



Comment

Non-Return and Non-Arrival in Aboriginal Australia. Comment on Isayev (2021). Ancient Wandering and Permanent Temporariness. *Humanities* 10: 91

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Abstract: This dialogue constitutes an engagement with Elena Isayev's article, "Ancient Wandering and Permanent Temporariness". It focusses on concepts Elena has marshalled for the analysis of ancient and contemporary experiences of displacement ("non-return", "non-arrival", "permanent temporariness") within what are largely international political frameworks. The point of our response is to see what happens when we apply these concepts to Aboriginal people's experiences of displacement *within* the Australian nation—a country that did not even count the indigenous as citizens until 1967. Some striking parallels emerge, in relation to how a people can be forced to live in a temporary state, their lives "made in between". Our response took the form of a conversation and was recorded on 6 December 2021. We choose to speak and transcribe these thoughts, rather than write them, as a way to maintain the dialogic mode (a.k.a. "yarning") in which Aboriginal intellectual work has flourished for millennia now. Towards the end of the exchange Paul Collis suggests that not only Aboriginal people, but the land itself, suffers from a kind of "permanent temporariness".

Keywords: permanent temporariness; internal exile; Aboriginal Australia; suffering of country



Citation: Magee, Paul, and Paul Collis. 2022. Non-Return and Non-Arrival in Aboriginal Australia. Comment on Isayev (2021). Ancient Wandering and Permanent Temporariness. *Humanities* 10: 91. *Humanities* 11: 86. <https://doi.org/10.3390/h11040086>

Received: 28 April 2022

Accepted: 16 June 2022

Published: 12 July 2022

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PAUL MAGEE: Elena's article starts with a long quotation from Sandi Hilla and Alessandro Petti. The quotation is about the idea of "permanent temporariness". Hilla and Petti begin by noting that "the condition of permanent temporariness is imposed on us. It is a regime that exists today and is manifested of course in refugee camps as an extreme, but it's diffused into many other spheres" (Hilla and Petti 2018, p. 52, qtd in (Isayev 2021, p. 1)). Elena is going to talk about it as a state of "non-return". You're not allowed to go back to wherever it is that you're in exile from. But she'll also say that it's a state of "non-arrival" (Isayev 2021, p. 3). There's nowhere you're allowed to get to. You're stuck in that camp, that detention centre, that whatever sort of place. Your temporariness becomes permanent.

She also talks about the hypocrisy of a system that, "does not allow for spaces and existence to be defined outside the confined units of the nation state, while complicit and fully aware of millions of people whose lives are made in between". Theirs is "an existence seemingly beyond history, where histories are nationally defined" (Isayev 2021, p. 5).

We're talking about people "whose collective absence from their countries would form an emptiness larger than any one of Europe's nations" (Isayev 2021, p. 4). According to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, there are 82.4 million displaced people in the world today—maybe three and a half times the population of Australia.

To come to the stuff that we're going to chat about, the people whose plight Elena is theorising, and wanting us to ameliorate, are obviously in a different situation to Aboriginal people in Australia. But then again, towards the end of the article, Lena starts talking about landless people in Brazil, who have reclaimed land in the Dandara region, and even set up civic institutions there, in spite of the risk of eviction. In other words, the things that characterise life in international refugee camps and detention centres, with all their

“permanent temporariness”, might characterise the life of internally displaced peoples within nations like Australia, as well.

I thought maybe we could start in terms of the forms of “permanent temporariness” experienced by Aboriginal people in Australia today. I am wondering how applicable you think this concept is to Aboriginal Australia.

PAUL COLLIS: I think, apart from a very small number of Aboriginal people, generally the Central Desert mob, people from the Kimberley, perhaps, Yolŋu, people Alice Springs-way, Uluru, apart from them, the rest of us have been temporarily removed from our country. And that’s unlikely to change. Well, it won’t change in my life time. Land rights has not been delivered to Aboriginal people. The sorts of places that we can claim are on land that nobody else wants—nobody else wants them and it doesn’t look like they’ll have any use for the public good in the foreseeable future. Swamps, deserts, those kinds of places.

