6.3

‘EARTH HONORING: WESTERN DESIRES AND INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGES’[1]

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> With each sign that gives language its shape lies a stereotype of which I/i am both the manipulator and the manipulated.[2]

Recent developments in environmentalism and feminism have intensified Western desires to affiliate with indigenous people and to call upon their knowledges and experiences. In settler Australia, alliances have developed between feminists, environmentalists, and Aborigines seeking to have their interests in land recognized. Within the Australian setting, environmentalists have presumed accordance between their interests and those of Aboriginal Australians seeking land rights. Similarly, many non-Aboriginal women’s groups have presumed that the land struggles of Aboriginal women resonate with their struggles against patriarchy. As the case of settler Australia testifies, such alliances do not escape the politics of colonialism and patriarchy. In particular, there are specific problems arising from the essentialized notions of Aboriginality and woman that underpin radical environmentalisms and feminisms. Yet to read these alliances only in terms of the reiteration of a politics of Western, mascu-linist supremacy neglects the positive engagement indigenous women may make with such ‘sympathizers’ in their efforts to verify and amplify their struggles for land rights.

I will begin with a critical examination of the colonial and patriarchal potentials of recent radical environmentalisms and feminisms. The analysis then turns to the Australian setting, where I establish a historical context by over-viewing the ways settler discourses have gendered both the Australian landscape and Aboriginal knowledges of that landscape. I next examine the recent history of political alliances between environmentalists and women’s groups and Aborigines. Finally I focus on a specific example of one such political alliance, which formed around the struggle by the Arrernte people of central Australia to stop the flooding of women’s sacred sites for the purpose of creating a recreational lake /flood mitigation dam for the residents of Alice Springs.[3] This case provides a specific example through which the troubled intersection of environmentalism, feminism, and indigenous rights can be explored.

My analysis of this particular political alliance requires some explanation. In moving from the political terrain of environmentalisms and feminisms to an analysis of practical political alliances, I move into an ethically uncertain realm

of describing Aboriginal political discourse and action. In part, my reading of this political alliance focuses on environmentalist and feminist affiliations with the Aboriginal cause. As such, my concern is with non-Aboriginal depictions of Aboriginal interests and the logic of non-Aboriginal expressions of sympathy for the Arrernte struggle. That is, Arrernte discourses are presented in terms of the ways in which they appear within and are spoken about in white settler discourses and thereby in relation to the power structures of colonialist Australia.[4] This maneuver may appear politically correct because it is social constructionist in its emphasis. However, such approaches are not released from certain difficulties that continue to sustain colonialist power relations. Even in the presence of an empowered voice of the 'other', the move to social constructionism has the potential to more complexly and deeply reinscribe colonialist constructions and thereby rerender the 'other' passive.

Moreover, such perspectives presume that there is a clear distinction between Arrernte and non-Arrernte discourses /Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal discourses, and that there is a line beyond which I (and others) as a non-Aboriginal, a non-Arrernte, cannot step. I believe there are such lines. But I also believe that the politics of difference in contemporary settler nations like Australia exist in an interdiscursive political space, which is neither solely Aboriginal nor non-Aboriginal. Nor is this space singularly a domain of hybrid identity, for essentialist positions are present both as strategic and internally held realities. My concern in this chapter is with this political interspace. And in my efforts to examine this space I not only draw upon non-Aboriginal discourses but also take the 'risk' of making contextualized readings of Aboriginal statements and political actions.

New Environmentalisms, Feminisms and Indigenous Knowledges

Recent elaborations in Western environmental and feminist thought have heightened interest in 'non-Western' peoples and peoples of color in the West. In environmentalism this is most clearly expressed within certain strands of Deep Ecology. For feminism, reconciling issues of gender difference with racial difference has been a major challenge and is variously expressed. On the one hand, there has been an embellishment of the concept of universal patriarchy by 'adding' the experiences of Third World women and women of color. In a more radical position, similar to Deep Ecology, ecofeminists turn to 'non-Western' women to provide guidance for an alternative society. Radical environmentalism and environmental feminism both provide a relevant insight into the racial and neocolonial implications of this attention to 'non-Western' peoples.

Environmentalism has long depended upon Western rational thought and in particular upon scientific thought to argue its case against the on-going exploitation of the environment. In this sense it may be interpreted as having depended upon masculinist knowledges in order to challenge exploitative, mas-culinist and colonialist approaches to the environment.[5] In recent years other forms of knowledge have become more central to environmental philosophy and politics. In particular, there has been a conscious insertion of critical 'otherness' into environmentalist thinking by means of ecocentric and ecofeminist perspectives.[6] Deriving from this movement has been a turn to 'women's knowledges' and to 'indigenous knowledges', which are seized upon as providing cultural models for a modernity that might construct itself not around masculinist anthropocentrism, but through a decentered subjectivity – a part of, and at one with nature. The spiritualism and holistic visions of indigenous peoples readily accords with more radical strands of environmentalism.

Let me turn first to ecocentric environmentalism or Deep Ecology. Ecocentric environmentalism recognizes a moral value in the nonhuman world and stresses the interconnectedness of the living and the nonliving, the human and the non-

human.[7] Ecocentrism argues against centering human interests (anthropocentrism) and instead locates nonhuman interests as central to decision making. This is a radical subjectivity, a 'transpersonality' that advocates the development of a wider sense of self to include all beings and all things.[8]

Knudston and Suzuki's *Wisdom of the Elders* provides a popular advocacy of such radical subjectivity and explicitly turns to 'Native peoples' and their intellectual and experiential insights for guidance into 'proper human relationships with the natural world'.[9] For Suzuki, the turn to indigenous wisdoms is a specific response to the failure of scientific wisdom. The struggle of indigenous peoples to protect their land has automatic accordance with the objectives of his own environmentalism:

> If biodiversity and ecosystem integrity are critical to salvaging some of the skin of life on earth, then every successful fight to protect the land of indigenous peoples is a victory for all of humanity and other living things.[10]

The diverse cultures that carry the indigenous knowledges Knudston and Suzuki honor are drawn together under the generic descriptor 'the First People of the world'; these are people with a lineage to precolonial and premodern times. Under the generic label of 'First People', cultural diversity is transgressed by a 'shared primary ecological perspective', thereby emptying these groups of the specificities of their histories and geographies. The First People are located within a global chronology, which begins with them and ends with an environmentally sound 'us'. At the hands of Knudston and Suzuki, indigenous knowledges are drawn into more contemporaneous global discourses of environmentalism that seek the preservation of the planet.

