

Two Thousand Generations of Place-making

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The relationship between Aboriginal people and any critical discourse of place that is sponsored by Academe is an uneasy one. Where a 'Welcome to Country' is increasingly anticipated from an Aboriginal person, it becomes increasingly important to question the role of these ceremonial, often perfunctory gestures. Do they belie something more sinister – or at best obsequious? What does the demand for this ceremony tell us about our desire for renewal? What can Aborigines tell us? What has been lost – and what can be gained?

When European visitors to Australia began to arrive on these shores early in the Seventeenth Century – and even before this as Macassans, Chinese, Maori and perhaps many, much earlier maritime cultures encountered the Aboriginal nations living throughout the continent – a curious thing was experienced. Sometimes the arrival of visitors would be greeted by a delegation of two or three warriors. Sometimes it would be greeted by a great crowd. And sometimes it would be completely ignored. This perplexed the Dutch, French and British officers as their arrival seemed to be greeted with no consistency. They did not understand.

Without an appreciation of the context of their arrival for the Aboriginal people that they saw on the shore, they could not know what might be appropriate for that group. For that location. For that day. Or even for that hour.

To this day, colonial history is filled with naive accounts of early encounters with Aboriginal people. Here in Tasmania we have one of the most problematic. In 1804, at around this time of year, just ahead of the coming winter, a large group of perhaps a hundred or more Aboriginal men, women and children appeared in the hills above Risdon Cove. As they moved down the hill toward the cove, driving a mob of kangaroo ahead of them, the British, who has set up camp in the cove became alarmed and – interpreting the event as a potential attack, moved quickly to position their artillery and infantry for defence. The results were predictable. There were many deaths – all of them Aboriginal people.

In recent years there has been general agreement that the events of May 3 1804 were unfortunate and that the British over-reacted. Regardless of the debate over how many were killed, it certainly constitutes Tasmania's first massacre. But was it simply a regrettable over-reaction to the accidental appearance of a hunting party? Or was it something much more tragic?

I have never been able to understand something about the Risdon Cove story. If the British had only appeared a week or two before, and they had yet to encounter the local Laimaremmener people, I could more easily imagine how a ceremonial hunt – that had probably been looked forward to for months beforehand by the local people – could have been just as surprised at the sight of the British as the British were of them! But British records indicate that there had been encounters with Aboriginal people – and a dispute over the white people taking swan over the preceding week. So the Laimaremmener knew that the British were there. Some recent analysis gets around this by suggesting that the Aborigines who approached the Risdon settlement that day must have been strangers to the district.

Another, more disturbing possibility emerged for me last week, when I was attending 'Strangers on the Shore' - a fine conference hosted by the Australian National Museum and AIATSIS. The matter of interpreting first encounters with Aboriginal people was being discussed – and I heard a Yolngu analysis of why European visitors to country might find themselves greeted by a large group of men and women waving spears and presenting a large quantity of game.

Of course. A welcoming ceremony.

A sense of place occurs when we are involved in an act of creation – through the processes of art, poetry, philosophical speculation: engagement with the relational aspect of the universe – not just at a local level – but at a much broader and deeper state. This is what Martin Heidegger called Da-sein 'being in the world' in such a way that we realise our role in co-creating the context of our lives.

The organisers of this conference have asked me to provide a 'welcome to country'. In this context a request for a welcome to country is an appeal to Aboriginal people for permission to be. This request is now made in hundreds of instances across Australia every week. It is a powerful process – a potential engagement with that relational aspect of the universe that offers the opportunity to be the authors of our own being.

But it is a process that is squandered if it is given uncritically by the seemingly unfailing generosity of Aboriginal people – a generosity that has characterised most of the past two hundred years. This generosity is a testament to another of the qualities of Aboriginal people – that of belonging to one of the oldest cultures in the world. It flows from a powerful knowing of our place.

So I offer this welcome – It is a welcome to country that was developed as a Eulogy to those who died at Risdon Cove two hundred and two years ago.

*milaythina nika milaythina – mana.
pakana laykara milaythina nika mulaka
waranta takara milaythina nara takara.
milaythina nika waranta pakana,
waranta palawa, milaythina nika*

This land is our country
Aboriginal people ran over this land to hunt and many died here.
We walk where they walked.
This country is us
And we are this country

The Western culture is the only culture in the world – perhaps the only culture that the world has ever known – that argues for the non-existence of any dimension or reality that the senses cannot perceive. Accordingly, every other suggestion of an alternative to scientific, sensorial reality is rendered as metaphor. At surface analysis, this threatens to rob us of having an intimate relationship, not only with our own spirituality, but with the spirit of those presences in our world that all other cultures recognise in some way every day.

This culture drives back the dark and banishes evil demons from our lives. It makes us free to live whatever life our technology invents for us. But what sort of place does it give us to live out our life? Some of the answers to this question will emerge over the next few days.