PAUL MAGEE: You mean because of the 1993 Native Title Act, which held that native title applied in Australia, but only on places where there was continuous indigenous occupation? In other words, it didn’t apply in places you guys had been kicked out of.

PAUL COLLIS: Yes.

We don’t really have land rights. I think Aboriginal people who come from places like Bourke, who’ve lived in communities like I have, would generally agree that we are not welcome on our traditional lands. So we are nowhere near a kind of traditional behaviour or lifestyle.

PAUL MAGEE: That’d be this idea of “non-return”—you can’t go back. Even if you maybe can, to visit, you can’t go back and live there. It’s not being allowed, to live that way.

What about this idea of “non arrival”?

PAUL COLLIS: Non-arrival is interesting, isn’t it? It’s a terrible term, but it’s very succinct. It’s exactly what refugees and other displaced people suffer.

I was born in Bourke and I grew up in Bourke. We generally didn’t go too far outside of the town. That’s because outside of the town is owned by white people: big station owners. There’d be signs. Some Aboriginal people would go shooting for a kangaroo, or an emu, or something like that. They’d go out in a car, they’d get onto the floodplains, chase one down. Sometimes they’d have to cross private property, a station owner’s property. The station owners had signs—I still remember the signs quite clearly, from when I was a kid—“YOU TRESSPASS, I SHOOT”. They were protecting their land (our land, really) with guns, and they were not afraid to use them.

We know from experience that when an Aboriginal person’s been shot, or run over by a car, or something like that—and there’s generally no witnesses, or not many witnesses—white people can say virtually anything. “I didn’t see him, it was dark. He jumped in front of the car. He threatened me with a knife”. All too often, the prosecution of Aboriginal people is flawed.

So I didn’t venture outside the town much, when I was a kid. I’d go down the river.

Along the river, we were free, really. No one owned that land, because it was the river banks. But there were places we wouldn’t go, because they were sacred places, or women’s places. Down past the Catholic church, for example, round the bend from that big structure down near the wharf, about 400, 500 m around the bend, there’s a women’s birthing site. I asked Gertie and Margaret, last time I was home, “Did boys go down there and swim?” And Gertie said, “No, generally they were pretty good. They’d stay away from where they knew there was women’s business”.

PAUL MAGEE: So you grew up in Bourke. Is there a way in which Bourke was a place you’d arrived at? Or did it have a feeling of temporariness about it, too?

PAUL COLLIS: Very temporary. If you have a look at the cemetery in Bourke, you’ll find a lot of kids from the 1960s, dead before they were ten years old.

PAUL MAGEE: Oh fuck. I hadn’t meant temporary that way.

PAUL COLLIS: Yeah. Very fucking temporary. Kids dying of whooping cough, polio, those kinds of things. Generally preventable diseases. Those kids were dead well before

they were ten. The next gap was people who were dead before they were 21. The older brothers and sisters. I don't know what the numbers are like now. But I know that the Aboriginal youth suicide rate is the highest in the world. We're very temporary.

We know that cops and other people don't like us. We know that if we're walking around at night, going from one place to another, we might be talking, couple of cousins or something, our voices might be raised—people ring the police on us. They ring the police, thinking that we're trying to break into their house.

You're under constant surveillance. That kind of pressure—I reckon it's one of the reasons those kids end up so fragile as well. Not the only reason.

And that's pretty typical of most bush towns.

When you and I went to Mudgee that time, it took us a while to find any black faces. When I asked the Aboriginal youth worker, "How do youse get on with whitefellas?", she said, "It's all right, because a lot of us are like me". She pointed to her skin, which was a really light tan. "They don't give us a real hard time. But we stay away. We stay out of town, mostly". And that's their country.

So we're very temporary.

