



Weedy Life: Coloniality, Decoloniality, and Tropicality

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Abstract

Respect for any form of life entails nurturing all the potentialities proper to it, including those that might be unproductive from the human point of view. Are there lessons to be learnt about decolonisation of the tropics from a focus on 'weeds'? The contributors to this photo-essay collectively consider here the lessons that can be learnt about the relationship between colonisation and decolonisation through a visual focus on life forms that have been defined as weeds and, consequently, subject to a contradictory politics of care, removal, and control – of germinating, blooming, and cutting. The essay demonstrates the continuing colonial tensions between aesthetic and practical evaluations of many plants and other lifeforms regarded as 'invasive' or 'out of place'. It suggests a decolonial overcoming of oppositions. By celebrating alliances of endemics and 'weeds' regeneratively living together in patterns of complex diversity, we seek to transcend policies of differentiation, exclusion and even eradication rooted in colonial ontology.

Keywords: decoloniality, coloniality, weeds, more-than-human-lives, tropicality

Introduction: Weedy Beginnings

Interest in multispecies ethnography has been on the rise in anthropology in recent years, building on a long history in the discipline of exploring how humans construct their social worlds in terms of more-than-human things – plants, animals, spirits, and others. Yet, some scholars who were originally drawn to anthropology because of its very focus on the human being, *anthropos*, have been critical of research in the discipline that appears to be about everything and anything *but* the human, particularly research that effaces human political and economic relations, and issues of social inequality, justice, and injustice (Jackson, 2015; Ahuja, 2009; Lowrey, 2022). However, as Chao (2022), among others, has so well demonstrated, multispecies anthropology can no longer be accused of simply celebrating “the fact of human/nonhuman mingling” (Chao et. al., 2022, p.1). Instead, what a multispecies approach allows us to do is to reflect even more closely on social justice and injustice amidst the support we might give or deny to all species of being (Chao et al., 2022).

In attending to such issues, at the annual Australian Anthropological Society (AAS) conference in November 2022, participants in a session entitled “Weedy Life Support” were invited to reflect on vegetal and other things classified as ‘weeds’ in relation to concepts such as colonisation, decolonisation, cultivation, enslavement, eradication, and parasitism. The conference session considered questions such as: Are there lessons about coloniality and decoloniality to be learnt from a focus on weedy lifeforms? How might coloniality be confronted through textual and visual representations of various multispecies entanglements and assemblages? Or are such representations largely metaphorical eulogies for multispecies relations about to pass away or be diminished? If “so many of us are Anthropocene weeds”, as Tsing (2017, p. 17) writes, then is it possible for our own weediness to allow for “landscapes of more-than-human livability”? This photo-essay is an outcome of the discussion that began at the AAS in which participant stories of the multispecies relations in which they were themselves immersed revealed tensions in the complex antagonistic relations between coloniality and decoloniality. As this essay developed, it became clear that conceptualisations of ‘weeds’ from the colonial period and continuing into postcolonial eras share several of the valuations that also define tropicality (Lundberg et al. 2022, p. 3) – as wild and fecund, threatening and alluring, and needing to be tamed by policies of control and eradication. Several of our contributors highlight the positive affordances of vibrant tropicality for diverse relations between endemic plants and ‘weeds’, humans, bush spirits and other more-than-human life forms. Contributors consider some lessons to be learnt about the relationship between colonisation and decolonisation through our visual focus on life forms, highlighting how these processes

are subject to a contradictory politics of care, removal, control – or what we term germinating, blooming, and cutting.