James Lovelock's christening of the earth as 'Gaia', after the 'wide-bosomed' earth goddess of Greek mythology, explicitly genders this 'total planetary being'.[11] The feminized 'planet Gaia' is shown 'undisguised love, respect and awe'. It is 'embraced' as 'Mother Earth', guardian of the extended human/non-human family. Deep Ecology center's a specific familial organization which, within Western thought and practice, has long been confined to a feminized domain. The ecocentric perspective struggles to free itself from patriarchal assumptions about sexual difference. Indigenous peoples are seen to be specially placed to understand the feminized planet. It is not surprising that Burger has provided Gaia followers with a much needed 'atlas' of 'First People' – a spatial guide to those 'indispensable partners' in the movement towards a 'sustainable future on our precious plane'.[12] The atlas maps indigenous peoples as the surface custodians of the feminized planet. Marked on the map, the 'West' captures the geography of ecological knowledge. Such mappings of ecological knowledge banks may well be part of the serious and urgent quest for planetary survival; but they are just as likely to circulate, as they do in *Body Shop* marketing, as part of the paraphernalia of global green consumerism – take home souvenirs for the environmentally aware shopper.

Ecofeminism shares with transpersonal ecocentrism a relational image of nature, but ecofeminism stresses the historic and symbolic association of women with nature.[13] Ecofeminists embrace the woman/nature association as a source of empowerment and the basis of a critique of patriarchal domination and the exploitation of both women and nature. Eckersley argues that this is a project that explicitly exposes and celebrates that which was once regarded as 'other' by masculinist visions and consistently reclaims the 'undervalued nurturing characteristics of women'.[14] Ecofeminism engages positively with essentialist understandings of the feminine. Some ecofeminists build upon the 'body-based' assumption that woman's reproductive self predisposes her to being a caregiver, which extends to the nurture of nature. Other ecofeminisms build upon the 'culture-based' assumption that women and nature share the experience of patriarchal oppression and exploitation.[15]

Janet Biehl argues that ecofeminism takes male characterizations of women and turns them into an 'ideology that roots women outside of Western culture altogether'.[16] For example, Spretnak suggests that women have a unique biological disposition that provides them with an ecologically sympathetic sense of 'boundarylessness', allowing them to know all others, natural and cultural.[17] Thus formed, ecofeminism can turn to nonhierarchical pre-Christian cultures and earth-based traditional cultures for validation and inspiration.[18] Biehl refers to this as 'the Neolithic mystique'.[19]

The reclaiming of traditions takes a variety of forms in contemporary eco-feminist writings and practices. Celtic and Neolithic cultures are a popular source of guidance for many Western ecofeminist retrievals, particularly if they are documented as matrilineal or matriarchal and were based around a specifically female deity. Increasingly, however, it is not to the past that ecofeminists turn but to contemporary non-Western cultures. This shift is consistent with, but not identical to, wider trends within feminism that attempt to address the experiences of Third World women and women of color. In countries with colonial histories it is often local indigenous cultures that give guidance. Mellor provides a detailed account of the ways in which matrilineal clan societies of North America have provided environmentalists with a regular and locally relevant inspiration.[20] For example, in Carolyn Merchant's ecohistorical account of development in New England, Native Americans are both victims of colonialism and custodians of knowledges which provide clues for future ecosocieties.[21] Similarly, Rogers argues that the 'experiences of women from societies with remaining links to matrilineal traditions may prove instructive to feminists from industrialised countries who wish to explore a better relationship with the land'.[22]

It should not be presumed that the cultures of Third World women and women of color are only passively appropriated into Western ecofeminist positions. Maori writer Ngahuia Te Awekotuku provides direct testimony concerning the need for the environmentalist project to look to other cultures.[23] Similarly, Vandana Shiva's ecofeminist account of colonialist exploitation of women and nature combines an unusual attention to historical processes with a visionary prescription for the universal adoption of the 'transgendered creative force … Prakrita', in order to combat Western gendered objectifications of nature.[24]

Ecofeminist perspectives draw much criticism, not least from other feminists. In the first instance, there is consistent criticism of the way in which the identification of women with nature 'speciously biologizes the personality traits that patricentric society assigns to women'.[25] As Shiva's work shows, even when the women/nature/nurture concept is supplemented by an acknowledgement of its socially constructed form and historical specificity, it remains a central theme in ecofeminist political visions. Biehl argues that this raises important ethical questions about a feminist ecological movement that builds upon an essentialist 'falsehood' of 'woman', the refutation of which has been a key theme in feminist writings since Simone de Beauvoir. Others have criticized ecofeminist retrievals of clan and Neolithic societies for being romanticized reconstructions that neglect evidence of patriarchal domination and environmental exploitation.[26]

The attention to other cultures contained within ecofeminism has the appearance of a feminism sensitive to difference. Radical feminism may presume a history of Western patriarchy, but more spiritually derived versions often neglect imperial histories and the impact they have had on racialized and colonized groups. Concepts of interconnectednes can stop short of incorporating the uneven histories of global capitalism.[27] Breaking down the boundaries within ourselves and between ourselves may be a necessary step on the path to global survival but this path travels across a terrain marked by inequality.[28] The recourse to an original femininity does not necessarily transcend such uneven geographies and Judith Butler argues that such nostalgia leads to exclusionary rather than inclusionary practices.[29]

It is from women of color that the most trenchant criticisms of such feminisms of difference and particularly the ecofeminist desire for indigenous knowledge has come. Winona LaDuke argues that some New Age environmentalisms have 'commodifled' indigenous cultures.

