missed or reversed (Davis, 2001).

These are just some of the ways that different regions rattle and sway to deeply divergent rhythms. Each of these ways has had profound consequences in the encounter between Europe and other places, meetings that have often been mobilised or mediated through cities. As Mike Davis (2001) has shown, the collision between human populations from different parts of the world can have dire consequences when these peoples come equipped with incompatible experiences of earth processes, and incongruent ways of coping with prevailing conditions and exceptional events. When one group has the power to impose inappropriate responses to environmental stress and extremity on another, these repercussions can be catastrophic. And even more so, Davis insists, when this involves the exposure of people when they are at their most vulnerable to the additional vagaries of a competitive and unforgiving global market (2001: 12-16, see also Worster, 1993: 43).

By this logic, if we are to understand the conditions that broadly configure want and plenty, estrangement and emplacement, ontological insecurity and security on this planet, then we must address the injustices that inhere in specific ways of organising global social life while at the same time accounting for variability that is characteristic of the earth itself. Or to put it another way, if we are going to dream of modes of 'cosmopolitanism' that reach out across the great and painful differentials of contemporary globalized life, then we will need to come to terms with the volatilities of the cosmos, together with the unsettling dynamics of the polis.

But this is not simply a matter of North and South. In this light, I turn to Australia - not only to carry on my childhood fascination for a strange and boisterous neighbour, but as a way of complicating the North-South divide. Virtually the whole of the Australian continent is subject to the influence of the coupled ocean-atmosphere system known as the El Niño Southern Oscillation - a vast dynamo of circulating and dissipating solar energy that periodically changes direction (Davis, 2001: ch 8, Grove, 1997: ch 4). Most years, easterly trade winds drive the warm surface waters of the Pacific Ocean eastwards. Then, at irregular intervals of some 2-7 years, changes in the trade winds alter the distribution of warm and cold water - causing a reversal of the normal pressure gradients over the Pacific and a reorganisation of wind circulation and precipitation. This is known as an El Niño event. When these episodes are particularly strong, normally arid areas of the East Pacific and the Americas experience torrential rainfall, while characteristically humid or monsoonal regions from East Asia to Africa suffer from devastating drought (Davis, 2001: 214-6). As does much

of Australia, where the population is now anxiously awaiting a reversal of fortune after two years of intense El Niño effects.

One of the effects of this climatic pulsing is that damp cycles plump up forests and grasslands with biotic material, which is then dried out and readied for combustion when spells of drought descend. In this way, severe El Niño episodes manifest themselves in outbreaks of wildfire, as in the years of 1997-8, when tens of thousands of blazes raged uncontrollably from Siberia to Sumatra, across Australia and in Amazonia (Pyne, 2001: 172-3, Davis, 2001: 252-5). Many of the most extensive bushfires that punctuate Australian history have now been identified as signatures of the dry phase of ENSO, including numerous conflagrations that have accompanied the current drought. The implication of this for Australians is not only that they have a countryside biophysically destined to burn, but that their cities – characteristically dispersed and verdant – are also in the line of fire (Franklin, 2006).

While the current drought has been strongly linked to an El Niño event, there is growing evidence that the intensity of the great southern oscillation is being exacerbated by human-induced climate change, prompting speculation that Australia may be on the way to becoming the first large-scale victim of the enhanced greenhouse effect. Or, rather, the first *developed country* to be hard hit (Marks 2007, Flannery 2007). Apocalyptic scenarios about the fate of Australian agriculture and cities now abound, as I hinted earlier. And a good bout of apocalypticism is not without its uses. Already, a conservative administration that has long been climate change sceptical and opposed to the Kyoto Protocol is finding itself compelled to rethink its position (Marks, 2007). Of course the moist cycle of ENSO is likely to provide some relief, while the strength of the Australian economy, riding a minerals boom, provides a buffer for the economic impact of drought and a resource for adaptive strategies.<sup>1</sup> End-of-the-world scenarios, in other words, can be easily deflated. They also tend to be politically and ethically pliable, as easily set to the task of self-serving and exclusivist strategising as they are to the opening up generous and generative prospects.

But Australian thought, in and through its entwinement with a volatile landscape, is rich in other possibilities which might serve to supplement environmental apocalypticism. Prompted at least in part by sensitivity toward the vast disjuncture between the span of Aboriginal and white settler inhabitation of the continent, there is, as Tom Griffiths detects amongst his compatriots an increasing willingness to ‘travel adventurously in deep time’ (2000:4). Griffiths and fellow travellers are wary of the risks of aligning indigeneity with the primordiality of the earth, but are also mindful that integrating social history with geological, climatic or evolutionary history has its own potential to destabilise colonial narratives. This is a point that Gayatri Spivak has also made, likewise looking towards Australia, as she counsels us not to let the current fascination with mobility around globe occlude the experience of ‘those who have stayed in place’ - peoples who have inhabited their regions for tens of thousands of years. (1999: 402). This is a sensibility, Spivak adds, that demands an awareness of the ways that ‘history’ blends into ‘geology’ (1999: 69-70 n 86).

