

JASPER GORGE, NT

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During the strong silver nights dingoes howled up and down the gorge. For over a week we camped there – claimants, land council people, and the judge and his party. We were at the western edge of Jasper Gorge in a little flat called TK. The moon was big by night, but at dusk and dawn the place glowed like ancient burnished copper.

The land claim was successful and Jasper Gorge is now Aboriginal land. The road that runs south from the Victoria highway goes through the gorge and is still public. Every day people drive through, and every trip is another iteration of the path of the Black-headed Python, the great snake-woman who made this place.

The sinuous valley of the Gorge is the track of the snake. She formed the place with her swervy action, and other parts of the story can be seen along the cliffs. Over there is a large stone that is her coolamon; here the rock is split where she cut it with her hairbelt, and up there are more tracks. The Black-headed Python walked in the shape of a woman as well as in the shape of a snake. Like many Dreamings, she was a shape-shifter, and her metamorphic power extended beyond her body to impress itself into the country as well. Most impressive to me is the hill that bears the impression of her body where she stopped and sat. Perhaps the term 'sat' is not exactly correct. One side of this hill belongs to Ngaliwurru people, the other side to Karangpurru people. Here she stopped, said goodbye to the country behind her, and gave birth to the language, songs and people of the country before her.

In Jasper Gorge the Dreaming ancestor is so very visible that even a western person like me can see the story. I make no claim fully to comprehend the Dreaming, but the hills, gorge, stones and other marks vividly express the sacred geography of creation as it is impressed and embedded in Aboriginal country. Anyone can see it, and many of the Aboriginal owners wished that everyone would see it. When we asked about their concerns about tourism, for example, they said that they hoped tourists would come and that through being there would understand something of what they were seeing. For the traditional owners, the proof of creation and continuing ownership is right there, accessible to everyone.

You can see the past because it is there in front of you in the track she made. But you see creation in many ephemeral forms as well, and thus you can come to understand that creation was not only a one-off event in the past, but is an on-going process of life. In her coolamon the Black-headed Python carried the seeds of many plants that she distributed as she traveled. Her action in the world created botanical communities – in the hills she put the seeds for hill country plants, and out on the flats she put the seeds for that place. On the eastern side she put boab seeds and today the trees mark the southern edge of the distribution of boabs (*jamulang* in local languages). Every tree that grows, every plant put there originally by the Python, is a contemporary effervescence of the Dreaming. When the winds carry the fresh smell of spinifex and sugarbag you breathe creation.

Now the Gorge is experiencing a new wave of ecological change. In recent years the vegetation has been thickening up. One of the beneficiaries of changing conditions is a

palm tree (*Livistona* sp, "Victoria River"). Known as *walmatj* in local languages, the palm tree is a delightful food. From its earlier habitat along the lower edge of the escarpment the species has started marching down the slopes to establish itself in the gullies and washouts. Once palms were a rarity confined to the top; now they are rushing around.

The Jasper Gorge road was one of the early whitefella tracks in the district and thus was the lifeline to the inland stations. Supplies brought by boat to Timber Creek were taken inland by cart. The place where we camped, TK, was named for the boab (*Adansonia gregorii*, after the explorer Augustus Gregory) on which Tom Kilfoyle carved his initials in 1884. People camped here before continuing through the gorge which, in the early days, had a fearsome reputation for Aboriginal resistance.

One group of travelers consisted of two teamsters, Mulligan and Ligar, and their Aboriginal workers. In 1895 they camped at TK and were attacked by Aborigines. Barricading themselves among the stores from the wagons, they fought out a three-day siege, at the end of which they escaped back to the north. The day after their escape, Mounted Constable Willshire arrived on the scene, assessed the damage, and sent word to Victoria River Downs. Willshire went north following the teamsters, and the manager of Victoria River Downs, Jack Watson, rode out with a party of stockmen, trackers, and diggers who had been en route to the Kimberley goldfields. The official death count was sixty Aborigines shot in retaliation for this incident.

Later, when relations between whites and black had stabilized somewhat, the track was widened by dynamiting a huge stone that rested exactly where white people wanted to expand the road. Aboriginal people remember the stone as a Dreaming and increase site for turtles. It is now gone, although people speculate that some of the smaller stones along the roadside in that area may be fragments of the original Dreaming.

