

## **Black Seed Dreaming: A Material Analysis of Bruce Pascoe’s “Dark Emu”**

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### **Abstract**

Indigenous Australians are outstanding for the way their ontologies and practices do not rely on a Western dichotomy that opposes material and spiritual realms. Their multiple totemic visions of the Dreaming space-time always state a material actualisation in landscape and the reproduction of all forms of life based on the pluriversal agency of animals, plants, minerals, rain, wind, fire and stars. Such cosmovisions resonate with current debates in the fields of critical posthumanism and new materialism through an Animist materialism. Indeed, Indigenous Australian’s complex social practices offer ways of thinking and being for the whole planet in this time of climate crisis. This is particularly crucial for the tropical world which is so strongly impacted by climate change. Indigenous Australian cosmovisions offer to tropical studies a way of thinking politically about climate and the materiality of life. Thus, Tropical Materialisms are enhanced by the vast body of Indigenous experiences and creative productions in and beyond the tropics. The material analysis of the Aboriginal author Bruce Pascoe’s *Dark Emu*, demonstrates how the book dared to challenge the Western written history, and to show a new relationality of being of humans with the more-than-human world.

**Keywords:** Indigenous cosmology, Indigenous Australians, Dreaming, Aboriginal Australia, Animist materialism, Tropical Materialisms

## Introduction to a Cosmvision

Indigenous Australians have helped to create the landscape. Through their continuing relationship with the land, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have developed a comprehensive knowledge of its resources and needs. Their land management practices are complex techniques that rest on a vast body of knowledge which is now being incorporated into biological research, land management, language, art and many other facets of contemporary Australian life.

— Wendy Mc Carthy AO, Chair, Australian Heritage Commission<sup>1</sup>

Indigenous Australians are outstanding for the way their ontologies and practices do not rely on the Western dichotomy which puts into opposition material and spiritual realms. Indeed, beyond the diversity of over 200 languages and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social organisations in varied environments across the vast land of Australia (desert, forest, coastal, tropical, island), their multiple totemic visions of the Dreaming space-time always state a material actualisation in landscape and the reproduction of all forms of life based on a pluriversal agency of animals, plants and minerals, rain, wind, fire and stars. Australian Indigenous philosophies and sciences, although specific to the various peoples of the country, also strongly resonate with the perspectives of the many Indigenous people of the tropics, including of the Australian tropics,<sup>2</sup> and of Indigenous people around the world. Indeed, the notion of the pluriverse, as developed by Arturo Escobar and colleagues (2019),<sup>3</sup> was accompanied by many examples from this vast world knowledge of different Indigenous peoples; nevertheless, the contemporary insight of such Animist materialist philosophies is still underestimated in the search for socio-ecological solutions to Earth's environmental crises.

Such cosmvisions resonate with current debates in the fields of critical posthumanism and new materialism. In the case under investigation in this essay Indigenous Australians' complex social practices based on their ritual and technical care of land furthermore offer a challenge and an important contribution to the tropical world and tropical studies. This is important, for while the impacts of climate change affect the whole planet, they are being felt most deleteriously across the tropical belt of the world (see Lundberg et al. 2021). Thus, tropical studies which include such Indigenous

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Deborah Bird Rose, (1996). *Nourishing Terrains*, p. v.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the material and spiritual ontology regarding tropical Aboriginal artefacts collected in museums see Aaberge et al. (2014).

<sup>3</sup> See Kothari, Salleh, Escobar, Demaria et Acosta (Eds) 2019.

viewpoints, are at the forefront as sentinels for the future of humanity and all ecosystems. The movement to decolonize Western sciences by recognizing Indigenous systems of knowledge and traditional technologies of land care simultaneously shake many preconceptions and misunderstandings about hunting and gathering economies. This trend goes beyond the debates of the ontological turn. Now is the time to think politically about climate and the materiality of life; material agencies which cannot be separated from spiritual considerations.

Animist materialism is valued particularly in the recent understanding of Indigenous Americans in North, Central and South American countries. It was given a theoretical dynamism with Viveiros de Castro's concept of perspectivism – which was inspired by Brazilian artists of the 1920s and applied by the Brazilian anthropologist to Indigenous forms of multinaturalism.<sup>4</sup> The struggles against ecocide and to promote a planetary recognition of the rights of nature or Mother Earth has seen incredible mobilisation of local collective imagination which succeeded in the legal recognition of personality of rivers, forests or mountains in the Americas, New Zealand, and Australia.<sup>5</sup> Mostly based on Indigenous systems of kinship with natural features, this legal model is now inspiring struggles to protect rivers as living entities in Europe and especially in France with the Loire, the Rhône, and the Tavignanu of Corsica.<sup>6</sup>

Not only do Indigenous studies offer a necessary re-interpretation and a decolonial critique of Western knowledge, but Indigenous writers and artists in film and other media also offer very powerful materialist arguments through their creative rereading and deciphering of colonial misinterpretations of Indigenous practices, and their in-depth analyses of simplified dichotomies and inappropriate evolutionism. Thus, tropical materialisms are enhanced by this vast body of Indigenous experiences and creative productions in and beyond the tropics, including those of the many Australian Indigenous peoples from different regions of the continent.