As an alternative to both linear, progressivist narratives and flash-bang apocalypticism, attentiveness to long term dwelling viewed in tandem with dynamic environmental history puts the stress on enduring, surviving, living-on through whatever challenges the world delivers. But sometimes, survival needs a helping hand. In this regard, I want to suggest, a sensitivity toward deep temporalities might also help stretch and fill out existing notions of the cosmopolitan, by broadening our sense of who counts as a stranger, and how needs arise. The stranger, it is worth remembering, is not simply a foreigner - one from another place - but anyone who has suffered estrangement, anyone whose world has been shattered or upended. And if there is one thing that a feel for deep time should instil, it is the awareness that our earth has a tendency to test our tolerance levels - to push us all, now and again, to the limits of our endurance.

White Australia has learned, is still learning, its environmental history lessons the hard way. The wildfires of Black Friday took their name from the 3 of January 1939, but blazed across the state of Victoria for a week, consuming millions of acres of forest, immolating dozens of settlements, and casting a pall of dread and anxiety over the nation (Griffiths 2001: ch 10, Pyne, 1991: 309-314). If the horrors of Black Friday initiated the slow push towards the

settler society's acceptance of the inevitability of fire in the Australian landscape, they also seem to have sparked a new sensitivity towards temporality. As head of the Royal Commission into the fires, Judge Leonard Stretton said of those caught up in the inferno: 'They had not lived long enough'. It is a deceptively simple pronouncement, one from which Griffiths has teased out the full import:

The judge...was not commenting on the youthfulness of the dead; he was lamenting the environmental knowledge of both victims and survivors. He was pitying the innocence of European immigrants in a land whose natural rhythms they did not understand. He was depicting the fragility and brevity of a human lifetime in a forest where life cycles and fire regimes had the periodicity and ferocity of centuries. He was indicting a whole society'(2001: vii).

Never far from such reckoning is the awareness that Australian Aborigines work *with* rather than *against* fire (Jones, 1969; Main, 2004). Many peasant or tribal populations around the world actively use free-range burning as a way of managing their environments, but those who have been inhabiting the exceptionally fire-prone continent of Australia for some 60,000 years seem to have a special way with fire; a pyrotechnics which often held early European explorers and settlers in awe. 'The dexterity with which they manage so proverbially a dangerous agent as fire is indeed astonishing', as John Lort Stokes of HMS Beagle observed after a foray in South-west Australia in 1840 (cited in Hallam, 1979: 33). In a range of ways across a spectrum of ecological zones, Aborigines burn to increase the richness of flora and fauna, to render the land traversable, and as protection against larger and uncontrollable wildfires. They burn, as they like to say, as a way of caring for the land (Yibarbuk, 1998; Langton, 1998).

Attuned to variable weather, to accumulating fuel-loads, and the movements of wildlife aboriginal pyrotechnicians exemplify the worldly knowing of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's 'nomad' (1994). Their take on the nomad refers to those who track the pathways that different living and non living materials take. Nomads know from experience where elements or entities are to be found. More than this, they have a feeling for how things change, when systems are approaching thresholds, and when the time is right to tap in or intervene. In other words, they know how to go with the flow, how to live on an earth that is subject to localized shifts and changes of state – one that 'constantly carries out a movement of 'deterritorialization on the spot' as Deleuze and Guattari put it (1994: 85). In this way, the true nomad is not simply or primarily someone who migrates, but one who 'occupies, inhabits, holds...space' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994: 381, see also Serres, 1991: 240).

The point is that to stay in place over the long term is also to 'travel adventurously'. Settling in, or 'holding space', is always a kind of mobility, a journey through the variability of earth processes. And sooner or later, it is a tough journey. We speak of changing regimes, of shifting from one state to another, and passing across borders or thresholds as challenges presented by a complex social world, but complex physical systems also switch between different states or regimes, and move across thresholds, often with great speed and little warning (Scheffer et al, 2001, DeLanda, 1992). This too can be challenging for humans and other living things who are part of these systems, for it means that you don't have to leave home for your world to become strange - your world can leave you. Experience counts, as the lesson of the nomad suggests, and as a rule the longer a people or a species or a mixed community has inhabited a region, the greater the range of variation they will be conversant with, the more attuned they will be to its characteristic shifts, peaks and troughs (see Davis, 1998: 35-6). But an earth composed of variable and volatile systems can always come up with something new, something more extreme, something surprising. The adventure does not stop.

