

Concluding Comments

Lisa Ford

AS THE INTRODUCTION NOTES, this volume began at a conference held at Stanford in January 2012, the outcome of an ongoing collaboration between Stanford University, the Australian National University, and the University of Western Australia centered on interactions between settler states and indigenous peoples. The essays gathered here demonstrate the richness and value of that thematic focus. Most investigate the encounter between indigenous people and settlers in the spheres of land use, art, and story in Australia and the United States. Some, however, imagine a very different “West”—investigating the role of transpacific transportation in the articulation and practice both of immigration law and of settler aesthetics. I will return later to the notion of “comparative Wests”—its limits and its promise. But first, in this short essay, I will investigate the themes raised by the papers here.¹

While few are explicitly comparative, all the papers gathered in this volume suggest the possibilities for a rich engagement across disciplines and across the Pacific Ocean. The key theme explored by most is the role of indigenous people in land management from prehistory to the present. American and Australian Wests tend to be arid and fire-prone places—the history of anthropogenic uses of fire, water, fauna, and flora is vital to reconstructing lost landscapes and land management strategies. These papers also suggest that recovering indigenous land management strategies will help to craft new ways of understanding and preserving balanced human ecologies.

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¹ This essay is based on oral comments made at the conference.



Alistair Paterson and Frank K. Lake demonstrate the importance of interdisciplinary approaches to the recovery of past indigenous fire use. Both suggest ways in which science can take stock of changes in the land wrought by indigenous people and settlers by using ethnography, archaeology, and history in addition to conventional scientific methods. As Paterson and Lake argue (following a long line of environmental historians), for thousands of years our Wests have been the product of nature and nurture.² Paterson argues that scientists can understand changes in the Australian environment over the last 50,000 years only if they reject the pervasive binary opposition between “natural” indigenous and “nurturing” or “destructive” settler land uses.³ Scale matters; European settlers and their quadrupeds have disrupted Australia massively since 1830. But Paterson reminds us that humans, flora, fauna, and microorganisms have all wrought changes in the land over much longer time scales. If we are to understand the nature, significance, values, and harms inherent in those long-term interwoven processes of change, we need to use a combination of climate science, archaeology, ethnography, and history.

Paterson’s call has already been heeded by a number of authors in this volume. Lake, however, shows the ongoing perversity of environmental scientists who reduce indigenous land use to a footnote or an unknown variable in “proper” scientific studies of wildfire. Lake demonstrates how ethnographic knowledge, bureaucratic know-how, archaeology, and science can be used to bring indigenous people into formative conversations about wildfire management in California. He argues that science cannot understand fire without ethnography and history; for example, early photographs and interviews with indigenous people can help to re-create landscapes before modern forest management and indigenous dispossession. Tracking the distance between fire and archaeological remains can help to form and to test hypotheses about indigenous fire use. Tribal knowledge can describe the nature and purpose of human-made fire. These conversations are not mere curiosities. They might help to manage wildfire in the contemporary American West.

Judee Lena Burr, meanwhile, provides a compelling example of how indigenous land use and settler policy can be fruitfully compared on the Anglophone Pacific littoral. Australian Aborigines and Native Americans have very different status in law. Australian Aborigines have very weak land rights and have not been accorded even the shadow of sovereignty by Australian courts. In contrast, Native Americans—at least those registered as tribes—have a tempered (if constantly eroded) “domestic dependent” sovereignty that has left them with relatively robust structures of tribal governance. And yet, as a great deal of scholarship has demonstrated lately, both groups of indigenous people must operate in collaboration with—or, perhaps more correctly, in narrow gaps and fissures within—settler sovereignties.⁴ Burr’s essay demonstrates the rich possibilities opened for indigenous people by relationships with bureaucracies that are not dependent on indigenous sovereignty: after all, indigenous fire use in North America is facilitated by government-issued permits even on Indian reservations. Curiously, it seems that Aboriginal Australians have had much more success in negotiating autonomy in fire use than their

² For an early and classic statement, see William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2003), 34–53.

³ Alfred Crosby described indigenous peoples as the “shock troops” of ecological imperialism: Alfred Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 280.