Aboriginal sociologist Moreton-Robinson examines the ontological status of the link between humans and the earth in relation to an Indigenous Australian sovereignty which cannot be understood within the legal regime of Western ontology with its separation of the body from the earth:

...this Indigenous ontology is not thereby erased. Indigenous subjectivity represents a dialectical unity between humans and the

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<sup>4</sup> See Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1998). *Cosmological Perspectivism in Amazonia and Elsewhere* <https://haubooks.org/cosmological-perspectivism-in-amazonia/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.stop-ecocide.fr/definition-legale>; see the Universal Declaration of Rights of Mother Earth drafted in Bolivia in 2010 and also the world campaign for a UN recognition of the rights of nature : <https://www.rightsofmotherearth.com>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.tavignanu.corsica/declaration-des-droits-du-fleuve-tavignanu>

earth. It is a state of embodiment that continues to unsettle white Australia. (Moreton-Robinson, 2020)

Indeed, the body cannot be reduced to a 'vehicle' of the mind, but rather should be understood and considered as endlessly transformed by the mind (or a number of minds), which she calls a "dialectical subjectivity" (Moreton-Robinson, 2020).

From my own 43 years' experience with Warlpiri people, and other Indigenous Australians, I define this as a process of subjectivation that is always in becoming (see Glowczewski, 2020, 2021a, 2022). The earth cannot be reduced to a mere support structure, to inert material, or a reservoir of lifeless mineral resources. The earth, on the contrary, is "embodied", incarnated. Both humans and non-humans belong to places and in this sense are living extensions of the earth. Indigenous peoples define themselves as made of the same "flesh", the same living matter as the earth and its many other inhabitants – animals or plants or elements. The Warlpiri call this common materiality Kuruwarri "image-forces". Anthropologists called this vision totemism. Unfortunately, many historical and current interpretations of totemism miss both the material dynamic and the poetic creativity of these spiritual kin connections with the land.

The French journal *Cahiers de Littérature Orale* (CLO) was created in 1976 with the objective of giving knowledge status to the multiple forms of orality of the many peoples that describe in stories, myths, and performances these understandings of materiality and connectivity to human and more-than-human kin, including to land.<sup>7</sup> And yet today still too few intellectuals agree to accredit such stories the status of knowledge. Copyright laws give more legitimacy to those who collect these oral stories in Western interpreted and written texts, than to those who tell them from their diverse traditions and through their varied literary performances, in song and dance and rituals. This material prevalence of written or audio-visual recordings creates prejudice and injustice for those who only have their word by which to testify for Indigenous rights. In the courts, published texts – even when anthropologists or historians were obviously biased in their interpretations – carry more weight than the testimonies of bearers of ancient knowledge who have not done 'scientific studies' under Western systems of knowledge production.

This also extends to the case of Aboriginal writer Bruce Pascoe. Pascoe is an autodidact who has dared to relate new relationships of being and land care through his re-readings of Western texts and encounters with Indigenous peoples. His book

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<sup>7</sup> See for instance the special issue around the work of the Papua New Guinea ethnomusicologist Stephen Feld in Bourlet et al. (2020) *Ec(h)opoetics*

*Dark Emu* has caused much debate since its first publication in 2014, and this debate is sparked by his audacity in challenging a (Western) written history that has legitimized itself in its speculation and theorization of a fixed model of notions of hunting and gathering and Australian nomadism – which are based in racialism and evolutionism. Some have rightly criticised Pascoe for his own evolutionist vision which gives the impression that the agriculturalist paradigm would be superior to hunting-gathering and nomadic economies. Lance Sullivan, a Yalarrnga lawman and *ngangkari*, who was trained in archaeology and anthropology at James Cook University in the mid 2000s, has expressed his disgust at the way the projection of a farming model on desert peoples is disrespectful of their tribal economical mode of existence: “We are proud tribal people not farmers. We belong to the country, we are proud of it, not like others who work the land to own it.... OUR CULTURE is good. PROTECT IT and DEFEND IT”, he wrote on his Facebook page in early 2020 [capitals in original]. He further insisted that the desert environment could not sustain a sedentary economy over a long period, or the stocking of wild food resources (Glowczewski 2021b, p.115-116).<sup>8</sup> The critique of the universalism of evolutionist European economical classifications is currently a hot issue addressed by many scholars. In this debate, Pascoe’s book remains a contribution to the many ways different cultures invented different forms of care of land which cannot be reduced to old classifications (see Graeber & Windrow, 2021). On the basis of archeological and anthropological evidence (Gammage, 2011; Jones in Bliege Bird et al. 2008 and many others), Pascoe clearly reveals for a wide audience that we have not appreciated the impact on our own knowledge production of certain colonial observations, viewpoints, and biases, which have blinded us to the evidence of the many modifications of the environment that were carried out through Aboriginal care of the land over millennia.