> What is happening is that our culture is taken out of context and certain parts of it are sold or just extracted. It's like mining … Certain things are taken out and certain people are practising those things in their own ways, and to me, that's appropriation of our culture. It's the same thing as expropriating our wild rice or our land. And it is one of the last things we have. It is our culture.[30]

After a colonial history of subjugation and exploitation, these women are rightly suspicious of the West's new fascination with difference. Western feminisms of differences are placing new pressures upon indigenous women and women of color. Audre Lorde criticizes this process:

> Now we hear that it is the task of black and third world women to educate white women, in the face of tremendous resistance, as to our existence, our differences, our relative roles in our joint survival. This is a diversion of energies and a tragic repetition of racist patriarchal thought.[31]

Ecocentric and ecofeminist environmentalisms are coalitional political formations under a guise of celebrated difference. It should not be presumed that such cross-cultural extensions of ecocentric and ecofeminist environmentalisms can divest themselves of colonialist trappings. These eco-driven reclamation processes are unsettlingly similar to earlier forms of colonialist appropriations, such as the museum practices of imperial science, and retain the potential for reinscribing patriarchal and colonialist constructs and practices.[32] Ecofeminist and ecocentric positions depend upon unifying modes of subjectivity, such as women with nature or Western and premodern/non-Western cultures. At one level they seem to celebrate difference, but at another level they obliterate difference through reductionist concepts of 'oneness'.[33] In such environmentalisms and feminisms, 'otherness' becomes an 'imaginary space' for 'uniting subjectivities' in Western universalist objectives.[34]

There is of course a significant gap between these philosophical positions and the everyday practices of environmentalists and feminists in, say, Australia. Not all environmentalists consciously follow an ecocentric or ecofeminist philosophical position. And certainly most active conservationists and feminists would be shocked to consider their well-meaning support of Aboriginal land issues to be colonialist or patriarchal. This question of consciousness does not seem to concern ecocentric and ecofeminist philosophers. Hay argues that 'eco-centrism is an unarticulated impulse common to most environmentalists'.[35] Carolyn Merchant claims the environmental action of minority women worldwide as part of the ecofeminist movement: 'They might not call themselves eco-feminists, but that is what they are doing.'[36] The relationship between political practices and a consciousness of particular philosophical positions is problematic when attempting to trace connections between the politics of such positionings and everyday political practices. Such linkages may be faintly marked. But in the coalitional politics of environmentalists, feminists, and Aboriginal rights in Australia there is the possibility of seeing more clearly the interweaving of these broader positions and their political effects.

She Land/He Sacred: Land, Gender and Indigenous People in Settler Australia

Kay Schaffer argues that in the early history of masculinist settler Australia a woman's presence was registered through metaphors of landscape. Drawing on Irigaray's notion of woman as 'the scene' of rival exchanges between men, Schaffer argues that Australian colonization was of a land 'imagined, through metaphor, as the body of a woman'. Schaffer continues:

> For centuries Australia existed as an empty space on the map of the world, as a body of desire. Man, as the agent of history, confronted raw nature, as a vast and empty Other, and named it his Australia Felix. The land has taken on the attributes of masculine desire. This desire acts as a generative force in the narratives of exploration and settlement.[37]

Schaffer makes explicit the link between masculine (man, empire, civilization) and the subduing of the feminine (woman, earth, nature) in the settlement of Australia. The colonizing of Australia is enacted through patriarchal constructions of masculinity and femininity in which the land and women were collapsed into a single category.

If the land 'Australia' was feminized in the name of colonization and exploitation, then the indigenous inhabitants of the land were in many renditions conveniently consigned to that feminized nature. The declaration of Australia as *terra nullius* discursively emptied the nation. This emptying was an act of desire challenged by the realities of active Aboriginal resistance or merely a persistent Aboriginal presence. Early depictions of Aboriginal Australians often placed them as part of a feminized nature: sometimes passive, sometimes capricious or wild, but always to be invaded and possessed. Lattas argues, in relation to Australian art, that the land and the Aborigines are simultaneously aestheticized and spiritualized, with Aborigines always depicted as being 'in harmony'with the land. The feminized land, the pacified native, were to be dominated, exploited, possessed.[38] As historians Butcher and Turnbull suggest, the settler's perspectives did not provide the basis for 'an ecologically-sound understanding of the land'.[39] Aboriginal knowledges, they argue, were undervalued and the Aborigines themselves considered simply a nuisance to be Europeanized or eliminated.

Aborigines were not eliminated nor were they ever to become 'European'. Those in the more remote parts of settler Australia, who maintained tradition-oriented ways of life, came under the anthropological gaze. Early anthropological accounts of 'traditional' Aboriginal society were translated through the lens of Western patriarchy. There was a lack of acknowledgment of, or a denigration of, women's 'business', that is, the spiritual and ritual knowledges and practices managed by women. Male anthropologists either ignored the business of women or were denied access to it in accordance with the gender-specific restrictions of Aboriginal society. The spiritual knowledge and ritual practices of men were often assumed to provide for the entire community. Women were viewed as 'profane', participating in 'small-time' rituals and magic unconnected to the more important issues of land and social harmony.[40]

It was only when female anthropologists began entering the profession in Australia that an ethnography of Aboriginal women's business began to emerge.[41] Diane Bell's landmark ethnography of the Kaytej and Warlpiri women of central Australia provided the first detailed study of an empowered and autonomous women's spiritual and ritual life. *Daughters of the Dreaming* shook the foundations of masculinist readings of Aboriginal society. Bell challenged the view of Aboriginal women as 'feeders and breeders' servicing the loftier and more spiritual men. Bell's ethnography was crucial in asserting that Aboriginal women had important land-based traditions and were equally important as the men in maintaining the land. Bell writes:

> Aboriginal women ensure that harmonious relations between people and land will be maintained and that the land will continue to 'come up green'. They perform exclusively female rituals, yawulyu, for the country.… There are other ceremonies which men and women perform together.… A central responsibility of women is to nurture both people and land.[42]

Bell's ethnography helped redefine the parameters of legitimate claims to land. Women's sites were as important as those of men, they were as 'sacred' as those of men. The Dreaming may have contained songlines depicting male violence against women, but in practice women had much autonomy and power over the management of social relations. Bell's reinterpretation of gender roles and relations in traditional central Australian communities was to prove crucial in land claim controversies throughout the 1980s. It is a reinterpretation that also changed the nature of alliances between Aboriginal women and non-Aboriginal women. The shared experience of the violence of patriarchy was optimistically underwritten by a relic separatist environmentalist possibility contained in Kayetj social organization.