As a plant that is considered invasive or colonising, the concept of ‘weed’ carries with it many negative connotations. The contributions by Rosita Henry, Helen Ramoutsaki and Debbi Long in the first section of this essay – Germinating – all focus on the re-evaluation of weeds as good for germinating understandings about the entanglements of coloniality and decoloniality. Henry draws on three images to show how weedy multispecies alliances might provide a way to rethink decoloniality in a way that transcends categorical and relational oppositions. Ramoutsaki poetically re-evaluates a weed that is widely considered an alien in Australian tropical gardens. Some weeds are defined as plants in the wrong place – colonisers of places from which they need to be ‘weeded out’, perhaps due to their tendency to become invasive (Maron et al., 2013). Their very tropical fecundity is seen as a problem because it enables them to dominate, to take over and force out others – and so we humans often respond by trying, in turn, to ‘weed them out’. Yet, in the process of ‘weeding’ we might also grow to value the tenacious beauty and joyful exuberance of such ‘matter out of place’ (Argüelles & March, 2021; Douglas, 1966). Such is the case with Ramoutsaki. Her contribution here in photo and text also serves as an exegesis of the performative piece *MC Nannarchy’s Cinderella Weed Rap*, which she created especially for the AAS session (see <https://vimeo.com/821116266>) and to which she refers in this essay. Debbi Long rounds off this section with a photographic and textual account of the value of weeds in permaculture, conveying the principle that, rather than being seen as invaders needing to be removed, such plants are incorporated into the ecosystem in the service of regeneration.

The second section of the essay – Blooming – concerns different species that tend to over-bloom, in the sense of their capacity to thrive and spread, both in and out of place. Here the short reflections by Greg Acciaioli, Simon Foale and Celmara Pocock look to plants, fish, and landscapes as affects and effects of colonial tastes. Acciaioli focuses on contemporary issues concerning the water hyacinth in Indonesia, which was originally spread by colonial powers for its aesthetic value, while Foale critically reflects on the scientific under-recognition of fish commonly labelled ‘weeds of the sea’ – sardines, scads and small mackerels – that contribute to food security in the global tropics, in favour of the aesthetic value of colourful coral reef fish. The problem of the dominance of colonial aesthetic criteria also informs Pocock’s contribution on the historical replacement of native casuarina trees by coconut palms as part of tourist developments on islands of the Great Barrier Reef, transforming not only the landscape but also the soundscape. Paying closer attention to the sensory dimensions of human relations with the more-than-human, Pocock argues, may offer a pathway to decolonise tropical living.

In the third section of the photo-essay – Cutting – Kristin McBain-Rigg, and Michael Wood reflect on how tropicality, coloniality and decoloniality are brought into relation by focusing on human and more-than-human responses to eradication or removal; responses to the threat of being cut down or cut out. McBain-Rigg focuses on how her own planting of the cuttings from a vine enables both her and the vine to cut across fences, and boundaries built to separate neighbours, and to exile both the living and the dead from one another. Finally, Wood outlines how some bush spirits in Papua New Guinea (PNG) combine with industrial logging to produce trees that are protected, yet dangerously out of place. He argues these trees are involved in both colonial and anti-colonial social relations.

Germinating: The Re-Evaluated

Tropical Alliances: Persons, Plants, and Place

by Rosita Henry

Perhaps because I am a descendant of once frowned upon *mésalliances* between racial categories, I treasure the exuberant and unruly assemblage of plants in my garden lawn (Figure 1). Vegetal life provides a rich conceptual vocabulary for human reflective engagement with the world – such reflection itself being an expression of multispecies relationality.

Figure 1. *My tropical lawn of vegetal alliances in Cairns, Australia*



Photo by Rosita Henry, 2022.

Plant metaphors have proved to be particularly fertile in social theory. For example, plant life lies at the heart of the social theory (or theories) of peoples of the Highlands of PNG. Plants have also provided much food for thought among a global community of other scholars across the humanities and social sciences, as evidenced by Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) widely propagated philosophical concept of the rhizome (Strathern, M., 2017).

A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo. The tree is filiation, but the rhizome is alliance, uniquely alliance. (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988, p. 25)

Placing Western philosophical ideas within the same frame as the onto-epistemologies of Papua New Guinean Highlanders raises the spectre of coloniality in our own writing. To be decolonial, must we totally eradicate colonial concepts and their exclusionary dualisms – rhizome-tree, alliance-filiation, western-non-western, from our texts and images? My tropical lawn is the subversion of a well-manicured lawn that requires a vigilant ‘weeding out’ of difference for the sake of routinely reproduced sameness. Surface uniformity is required to emerge and be maintained through colonial order and control. Instead, my tropical lawn project embraces the idea that colonial ordering is inseparably intertwined with the decolonial. The decolonial works towards tempering coloniality through the creation of rhizomic alliances across all kinds of differences and dualisms engendered by various onto-epistemologies.

