



Disconcerting Ecologies

Representations of Non-Indigenous Belonging in Contemporary
Australian Literature and Cultural Discourse

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Abstract

Engaging with current debates on national identity, environmentalism, and the legacies of colonisation, this thesis considers non-indigenous belonging in contemporary Australia and its discursive representation as insufficient, illegitimate, and in urgent need of resolution. Apocalyptic overtones adhere to discussions of an unsettled and anxiety-ridden non-indigenous culture in which a 'crisis' of belonging for a non-indigenous majority is seen as an historical inheritance weakening, or indeed dissolving, any kind of national cohesion. It is frequently argued by non-indigenous commentators that the past must be left behind if settler Australians are ever to be 'at home' in their environment. My specific concern in this field of debate is the poetic, as well as literal, significance given to the environment, and in particular to land, as a measure of belonging in Australia. Environment is explored in the context of ecologies, offered here as an alternative configuration of the nation, and in which the subject, through human and non-human environmental relations, can be culturally and spatially positioned. I argue that both environment and ecology are narrowly defined in dominant discourses that pursue an ideal, certain and authentic belonging for non-indigenous Australians. While these definitions often seek to collapse the entrenched western binary of nature and culture, the attempts to settle what is perceived to be dangerously unstable, or disconcerting, ontologically and ecologically, relies on the diametric opposite of a sharp divide: a smooth reunion, whole and complete.

Through various theoretical perspectives of the subject's relation to its environment, I explore an alternative understanding of belonging and its negotiations with the past that refuses resolution or a final settlement and instead endorses a constant repositioning of

the self in dynamic relation to its environment. Of the three novels discussed, Thea Astley's *Drylands* and Nikki Gemmell's *Cleave* are read as apocalyptic narratives that consider the refuse of the past and present (what blights a healthy environment) as excluded from any complex relations or generative encounters within an immediate ecology. Counter to this, Chloe Hooper's *A Child's Book of True Crime* presents an environment and a topographic surface that is spatially disorientating, insisting upon a relation between the subject and its environment that can never be settled. Hooper conceptualises a promiscuous ecology, shifting and becoming, and in which the past is an active presence. The notion of a stable, and as such legitimate, belonging—as it is desired and responded to from a non-indigenous perspective—is confronted, and with it any sense of a firm historical truth which can be finalised and transcended. Ultimately, I propose a concept of belonging that is shaped by these negotiations, and an understanding of being in an environment that engages with cultural forms and effects without demanding ontological security for the subject in place.