It has been recently noted that: “Undoubtedly the first merit of Australian writer Bruce Pascoe’s book is to have crystallized the tensions around these subjects, which have until now worked underground, both with the general public and specialists.” Furthermore: “the scientific implications... emerge only with difficulty...a fundamental epistemological reflection is in fact emerging, bringing into play, far beyond Australia, the heuristic scope of the major universalizing categories of anthropological thought.” (Hadad & De Lary Healy, 2022, p.103)

Pascoe’s book *Dark Emu* (2014/2018) invites us to value this creative power of the story (or re-storying) which proposes to see living landscapes transformed by mineral, vegetable, animal, geological and climatic agency in alliance with human practices.

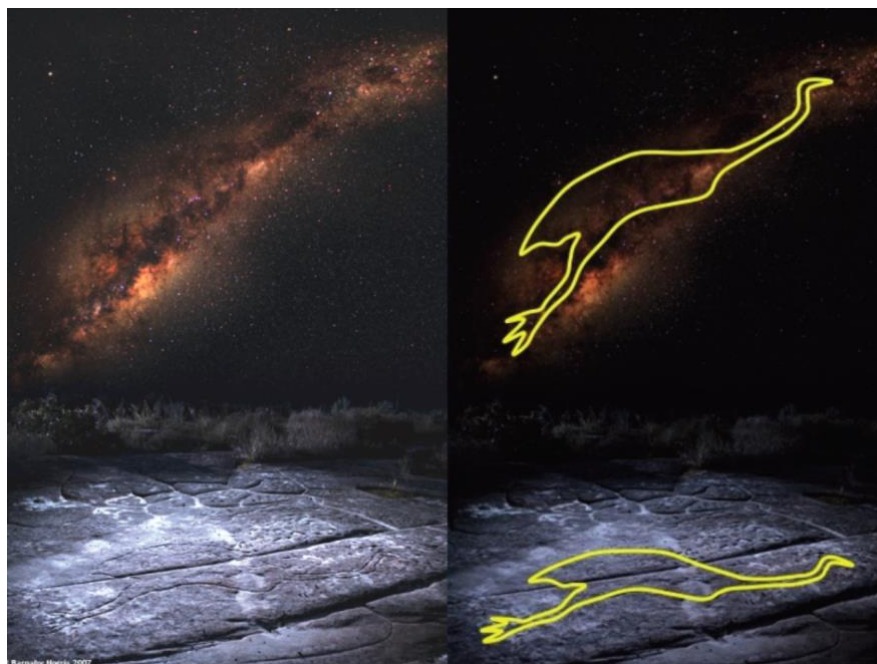
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<sup>8</sup> Sullivan was invited to speak by the French Musée des Confluences in Lyon in 2009, and the festival of traditional healers in Genac in 2017. See the filmed discussion with B. Glowczewski (<https://vimeo.com/233652286>), and the transcript in Glowczewski (2020). He has also been interviewed in three recent French television series on cultural custody.



His provocative account sheds new light on records that were underestimated or dismissed in the past, even though Aboriginal activists have repeatedly highlighted the stone constructions, including houses and fish traps, of southeastern Aboriginal villages which were dismantled by early settlers; and the soil fertility maintained by various practices accompanying the Aboriginal dispersal of seeds and the grazing of native animals. It is in this spirit of recognition of the power of emergence and enaction of improbable connections and of multiple entanglements that I recently wrote a foreword to the French translation of his book *Dark Emu (L'Émeu dans la nuit, 2022)*. Below is a further translation. This time the French foreword is translated into English. The aim in this re-translation is that an analytical summary of this important articulation of Aboriginal knowledge and material ontology is made further accessible to international audiences.

**Figure 1. *Emu in the dark sky***



The emu's head is in the Coalsack nebula while the body trails through the Milky Way. The same configuration is seen in a rock carving.<sup>9</sup> Image credit, Barnaby Norris and Ray Norris, 2007.