I was fighting other boys in the school yard when I was 11. The police drove me home one time, and warned my parents that'd be no second chance. Next time round, I'd be charged. This is another aspect of that temporariness. They meant that I'd be sent away to Mount Penang, or somewhere like that. I wouldn't have come back for at least 18 months. You'd come back at 13, but by that stage, you'd've missed out of on a hell of a lot of family life, and a hell of a lot of town life. You don't fit back in very well. And once you do a sentence, cops are all over you, they let you know that they're watching you—this kid of shit. I've seen cousins that I went to school with—Trevor and Barry are the same age as me—they started doing Cobham and Mittagong when they were ten years old.¹ Up until then, they were fairly regular at school. Barry lived out of town, so he didn't come to school much. But Trevor was fairly regular. I'd go every day. He wouldn't some days—he didn't have money to get food. Once Trevor started going to those boys' homes, I only saw him at school twice.

So we're very temporary.

People say this is a fair country.

PAUL MAGEE: You were talking before about not being able to leave Bourke. We usually associate that kind of restriction on movement with places that have a wall around them: prisons, detention centres, certain kinds of camps. But what you described had me thinking that that sort of restraint on movement can come about through fear of likely consequences, as well.

PAUL COLLIS: Yeah. My grandfather was born at Mount Gundabooka, near the caves I took you to in 2018. I'd never been to those caves until I went out with you blokes. I was in my fifties.

PAUL MAGEE: You hadn't been there before?

PAUL COLLIS: No. That station had been private property. It was handed back over to Parks and Wildlife about 15 years before we went out there —there's an Aboriginal Management Body that's supposed to look after it.

I'd never been there.

People'd ask me, "You been out to Gundabooka, Paul?"

I'd always say, "Yes".

I was embarrassed to say that I hadn't seen the place.

When Grandfather came to live in Bourke, after the station-owner said, "You'll have to go Arch, we can't afford you anymore"—this was in 1967, when equal wages came in, and the talk around the place was that no black man was worth the same as a white man. So the black men had to go—when he came into town, my grandfather was really quiet for a long time.

One day he was drunk and he said, "I'll never go back to my country".

I said, “Why, grandfather? I won’t always be small, I’ll have a car one day. We can go back”.

He said, “No. No whitefella’s gonna tell me to get off my country. Stick it in their arses”.

That heartache really crushed him. He worked until he was 65, retiring age, and then got a job as a truck-driver. And this other old truck-driver was his off-sider.

He was dead at 70, not very old really.

PAUL MAGEE: Do you think maybe he never went back because he wanted to keep the country alive in his mind, alive in the way he’d known it?

PAUL COLLIS: I think so.

He was about 44, or 45, when he came from that station to Bourke. His kids were raised in Bourke. Previously, he would come in once a month, give Nan money and spend the weekend with them. Nan and the kids were on the Reserve.² Technically he wasn’t supposed to visit them because he had the Certificate of Exemption, which meant he was exempt from being Aboriginal.³

PAUL MAGEE: Oh. Jesus.

So if he was still classified as an Aboriginal, he wouldn’t even have been able to leave the Reserve, to work on the land. But now he had an exemption, he wasn’t allowed to be on the Reserve, wasn’t mean to be with Aboriginal people at all.

PAUL COLLIS: Yeah.

But by that stage, they’d kind of turned a blind eye to those things. The kids were really happy to see him, as kids can be. Nan was struggling hard with nine kids. She had ten, but one baby died. Nine kids she raised, virtually without him.

So those first forty years, he lived on that station. He was born there.

In my PhD, I wondered who would have suffered the most from that absence: the country, or him? I came to realize that they both suffered. Because after the Aboriginal men had gone, the station no longer had them there to say, “You can’t farm there”. They used to keep the whites away from sacred places. We were looking at those cave paintings at Gundabooka, back in 2018. Round the other side, they’re much grander. But they’re also more accessible to the public. So Parks and Wildlife put a fence around, to stop people getting in and sleeping there, rubbing against the cave paintings. Their sweat was taking stuff away, so they fenced it off. They were round there shooting, as well, roo-shooting at night, putting holes in the roof and stuff like that. Pretty irresponsible.

