A case for reimagining Australia: Dialogic registers of the Other, truth-telling and a will to justice

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Abstract: The critical and compelling impetus of reimagining Australia, which this and the previous special issue of *Coolabah* attempt to realise, has been formed through an ethical and intellectual lens fraught with profound acknowledgement of and attention to the legacies of epistemic, structural and psychological violence that characterise the formation and continuation of the modern nation-state of Australia. After all, what do *we* (writers, activist scholars, historians and intellectuals contributing to these special issues) mean by reimagining Australia? Is it possible to reimagine this place, polity, culture, country, nation, idea, people, with all the weight upon us of how it has been desired into being, specifically by those Enlightenment traditions that have come to dominate its present? As much as Australia is a vast place with diverse cultural lives, its dominant colonial history has incapacitated it from unleashing the energies within these diversities. By putting our sense of place central to how we mediate and relate with each other and the environment, by remembering silenced histories and recognising multiple memories, reimagining emerges from linked lives, crossed borders, and in-between spaces. We are reminded that reimagining occurs in multiple and intersectional sites that allow multiple realities to mediate with each other in dignity. In this regard, the significance of listening to diverse knowledge traditions, in particular Indigenous and non-western voices, becomes critical for the type of cognitive and knowledge diversity such reimagining requires.

Keywords: reimagining; Australia; Other; truth-telling; will to justice.

Writing in reference to Australia, Ashis Nandy has perceptively argued that over the past two hundred years the European Enlightenment has "shaped virtually every new imagination of a desirable society and every radical intervention in societies and states, even when—during this same period—Enlightenment values have also often been used to justify some of the major projects of Satanism in our times" (quoted in Offord et al. 2015, vii). Australia—a stubborn crucible of such justification—remains an implacable site of struggle and unfinished business, manifest through cultural, political, social and historical arcs of amnesia; deliberate and conscious selections of story telling and ordering of nature; as well as the administering of an epistemic architecture that persists in its core institutions despite the mythology of *terra nullius*, (among many mythologies), being dealt a mighty legal and truth making blow.

Thus, the critical and compelling impetus of reimagining 'Australia,' which this, and the previous special issue of *Coolabah*, attempt to realise, has been formed through an ethical and intellectual lens fraught with profound acknowledgement of and attention to the legacies of epistemic, structural and psychological violence that characterise the formation and continuation of the modern nation-state of Australia. After all, what do *we* (writers, activist scholars, historians and intellectuals contributing to these special issues) mean by reimagining Australia? Is it possible to reimagine this place, polity, culture, country, nation, idea, people, with all the weight upon us of how it has been desired into being, specifically by those Enlightenment traditions that have come to dominate its present? What is required to identify, question and even, perhaps, undo (for the sake of honesty) those cultural priorities that have come to shape how Australia is imagined? What are the ethical challenges of such energies?

Reimagining Australia through dialogic registers of the *other*

The reimagining Australia project substantially comprised of research conducted, presented, performed and discussed in and around the 2016 International Association of Australian Studies (InASA) conference held in Fremantle or Walyalup in Whadjuk Noongar country. Together with the editorial work represented in these two special issues of *Coolabah*, the project itself can be thought of as an assemblage (Srinivasan and Fish 2017) that has been consciously co-constructed towards a more ethical horizon (Zylinska 2005) of being and belonging in Australia, and of understanding the deep and complex contextual ramifications of otherness, as it has been experienced through the effects of colonialism and its ongoing permutations. The project draws on and may in turn contribute to assemblages of reimagining in other countries and communities as geographically far away as Canada, where familiar challenges have been addressed by emerging movements such as Idle No More (Coulthard 2014; John 2015).

As editors we assumed authority for soliciting articles, arranging their peer reviews, then including, clarifying and excluding some of them to produce two issues of *Coolabah* offered as a dialogic imagining (Bahktin 1981) of a more ethical Australia. In assuming this authority, we are ultimately responsible for the *other* (Levinas 1985) represented in these issues: that is, the dialogic imagining of spaces outside or *other* than reimagined Australia.