Figure 2. Seeds of alliance, Western Highlands, PNG



Photo by Rosita Henry, 2018.

Alliances of difference across dualistic and oppositional identifications of people, plants, and place are created in many cultural contexts through the gift exchange of seeds, seedlings, and cuttings. The photo above (Figure 2) shows a display of seeds ready for planting in freshly prepared ground at Kunguma Village in the Western Highlands of Papua New Guinea. The Penambi Wia people who made the display of seeds often present themselves as planted cuttings, as do other Western Highlanders (Henry & Wood, 2022). Andrew Strathern (1977, pp. 504–506) notes that in Melpa *tok ples* (language) persons from the same segmentary group, or lineage, refer to themselves as *mbo tenda* ‘one shoot’ or ‘one stock’. *Mbo* refers to a plant ‘shoot’ and to something ‘planted’ by humans. Knowledge too is understood to be propagated by implanting it in people. *Mbo rondont* is the term for teaching (literally meaning to ‘implant a cutting’, *mbo*). The seeds shown in the photo were displayed as part of a lesson given by Penambi Wia gardeners on their propagating practices to a group of Australian students from James Cook University attending an ethnographic field school. The teachers explained that gardeners often gift seeds and cuttings to each other and that such a gift creates the obligation of a return – often part of the yield of the plants grown from that seed or cutting. In the Western Highlands, segmentary groups (cuttings) seek alliances with other such groups. For Penambi Wia gardeners, productive relationships are not created within sameness but are carefully cultivated across difference through the exchange, germination and propagation of plants.

Exchanges of seeds and cuttings have also been vital among my own immigrant family in our attempts to put down roots in the tropics of Australia. Among these is a plant that, like my Sri Lankan Burgher forebears, has a long colonial history – the chilli.

Figure 3. Granny’s Sri Lankan chilli bush



*In my sister’s garden, with Australian gum trees in the background, Clohesy River, North Queensland.
Photo by Ranjini Rusch, 2023.*

The variety of chilli we favour growing is likely to have been introduced from Brazil to Sri Lanka during the time of Portuguese colonial power on the island (1505 to 1658) (Katz, 2019, p. 30). My eight siblings and I all grow the chilli in our gardens. We call it 'granny's chilli', but also sometimes by its Sinhala name, *nai miris* (cobra chilli). The plants we grow (Figure 3) come from generations of seeds produced from one that our maternal grandmother brought from Sri Lanka (secreted in her shoe, according to family legend) to satisfy her yearning for the taste of home in a foreign land.

My forebears were both colonialists *and* decolonialists. My mother and her parents were classified as 'white' enough during the era of the White Australia policy¹ to be accepted as immigrants. Yet, their non-white whiteness challenged colonial subject positions and racial classifications that made Australia white, and their attempts to put down roots subverted distinctions between endemic plants and potentially dangerous exotics prohibited from entering Australia. They worked with their bodies and seeds to subvert and weaken such distinctions by creating collaborations across dualistic and oppositional identifications of people, plants, and places.

Cinderella Weed at Home in the Wet Tropics

by Helen Ramoutsaki

At the core of MC Nannarchy's *Cinderella Weed Rap* (Ramoutsaki, 2022 <https://vimeo.com/821116266>) are questions regarding which entities and practices fit and are valued in the context of the Wet Tropics of Northern Australia, with a focus on my backyard on Kuku Yalanji Kubirriwarra bubu (Indigenous land). Two imported plants are contrasted: the North European daffodil with flashy golden flowers and the tropical Cinderella Weed, *Synedrella nodiflora* (L.) Gaertn. In the Wet Tropics, the genus name '*Synedrella*' is not only linked to the common name 'Cinderella Weed' as a quasi-homophone: there are similarities between the status of the plant and the protagonist of popular tales. Possibly originating in China or Egypt, there are now thousands of versions of the Cinderella rags to riches narrative. Cinderella tales concern a downtrodden young woman who "must prove that she is the rightful successor in a house in which she has been deprived of her rights"; yet, to her advantage, "she has also been driven by her own indomitable spirit and desire to claim her rightful place in the world" (Zipes, 2016, pp. 358–359). There comes a time when both Cinderella and *Synedrella* call to be acknowledged.