While it seems likely that some version of the ENSO phenomenon has been in operation ever since shifting tectonic plates closed the Isthmus of Panama and gave the Pacific its present shape (some 5 million years ago), there is evidence that the cycle only assumed its current, and more pronounced, contours relatively recently (Caviedes, 2001, 256). Ash cores taken from different sites around Australia backed up by samples from further afield point to a dramatic increase of outbreaks of fire around 6,000 years ago, which researchers have been reading as a signature of the onset of El Niño episodes of similar intensities to today (Black

and Mooney, 2007). By this time, Aboriginal people had been living in Australia for tens of thousands of years, a span that includes the height of the last Pleistocene glaciation and the shift into the warmer interglacial Holocene era we still inhabit (Langton, 1999, Kohen, 1995: ch 3). For much, perhaps all, of this time, they had been using fire to shape and tend the landscape. But the intensification of the ENSO cycle implies that Aboriginal burning and many other land-use practices would have had to confront a radically different climatic, hydrological and pyro-geographical regime.

This is what happens when the earth deterritorializes. *On the spot* Looking at the paleoclimatic record more generally, William Calvin conjectures that the jumps associated with climate change are often '...so large and so quick that a single generation gets caught, forced to innovate on the spot' (2002: 17). If this is the case, then many people in Australia, around the Pacific, across the southern hemisphere would have got caught, would have had to improvise, in the face of the intensifying of El Niño events 6000 years ago. Confronted by dramatically intensifying wild fire, it appears that Aboriginal burning across Australia may have intensified also, that fire was fought with more fire (Black and Mooney, 2007). That fire had to be fought with more fire, because no other force could possibly match fire's power and prevalence.

Improvisation, the imperative of the nomad, is a matter of trial and error, and we shouldn't forget that erring can be costly. To hold the ground, we can only imagine, lives were on the line. When working with fire in a pyrophiliac environment, one would not have to be a recent arrival to experience the 'fragility and brevity of a human life time'.

Cities rest on these life times. Somewhere amidst, beneath, beyond every Australian city, someone else has been doing the work of holding space, of securing a terrain, rendering it traversable and inhabitable. Where Emmanuel Levinas speaks figuratively of 'burning for the other' (1998: 50), Aboriginal Australians quite literally tended fires that prepared the ground on which later Australians settled and multiplied. Perhaps there are the traces of similar work in every city on this planet (see for example Cronon, 1991, Serres, 1991). And while we may know something of the cost of wresting places away from their prior inhabitants, we tend to know a lot less about the price paid to shape, tend and hold these spaces through time 'immemorial'. Though there may be murmurings from time to time. As Steve Pile observes: 'Cities haunt in the sense that they force us- perhaps against our will, perhaps only occasionally – to recognise the lives of those who have gone (before)' (2005: 162).

Recent events in Australia, the Gulf of Mexico, and the Indian Ocean have reminded us of the elemental precariousness of urban life (cf Davis, 1998, Kaika, 2005). When contemporary cities burn, drown, dry out or topple, we urbanites are reminded that geophysical change can take place in the eye-blink of the present, as well as inching along through eons and epochs. And perhaps in this way, the lives of past adventurers in deep time may come to gain prominence among the host of spectral figures with whom we share our cities. In this sense, a little strategic apocalypticism is not without its uses. But if we are to truly embrace the variability of our earth, and welcome those who have been pushed past their limits by its eventfulness, then more generous outlooks are called for.

What I would like to call 'aboriginal cosmopolitanism'<sup>2</sup> refers to the nomad's openness to the past and future, to the disposition of all those who understand the capacity of their worlds to deterritorialize well enough to know that these events can make strangers of any of us. And who live accordingly. Beyond this, I imagine a more general appreciation of the adventure of deep time, an inclination towards those who have made the difficult and trying journey through what Tom Griffiths refers to as 'the really *long durée*' (2000:1). A sensibility that is also respectful to the spectres of those whose journeys were cut short, whose spatio-temporal pathways were blocked, diverted, usurped when other ways of securing a territory were laid down over the ground they held and prepared. Such a hospitality might find its nourishment in gratitude, in an appreciation of the debt we owe those others who prepared the way for us. This is a debt - immeasurable and unredeemable – that is owed to those unnamed others whose trials and labours ultimately offered up 'the gift of the possibility of a common world', (see Diprose 2002: 141). My vision of a cosmopolitanism 'yet to come' would welcome others who move laterally across the earth's surface - from city to city or state to state - but it

would do so in ways that are informed and inspired by that other great mobility, the abyssal trek through the thresholds and changes of state that are intrinsic to the planet itself.

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<sup>1</sup> Indeed, a week after writing this, torrential rainfall hit the states of Victoria and New South Wales causing extensive flooding in previously drought-stricken areas. Initial reports link the heavy rainfall with the onset of the moist phase of ENSO (Sands, 2007)

<sup>2</sup> When I struck on this phrase, somewhere in the back of my mind was Ross Gibson's (1999) intriguing account of the British castaway James Morrill who was saved and sheltered by Queensland Aborigines in the 1840s. Morrill became the topic of a symposium that drew Aborigines from distant parts of the country to study and debate his presence amongst them. After completing this piece, I was thrilled to find that Gibson refers to this incident, and other reports of extensive trade and communication networks, as evidence of 'Aboriginal cosmopolitanism' (1999:42). Anne Brewster (2002) also speaks of the 'cosmopolitan culture' of indigenous Australians.