Almost a decade later, the centrality of women's business to Aboriginal culture was reaffirmed in Deborah Bird Rose' s land-based history of the Yarralin people of Victoria River, in Western Australia. She explains that in Yarralin culture geographical areas are 'defined in relation to gender' and are 'imbued with the essence and secrets of femaleness or maleness'.[43] In Rose's account women and the feminized earth play a pivotal role:

> Men throughout the Victoria River District recognise that much of their secret ritual and Law ultimately derives from women Dreamings, just as all life originates in mother earth, and as they themselves are born of women.[44]

In Rose's view, 'When Yarralin people speak of mother Earth they speak to a similar understanding' to that of Lovelock' s Gaia.[45] For the Yarralin, 'Dreaming and ecology intersect constantly'. But Rose's collapsing of Yarralin women's Dreaming into Western concepts of the 'Earth Mother' has not gone without comment. Swaine, for example, goes so far as to suggest that the notion of Mother Earth uncovered in Rose's ethnography is a 'reinvention', or more precisely, an elaboration, of indigenous concepts through Christian and ecological thought.[46] Swaine's critique rests uncomfortably on a notion of cultural hybridization and is ghosted by the problematic idea of a pristine authentic, that which really is (or was) Aboriginal, and which has been subsequently 'contaminated'.

According to Rose, Yarralin accord with contemporary environimentalism not only through the concept of Mother Earth. They also share the radical decentering of self and the 'boundarylessness' associated with ecocentric/ecofeminist positions:

> Boundaries between species are immutable; they are not, however, impenetrable. Clever people and clever animals can change their shape, disguising themselves as other species and learning to communicate with them. This is what it means to be clever – to be able to cross boundaries.[47]

In Rose's account, the Dreaming is embellished to become the 'Dreaming ecology … a political economy of intersubjectivity embedded in a system that has no centre'. Concomitant with this heightened intersubjectivity comes a fundamental wholeness in which 'there is no Other … there is only Us'. In her final chapter Rose explicitly links her account of Yarralin life to holistic ecovisions. It is here that the prescriptive role Yarralin life holds for global survival is

articulated. Citing Carolyn Merchant, Rose reiterates the ecofeminist view that modernity is secular and that the lack of spiritual understanding has 'killed Nature'. The stories of the Yarralin are offered by Rose as 'possibilities' for finding answers to the 'difficult questions', raised by the damage being wrought upon the 'holistic Earth'.[48]

Diane Bell and Deborah Bird Rose confirm a significant shift in anthropological and academic understandings of Aboriginal knowledges of the land, a shift in which women's business and environmentalist and feminist projects are at one. In their attention to difference, these ethnographies displace ideas of universal patriarchy, but retain and embellish essentialized notions of women as nurturers of nature. While these ethnographies are attempting to reinstate the status of women in non-Aboriginal understandings of Aboriginal society (and in so doing, to write new maps of geography), they are also part of a Western feminist/environmentalist project in which Aboriginal gender and land relations serve a non-Aboriginal revisionary political agenda.

Coalitional Politics in Australia

Australian environmentalists have long seen Aboriginal Australians as the original conservationists. Sackett has noted the predominance of Aboriginal motifs and music as backdrop to populist 'wilderness' presentations in the media, as well as the abundance of literature on Aboriginal Australia in conservation shops.[49] The philosophical alliance between environmentalism and Aboriginal views of the land have begun to gain expression in political action and social formations. In the early 1980s a group of people of both non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal backgrounds gathered in eastern Australia to celebrate a dawn ceremony 'to renew the life force of the dominant hill in the locality'. The event was heralded as 'the beginning of the renewing of the Dreaming', and was the first of many such ceremonies by 'Renewal People' or 'Dreamers' (as they call themselves) at 'places of power' in the eastern parts of Australia.[50] One 'Dreamer' acknowledged that the efforts were 'fumbling and hesitant' but that guidance could be found in 'our own Aboriginal Earth tradition'. Newton's examination of the counterculture movement in eastern Australia shows how it consciously embraced Aboriginality.[51] The 1983 Nimbin Lifestyle Festival in rural Australia held workshops on establishing dialogues with Aboriginal communities. At the event a non-Aboriginal women's group promoted Aboriginal women's knowledges, holding seminars on their land-based culture and on traditional birthing methods. Festival profits went to local Aboriginal groups and the event closed with a collective dance choreographed in a spiral to represent the Rainbow Serpent, a common Aboriginal Dreaming figure. Such events may be seen as fringe activities, but the concern with indigenous knowledges is now considered an important part of mainstream environmental politics. The national Ecopolitics Conference in Australia has in recent years regularly designated sessions concerned with 'First Peoples'.

In a recent publication Robert Lawlor provides transpersonal environmentalism with a treatise for survival. *Voices of the First Day* is a more spiritual version of *The Wisdom of the Elders*, developed explicitly through Australian Aboriginal culture. Lawlor is concerned with what he describes as the 'terminal crisis in the life cycle of the planet'. The 'spiritual guide' for recovery is 'the oldest known human culture … Australian Aborigines'. He invites the reader to enter into an Earth Dreaming, guided by Aboriginal Dreamings.[52] Lawlor has little sense of a need for boundary between Aboriginal knowledges and his New Age quest for the ecospiritual recovery of the planet. His publisher's preface attests to the way in which this volume conflates difference and denies history in the quest for ecospiritual rebirth:

> The Dreaming has no religious racial, or cultural boundaries, no governments or social castes.… Perception and Dreamtime are the two worlds of all Aboriginal people.[53]

Lawlor is only one of a number of ecospiritual revisionists who have turned to the Aboriginal Dreaming for inspiration and guidance. Matthew Fox, founder of a 'creation spirituality' movement, calls for a 'wilderness Dreamtime':

> Spirituality must begin with the land. This is basic to the entire Aboriginal consciousness. It is also basic to the environmental survival not just of our species but all the species with whom we share this planet.[54]