<sup>9</sup> See the excellent article by Robert Fuller, Michael Anderson, Ray Norris, and Michelle Trudgett (2014) regarding Indigenous and cultural astronomy which details the widespread knowledge of the emu in the sky amongst Indigenous Australians across the continent.

## The Land where Black Seeds Dream<sup>10</sup>

Bruce Pascoe opens his book *Dark Emu* with mention of the Emu's Creator Spirit, *Baiame*, who, after manifesting on earth, became a dark form in the Milky Way. You have to be in the Southern Hemisphere to see the shape of the long-necked, flightless Australian bird at the heart of our galaxy. Astronomers call this black patch Coalsack Nebula, whose density is such that it hides the stars thought to be born when its dark matter collapses.<sup>11</sup> As indicated by the photographic montage which precedes the French foreword, the ancestral Emu of the sky is also reflected on earth, notably in a rock engraving in Garingal National Park in New South Wales. Pascoe, whose ancestors come from southeastern Australia, points out that the fate of the emu and that of people and grain, are intertwined because "for the Aborigines the economy and the spirit are inseparable" (2014).

The book sold more than 100,000 copies, was followed up with an illustrated book for children, and a performance by the famous Bangarra Dance Theatre<sup>12</sup> – and it provoked many intense debates. In *Dark Emu*, Pascoe revisits and critiques the pre-colonial and early colonial history of Aboriginal Australia by breaking the foundational image of hunter-gatherers dependent on virgin nature in favour of an image of societies holding multiple techniques and knowledges which they used to enhance their environment. Indeed, various Australian groups used the movement of the stars as a calendar to mark the brooding periods of birds; some implemented a diversified economy with the construction of kilometers of fish traps and dams constructed out of stones dating back at least 8,000 years; in many areas across the Australian continent there were forms of proto-agriculture and soil fertilisation for the growth of seeds and yams. However, the British colonisation in 1788 and a few decades of intensive agriculture of non-native cereals and extensive breeding of imported cattle, were enough to destroy traditional fertility and food opulence. Pascoe mobilises various descriptions from explorers, and works of archaeologists, geographers and anthropologists, showing the extent that this research was ignored, or even knowingly made invisible, due to prejudices that still blind the history of Western science.

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<sup>10</sup> This title is an allusion to Werner Herzog's German-Australian film, *Wo die grünen Ameisen träumen/Where the Green Ants Dream* (1984). An Australian mining company is carrying out research in the heart of Australia to extract uranium. Research is peacefully interrupted by Aborigines who try to demonstrate that the site is the sacred land of the green ants' dreaming.

<sup>11</sup> See Botti & Hook, (2015). A Cosmic Bag filled with Black Coal

<https://www.eso.org/public/france/news/eso1539/>

<sup>12</sup> *Young Dark Emu* (2019); Bangarra dance performance <https://bangarra-knowledgeground.com.au/search?q=Dark+Emu>

Through his title *Dark Emu*, the author pays homage to what is fundamental for all Indigenous Australians. Indeed, beyond their hundreds of languages, all the groups saw in the shape of the black hole of the Milky Way that of an ancestral Emu. Pascoe does not comment on this mysterious title; rather, it is as if he is basing his argument on tacit knowledge common to early Australians. Any translation is difficult, but even more so when it comes to Indigenous concepts from traditions other than those of the dominant history of Western societies and languages. Transliteration requires imagination, including thinking beyond the (Western) separation between imaginary and real, human and non-human, terrestrial, underwater, and interstellar life. Indeed, many mysteries connect humans with the memories of the living, the earth and the cosmos which, according to Indigenous Australians, have been tied up since the dawn of time and can be revealed in the nocturnal experience.

In this regard, the recent French translation of the book, *Dark Emu*, preferred a non-literal translation of the Emu as "dark" or "obscure". The French title *L'Émeu dans la nuit* [Emu of the night] evokes the fact that the nocturnal darkness makes visible the black silhouette of the ancestral Emu, just as the night refers to sleep and dreams. This ancestral spirit is dark; "black", like the dark skin evoked by this term in English of those who have lived on the continent for at least 60,000 years and have experienced unprecedented transformations of its landscapes. For instance, 7,000 years ago parts of Australia's vast coastlines were submerged by floods and some 4,000 islands were cut off from the old continent, a geological observation confirmed by hundreds of myths of the Aboriginal peoples who were custodians of coastal areas.