Notably, the dialogic *other* of this reimagined Australia can be identified in the descriptions of processes—verbs and their nominalisations (Fairclough 2013)—offered, typically, in the context of issues, themes and artefacts investigated and created in these *Coolabah* articles. These processes endure, shun, lose, discover, occupy and settle. They socially and selectively dis and possess, de and re territorialise as well as hurt, forget and remember. These processes also inhibit, ignore, diminish, deny, reject, silence, limit, repress, capture, create, confer, accumulate, maintain, constrain, render, fix, normalise, predetermine, impoverish, accept, colonise, racialise, ethnicise, marginalise, dominate, exclude, fear, fail, disconnect and dichotomise.

Tony Birch calls out the *other* of reimagined Australia, as an enduring shunning of Indigenous people, Indigenous self-determination and Indigenous care for country. For Rachel Joy, the *other* is produced by settler colonisation, where people are defined by possessions and belonging is conferred via land title. The *other* in Maria Chisari's re-imagination is the process of normalising an apparently unchanging and unique set of 'Australian values.' The *other* in Majon Williamson Kefu's article is disconnecting policy and practice in teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in primary school education. For Alison Atkinson-Phillips the *other* denies space in the national story for grieving and making reparation claims. Elfie Shiosaki's *other* silences and, collectively, imagines away the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in accounts of Australian history. This silencing contributes to the dichotomisation of heritage values in the *other* of Sarah Yu's Reimagined Australia.

The *other* of Reimagined Australia in Fausto Buttà's work is the fixing and predetermining of migrant identity in Australia. Along these lines, Carol Millner's *other*

is the dominating narrative of the single female immigrant arriving, working briefly then marrying well. Yuriko Yamanouchi's *other* lacks understanding of the complexities of being a mixed descendent. Diverse civic being and belonging are constrained by processes of enthnonationalism, the *other* in Yirga Gelaw Woldeyes' article. Interventions are needed. Yet, failing to intervene in processes that systematically marginalise African students is the *other* in the work of Kwadwo Adusei-Asante's article. Apathy or doing nothing to enable spaces and places to promote knowledge sharing on different ways of being is the *other* in Greg Watson's work. Fearing diversity and difference rather than celebrating them is the *other* in the article by Lekkie Hopkins and Lucy Hopkins.

Michelle Bui's *other* of Reimagined Australia is the process of rendering people invisible through technologies of offshore incarceration. The *other* in Shaphan Cox and Thor Kerr hurts people through exclusive national celebration. Brenda Downing's *other* inhibits understandings of sexual violence and trauma. While Molly Murn's *other* ignores the creative opportunities for justice offered through encounters with liminal spaces. Paul Hetherington and Cassandra Atherton's *other* limits truthful expression of trauma and anxiety through conventional literary genres. Straight-acting away spaces for reimagining how class, ethnic and sexual mobility is negotiated is the *other* process in Nicholas Manganas' article. The *other* in Katie Ellis, Mike Kent, Scott Hollier, Shawn Burns and Gerard Goggin is the process of socially creating the exclusion of disability through misrepresentation and inaccessible technology. Danielle Brady and Jeffrey Murray's *other* is losing social memory of natural/cultural places. Such loss strengthens Yvonne Hartman and Sandy Darab's *other* in maintaining unsustainable relationships between humans and their environments.

The multiple and diverse registers of the *other* found in these reimagining Australia issues of *Coolabah* were identified in the reflection of experiences, challenges, successes and injustices of living with contemporary Australia. Recognition of alterity in the dialogic of this collection has provided us with the possible energies to question accepted cultural priorities whenever we find ourselves implicated or mired in these processes outside a reimagined Australia. By choosing to recognise and refuse these processes of othering through creative, written and intellectual acts and interventions (Coulthard 2014; also see Birch), of being idle no more, a sense of responsibility is manifest, where reimagining itself is able to go beyond the limits of Enlightenment thought.

Acts of truth-telling through reimagining ways of knowing

Reimagining narratives of Australian national history restores some sensation to our numbing encounters with the past in the present. These narratives of history weigh heavily on us. Under their weight, we feel we are losing all sensation. Acts of reimagining historical narratives are syncretic movements between the two worlds of past and present. They are momentary incursions across borders of time and place.

This collection of writing reflects on how we might reconcile our truths in the present, with those in the past. In this way reimagining becomes a form of truth-telling, deeply motivated by a desire for reconciliation with ourselves and each other.