As in Lawlor, boundaries of difference are breached in this quest. Fox suggests that ecospiritualists call upon 'Australian Aboriginal peoples not only outside you but *in* you'. One of Fox's fellow travelers suggests that we must 'reclaim' Aboriginal sacred sites and Dreamings and think of the Aboriginal Dreaming 'as our root and foundations as Australians'.[55] Ecospiritualists evoke the possibility of an ultimate invasive colonial moment in which all Australians are able to claim an Aboriginality by way of an appropriated and reimagined Wilderness Dreaming. In his analysis of Lawlor's text, Thomas notes the presence of a New Age primitivism that constructs Aboriginality as culturally stable and ahistorical.[56] Within the ecological discourse of Lawlor and other environmentalists, primitivist essentialism adjudicates on what is authentically Aboriginal, problematizing the place of Aboriginal communities that are no longer 'traditional' on his road to ecological salvation.

In such practices Aborigines become both 'an otherness and an origin' in settler Australia's desire for ecological sensitivity.[57] Lattas argues that the ecospiritual alienation from the land that underpins environmentalism in Australia is part of a more pervasive and officially sanctioned discourse regarding the ecologically sound nation. Possessing Aboriginal knowledge is not only the final step in securing the Australian eco-nation, but also in a process of colonization, in which settler Australians can move from the status of aliens to that of indigenes.[58]

The land rights process has consolidated Aboriginal and environmentalist alliances. Many significant tracts of land are returned to Aborigines under land rights provisions *only* if they are then re-leased to National Park authorities. In other parts of Australia, Aborigines are *only* able to claim Unalienated Crown Land or designated National Parks.[59] While this does extend Aboriginal claims to land, it also confines Aboriginal use of the land to ecologically sanctioned options.[60] Under such legal confines, Aboriginal coalitions withe environmentalists are as much a strategic necessity as they are a possible recognition of shared environmental objectives.

Indeed, not all Aborigines accept the idea that conservation is compatible with Aboriginal interests. The Aboriginal politician Michael Mansell complained when conservationists failed to seek Aboriginal approval to defend the Franklin River in Tasmania from damming and charged environmental activists with invading Aboriginal land.[61] In the conflict over a road being built through the World Heritage Listed Daintree Forest in northern Australia, Aborigines and environmentalist were far from sharing a 'wilderness dreaming'. While environmentalists spoke of how important the area was to local Aborigines, the very same Aborigines argued for the construction of the road to their poorly serviced and barely accessible settlement.[62] As Lee Sackett suggests, the view of Aborigines as the first conservationists is often based on a partial, romanticized and racist understanding of traditional Aboriginal associations with the land and the political action Aborigines may wish to take in relation to that land.[63]

Many environmentalists feel women are specially placed to pursue the goal of the econation. The assumption that women are 'natural' caregivers, not only of the immediate family but of the planet, permeates at a policy level in

Australian environmentalism. In recent years the Australian government has been outlining a program for ecologically sustainable development. The National Women's Consultative Council, in calling for women to contribute to the consultation program, said this:

> Women are life givers. It is no accident they have led on environmental issues at all levels … locally and globally. Women's concern is rooted in concern for the health and well-being of our families and communities.[64]

The executive director of Australia's most mainstream conservation lobby group, the Australian Conservation Foundation, holds an equally essentialist position, arguing that 'women are more concerned about the environment than men' and that they alone in their role as nurturers have the capacity to 'sow the seeds for new attitudes and practices'.[65] Certainly, the women's movement in Australia and elsewhere gained new strength through coalitions with the environmental and peace movements.[66]

The joining of the women's movement with environmentalism coincided with a growing alliance between women's right activists and Aboriginal women.[67] This vision of a cooperative ecodevelopment between Aborigines (particularly women) and environmentally sound settler Australians (particularly women) is advocated by some Aboriginal spokespeople. Burnam Burnam argues that:

> it will be the female peace-keeping energy which will save the planet from destruction by old males. Females make up three-quarters of the Green movement.… And it is Aboriginal women who possess an indisputable connection with our mother the Earth. Her spiritual strength, born out of tradition, is also acquired from male abuse, mainly sexual.[68]

Yet coalitions between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women have been sporadic and at times troubled.[69] The source of this conflict was non-Aboriginal women (and indeed some Aboriginal women) seeking to make rape within Aboriginal society (that is rape of Aboriginal women by Aboriginal men) a general political issue for the women's movement.[70] The women's movement saw such violence as evidence of the workings of patriarchy within another cultural setting, whereas Aboriginal women opposed the politization of rape in this manner arguing it set female solidarity ahead of racial solidarity. For Aboriginal women, colonization had meant an ongoing battle to protect the family, most starkly from government policies to forcibly remove children who were known to have non-Aboriginal parentage. The appropriation of the issue of rape within Aboriginal society into the political agenda of the women's movement was seen as yet another non-Aboriginal invasion into the Aboriginal family.[71] Such rifts point toward the limits of coalitional politics and suggest that these limits are grounded in the historical specificities of colonialism.

In the final part of this chapter I want to examine a recent development controversy in remote Central Australia, in which Aboriginal women, conservationists, and feminists came together in a loose political coalition. I want to explore this coalition in the context of the critique of radical environmentalisms covered in the early part of the chapter. I think it is important to consider such political formations, for they reveal complexities and ambiguities that are often conveniently avoided when one's analytical field is confined to easy target texts such as Robert Lawlor's ecospiritualism or more extreme ecofeminist prescriptions against which charges of 'appropriation' are easily laid. Examining such a political alliance problematizes the notion of 'appropriation', which as Meaghan Morris notes, has become 'the model verb of all and any action' setting 'predation' as 'the universal rule of cultural exchange'.[72]

Earth Dreamings: the Arrernte Land Struggle

Since the early 1960s the Northern Territory government has been considering building a dam in the vicinity of landlocked Alice Springs, in central Australia. The dam was intended to offer both recreation amenities and flood mitigation for the occasions when the usually dry Todd River rages. In 1983 the Northern Territory government announced that a site on the Todd River north of the town and near the Old Telegraph Station had been selected as the most suitable dam location. The site is part of a historic reserve that incorporates the remains of the first European telegraph station and government outpost to be built in the area.