⁴ For very recent scholarship on the subject, see the essays gathered in Lisa Ford and Tim Rowse, eds., *Between Indigenous and Settler Governance* (London: Routledge, 2012).

American counterparts. Sometimes the spaces between indigenous and settler governance are more capacious than the shrinking boundaries of US tribal sovereignty. Burr gives a complex and interesting account of a growing sphere of engagement in contemporary American and Australian Wests—including NGOs and corporations as well as state and indigenous players.

Burr stresses that successful collaborative land management arrangements among indigenous people, NGOs, and settler states in North America and Australia rest as much on the capacity of indigenous leaders to speak the language of policy and of science as they do on settler respect for indigenous culture. Jared Dahl Aldern takes a different view in his account of the value of indigenous stories in water management plans in the American West. He seeks to bridge the gap between Native American paratactic storytelling and the causal, output-oriented language of modern land use planning. Instead of demanding that indigenous stories be transformed into usable information for scientists (Lake) and policy makers (Burr), Aldern wants stories to be valued on their own terms. The importance of North Fork Mono stories of inundation, of origin, and of negotiation with creatures about water use, he suggests, lies not in the cause-and-effect histories they contain and distort but in their nonnarrative, contextualized engagements with landscape. These stories assert long-standing coexistence without control. They suggest mutuality rather than dominance. They simultaneously assert the special relationship of First Nations with land (which can also be rendered in terms of rights discourse) and call for a cooperative, intercultural approach to land use that privileges the health of flora, fauna, and earth over extraction and short-term conservation. Implicit in Aldern's attempt to unpack the value of Mono stories is the potential for their misunderstanding and their irrelevance. Aldern celebrates the value of Mono stories as monologic lessons for planners. I am still not sure whether Burr's and Lake's pragmatic emphasis on using bureaucratic language is not a more important strategy for indigenous people trying to play an active role in the articulation of land management policies in these Anglophone Wests.

Jill Milroy, Grant Revell, and Darren Jorgensen demonstrate the importance of indigenous art projects as a medium of engagement between indigenous peoples and settlers in Anglophone Wests. Milroy and Revell describe two artistic interpretations by Australian Aborigines of the history and experience of settlement. The first is the Canning Stock Route Project, which began in 2006 with the backing of the Western Australian government. The project aimed to facilitate the visual and verbal reappropriation of the famous Canning Stock Route by indigenous artists. Alfred Canning's map facilitated the movement of cattle over the Kimberleys to market in the early twentieth century. The map incorporated indigenous knowledge, and the cattle that followed its path exhausted and sullied indigenous waterholes.⁵ The 2006 project invited Aboriginal artists to artistically reinterpret the map (and, metaphorically, to reclaim the land it described). Using a combination of art and verbal storytelling, the project did more than assert the primacy of Aboriginal knowledge of Country: it explicitly shared knowledge—cartographic, visual and oral—to produce hybrid understandings of place. Milroy and Revell's second example was the use of art in the Spinifex people's native title claim, resolved in 2000. Indigenous claims

⁵ Ruth Morgan, "Making 'a Way in the Wilderness': Colonisation, Water and Indigenous Ecologies in Western Australia, 1826 to 1918" (paper delivered at Comparative Wests Winter Conference "Transforming the Wests: Understanding Shared Pasts and Enduring Issues in the Comparative Wests," Bill Lane Center for the American West, Stanford University, January 20–21, 2012); and see generally Ruth Morgan, "Drying Out? An Environmental History of the Responses and Understandings of a Changing Climate in Southwest Western Australia, 1829 to 2007" (PhD diss., University of Western Australia, 2012).

to land in the Great Victoria Desert were documented through art and stories—a melding of artistic practice, indigenous knowledge, and legal discourse.