This writing also reveals how colonial narratives of Indigenous dispossession continue to pervade discourses about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, our humanity and our human rights. As the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, June Oscar (2017, np), reflected in her Mabo Lecture, "for many of you, I know that human rights are just words on a page and not a part of your lived reality." Words are so easily erased.

Within these colonial narratives of dispossession, Aboriginal people are voiceless. They are denied the agency to speak for themselves. They are spoken about by others.

In the same way that colonisation attempted to erase Aboriginal people by displacing them from country and systems of kinship, it attempted to erase their voice. Colonial narratives too are acts of erasure. How do we restore humanity to such un-human ways of knowing each other?

This collection of writing also reveals how Aboriginal people have asserted their collective humanity. Many of these assertions are held silently within the files of colonial archives. These assertions have been made in discursive advocacy by Aboriginal people for self-determination for centuries. This advocacy is framed by Indigenous ontologies of the way they are in their worlds. These assertions contribute to an unceasing movement for Indigenous human rights in Australia.

In the words of Noongar historian Elfie Shiosaki, "We echo the voices of our old people with our own, as Aboriginal people of our generation continue to contend with practices of colonisation. We move between the two worlds." These histories of advocacy revitalise colonial narratives of Indigenous dispossession by amplifying significant Aboriginal voices. These histories reveal more ancient narratives, which Irene Watson (2014, 515) defines as "one that situates us as we have always been, transforming the world, and as agents in the bringing of the future."

Reimagining Australia casts our minds back to the past, not the future. It asks us to reflect on its ancient creation as a nation. It asks us to reflect on its sovereign and lawful Indigenous peoples. Aboriginal people have been imagining Country for tens of thousands of years. This imagining is of the beginning, when Country was sung into creation in the first songs sung by our ancestors. Shiosaki observes, "We continue to sing these songs."

In 2017 over 250 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people gathered to make the Uluru Statement from the Heart. The statement was a reimagining. It was a form of truth-telling. It significantly reimagined peace-making between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Australia.

One of the key recommendations of the statement was the establishment of a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution. Such a polity would enable Aboriginal people to speak for themselves. The statement reflects that "in 1967 we were counted,

in 2017 we seek to be heard." The statement made these recommendations to "… empower our people and take a rightful place in our own country." This motivation echoes the voices of Aboriginal Elders who have advocated for self-determination as "a rightful place in our own country." This collection of writing traces some of these histories of advocacy, which have compelled us forward to the present.

This reimagining of narratives of Australian national history will only be realised by continuing to amplify Aboriginal voices, and listening with both our ears and our hearts. We encourage this form of listening to the voices within this collection of writing.

Reimagining Australia: Epistemologies, decolonisation, connection

As a process, reimagining Australia is necessarily always in the present with our senses simultaneously tuned towards the sediments of the past and an uncertain future. And the future, our imagined future, bears in on us often with a sense of foreboding, especially where the environment is concerned. We imagine and reimagine together the place where we (will) live and the time in which we (will) live. Both are tinged with necessary hope and well-founded fears. In this context it is no wonder that apocalypse looms in the cultural milieu as a figure urging us to reimagine. In Western popular culture the apocalypse figures as a catastrophic break in history, often marked by a world devoid of people, or at best one that is sparsely populated (Danowski and de Castro 2017). Any human response is paltry against this scale of catastrophe. Yet as Stephan Skrimshire (2010) reminds us, apocalypse in its original sense did not refer to the "end time" so much as to the unveiling of some truth, a revelation. This unveiling may occur in an instant or over decades. Drawing on Skrimshire, Andreas Malm (2016) suggests the unveiling of fossil-fuelled climate change may have first become apparent to workers in hot, steam-powered Manchester factories in the 1850s. In our times, climate change has billowed such that Earth systems are perturbed on a geological scale encapsulated in the term the Anthropocene (Latour and Aït-Touati 2017). If we add in other indicators that provide evidence for the great acceleration (Steffen et al. 2015), the exponential growth since the mid-twentieth century of indicators of environmental degradation, our time is one of intense revelation: that those of us benefiting from "economic prosperity" are doing so to the detriment of ourselves and all others on the Earth. The revelations are unfolding at a global level though through local manifestations (Garbutt and McIntyre 2017, 166).