There was strong opposition to the proposed dam site from local Aborigines. As early as 1979 they had alerted the Aboriginal Land Council for the area of the presence of sacred sites in the proposed dam location. A special committee, the Welatye Therre Defence Committee, was established to assist in organizing support for the protection of the site. The most dramatic form of protest came in April 1983, when the traditional Aboriginal owners of that area, the Arrernte people, reoccupied the site. To the Arrernte people, it is the site of the 'Two Women Dreaming' songline, which traverses Australia from south to north. According to an Arrernte press release, the main site in the area is 'Welatye Therre' (Two Breasts), a place where 'women have danced and sung for thousands of years to assert and strengthen their unique relationship with the country'.[73]

Some fifty Arrernte men and women remained camped at the site for six months. An Aboriginal government official and leader, Charles Perkins, set up office at the site for a week in order to draw national media attention to the concerns of his Arrernte people.[74] Women's ceremonies were held at the site, during which Arrernte women were joined by other central Australian Aboriginal women, to reaffirm the significance of the country.[75] Aboriginal opposition was largely unsupported by the local non-Aboriginal population. Two prodevelopment petitions received by the government about the proposed dam contained over 5,000 signatures, accounting for some seventy-five per cent of the local urban voting population.[76] To resolve the conflict, the federal government called for an inquiry.

The Northern Territory government were not insensitive to the likelihood of Aboriginal sites being present in the proposed dam area. The authors of early feasibility studies had consulted with the relevant Aboriginal Lands Council, but had reported that there appeared to be no Aboriginal opposition to the flooding of known sacred sites in the area. But the confusion over Aboriginal approval of the proposal to flood the sites simply reenacted the anthropological practice of men's knowledges being privileged over that of women's. This gender bias had been carried into the emerging government structures to accommodate Aboriginal interests in the land: and early consultations were primarily 'by men and with men'.[77] The official inquiry into the dam deadlock guaranteed that future consultations about Aboriginal interests in the area acknowledged the rights of women. The Aboriginal Sacred Sites Protection Authority (ASSPA) arranged for female anthropologists to consult with local Aboriginal women. The importance of the area to women was recorded and the site, Welatye Therre, was placed on official registers of sites of significance to Aboriginal peoples.[78] Although both men and women know about the site, the responsibility for speaking for that country rested with the women.

The protection of Welatye Therre required details of its secret and sacred content to be revealed, at the very least to the official site-recording agents. Elsewhere I have discussed the political and cultural implications of such transferals of knowledge.[79] Within established land rights mechanisms 'traditional' land-based knowledge has become a key means of verifying the legitimacy of land claims. However, the passing over of such knowledge to government agents has the potential to undermine Aboriginal self-determination and particularly to enhance non-Aboriginal powers of arbitration

over the 'authenticity' of Aboriginal claims, seriously disadvantaging those Aborigines who cannot or will not bring 'traditional' proofs of evidence to bear on land claims.

In the case of Welatye Therre, the Arrernte agreed to disclose information to the official site recording authorities on the condition such information was not widely circulated. This request was adhered to. But as the likelihood of the dam proceeding grew, it was the Arrernte themselves who reluctantly decided to make known that which should be unknowable to non-Aborigines. This caused considerable anxiety among the Arrernte, for such disclosures transgress important rules of secrecy surrounding such sites.[80] It is this process of disclosure and the political alliances that emerged around this disclosure that I want to concentrate on in the last part of this chapter.

The Arrernte women's opposition to the dam proposal was organized through the Welatye Therre Defence Committee. This group made public the Arrernte struggle throughout Australia and overseas, by means of press releases, pamphlets, a newsletter and a video which specifically targeted conservation and women's groups. The Arrernte deliberately allowed selected members of the press to see and photograph the site. Reports by the chosen journalists were sensationally explicit about the content of the site. In one report a group of Arrernte women are pictured 'cradling' sacred stones stored at the site. The report opens with this provocative evocation of the site's significance:

> The dry Todd River bed in Alice Springs conceals an ancient secret story of violence and rape. Only Aboriginal eyes which know the Dreaming can read and understand the story, laid out in rocky outcrops in the river bank.[81]

The narrative flirts with the knowability of the sacred content of this site. Simultaneously, readers are being told a story and being told it is a story they cannot know. The report continues, taking us into the explicit realms of the unknowable. I am not going to quote this section of the 1983 press report. This detail was released into the public domain under the specific pressures of development, not the conditions of the production of this chapter. My concern rests not with the explicit detail of the site (beyond the media designation of it as a 'rape site'), but with the knowability of the site, especially how non-Aboriginal interests come to know of it and demonstrate support for its protection.

While journalists were strategically led to view certain aspects of the site, the Arrernte still engaged in strategic nondisclosure, for there were 'other stones' nearby, that journalists were told of but not permitted to see. It was the presence of *these* ritual objects that was of paramount importance to the Arrernte women. A non-Aboriginal spokesperson suggested that if these objects were removed or flooded over, then sickness and death would occur among the elders.[82] Another warned that 'if they go ahead and build the dam here it will be no good for all the women in Australia'.[83]

Arrernte women were not insensitive to the resonance of their struggle with those of women elsewhere. Speaking of the sacred objects stored at the site, one Arrernte woman said:

> They are a vital part of being a women. Like you've got women's liberation, for hundred of years we've had ceremonies which control our conduct, how we behave and act and how we control our sexual lives.… They give spiritual and emotional health to Aboriginal women.[84]

The Welatye Therre Defence Committee campaign was successful: statements of support and donations poured in from across the country. It was indeed becoming an issue for all women. Support and donations were received from Women's Action Against Global Violence, the Feminist Antinuclear Group, Women's Health Centres (Adelaide and Sydney), the

Feminist Bookshop (Sydney), a Sydney women's refuge, Women for Life and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom.[85] The Arrernte women were keen to advertise this wider support for their cause: a broadsheet was released that listed and quoted many non-Aboriginal supporters.