PAUL MAGEE: Something I think a lot of white people don’t realize is that in many parts of Australia, indigenous people had their land taken away, but they also stayed on it, labouring for others. They hardly earned anything. But that allowed them to maintain contact with the land, and to have some control over it. It’s one of the really sad parts of Australian history, just to think what it must’ve been like, to be in that situation: working for the people who stole your land, so as to stay close to it.

PAUL COLLIS: I think he started work round about the time he was ten, or 11 years old. His brothers would have then gone to the war. Some of them came back, some of them didn’t. There was a shortage of men. Black men knew that country better than anybody else, they worked twice as fucking hard. You’ve got a horse to ride, that wasn’t yours to own. You’ve got a saddle to use, but it wasn’t yours to keep. He became the head stockman. In those days, going on droving trips, he would have driven 800 sheep from the Queensland border to Bourke. It might take you eight days or something, just depending on how hot it was and how slowly you were going. And how many other drovers you had. If you’re out for three months, each drover would need probably eight horses. And you might have eight stockmen. 64 horses. He’d break all the new horses. Saddle-break them: take the saddle off, just mount them lightly so they respond to the reins, and then turn them out again. He wasn’t afraid of work. I guess he didn’t like the sadness of seeing himself age, and the country deteriorate.

PAUL MAGEE: He sounds extraordinarily proud—that decision to just leave and not go back, because he didn’t want to be in the position of someone who gets knocked back from his own land.

PAUL COLLIS: He would have been the boss Aboriginal guy on that station, and he was our elder as well.

He only had two sons and they both worked there on the station, straight from school. Robert, the eldest one, stayed. He got called, “Boy”. Uncle Crow went droving with Frank Dyneton. He was about 14 when he went. Never seen him much. Boy worked down there and so did most of grandfather’s nephews. So all these Barkindji⁴ guys were working on that station. And when the referendum and equal wages came along in 1967, most of them were sacked.

PAUL MAGEE: I want to connect the situation you’re describing with your grandfather, and your uncles—Aboriginal people managing the land that had been taken away from them, in this very precarious position, but nonetheless managing to look after sacred sites—I want to draw a link between that and Albert Namatjira in Central Australia in the 1950s. I remember once you saying about Namatjira that he was doing paintings that appealed to whites, but he was doing ritual through those paintings as well.

PAUL COLLIS: It isn’t well known. But when he was painting Hidden Valley and other places, Aboriginal men in Alice Springs weren’t allowed to leave Alice Springs. They were under lock and key, because they were on Reserve. He was a postman. He would be on camels, he might be gone for three, four weeks. When he was going through these sacred places, he was painting them for the men stuck in Alice Springs, to show them where they would have been going through law. A very impressive man.

PAUL MAGEE: He was doing a kind of virtual initiation?

PAUL COLLIS: He was preparing the land for them, doing ceremony there by himself, then bringing those paintings back to show them in Alice, in the months before he exhibited them.

I don’t think there was any end that Aboriginal people wouldn’t have gone to, to maintain their contact with the country.

I remember Wendy Sommerville telling me—it must have been four or five years ago, when she started her PhD—about a piece she’d written about her mother and her uncle, who were born on a mountain, down on the South Coast. That mountain was their home, and it then became a reserve—whitefellas put a fence around it. But in the 70’s, the government was closing the reserves, and said, “You have to leave this mountain and move to Nowra”.

Wendy said, “I’ve never seen my mother so upset, and so quiet. Same with my uncle”. You never recover from that stuff.

If you have a look at some of the oral histories about the 1960s, *Wiradjuri Stories*, for instance, you’ll see people speak about the reserves with rose colored-glasses. “Weren’t we better then? We didn’t have all this money and all these jobs, we looked after each other”.

That is true, but it’s not completely true. They didn’t have much to look after each other with. If you think of the high morbidity rates with the kids, it was terrible. There wasn’t a lot of food to go round. But women still say, “Oh, it was great”.