In reimagining Australia in the face of such revelations, the ancient Greek origins of apocalypse might yield possibilities for response. In ancient Greek *apo kalúptō* is to take off a covering, while the verb *kalúptō* not only means to cover, but also to cover with dishonour (Liddell and Scott 1940). With this in mind we could consider how Indigenous Australian activists, scholars and allies have uncovered for non-Indigenous Australians the "apocalyptic" events of unfolding colonisation and of the mechanisms by which colonisers have covered Indigenous knowledge and culture with dishonour. It might be a revelation then, as Mary Graham (Brigg and Graham 2009) has observed, that in Australia the mainstream has much to learn from Aboriginal people who are well-versed both in living with Country and responding to apocalypse in the form of the destruction of Country, people, culture and knowledge. Ecofeminists (for example,

Plumwood 1993) have also unmasked how masculinist, exploitative visions of nature have worked to normalise and celebrate environmental degradation. Reimagining Australia, then, requires developing an Australian "ethics of location" that extends the decolonising ethic Garbutt (2008) calls for, to one in which environmental justice and social justice are inseparable. This is a refashioning of the local order (Garbutt 2005) that necessarily involves human and more-than-human considerations, that is, considerations of the culpability of the invaders in unsustainably exploiting resources in actions that necessitated the genocide and oppression of Indigenous Australians.

We evoke the local here because when we bring the environment of Australia into our considerations of what reimagining might entail, and connect it with an Indigenous Australian understanding of living within "ecologies that fit" (Kearney 2018, 189) Australia as a relational object seems at once too large and too small. Too large because the nation and its country are too vast to consider in one gaze without venturing into space; too small because when it comes to the regional variations in country and cultures a unified national story could never contain them all. And as we have noted, this unified national story has been so carefully constructed within a masculinist, colonial clearing (Garbutt 2010; Latour 2009, 6) it is hard to open it out while leaving old unified concepts of Australia intact. Our task is to reinterpret and redesign Australia, to reconnect its elements in new ways, to 'restory' it, to use the materials at hand in a construction relevant to our times. In addition, with the failure of political leadership in addressing anthropogenic environmental change, there is a sense in which the future needs to be reworked from below, through new cultural, social and economic forms (Wark 2015). Authors in these reimagining Australia special issues do just that.

Joy explores the intricately entwined practices of belonging and their accompanying philosophical beings. As she writes, for non-Indigenous Australians, there is an imperative to begin reimagining their relationship with place by relinquishing the possessive logic of belonging (Moreton-Robinson 2004). With this logic of exclusive property rights, land is a belonging with which the subject-possessor does as he desires. From this proceeds a sense of entitlement over place despite global and local consequences of which Adani's proposed Carmichael mine stand as an exemplar (see Birch). This ethos of domination of land is at odds with Joy's call for non-Indigenous Australians to join Indigenous Australians in thinking for place. This is not a white, patriarchal call to do the thinking *for* another set of existents, but to think with attentive awareness "with both place and all the beings enfolded in it" (Joy). This decolonising move has the potential to decentre the Western settler subject and set in place a process of becoming other than occupier.

This combined movement towards justice for land and Indigenous people is extended by Birch who proposes that combating climate change depends on productive relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. While for Joy place has the potential to link Australians together, for Birch it is Country. Drawing on the inspiring work of Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2014), Birch evokes land as pedagogy, and conjures for us a judgment day when we answer to those who walk ahead of us, the Elders who were stewards of Country for millennia. Like Joy, Birch challenges non-Indigenous Australians to embark on reimagining Australia beginning with settler subjectivity. But unlike Joy, he recognises tension for Indigenous Australians, a sense of doubt that colonisation as an ongoing process will ever be

changed by the colonisers without challenges, or acts of refusal, from Indigenous communities: refusal in the form of denying rights to environmentally unsound development or refusal of a politics of recognition that is accompanied by the *status quo*. The tension therefore is between denying and nourishing relationships, of denying and maintaining connectivity in a contested process of re-imagination. There is nothing comfortable in the prospect of achieving environmental and decolonial justice except repose in the work for necessary change.