Welatye Therre resonated with existing forms of feminism in a variety of ways. The disclosed content of this site hints at a premodern patriarchal violence against women. Designated as a 'rape site', it acts as an embodiment of the most violent act of male oppression. Under the pressure of development this violence is disclosed and threatens to be re-enacted through the dam construction as rape of the landscape. Pushed into the public sphere, the content of the site is opened to the gaze of all women (and men) and can be collectively claimed as a symbolic site of the violence of patriarchy. The site entered a discourse of universal patriarchal oppression. The Arrernte sites became proof of women as 'archetypal victims', spanning all time and all cultures.[86]

The violence this site and these women now faced reiterates the specific violence of colonialism.[87] This site and the struggle around its protection were absorbed as symbolic markers into a feminism that was struggling to come to grips with the concept of 'double oppression'; women's and black oppression added together.[88] Aboriginal women had ensured that the Australian women's movement was aware of the sexual as well as the racial violence of colonization.[89] In this adjustment the Aboriginal 'other' was included as a 'variegated amplification … of … global phallocentrism'.[90]

The alliances formed between women's groups and the Arrernte women may well be an example of a colonizing, self-aggrandizing feminism. But Welatye Therre is also a site whose violent content operates to provide guidance: it is a pedagogical site that teaches Aboriginal women and men about appropriate behaviors, in short, how to avoid the violence of patriarchy and how to care for the land. It calls into question a totalizing feminism and provides the type of template desired by ecofeminist visions. Yet even within this less totalizing conjuncture with feminism, it is difficult for the Arrernte struggle to remain untouched by the force of feminism.

Environmentalists too found that the concerns of the Arrernte women resonated with their own concerns. Statements of support were received from Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, and other, more local, environmentalist groups. Extracts from some of the statements of support reveal how the political alliances around Welatye Therre were closely linked to an ecocentric/ecofeminist retrieval of indigenous wisdom. The Canberra-based Friends of the Earth wrote:

> The proposed Alice Springs dam will destroy a sacred site of great significance. It is a site where, for thousands of years, Aboriginal women have performed ceremonies to strengthen their special relationship with the land.… Aboriginal culture ['s] ecological sensibility is exemplary. The Aboriginal relationship to the land, spanning 40,000 years of judicious ecological management, puts to shame 200 years of European pillage.[91]

The London-based Aboriginal Support Group made clear their sense of saving this site as part of a global indigenous knowledges project:

> We have all come to admire and respect the deep feeling Aboriginal people hold for their land and feel that we in Europe and people all over the world have much to learn from you in caring for the earth and its people whoever they are.[92]

Under the pressure of development, the Arrernte excessively express the nature of their Dreaming site: disclose it beyond unusual limits of disclosure and warn of an effect beyond the geography of their local land interests. This is not to say the women exaggerated the possible outcome of site destruction or invented the site. It is to say that this site has

an amplified presence under the conditions of modernity, it is spoken (and not spoken) within the global geography not only of development but also of non-Aboriginal political agendas. In the modern discursive constitution of Welatye Therre the site's significance was amplified by the ways in which its specific characteristics as a women's site, a site of violence against women and a site belonging to 'indigenous nurturers' of the land intersected with non-Aboriginal environmentalisms and feminisms. Arrernte women's business, and its very localized expression in the sacred site of Welatye Therre, was being globalized through its intersection with planetary environmentalisms and feminisms.

The alliance between the Arrernte women and feminist and environmentalist groups is more complex than a process of appropriation of indigenous knowledges. For a start, the idea of appropriation is at the very least complicated by the issue of Arrernte women's agency: their strategic, albeit pressured, engagement with more universalist conservation and feminist agendas. But I think the complication of this alliance lies in some thing that is neither purely domination nor purely strategic agency. Nor does it reside satisfactorily in an explanation that presumes hybridization, that Aboriginal women's business is no longer 'purely traditional'. The importance of this alliance is that it maps a discursive interspace typical of race relations in settler countries like Australia.[93] It is that space formed out of a constant interplay of dominant constructions of Aboriginality and Aboriginal self definitions. The political alliances that formed around Welatye Therre may evidence some form of 'enunciative appropriation'. But the power dynamic of this process has a political ambiguity, suggesting that it is 'neither displaced identity, nor colonialist invasion, but a process that takes place in both', a struggle to 'fix the terms of reference'.[94]

The political problem of 'fixing the terms of reference' for the Aboriginal sacred is well illustrated by later developments in the ongoing efforts of the Northern Territory government to build a dam near Alice Springs. In the early stages of the controversy the disclosure of the content and effect of the Welatye Therre site was done reluctantly and strategically by the Arrernte. Some five years later the proposals for a dam re-emerged. A new location was considered, but it too encroached on land with sacred sites with 'sexual significance' relating to the Two Women Dreaming (as well as a men's Dreaming).[95] The Arrernte women seemed to take a more cautious approach to widespread disclosure in this second round of negotiations.

One Arrernte woman explained this caution to the second board of inquiry established to arbitrate on the deadlock:

> Only the Traditional owners used to hear these stories that their grandparents told them. Now they are going to hear this story all over the place. This dam has made the story really come out into the open, the story that used to be really secret. Now other tribes are going to hear about it … now everybody is going to learn, and the white people as well are going to learn about it. The country story that used to be hidden. It was like that for … Welatye Atherra. Now they know about that place all over the world, about the Dreaming as well.… We are giving away all our secrets now, and it will be heard all over the world, if there is a protest against building the dam. We'll have to give away our secrets again.[96]

A newspaper report on the second dam proposal evokes the Aboriginal interest in the land not by disclosing secrets that would not normally be disclosed, but by focusing on the impact of desecration and on secrecy itself. The *Age* newspaper reports:

> The sickness affects women, in ways that are so secret that only the half dozen older women who are its custodians are allowed to know the full dreaming story of the site and the implications of its destruction.… Aboriginal women will not discuss the site with men, and they will speak about it to a woman for publication only in generalities.[97]

While the detail of the site remained more carefully guarded in this second round of the controversy, the effect of damaging the site was again clearly put. Destruction of the site, an Arrernte spokeswoman is quoted as saying, would 'bring a curse on all women.… [n]ot just Aboriginal or local women, but all Australian women'.[98]