¹ The 'White Australia Policy' is the unofficial name used to describe Australian immigration policy between 1901 and 1958. It was based on the *Immigration Restriction Act* 1901, which aimed to keep Australia British by limiting non-white (particularly Asian) immigration to Australia.

Figure 4: *Synedrella nodiflora*, the Cinderella Weed



Photo by Helen Ramoutsaki, 2022.

Synedrella nodiflora's entrance into Australia's tropical ecosystem came without colonial poetic, aesthetic or commercial fanfare. The species is quietly logged in a botanical database as first identified on cleared land in Cairns in 1914 (Australian Virtual Herbarium, 2023). Not fitting into the settler coloniality of a Eurocentric aesthetic and with little recognition in Australia for human usefulness, *Synedrella nodiflora*'s status is limited to weediness. In considering who fits or has a rightful place in my backyard, allowing that such a species has value is an act of decoloniality, delinking value from imposed hierarchies and rethinking whether value is an attribute that applies to one species in isolation.

In the broad view of my backyard, the *who* that fits are *all* in the more-than-human world. Creatively, the prolific biodiverse perspectives in the tropics invite a poetic profusion, a tumble of words with layers of storeys/stories and multiplications of meanings. In the lushness of tropical flora, valuing begins with noticing, picking out a plant from others that crowd around it. MC Nannarchy's rap came from my eventual awareness of *Synedrella nodiflora*, who has been introduced from the tropical Americas and is naturalised in areas of Australia, including the Wet Tropics (CSIRO, 2020). MC Nannarchy refers to the value *Synedrella* has to humans: as food, medicine and animal feed (CABI, 2022).

Figure 5: *Synedrella nodiflora* gives value to underappreciated weedy others



Others in the multispecies gardening collective include fattening grasshoppers which can cast a shadow over shared foodplants, yet *Synedrella* leaves provide an additional food source while also hosting leaf-curling caterpillars in their silk-stitched retreats. Photo by Helen Ramoutsaki, 2023.

Yet, *Synedrella's* worth is not only as a servant of others. Saying a weed is 'the right plant in the wrong place' might allow the possibility that the plant has some value when kept in its place. However, this anthropocentric position does not consider that from *Synedrella's* perspective, my tropical backyard is absolutely her right place: she has found a fit in the system. This is significant to my style of *Whatever Gardening*, in which value comes from co-participation. Rather than having a central role as a gardener, I am a part of a multispecies gardening collective and the conditions of the tropical habitat determine who thrives in relationship to others in the ecosystem. As a plant who has established a fit in the Wet Tropics, *Synedrella* is part of the co-relationships in my backyard.

In the rap, Cinderella Weed is contrasted with the daffodil, which is valued but does not fit in the Wet Tropics. Its high value in its native Northern Europe is exemplified in Wordsworth's poem *I wandered lonely as a cloud* (1815, p. 328). The gold of the daffodils represents an aesthetic wealth that endures in memory, bringing joy and comfort. Coloniality in Australia encompasses the value-legacies of such garden plants. Daffodils were offered for sale in the colony of Van Diemen's Land from at least 1836 (*Hobart Town Courier*, 1836). They are now normalised as garden plants throughout temperate Australia; however, in the Wet Tropics their cultural legacy seems to have been restricted to a nostalgic fancy dress costume at 'Cinderella balls' (*Cairns Post*, 1925).

In the tropics, daffodils will possibly bloom during the dry season but only after being kept in the refrigerator to simulate temperate winter conditions. They only grow as annuals: the bulbs rot in hot, humid, monsoon-saturated ground. To regrow them, the gardener has to import bulbs back into the ecosystem. There is no co-relationship through lifecycles with others in the gardening collective. Daffodils remain forever temporary visitors, giving aesthetic value but not contributing to the wider system.