Of course, speaking for place through resistance and protest is occurring, with Country/place as a meeting ground for developing a decolonising ethics that is necessarily collaborative and active (Rose 2004, 33; Aboriginal Heritage Action Alliance 2017). The wetlands of Perth, and the Beeliar wetlands in particular, are such sites (see Brady and Murray). Our cultural connectedness with wetlands demonstrates the difference between non-Indigenous and Indigenous relationships with country. For the former group, wetlands moved from being sources of water and fertile land in the nineteenth century to becoming undesirable swamps that were drained in the twentieth century. Only more recently have the swamps been re-valued by some as abundantly biodiverse wetlands. Brady and Murray delve into the archive to reveal that for Noongar people wetlands were always places of abundance providing food and places for gathering, even for evading hostile colonists. The recent Roe 8 protests have the potential to take non-Indigenous and Indigenous relationships with Country and place off the page and into the type of decolonising collaboration that Rose suggests. For academics, the decolonising imperative is to consider how such relationships are developed through their work and into research outputs.

Similarly, Hartman and Darab write of the importance of people coming together "on the ground" regarding environmental matters of concern. Examining the case of a successful campaign to stop coal seam gas extraction in the Northern Rivers region of New South Wales, Hartman and Darab identify two important aspects of the action: an enmeshed relationship with place and the use of non-violent, direct democracy principles that are in continual development in the community. Relationships with place enabled the drawing together of disparate groups into the action including Githabul Elders, land titleholders, farmers, and environmentally concerned community members of all ages, including the formidable Knitting Nannas (see https://www.knitting-nannas.com/index.php). These groups were galvanised through learning from the experiences of those involved in previous non-violent environmental actions in the region that stretch back to the 1979 Terania Creek rainforest campaign, the first successful rainforest protection campaign in Australia (Bible 2018). In this sense, over an extended period of time resistance is always being learnt on country for country; learning that from the outset recognises the primacy of Aboriginal claims to and relationships with Country. Reimagining Australia in this local on-the-ground process is not solely a cognitive exercise, but as Hartman and Darab remind us, it is embodied and shared with a collective of human and more-than-human actors—as Deborah Bird Rose (2008, 110) puts it, to "open our minds and our bodies to other people's epistemologies."

And finally, on this theme, Yu examines how this discussion centres on questions of value and relationship. She asks for relationships between Indigenous people and country to be counted as cultural heritage; heritage that we might all learn from. The

Yawuru people of Western Australia have a word for the "interconnectedness between a sense of personal self with the wider community and the natural landscape"—*liyan* (Patrick Dodson in Yu). When culture is strong, good *liyan* results, and when culture is interrupted, *liyan* is out of joint. Yu calls for us all to be accountable for *mabu liyan*, well-being, to value relationships with country, that densely entangled term that ultimately is the key to survival, earthbound as we are. While it is currently impossible for non-Indigenous Australians to fully share in this sense of interconnectedness, it may be that reimagining Australia in these apocalyptic times demands of us all to work towards *mabu liyan* as the horizon of environmental and decolonising peace.

Reimagining Australia and a will to justice

As much as Australia is a vast place with diverse cultural lives, its dominant colonial history has incapacitated it from unleashing the energies within these diversities. For a long time, Australian political culture has been driven by the anxiety to control the dynamics of change that its diversities may precipitate. This fear of change has initiated the institutionalisation of mechanisms for the control rather than the flourishing of difference. The will to reimagine Australia partly emerges from the need to challenge the fear of diversity and difference in social and political life.