So far I have argued that detailed disclosure of the sacred content of sites assisted in the process of amplification of significance in a political interspace between Aboriginal land rights and its sympathizers. But part of the presentation of this women's Dreaming arises not out of a detailed elaboration of its content and geography, but instead out of quite the opposite; it is, in a Lacanian sense, the lack of representation. In the first stage of the dam controversy the explicit disclosure of the content of the site was accompanied by an act of nondisclosure: journalists were told some things but were also told there were other things they could not see and could not know. In the second part of the controversy even fewer details of the sites to be affected by development were disclosed. This hardened line on nondisclosure and the explicit statements by the Arrernte about the anxiety of disclosure had two effects. For non-sympathizers, the unknowability of the sacred opened the way for discrediting Arrernte claims. But for non-Aboriginal sympathizers the secrecy of the Arrernte sacred worked to intensify allegiance and, under the political force of this alliance, to finally ensure that the proposed dam did not proceed.

Secrecy around a sacred site is not simply a strategic measure: it accords with Aboriginal law. But within settler Australia secrecy has a strategic effect beyond the limits of Aboriginal society. Secrecy hints at an unknowable dimension of the women's concern for the Dreaming.[99] It is this unrepresentability that in a paradoxical sense authenticates the women's Dreaming for sympathizers and positively amplifies the significance of sites. It is under conditions of secrecy and partial disclosure that Welatye Therre becomes known. It becomes a sublime object, an embodiment of the lack in non-Aboriginal gender and environment relations. It is the 'half-seen' status of the women's sites that ensures their role in fulfilling the desires of contemporary sympathizers. Trinh argues that when non-colored feminists embrace 'the other' they seek the 'unspoiled', an 'image of the real native – the truly different'. She adds that 'the less accessible the product … the greater the desire to acquire and protect it'.[100] In the case of Welatye Therre the globalization of this local geography of the sacred was as much driven by the nostalgic desires of environmentalisms and feminisms as it was by the forces of development. And non-disclosure had a strategic effect with sympathizers by not only intensifying the authenticity of Aboriginal claims in their eyes but also by presenting the Aboriginal sacred as a lacuna that could be filled with their own political aspirations.

Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to understand the logic of Western environmentalist and feminist affiliations with if non-Western peoples. My analysis of the eco-centric and ecofeminist perspectives uncovered their colonialist and patriarchal subtexts, borne of a rearticulated desire of the West to possess indigenous knowledges held within a primitivist stereotype of the environmentally 'valid' and 'useful' indigene. It has been commonplace for postcolonial critiques to attack essentialisms like those in the primitivist or womanist subtexts of eco-centric and ecofeminist positions. Part of the presumption of this critique is that these essentialist idealizations are the constructions of colonial and neocolonial formations and may work to contain indigenous identities within a nonexistent premodern identity. Within this discursive terrain, charges of appropriation are easily laid. It is possible to presume that 'predation' does indeed remain the dominant power dynamic of cultural exchange in settler states and that this is only negative in its effect, reenacting an ongoing process of invasion of Aboriginal knowledges and determining of Aboriginal identity.

Yet the Arrernte struggle unsettles this reading. The political alliances around their sacred sites do sustain the dynamic of appropriation, particularly in the sense that Aboriginal culture serves universalist environmentalist and feminist agendas. Yet the issue of secrecy and non-disclosure provides a key to an important complexity in the way 'appropriation' needs to be understood. Under the conditions of secrecy the desires of non-Aboriginal sympathizers to support Aboriginal rights did not diminish, but intensified. Secrecy may enhance desires of sympathizers, providing an unknowable space into which their imaginative desires about Aboriginality are projected. When one outcome of non-Aboriginal imaginative projections (such as the nostalgias of environmentalism and ecofeminism) is a political alliance that desires and does not discredit secrecy and assists in the acknowledgment of Aboriginal rights, then narrow adjudications of 'predatory appropriation' are problematized. They are not, however, eliminated. The disclosure of Arrernte business happened under the force of modernity. This includes the familiar pressures of development. It also includes the political imperative of harnessing the force of antidevelopment sympathizers. The sites were saved through such an alliance, but the politics of the alliance resonates with less sympathetic moments in the history of settler Australia.

It is the ambiguity of these sites, their ability to slip into and out of the universal issues of patriarchy and environmentalism, as well as an elusive premodern ecosensibility, which made them the loci of broader political coalitions. These sites contained a memory of universal oppression and exploitation as well as an unknowable hope of an alternative world. These sites became objects of desire for those who seek ecological salvation in the wisdom of the elders.

Notes

1. Part of the title of this chapter is taken from a book that defines 'a new male sexuality' through a reconsideration of the relationship between masculinity and environmental ecology; see Robert Lawlor, *Earth Honouring The New Male Sexuality* (Newtown, Australia: Millennium Books, 1990).
2. Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 52.
3. This has been a long-running dispute that reached final resolution only in 1992. My account focuses mainly on the early stages of the dispute in 1983–84 when there was concern for the site known as Welatye Therre.
4. Patrick Wolfe, 'On Being Woken Up: The Dreamtime in Anthropology and in Australian Settler Culture', *Comparative Studies in Society and History 33* no. 2 (1991): pp. 197–224, esp. p. 198.
5. See, for example, Andree Collard, *Rape of the Wild: Man's Violence against Animals and the Earth* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989); Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation* (London: Zed Books, 1989); Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development* (London: Zed Books, 1989); Susan Griffin, *Women and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978); Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980), *Ecological Revolutions: Nature, Gender and Science in New England* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989; and *Radical Ecology: The Search for a Livable World* (New York: Routledge, 1992).
6. Robyn Eckersley, *Environmentalism and Political Theory: Towards an Ecocentric Approach* (London: UCL Press, 1992), p. 67.
7. See, for example, Arne Naess, 'The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement, a Summary', *Inquiry 16* (1989): pp. 95–100; Alan R. Drengson, *Beyond Environmental Crisis: From Technocrat to Planetary Person* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989); William R. Catton, Jr. and Riley E. Dunlap, 'A New Ecological Paradigm for Post-