What was great was being close to a more natural environment. In Bourke, I’ll show you next time we go up there, there’s a pound yard. It’s a round yard, where any stray horses would be put. This is going back to the fifties and sixties, when horses were prevalent. If a horse or donkey got away, they’d put it in that pound yard. You’d come down and pay 2 pound ten, or whatever it was, to get your horse out, and off you’d go.

PAUL MAGEE: Like a pawnbroker.

PAUL COLLIS: Yeah, but it’s to the shire.

Aboriginal people were put in that fucking pound yard too. My Nana lived there for a while.

PAUL MAGEE: Living there?

PAUL COLLIS: Yeah, they put us in the pound yard. I think they did it because it was land that was already destined to be occupied by animals. So the blacks wouldn't take up any of their land.

They were that spiteful.

PAUL MAGEE: I think the whites in Australia have always been very reluctant to see black people as the same as them, because then they'd have to face up to the fact of theft.

PAUL COLLIS: That's right.

PAUL MAGEE: It's so obvious and so undeniable.

PAUL COLLIS: It sure is. You don't like to talk about it.

If I did a vox-pop on any street, I reckon, any part of Australia, and you asked those white people, "What are Australians?", you'd hear, "We're good. We're bloody good people. We stand up for our mates. We're there in a fight. We're generous".

None of that's come Aboriginal-way—not without a whole lot of effort.

The great "heroes" of this country, like Lang Hancock, say, "Those half-caste ones, they're the ones that are bloody no good. I would put stuff in the water to sterilise them. So they'd eventually die out".

That's what he used to say. He's not the only one who said it.

Go back and have a look at John Pilger's first film, *The Secret Country*. There's a scene up in Moree. He was following Charlie Perkins and the students doing freedom rides. In Moree, you see an old white guy, an old cigarette-stained bastard, you know: "Those bloody blacks. 'Eh won't work. 'Eh no bloody good".

Everything's based around this idea of work. And you have other white people saying, "Oh yes, they've gotta work. They've gotta work, just like everybody else".

PAUL MAGEE: Yeah, that's a common phrase: "Just like everybody else".

PAUL COLLIS: You've got to work like everybody else, but you won't get paid the same. They didn't like paying Aboriginal people wages: "They'd only drink it. They don't know how to manage money".

Maybe Aboriginal people didn't know how to manage money because they didn't have enough of it to manage, and because they didn't have a bank book. When the referendum came through in 1967, it meant that you could carry your own bank book. It meant that you could go into another town without getting permission off the police.

PAUL MAGEE: So Aboriginal people weren't just allowed to have citizenship in 1967, which is what most people think 1967 means: it also brought them more freedom of movement.

PAUL COLLIS: Yes.

But white people are still nervous when they see black people walking around after dark. Thinking that we're the Bogeyman, murderers, rapists, robbers.

There have been Aboriginal people who have robbed and fought, but generally that's not the case. Bourke's got a really high crime rate for a small country town. But much of that crime rate is for summary offences: swearing and stuff like that, being drunk on the street. I looked into this, when I was doing my PhD: there have been two or three murders in Bourke in the last 100 years. And yet the *Sydney Telegraph* had on the front page, "Bourke, Biggest Crime Rate in the World".⁵

It's often for driving without a license. An Aboriginal guy got sick of seeing his nieces and nephews getting pinched for unlicensed driving, so he started a learn-to-drive course. It dropped the crime rate by 70%.

Why didn't the cops do it?

PAUL MAGEE: About halfway through Elena's article, there's another set of quotations from the architects, Hillal and Petti. Petti is referring to refugees returning to their homelands, and he says at one point, "There isn't a single return, but many possible returns". Hillal adds, at that point, "In Bahia, they told us, 'Every time I plant a Boab tree in Brazil, it feels like I'm going back to Africa.'" (Hillal and Petti 2018, pp. 44–45, quoted in (Isayev 2021, p. 7)). Even though those Bahians are way over in Brazil, as a result of the slave culture that forcibly migrated them there, they tell Hillal they return to Africa through

the act of planting a boab tree. I'm wondering whether this might relate to the poems that you've been writing in Barkindji language. Do you think there's a kind of return, when you're writing in Barkindji? Is it a way of going back?