In her tropical fit, *Synedrella* spreads through a series of adaptations, including the two types of florets and seeds produced by members of the sunflower family. Ray florets produce heavier seeds that fall close to the parent plant and are suited to their conditions. The seeds of the disc florets disperse more widely and are suited to a range of growing conditions (Usharani & Raju, 2018). This means that *Synedrella* can thrive where she is established and is also well adapted to colonising in the botanical sense of occupying a new habitat or ecological niche. She tends to overgrowth where there is disturbance, so my low-intervention *active undisturbing* helps keep her presence in equilibrium when weeding would likely not.

Regenerative practices, as described by Wet Tropical organic farmer Andre Leu (2021, pp. 27–38), do not seek to eliminate plants designated as weedy but to bring them into balance with the ecosystem by cutting back and allowing them to mulch the ground, by trusting the shading-out process of larger plants as the system matures, and by allowing the plant's role as a living mulch. In relationship with the thrips and bees and butterflies that assist her pollination, and the *Hypolimnas bolina* caterpillars that eat her leaves, *Synedrella's* value is not rare, but it is shared.

Permaculture and the Reframing of Weeds in the Subtropics

by Debbi Long

Industrialised monocultural food production clears land of diverse habitat, planting single crops over wide areas. Taking inspiration from tropical forest systems, permacultural land management values ecosystems where plants are 'stacked' in multiple, diverse layers. In permaculture philosophy, no plant is a weed in and of itself. It is always about context. Weeds – classic matter out of place – are plants in places people do not want them to be (Morrow, 2022, p. 340) and "usually appear when successful and stable ecosystems are altered so that new conditions favour them" (Morrow, 2022, p. 341).

Figure 6. Weed reframing



Photo by Debbi Long, March 2023.

The photo above (Figure 6) illustrates a block of land on subtropical Yuin country on the south coast of New South Wales which is in the process of being regenerated through permaculture practices. The soil, in which there is minimal microbial activity, has been compacted from over a century of exposure to colonially introduced hooved animals (cattle and sheep). Grasses were the only form of plant life on the block at the beginning of the rehabilitation project. The photograph shows four different ways in which plants labelled as weeds are being made useful and welcomed as members of a regenerating ecosystem.

The first example is how a lawn has been mowed around the newly built cabin. Invasive kikuyu, couch, clover and other lawn-type groundcovers, regarded as weeds elsewhere on the block, are allowed to flourish in this small patch of lawn. The functions of the lawn include leisure space, snake deterrence, pollinator attraction, and fire protection.

The second and third examples involve two habitat plantings: the mulched garden bed in the foreground and the area of grass in the rear of the picture, in which a diverse range of native species has been planted into the current grassland. Both plantings are aimed at performing multiple functions: visual screening, windbreaks and shade, as well as habitat for birds, insects and lizards. The bed in the foreground of the picture, was made by covering the weeds with weed matting (cardboard) and mulch. Being deprived of sunlight, the grasses will rot and bring much-needed organic matter into the soil. The habitat planting in the large area of grass behind the water tank has been planted with over 100 native plants. The existing weeds here, left for the time being as long grasses, provide shelter for the infant bushes and trees and act as soil-stabilising groundcover. Over time, the grasses will be shaded out by the shrubs and native groundcovers.

The fourth example of how weeds are used can be seen to the left of the picture (Figure 6), in the black plastic tubs (see also Figure 7 below). These tubs are used to convert weeds into nutrient-rich fertiliser ‘teas’. With their deep roots, thistles bring micronutrients stored deep in the soil up to the surface. Thistle tea makes these nutrients available to plants with shallower root systems, and the bacteria created in the fermenting process kickstarts important microbial reactions, bringing life to sterile soil. Rather than being seen as invaders needing to be removed, plants regarded as weeds are incorporated into the ecosystem, supporting regeneration processes.

Figure 7. Thistle tea fermenting



Photo by Debbi Long, March 2023.