The name *Baiame*, which Pascoe associates with the ancestral Emu in the sky, is that of the primordial being of the southeastern Aboriginal groups. *Baiame*'s importance made the first anthropologists wonder if the Aboriginal people of this region were monotheists or would have, in front of the first missionaries, privileged this celestial *Baiame* Spirit compared to other spirits of animal or plant ancestors. Among the Kamilaroi and Euahlayi, the Emu is called *Daramulun*, son of *Baiame* (Fuller et al., 2014).<sup>13</sup> *Daramulun* is also the name of the Emu spirit pursued by the hunter *Baiame* (associated with the constellation of Orion), whose wife was an Emu-woman according to the Wiradjuri of the southeast (Leaman & Hamacher, 2019). For the Djugun and Yawuru of the northwest coast, the ancestral Emu present in the nocturnal void of our galaxy is called *Garnaninja*, and its presence is multiplied on earth in emu footprints in the form of arrows one meter in diameter imprinted on the still soft ground before their petrification. It was in pre-human times that feathered dinosaurs traversed part of the continent before its ancient shores were flooded by the sea as the northern glaciers

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<sup>13</sup> This online article on the Kamilaroi page <http://www.aboriginalastronomy.com.au/content/community/kamilaroi/> shows the outline of the Emu's shape in the sky and on the rock carving reproduced in *Dark Emu*.



melted. In tropical Broome, a small pearl port built in the 19th century on the shores of the Indian Ocean, specialists have identified around twenty different species of dinosaurs in the rocks which are usually submerged, but which are uncovered at each annual low tide.

These sacred traces of the Giant Emu under the ocean are recognized by Aboriginal desert groups, including the Warlpiri with whom I have worked since 1979 and who spot other traces of the Emu's ancestral Dreaming journey on their land, saying that this dream itinerary has crossed the continent from one side to the other. This is also the case for many other routes that they call *Jukurpa*, "Dreams", in the Warlpiri language, and that anthropologists have previously called totemic routes (Glowczewski, 2016). Nakakut Barbara Nakamarra Gibson, a Warlpiri ritual Law woman, was overwhelmed to sense the Emu Dream on the cliff at Gantheaume Point, just outside Broome, over a 1,000 kms from her lands in the Tanami Desert. Similarly, the Warlpiri Law man Wanta Steve Jampijinpa Patrick recounts that the Emu of this northwest coast is the same as that of the rock painting in Garingal National Park which he visited in the southeast, 3,450 kms from his country. Among the Warlpiri, the Giant Emu is celebrated in the *Jardiwanpa* fire ceremony whose custodianship Wanta shares with his fathers, aunts, brothers and sisters. They are responsible for implementing the fire ceremony in order to settle conflicts between humans of different clans and local groups.<sup>14</sup>

According to Ngarrinyin lawman David Mowarljarlai (2001), one of the ancestral Emus, while passing his people's country in the Kimberley plateaus of the northwest, took part in a great feast bringing together different peoples named after all kinds of birds. Impatient and greedy, he did not wait his turn to be fed and fled with a plum cake. It was this transgression that established the gathering as one of the first settlements of justice in a collective tribunal – whose sacred stones can still be seen erected in a circle (Glowczewski, 2004). Here the rules of the system of exchange between various groups of different languages of the Kimberley and the central desert were defined. This system is an intertribal network called the *Wunan*, linking chains of men and women over hundreds of kilometers to allow the circulation and exchange of food, tobacco and common or ritual objects, but also songs and rites. *Wunan* is also associated with two Nightjars, and with winds and rains – seasonal phenomena themselves linked to the Milky Way.

It is in this sense that Pascoe, in the opening of his book *Dark Emu*, affirms the inseparability of the fate of the celestial Emu-being, that of people, and of grains. The

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<sup>14</sup> Wanta Steve Jampijinpa Patrick testimonial in the film *Lajamanu*. Director Glowczewski (2018) <https://vimeo.com/290889175>

Aboriginal exchange economy, which transverses the entire continent, connects everything that lives and grows into a network of places in a series of spiritual links. Anthropology has called these associations "totems", while the numerous Aboriginal languages of the desert say that they are "Dreamings" in the sense of a space-time multiplied in mythical itineraries – the Dreamings, whose ancestral travelers in the form of animals, plants, people, rain, fire, or stars, have shaped the terrestrial landscape. All men and women inherit the custodianship of certain sacred places and must ritually take care of them by singing the mythical epics, dancing their journeys, and painting on their bodies and sacred objects the mapped narrative of the links between the totemic sites. They receive in dream messages from ancestral and eternal travelers Dreams (with a capital letter) which bear the totemic names of animals, plants or other forms considered as living images by the Aborigines: Emu, Yam, Kangaroo, Rain, etc. These totemic spirits reveal to dreamers new motifs to paint, sing and dance in order to celebrate the source – a rock, sacred sites, or stars.