As we have outlined above, in the political realm, reimagining is an invitation to critically examine the oft-celebrated ideals of Australia's liberal tradition. The mainstream political and cultural life of the country narrates the ideals of the rule of law, democracy, human rights, freedom of speech and 'the fair-go' as the foundation of the nation. In reflecting on this narrative, we can observe a fairly positive political culture that tolerates some level of dissent and is receptive of critical voices that lead to limited progressive outcomes. The Mabo case, the Apology to the Stolen Generation, and recent debates about moving Australia Day are important examples that show the possibility of the liberal tradition to permit progressive measures. Yet, reimagining challenges us to go beyond the celebration of liberal ideals to consider the everyday experiences of Australians under colonial and neoliberal systems of power. The shift from dominant liberal ideals and theories to the peoples' historical and lived experiences reveals how liberal ideals are fraught with inconsistencies and contradictions. Despite the stated commitment to ideals of freedom and human rights, the liberal tradition did not stop colonial violence or help the healing of the historical trauma unleashed through colonisation. The very same liberal tradition that values the rule of law and parliamentary democracy produced the White Australia policy and off-shore detention. It hardly welcomes strangers who are vulnerable, especially when they arrive by 'unsanctioned' channels (by boat) or are disabled immigrants who are, among others, considered 'economic drains' on society. Reimagining is a critical move towards the realm of uncomfortable but compelling and necessary questions. If we truly wish to reimagine Australia, we must question how the nation's celebrated liberal democracy was able to accommodate colonialism and how it continues to bear with, and ominously, sustain and rationalise its consequences. Can the liberal political tradition listen to voices informed by views other than its own?

In reimagining Australia, we consider the significance of listening to radically different worldviews or new voices. How can we imagine Australian life as a place where plural, diverse, and intersectional worldviews could exist and flourish? Reimagining is prefaced on the belief that "another knowledge is possible" and that cognitive justice is as important as social justice (Santos 2007). The question of justice in relation to knowledge is tied with the recognition of the right to narrate, to ensure that suppressed worldviews are able to speak their truths with dignity. Reimagining is not just a willingness to speak *for* suppressed voices or ensure the inclusion of their views into mainstream public discourse. It is the necessity to make public and political spaces available for subaltern, marginalised and suppressed agents; the recognition of the right of the supressed to narrate and create their world themselves (Bhabha 1994). This is what seems to be absent in Australian political life today. The rejection of the Uluru Statement from the Heart (2017) is just one of the latest examples of how Indigenous people struggle to establish a political space within liberal democracy in Australia. The ongoing attempt by the current Liberal government to introduce a regime of tough immigration measures based on proof of integration, an Australian values test and English language test, is also another example of how liberalism is able to bend towards tyrannical routes by criminalising specific groups and identities through institutional mechanisms (Belot 2018).

Furthermore, these patterns of setting political, cultural and historical priorities can be seen in how Australian political discourse has been able to garner a high level of public support towards integrating minorities into mainstream society. Both the political left and right are accustomed to representing Indigenous people, refugees, LGBTIQ people and other identities as objects of their discourses. While the idea of seeing marginalised people as 'like us' may be seen as a positive move, the tyranny of such discourses lie in the worth of these groups being evaluated in relation to their ability to conform to the values of mainstream society. To evaluate one's worth by what is perceived to be 'Australian' is to deny the agency of these people to speak their story and their truth. In the movement between the political left and the right, minorities such as Indigenous people are not allowed to speak as subjects, act as agents or design their destinies as free beings. In this regard, the difficult question is how can we reimagine the liberal tradition to accommodate radical diversity that hosts "the otherness of the other" (Levinas 1991), when in fact it is accustomed to subjecting all external meanings and realities into its own rationalities?

The various essays in these two special issues have offered various points of encounter, recognition, resistance and change that trigger important insights for the future. By putting our sense of place central to how we mediate and relate with each other and the environment, by remembering silenced histories and recognising multiple memories, reimagining emerges from linked lives, crossed borders, and in-between spaces. We are reminded that reimagining occurs in multiple and intersectional sites that allow multiple realities to mediate with each other in dignity. In this regard, the significance of listening to diverse knowledge traditions, in particular Indigenous and non-western voices, becomes critical for the type of cognitive and knowledge diversity such reimagining requires.

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country, and that of the Widjabal people of the Bundjalung nation. The editorial collective recognises that Aboriginal sovereignty has never been ceded, and we will continue to work together towards establishing recognition, representation and self-determination.

Our sincere thanks are extended to the many peer reviewers who generously read and engaged with the submissions to these special issues.

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Values (co-authored with Kerruish, Garbutt, Wessell and Pavlovic, 2015), which Raewyn Connell has remarked is a 'disturbing book, most relevant to our disturbing times.' He is an Executive Board Member of the International Association of Australian Studies, a Board Member of the Centre for Australian Studies at the University of Barcelona; and was Chair (Visiting Professor) of Australian Studies at The University of Tokyo (2010-2011).

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