PAUL COLLIS: I think you're right, there was a return through writing those poems—but not to the place that I knew, not to those barbed wire fences, and those signs. It was more connected to my grandfather, who's passed away, than it was to that country. I became more interested in the country as I got into places that he knew. And then, when I was writing in Barkindji, it was like the distance between me and the country shrunk. It's just like those words: *wita witalana*: "to look out over". When we went out to Gundabooka—like I said, I'd never been there before—but I knew every part of that road, and every bit of that rock.

PAUL MAGEE: I thought you must have been there before. You were guiding us.

PAUL COLLIS: I dreamt all that stuff. I could see it as clear as looking at you on this screen.

PAUL MAGEE: Paul, the last time we did one of these zooms—that lecture we did for my students in lock-down—I asked you, "Is writing home?" I'll read you your response: "I think for me, it is. It's the only home I've got. It's the only sense of place that I understand, that I return to. I live in a flat, but that is not permanent. It's not stable. Sometimes I sleep in my car. Where I am is not home. Writing is. It's a returning to, it's a place where I'm always at".

So when you're writing in Barkindji—

PAUL COLLIS: Yeah, I'm not here when I'm doing that. I'm sitting here, sometimes at this desk, but my head isn't.

In the last year of the drought,⁶ when the river was completely empty, I must've written ten poems and all around the drying river, the drying river, and the desecration of guys on motorbikes riding up and down the river bed. "Haven't you got any fucking respect?" Of course, they don't know the story about the Rainbow Serpent. They think, it's good flat country, great for tearing up with those knobby tyres on their bikes. That stuff was really stressing me out.

By writing in Barkindji, I'm also keeping something back from white people. They don't know the meaning.

PAUL MAGEE: If we go back to this phrase "permanent temporariness", there's a kind of permanence to writing, isn't there?

PAUL COLLIS: There can be, if it's what you choose to keep doing. You may have little breaks in between, bouts of ill-health, things like that, but generally, writing is there. It's there when you're feeling good and it's there when you're not feeling so well, either.

PAUL MAGEE: The writing will still be there after those tire tracks have worn away. And the writing provides us a model, a world for us to come back to, maybe?

PAUL COLLIS: I hope so.

Red Room Poetry asked me to go out to Broken Hill, and teach Aboriginal kids Barkindji. I said, "I don't know enough Barkindji, those kids'd know more than me".

They said, "You'll be okay. It's what you do with it".

Anyway, in the end, I didn't go, it was too far and I didn't have enough time in between the semester to get out there. But Red Room was really significant in getting me engaged with Barkindji.⁷

When I was 11, I asked Grandfather, "Why don't you teach me how to speak Barkindji, Grandfather?"

He says, "Who would you talk to, when I'm gone?"

It was like that. Very matter-of-fact.

"Who would you talk to, when I'm gone?"

He would have been, probably, about 60 years old, and he could speak Barkindji fluently, and those other eight surrounding languages—not as fluently, but almost. And he could speak English, and write as well. I'd call him pretty gifted. But he wouldn't. He'd say that was how everyone used to talk. We could all speak each other's languages, because

we were interacting. A lot of those languages were similar—some words were the same. If there were 254 languages across the country at the point of contact with whitefellas, it would have been 1800, 1900 dialects, easily. I think it was in the language, that's how they were keeping the country invigorated, alive, and sacred.

Later, identity was—it wasn't going anywhere—but it wasn't being taught either. It had gone into hiatus. Because the people that could speak the language were working on stations, railways. And they weren't trained teachers.

Grandfather grew up in traditional society. He would have probably seen the last Barkindji-led corroboree in that area, before he was ten. He was born into that traditional life, but started to grow out of it. He and the others had no doubt that Barkindji had been shattered. But because they could still speak it, they felt they had some sense about them of Barkindji.