The *Wunan* exchange network was mobilized to resist colonial violence, the deportation of rebels who defended their land against invading farmers, and the forcible abduction of mixed-race children born of rape or love affairs. *Wunan* was still very active in the early 1980s to update alliances of solidarity in the face of new problems, such as territorial claims for the restitution of despoiled ancestral lands, and against the mining impact which at the time mobilized many Aboriginal groups from the northwest and the desert. These links of the network of exchanges and alliances – where fabrics and then money were added to the ancestral hair cords that acted as currency – have been reinvested since the beginning of the 21st century to confront many new threats, such as the salinisation of underground aquifers, land pollution, and the disappearance of native animal and plant species. This environmental destruction follows a long history beginning with colonisation: Indigenous-cultivated meadows, or vegetable gardens filled with yams, were destroyed with the importation of European crops and grazing livestock and thus disappeared. Pascoe denounces this phenomenon of destruction of the traditional economy with conviction, with persuasive arguments, and through citing the works of specialists that he makes accessible to a general public.

"Black Seeds: Agriculture or Accident" was the original subtitle of *Dark Emu* when it was first published in 2014. It drew upon the binary distinction between hunter-gatherers and farmers. The exclusivity of such categories is today questioned, including by prehistorians. The Aboriginal people made bread before colonisation and continue to do so in the form of flatbread cooked on the embers of a fire covered with hot earth. Wheat flour imported by the colonists replaced the hundreds of native seeds and cereals ground on a stone mortar then mixed with water to form a highly prized

liquid paste given to children "like ice cream" (say Warlpiri people) or cooked to make essential flatbread for exchanges during ritual gatherings between groups from different regions (Glowczewski, 2016). The technique of grinding these seeds to make flour dates back at least 30,000 years, thus preceding the appearance of agriculture in Europe.

How did these seeds reproduce in the past? Accidentally carried by the wind, or helped by humans through a form of proto-agriculture? It is this last hypothesis that Bruce Pascoe proposes based on numerous archaeological and anthropological sources. In the 1930s Norman Tindale and David Kimber respectively mapped, and later in the 1950s analysed, the storage and trade of seeds. He notes that as early as 1905, Katherine Langloh Parker described how among the Yuwaaliyaay the cultivation of barley was undertaken by the cutting and burning of stalks to cause the grains to detach from the stem. Intensive human activity during the wild growth of certain seasonal plants such as bush tomatoes (*Solanum*), *ngayaki* in Warlpiri, made it possible to cultivate regrowth the following season by ejecting the seeds at the place of collection. In 1984, I was able to participate in a harvest near the Granites mine site in the Tanami Desert of the Northern Territory of Australia and see thirty women fill a truck with cans of bush tomatoes in two days; in the evening we split the fruits in half using a small wooden spoon reserved for this purpose to remove the poisonous seeds which fell to the ground while the fruits were threaded on sticks to be dried like dates. Since the women no longer prepare these skewers on site, the seeds no longer sow in the bush and there are very few tomatoes growing there (Glowczewski 2021b).

In the Tanami desert, I also followed the women in search of acacia grass seeds that the ants pick up and pile in small, well-spaced heaps, corresponding to the amount needed to make one flatbread: all the huntresses had to do was track the movement of ants to find hundreds of future breads scattered in the bush. Here there is a link between humans and animals that offers an original form of co-production. In this sense, as underlined by the Australian geographer Bill Gammage, quoted by Pascoe, the Aborigines therefore practiced agriculture – without being farmers.

In 1979, during Warlpiri rituals restricted to women, I filmed the custodians of the *ngurlu* Acacia Seed Dreaming who, their chests painted with the journey of these seeds, danced the role of their ancestral heroines while hopping in single file. They bent down several times to scoop up sand with their ritual flat boards, each allowing the sand to fall to the ground while continuing to hop. This created a very beautiful image which, in the light of the blazing sun, traced in the sky what looked like a rain of seeds falling from each wooden slab (Glowczewski, 2018).<sup>15</sup> At the time of filming, I

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<sup>15</sup> View the film *Lajamanu* here <https://vimeo.com/290889175>

found it dizzying that this society, which is not supposed to practice sowing of seeds, reproduced in a sacred dance the gesture of sowing attributed to ancestral heroines. The women then told me that their ancestors of the Seed Dreaming were “like the wind!” (which carries seeds to the soil). This is an example of interweaving with the elements. Through this oral and performative tradition of story and dance, nothing prevents us from contemplating that, in certain regions, it is thanks to prehistoric sowing that the desert has been enriched with all these seeds. Moreover, these regions were not desert scapes at the time of the ancestors when an inland sea covered the heart of the continent and verdant active volcanoes populated the land here and there.