In their essay Milroy and Revell make very modest claims for the potential of such collaborations. They discuss how these combinations of art and story might inform landscape design in Australia and North America. It seems to me that their examples show that art and story can do much more than to inform design. Just as Aldern stresses the value of stories as lessons, Milroy and Revell show the power of stories and pictures of place to demonstrate very real claims to land and to illustrate the violent rupture wrought by mapmakers, settlers, and cattle in very recent history. Moreover, Milroy and Revell themselves note—without fully exploring—the potential of art and stories to perform and to bolster indigenous political community. Paterson, Lake, and Burr all argue that interdisciplinarity is the key to furthering knowledge and collaboration between settlers, governments, and indigenous people. Perhaps we scholars need to acknowledge the importance of our data beyond the narrow confines of our disciplinary interests.

Jorgensen is also interested in art. He has explored the very different ways in which horses changed indigenous lives (and art) in North America and Australia. American Plains Indians took up horse riding with alacrity. After contact, they incorporated horses into migration, hunting, and war. The archive of Native American pictures gathered by Jorgensen focuses on the latter; pictures drawn in stolen ledgers in the period of violent encounter between US soldiers and Plains Indians depict heroic horses with indigenous riders fending off invaders. Later, the pictures of horses drawn by Native American prisoners for sale to the settler public emphasize intertribal, rather than indigenous-settler, wars; they depict tribal dysfunction, rather than heroism, for a market that both pitied and celebrated indigenous defeat. Early pictures of horses drawn by northwestern Aborigines portrayed their role in settler violence against Aborigines. The advent of Aboriginal employment in the pastoral industry, however, changed the depiction of horses. Aboriginal artists emphasized the relative freedom and safety that horses gave Aboriginal stockmen.

These stories are very different, but they suggest a very promising line of inquiry. Jorgensen's analysis would be much enriched by incorporating more artworks and complementary stories, not just about horses, but about the impact of all quadrupeds in these comparable Wests. As Alfred Crosby pointed out years ago, indigenous people often met quadrupeds before they met settlers. This does not mean that quadrupeds were not invaders—they formed the front line of European colonization. Sheep, cows, and feral horses could bring thirst and famine to arid Wests before settlers arrived to defend them with guns, enclose them in fences, or ride them in aggressive wars of conquest and displacement.⁶ A more contextualized and broad analysis could make a compelling case for incorporating art and story more fully into our understanding of colonization in these comparable Wests.

In contrast to most of the papers in the volume, William M. Taylor and Ethan Blue stretch the comfortable paradigm of indigenous-settler engagements in Australian and North American Wests by talking about the ships that connected ports around the Pacific—a zone where Easts met Wests in a much broader sense of the terms. Taylor reminds us of the importance of the clipper ship in the North American cultural imagination, particularly in land-based design. While Taylor points out that clipper ships are as important as covered wagons to Anglophone Wests, he leaves the story of their importance in linking Easts with Wests to Blue. Blue asks us to think of settler polities as self-appointed boundaries of “the West”—regardless of their geographical location in Asia or on the east

⁶ Alfred Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972), 64–121.

or west of the Pacific Ocean. Blue describes the importance of private shipping companies in the articulation of exclusive migration legislation designed to establish hard borders between “the East” (China and Japan) and “the West” (exemplified by Australia and the United States). Of course, ships and shipping companies make half-hearted border keepers. Even the distinction between land and sea was blurred by their endeavors; Blue starts with the fact that warehouses on land were defined as places at sea in order to better police importation and immigration. More to the point, shipping companies exist to facilitate international and intercolonial exchange. In the United States and Australia they functioned successively as the means of mass migration, as spurs to restrictive legislation, as private regulators of migration, and as active subverters of migration law.

Blue’s chapter effects its own subversion of the paradigm of “the West” as it has been imagined by the framers of this project. He reminds us that “the West” can operate as a strange and limiting concept. Most of the essays in this volume describe indigenous people and settlers who happen to be in the western half of two continents—this seems a curious limitation to someone like me who has written about settler-indigenous conflicts in borderlands close to the eastern shores of North America and Australia. As it is deployed by the project on comparative Wests, “the West” is more limited even than Frederick Jackson Turner’s conception that posited westward pioneering as a constitutive cultural and environmental project.⁷ In contrast, none of these essays analyze processes of settlement themselves—except, ironically, Blue’s essay about shipping companies, many of which linked east coasts and were little interested in dispossession, cultivation, or environmental transformation. While some papers delivered at the conference engaged with the march of quadrupeds into the Australian and American Wests, most of those gathered here deal instead with modern interactions between indigenous peoples and settler governance regimes. Even then, their interest is largely in indigenous, rather than bureaucratic, agency; settler bureaucracies in these essays are largely passive. The essays, then, are not about Turner’s Western movement but about its postcolonial aftermath—the rich and complex interaction between indigenous and settler governance long after “the West” was won. I wonder, then, if “settlement” or “settler colonialism” would not provide more flexible paradigms for this project than “Wests.” These terms can be overburdened by inflexible postcolonial theory, but they seem to provide more capacious containers for these essays.