My introduction to the gorge took place over many trips during which people explained bits and pieces of the story, but I really only began to understand its gender complexity when I visited a site where the Black-headed Python woman is said still to be present. In one place there is a portion of rock that is part of her body; traditional owners assert that she herself is living and conscious right there in that stone. The paint is neither old nor new, but the area around the Python's genitals is clean and fresh. The stone-flesh has been rubbed with red ochre and beautifully cared for over the years.

On a visit in preparation for the land claim hearing, our party split into two groups, and the women led us (women) down the women's side of the hill. As I walked I reflected on the gaze, the recognition, the acknowledgement, and the empowerment that are involved in seeing one's embodied self there in the creation of the world. Aboriginal women and men carry portions of the knowledge, songs, actions and care of this place and this Dreaming in these ordinary times. It takes both – men as well as women – to keep the place in connection with the living generations. In the women's part I encountered a powerful and life-giving femaleness that encompassed me and enriches my gendered personhood.

This land claim was successful, albeit failing fully to satisfy people's aspirations. Ngaliwurru and Karangpurru people's sites, rituals, knowledge, and words contained the proof of the claim – and more. Through this legal procedure we began to unmake more than one hundred years of conquest which have included the most appalling forms of racial and gender cruelty. Aboriginal people's remembrance was shared with others, and thereby was linked to action that re-structured local, Territory and national power. Giving new shape to the future, our work also affirmed the resilience that enables people to salvage life from the death work of the past.

In Jasper Gorge I worked with creation, gender, violence, and dispossession to accomplish a step toward decolonisation. I became a participant in a form of care that is embedded in a world of flux. Here I worked with people to unmake histories of violence and loss, and here my own feet follow the footprints of the Python creator. Here, I think, many histories of cruelty – around gender, conquest, belonging, and other contentious domains – can be unmade and new histories and responsibilities can be made. The story is never complete.

Inspiration can be a power that connects us with the world in life-affirming and life-giving action. In saying this I am working counter to a western cult of beauty. My own landscape aesthetic was originally formed in the American west and thus was embedded in the American sublime. This aesthetic of transcendence inspires a person to stand outside herself, to rise above daily life and to partake of a larger glory. Jasper Gorge is a place where something else happens. This is a place of inclusion; it draws you into the world of continuity and flux, empowering you to act.

I am urging an intersubjective mode of inspiration. The aesthetic of the sublime, in spite of its emphasis on landscape, is really about the self, its capacities, limits and possibilities for transcendence. Much of the wilderness aesthetic literature bears an even more paradoxical vision of self. In wilderness the self can encounter the absence of its own kind. Delightfully, and with great personal meaning, wilderness can be a place where presence and absence each stimulate the self. Care of one's self is a significant practice, and when exercised in relation to place may become a transforming and renewing experience, but I think there is more to inspiration than the personal.

An intersubjective mode of inspiration takes a different track, seeking relationship between self and other. In this mode of inspiration both self and other can potentially flourish. My underwriting premise is that place is both a subject in the world and a site of intersubjective encounter amongst humans, and between humans and other living things. Inspiration deepens all the selves who interact in a given place.

From the premise of the subjectivity of place, I would want to say to people who might visit Jasper Gorge: do not go there simply to marvel at its grandeur. Go there to discover specific ways in which you can inscribe yourself more deeply into the world, to remake and unmake the histories that brought you there, and to learn and relearn the connections between your embodied self, other people, and the world of constancy and flux.

Better yet, find more places where this work can be done. Jasper Gorge is not a singular source of creation: it is one among many, a site for life alongside all the other sites for life in this country.

Further Readings

On Jasper Gorge, see:

D. Rose 1994 'Flesh, And Blood, And Deep Colonising, in *Claiming Our Rites: Studies in Religion by Australian Women Scholars*, M. Joy & P. Magee (eds), pp. 327-41. Australian Association for the Study of Religions, Wollstonecraft, NSW.

D. Rose 1996 'Histories and Rituals: Land Claims in the Territory' in *In the Age of Mabo, History, Aborigines and Australia*, B. Attwood (ed), pp. 35-53, Allen & Unwin, Sydney.

On the cult of beauty, the sublime, and wilderness see:

J. Daniel 1994 [1992] *The Trail Home: Nature, Imagination, and the American West*, Pantheon Books, New York.

C. Oravec 1996 'To Stand Outside Oneself: The Sublime in the Discourse of Natural Scenery', in *The Symbolic Earth: Discourse and Our Creation of the Environment*, J. Cantrill & C. Oravec (eds) pp. 58-75, The University Press of Kentucky, Lexington.