An account in Pascoe's book evokes the surprise of a historian who was told by two elders that various varieties of medicinal plants from their country of the Bunya Mountains had been introduced by ancient Aboriginal visitors (Kerkove, 2017). Pascoe devotes a chapter to a discussion of recent experiments in sowing and cultivating native seeds already highly sought after by gourmet restaurants. Alas, the fires of late 2019-early 2020 ravaged these new fields. However, this precisely indicates that it is all the more urgent to take into account, as another chapter of the book explains, the gentle techniques tested over millennia by Aboriginal peoples, particularly the continued practice of small maintenance fires that prevent the devastating megafires of the dry season. As early as 1969 archaeologist Rhys Jones provocatively called this well-known practice “fire-stick farming” (Bliege Bird et al. 2008).

In January 2020, a French firefighter captain returning from an aid mission to combat the Australian bushfires, was questioned by an Arte TV channel show on the relevance of the Indigenous techniques. He paid tribute to his grandfather who had told him about this practice of “small fires” carried out in the South of France. I was able to observe in the central desert and the Kimberley region of Australia the ingenuity of the technique of these burning sticks to light small fires aimed at preventing the uncontrolled burning of spinifex. These tall “porcupine grasses” are covered with a highly prized resin with which to finish tools, but this also makes them highly flammable. The technique of small fires is also regularly used, by both women and men, to “clean the soil” in small areas to encourage the growth of certain plants smothered by others (Astier, 2020). Were Aboriginal people farmers in this sense? Or did they invent another way of caring for the land that has slowed climate-induced desertification for centuries?

Pascoe shows with both vehemence and humour how so much evidence of the millennial care and management of Australian soils has been ignored in the academic world, or even dismissed because it does not correspond to the stereotypes of

Aboriginal people who are identified with survivors of prehistory. He reports that many of the objects collected by the colonists remain classified in museums as "use unknown". In particular he notes large, very heavy wooden picks, which, as early as 1894, were identified by a palaeontologist as hoes. Jonathan Jones, a young archaeologist and artist of Wiradjuri descent, a people of the three rivers (Wambool, Kalari, Murumbidjeri), has studied dozens of them: he concludes that because of their size, their weight, the type of the stone cutting edge, and the marks which indicated the fixing of a handle, these picks must have been used between the legs like a pickaxe or a plough to work the ground.

These objects were found in regions of the southeast crossed by various rivers whose lands were regularly watered by the rains, and sometimes irrigated with diverted streams. Aboriginal activists exhibited photos in France in the 1980s showing that early observers saw stone villages in these regions with hundreds of houses and around 40 people occupying large buildings (O'Neil, 1982; Foley, 1989). The buildings and hoes indicate settlement and agriculture. However, the buildings were destroyed by the first settlers in order to recover the stones for their own construction purposes. Pascoe also relates the surprise of the explorer George Grey, who, when passing through the northwest in the middle of the 19th century, saw huts "very nicely plastered over the outside with clay, and clods of turf" (Grey cited in Pascoe, 2018, p. 30).

In a discussion of other Indigenous practices, various sources quoted by Pascoe confirm the existence of large hunts to drive kangaroos towards nets or trap them in hedges set up between clearings. Recalling that kangaroos have a very low impact on soil erosion and yield a low-fat meat, Pascoe is surprised that the press showed only contempt when in 2008 the Rudd Labor government of Australia, which sought to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases, offered to replace the breeding of cattle by that of kangaroos. In a similar vein, I have reported that at that time Australian scientists were working with a CNRS program to genetically modify the digestive system of cattle so that they did not emit carbon-producing methane (Glowczewski, 2021b). Although it can be problematic to privatize the production of free-breeding animals such as kangaroos and emus, why continue to eliminate them *en masse* under the pretext that they compete with livestock? This inability to think natively is reminiscent of the famous 1932 'Emu War', lost by First World War veterans who were sent to eradicate a migration of 60,000 emus that threatened grain crops in Western Australia.<sup>16</sup> Rather than this dichotomous war-like thinking, shouldn't we rather invent new ways of living and eating these native animals while also respecting their natural

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<sup>16</sup> Ornithologist D.L. Serventy remarked that the emus had resisted for a month and finally won by dispersing in small commandos as in a guerrilla war: [https://www.francetvinfo.fr/culture/patrimoine/histoire/video-la-guerre-des-emeus-quand-des-soldats-armes-font-la-guerre-a-des-animaux-invincibles\\_3623385.html](https://www.francetvinfo.fr/culture/patrimoine/histoire/video-la-guerre-des-emeus-quand-des-soldats-armes-font-la-guerre-a-des-animaux-invincibles_3623385.html). The case is analyzed by Cook & Jovanovic, (2019).



reproduction which is adapted to the fragile soils? For Pascoe, this is an ecological challenge.