If “the West” is a limiting paradigm, then the volume has not fulfilled the much broader promise of being “comparative.” Only three of the essays here compare the United States and Australia. Comparison is difficult: despite our transnational moment, very few scholars in the humanities and social sciences actually compare. We tend instead to talk of networks, convergences, and border crossings that allow us to follow an idea or a person across borders or to locate a single case study in a bigger analytical frame.⁸ It is particularly difficult to write across jurisdictions in chapter-length essays. Perhaps a project like this could do more by producing essays that engage in conversation with each other explicitly across borders. To this end, it might

⁷ Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” in *Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner: “The Significance of the Frontier in Western History” and Other Essays*, ed. John Mack Faragher (New York: Henry Holt, 1994), 31–60; John Mack Faragher, introduction to *Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner*, 1–10.

⁸ For reflections on the utility of networks and spatial convergences, see Alan Lester and Fae Dussart, “Trajectories of Protection: Protectorates of Aborigines in Early 19th Century Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand,” *New Zealand Geographer* 64 (2008): 205–20. For a recent reflection on writing transnational or comparative indigenous histories, see Karen Fox, “Globalising Indigeneity? Writing Indigenous Histories in a Transnational World,” *History Compass* 10, no. 6 (2012): 423–39.

need to imagine a new collaborative form of writing, allowing participants to produce multiple essays in dialogue, not only suggesting comparison but producing it.

No matter how it is framed, the final challenge for such a project is, of course, to look beyond Australia and the United States for “comparable Wests.” Most projects that are similar cluster Canada and New Zealand in the same analytical unit.⁹ It is time for us all to look further—particularly in our comparisons of indigenous dispossession, of environmental and demographic transformations, of debates regarding contemporary land use, and of engagements with indigenous land management practices. Casting our comparative net more broadly will not necessarily result in incoherence. If we put indigenous people at the center of study, or trace their strategies, successes, and failures in negotiation with modern settler states, then it matters not whether they are situated in California, Siberia, Norway, or South America.¹⁰ The very category “indigenous peoples” is the product of connected processes of settlement, many of which intensified at the same moment in history. Self-designated “First Nations” almost invariably have to articulate claims and engage settlers through the bureaucratic mechanisms of modern nation-states.¹¹ Broader comparisons would particularly benefit the essays that deal with contemporary relationships between land management bureaucracies and indigenous knowledge. Not only would broader comparisons produce a better understanding of settler states, modern bureaucratic processes, and their relationships with indigenous peoples and indigenous knowledge, but they might also produce better outcomes for indigenous peoples and for shared indigenous and settler environments globally.

These rich and varied essays, then, constitute a beginning. I hope this volume will be followed by a multiplicity of studies “comparing Wests.” A

⁹ See, e.g., Paul Haveman, ed., *Indigenous Peoples' Rights in Australia, Canada, and New Zealand* (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1999); James Belich, *Replenishing the Earth: The Settler Revolution and the Rise of the Anglo-World, 1783–1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Lisa Ford, *Settler Sovereignty: Jurisdiction and Indigenous People in America and Australia, 1788–1836* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

¹⁰ See, e.g., Benedict Kingsbury, “Indigenous Peoples’ as an International Legal Concept,” in *The Concept of Indigenous Peoples in Asia: A Resource Book*, ed. Christian Erni (Copenhagen: International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, 2008), 103–58.

¹¹ See Ford and Rowse, *Between Indigenous and Settler Governance*.