They didn't teach kids like me any of these languages at school. In High School, the two languages they taught were Japanese and German.

PAUL MAGEE: In Bourke?

PAUL COLLIS: No, in boarding school. I was in the A class. I was picking up German fairly easily. Japanese—I was starting to hear the language. The German teacher, who was an Englishman, didn't like me, I don't know what I did, but he kicked me out into the B Class. I had to go and do fucking farm mechanics, and learn how to weld. I was certainly not interested in welding and that kind of stuff because that's what they did on stations. "Do your own work, you bastards". I wasn't going to work for them.

PAUL MAGEE: I want to take you back to this phrase, "permanent temporariness". We've been using it to characterise the experiences of exile that Barkindji people like you and your grandfather have had within your very own country. But what about in traditional times? Were they all about permanence? Or was there a way in which temporariness might have been seen as the natural state of being back then? Maybe settling in a place for a while, moving around on the land?

PAUL COLLIS: Yeah. But it was also in the culture.

You are a boy for a little while, temporarily. And in your boyhood, they would separate you from girls, round about age 8 or 9—when boys are starting to get boisterous, running through their community, slapping girls and stuff like that. They'd put them into a men's camp. That's when your training out of boyhood really begins. Your main disciplinarian, if you were a Yolŋu for example, would be your mother's brother. He'd be the bloke that'd chastise you. He'd also be the bloke who's there when you get initiated. So he, and probably your father, would take you into the bush, after you got cut, if they were doing those things. They'd do hunting from there and look after you while you heal. They'd wait for two or three weeks to bring you back.

PAUL MAGEE: Did people's geographical location shift much?

PAUL COLLIS: Before white people came here it wouldn't have shifted that much. But there'd be change in your place in the culture. The story they tell you when you're eight or ten would be different to the story they tell you after you come out of initiation. You might be 11 or so when you do your first initiation. You'd do another one a couple of years later, three years, might be four. Meantime, you're growing up, gaining responsibilities. Once you go through law, you're allowed to carry weapons. They announce that you're initiated. Everybody knew that anyway, because you're in the community.

When they took the boys away, they'd put them on the other side of the camp. Same with the girls, they separated them too. Their training then began: how to be Barkindji, how to be the best Barkindji you could be in the world.

When I was fighting, at age 11, Grandfather took me down to the river, and he pointed to a brown kite circling over it, "See that one?"

I said, "Yeah".

He said, "That's me", and pointed to himself. "That's my meat, my totem. That's yours too. Do you know that?"

I said, "Yeah".

"Do you know anything else about it?"

"No".

He started to tell me about the totemic relationship: how from the earliest time he could remember, he was always told that that bird was his totem and how special it was. Then he pointed to a Gidgee tree and said, "Do you know why I'm not cutting that one down?"

"No".

"That's you. When you die, your kids can come and speak to that tree. They can speak to you. Your spirit's in there".

PAUL MAGEE: So people are the temporary vessels for this permanent spirit culture that moves through them.

PAUL COLLIS: Yeah.

When Wendy showed me that story about her mom and brother having to move off their land, into Nowra, I said, "Do you know, Wendy, all places have memory".

She said, "Yes, I know. That mountain is suffering as well".

If you go to places like the one I just mentioned, you can almost feel an emptiness. It's something quite strange and unnerving.

There's a back road that goes up from Dungog to Gloucester. John Heath, his wife, Louise, and Louise's old aunt, who was an old traditional woman, a Bundjalung woman, drove up that mountain. Louise started to haemorrhage, and to be sick. She was saying "Please, take me back. Take me back".

So halfway up the mountain, John turned around and drove her back down to Newcastle. As he got back down to the flat part, she stopped vomiting. The old woman was singing traditional songs in the back. John couldn't hear what she was saying, but it calmed Louise down.

About 30 Aboriginal women and kids were pushed off that cliff by [British] redcoats. That's the official figures. But Aboriginal people—Biripi people—say there's more like 60 to 80 people who were pushed off.

All these places have memory. A lot of places I won't go to, because the memories are like that.