Some commentators have criticised the way in which the land use and settlement practices seen in the southeast are extended by Pascoe to the archaeology of desert regions of the continent where the interpretation is not as convincing. However, conversely, it can be argued that Pascoe's work has not been able to mobilise all the evidence that supports this direction of thought, particularly in relation to feminine practices and the knowledge that affects the territories where there are cave paintings dating from tens of thousands of years in the Kimberley and elsewhere.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, Aboriginal people have criticised his work for a certain evolutionary posture that gives more credit to agriculture than to hunting and gathering as a choice for a non-accumulative and non-sedentary relationship to the land, of which they are very proud (Glowczewski 2021b). Still others have accused him of having been published by an Aboriginal publisher, and receiving a prize reserved for Aboriginal authors when he is not Aboriginal, or Aboriginal enough. On this last criticism, such debates regarding the authenticity and status of the descendants of Aboriginal people of mixed heritage have for years been tearing Australians apart and are based in a deeper problem regarding recognition and justice for Indigenous people in a country still subject to structural racism, despite being denounced by the United Nations, and despite numerous Australian government initiatives to alleviate racism.

Since the 1970s, millions of dollars have been spent on specific programs to try to reduce social injustices and to compensate for the massacres, the pillages, and the many other traumas inherited from the past. But the benefits enjoyed by some Aboriginal people mask the fact that many of their ancestors contributed to the wealth of the country by working without pay and that most mixed-race people suffered terrible conditions, including being forcibly taken from their parents. Conflicts related to recognition are political and are the cause of very dangerous positions. One case in point is that of a conservative Aboriginal businesswomen, who, in the midst of the 2020 fire crisis, called for DNA tests to ratify the self-declaration of Indigenous ancestry and a federal investigation against Pascoe.<sup>18</sup> Marcia Langton, an Aboriginal anthropologist and geographer, holder of the first Chair of Indigenous Australian Studies at the University of Melbourne, and famous for her activism and a pioneering book on controlled bushfires,<sup>19</sup> came to the defence of Pascoe. Speaking on NITV (National Indigenous Television) on January 17, 2020, she successfully prevented the

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<sup>17</sup> See for example Gwion et al., (2000); also presented in an exhibition at the Natural History Museum, 1996 and at the Quinson Museum of Prehistory, 2010.

<sup>18</sup> See the plea defending Pascoe against this attack by Jeff Sparrow (2020).

<sup>19</sup> See Langton's (1998) *Burning Questions*.

investigative and testing proposals, which recall the atmosphere of Australia's former colonial apartheid regime.<sup>20</sup>

The most convincing proof of Australian Indigeneity for the majority of Aboriginal people is that of recognition by their respective communities. According to this perspective, Pascoe has received the support of many Indigenous men and women, whether or not they are descended, like him, from the mainland Bunurong and Yuin peoples or Tasmanian Aboriginal people. Readers note on social networks that Pascoe's arguments allow them to revalue their Aboriginal heritage. According to various testimonies, *Dark Emu* completely changed the perception that non-Indigenous Australians had of their country and its first inhabitants. Historian Tom Griffiths (2019) has also paid tribute to Pascoe's other books, his storytelling skills, and his charisma, which make his audience reflect on this painful history of the Australian nation. He has also received academic recognition. In 2020, he was appointed Enterprise Professor in Indigenous Agriculture at the University of Melbourne, Faculty of Veterinary and Agricultural Studies.<sup>21</sup>

The propositions of Bruce Pascoe as writer, poet, performer, and activist, are essential on both the academic and public level, especially when confronted with the urgency that is incumbent upon us to revalue practices of care for the earth and its human and more-than-human inhabitants – the entirety of its material being. The challenge is also political because it is, as Pascoe proposes, a question of implementing an alternative economy, both inspired by old legacies and new experiments. This particularly concerns Australia, which is one of the world's areas on red alert for drought, the risk of fires, the devastating development of mines which is accelerating the depletion of scarce underground aquifers, and the fragility of its northern tropical regions and rainforests. This book, like other lessons – written, oral and performed – given by Indigenous peoples across the tropics and around the world, offers avenues of hope for reinventing a world in need of repair.

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<sup>20</sup> Langton's intervention was filmed and can be viewed via the article "The targeting of Bruce Pascoe marks a new frontier in Australia's history wars": <https://www.adelaidereview.com.au/latest/2020/01/24/bruce-pascoe-dark-emu-history-wars/> by Walter Marsh (2020). For an excellent French commentary of the debates around Pascoe's book, see Haddad & De Lary Healy, (2022).

<sup>21</sup> <https://fvas.unimelb.edu.au/news/bruce-pascoe-appointed-enterprise-professor-in-indigenous-agriculture>

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