PAUL MAGEE: It's just not a white way of thinking.

PAUL COLLIS: No.

The country's alive with the spirit.

Where I went through law,⁸ up the other side of Cessnock, coming round the road, you go down over this creek, and come out on the other side into this huge amphitheatre. It might be 200, 300 feet high. And it's all around you. Soon as you enter, the birds just go mad. Cockatoos, parrots, galahs, they just scream. They're happy that you're back.

PAUL MAGEE: An end to the exile?

PAUL COLLIS: We are temporary people. You're only a kid for a short time. If you're an elder, if you live long enough, you're an elder for a long time. Hopefully those elders live for a long time. We've got elders now who are 40 years old. They're grandparents, sometimes they're double grandparents, by the time they're 40—way too young. But they're taking care of things—not the traditional stuff, but other things. If we're living in town, we can't really look after the country the way we'd like to. A lot of us don't know those traditional things. But there are still enough people, enough elders who are around, taking adults and kids out into the bush and teaching them how to cut trees, how to do carvings.

I wanted to do that about 20 years ago. I wanted to get a stonemason and somebody who could do carvings in the trees and take them out to Bourke, because we weren't doing it anymore. I thought, once those trees are gone, and a lot of them did go in the last drought. Up around Moree and Gunnedah, those trees were well over 120 years old. They were so dry, once the water was gone, there was nothing to keep them from falling over. I was worried about what would happen, once all of that was gone. We know where there's still

some scar trees.⁹ But most of those scar trees were cut down by white people, because they didn't want any evidence that blacks were there.

I had a student two years ago, talking about Aboriginal presence. She said, "I didn't know there were Aboriginal people where I came from".

I said, "What do you think happened to them?"

"I don't know, I just thought they went away".

So we're kind of invisible. But we're highly visible in a place like Bourke. Bourke's got the highest number of cops per citizen anywhere in the country.

Why?

Author Contributions: Both authors contributed equally to the paper. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Cobham Youth Justice Centre, in Western Sydney, is the principal remand centre for juveniles in New South Wales and was opened in 1980. Paul is referring to an earlier institution on the site. Mittagong Training School for Boys, in the mountains to the south west of Sydney, functioned from 1943 to 1976.
- ² Reserves were government-controlled parcels of land, set aside ("reserved") for Aboriginal people to live on, with the aim of reducing, and otherwise regulating, indigenous interactions with whites. The reserve system began in the mid 1820's, spreading through the country into the early 1900's and lasted through to the late 1960's.
- ³ A "Certificate of Exemption" granted its bearer the right *not* to be subject to the provisions of the legislation governing indigenous people in the state or territory granting that exemption. Exemption allowed for greater freedom in employment, movement through areas where Aboriginal people were not allowed, and the purchasing and drinking of alcohol. In most jurisdictions, the exempt were required as the price of their certification to sever ties with all other indigenous people. Exemption could also be revoked. The system came to an end after the 1967 referendum, which determined that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders were to be counted as part of the Australian population, and so could be subject to Commonwealth laws, which served to override the State and Territory acts to which exemptions applied.
- ⁴ The Barkindji are one of the over 250 Aboriginal nations, each with their own language and culture, represented on the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) Map of Indigenous Australia: <https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/map-indigenous-australia> (accessed on 8 January 2022).
- ⁵ See, relatedly, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/bourke-tops-list-more-dangerous-than-any-country-in-the-world-20130201-2dq3y.html> (accessed on 8 January 2022).
- ⁶ The drought ran from 2017–2019.
- ⁷ See further, <https://redroompoetry.org/poets/paul-collis/> (accessed on 8 January 2022).
- ⁸ i.e., went through initiation.
- ⁹ The exposed sapwood of trees that have had bark removed for practical or ceremonial processes dries out and dies, forming a distinctive type of elongated scarring. Such scar trees provide rich evidence of Aboriginal habitation and culture and are found in rural and urban settings alike. There is one at the University of Canberra, just south of the library.

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