Blooming: The Overgrown

Aesthetic and Practical Allure of Water Hyacinth in Indonesia

by Greg Acciaioli

Now classified by the Invasive Species Study Group (ISSG) as one of the world's 100 most invasive species and often labelled as one of the world's worst weeds, water hyacinth (*Eichhornia crassipes*) was originally spread by colonial powers from its native habitat in the Amazon basin of South America to regions of Africa, Australasia and Asia (Osmond & Petroschevsky, 2013). Naturalists and botanists carried it to the colonies for its 'ornamental beauty', often first depositing it for display in botanical gardens established by colonial authorities (Kitunda, 2018, p. xiii).

Figure 8. Water hyacinth on the edge of Lake Tondano, North Sulawesi province



Photo by Greg Acciaioli, August 2022.

However, conspicuously gendered accounts, usually unverified, of its spread beyond colonial botanical gardens in South and Southeast Asia tend to depict female elites – 'a few Bengali ladies' (Iqbal 2021) and a 'Thai princess' (Mancuso 2020; Jernelöv 2017) – as, 'overwhelmed by the beauty of its flower' (Iqbal 2021), collecting it for planting in their own ponds, whence it spread unchecked throughout deltaic Bengal and all of Thailand. Ryan's (2017, p. 181) approach of literary botany depicts how water hyacinth has figured in Saya Zawgyi's contemporary poetry in Myanmar as "a sentient and expressive plant persona capable of responding gracefully to the

intensely variable aquatic conditions of the Irrawaddy River”, thus capturing the continuing agency of water hyacinth in seductively colonising the country’s waterways.

In the case of Indonesia, water hyacinth (*eceng gondok* in Bahasa Indonesia) was first brought to Java in 1884 so that its aesthetic attractions could be displayed in the botanical garden established by Dutch East Indies botanists in 1817 in Bogor, West Java (Mancuso, 2020). It is unknown how it spread from there, though the role of water reflux following a local flood of the Ciliwung River flowing through the Bogor Botanical Garden has been mentioned (Jernelöv, 2017, p. 119). It now forms dense, sometimes impenetrable floral carpets in rivers and lakes throughout the archipelago.

Figure 9. Elimination of Water Hyacinth from Lake Limboto by Heavy Machinery



Photo by Greg Acciaioli, August 2022.

Local authorities in Indonesia as well as many local inhabitants (although their terminology is very different) recognise various aspects of the long-term deleterious environmental impacts of this colonising flora: destruction of phytoplankton and aquatic plants beneath its light-blocking cover, sometimes proceeding to anaerobic or low oxygen content; monopolisation of available nutrients such as nitrogen and phosphorus; evapotranspiration of water, contributing to lakes receding and becoming shallower; fowling fish cages (*karamba*); and impeding access to fishing sites, as evident in its spread along the edges of Lake Tondano in North Sulawesi shown in Figure 8 (Jernelöv, 2017, pp. 119–120). Such effects have led, in some lakes, to endeavours of total eradication, as is currently being undertaken by the Indonesian military at Lake Limboto in Gorontalo, the province just south of North Sulawesi (Figure 9).

Figure 10. Water hyacinth spreading in proximity to fish cages (*karamba*)



The centre of Lake Limboto, Gorontalo Province, Sulawesi. Photo by Greg Acciaioli, August 2022.

However, despite the universal condemnation of this weed by environmentalists, some fishers have resisted such eradication efforts, seeking to live together with these expanses of water hyacinth and exploit their more positive effects. They recognise that these expanses also serve as food sources and congregation sites for such plant-eating fish as tilapia, the major introduced species in many of Indonesia's inland lakes (Acciaioli, 2009), thus increasing fish numbers and hence yields for fishers. Such a perspective mirrors the experience of fishers in another tropical lake where water hyacinth proliferation has been a problem, Lake Victoria in Africa (Njiru et al., 2012). Figure 10's depiction of water hyacinth in close proximity to fish cages (*karamba*) in Lake Limboto illustrates such placement together, as if in a symbiotic relationship. Some government officials have even promoted water hyacinth's spread – a government demonstration first brought water hyacinth to Lake Tondano – as they have envisaged furniture and handicrafts such as baskets made from the dried plant as a tourism draw and export commodity. Such a strategy once again parallels what has been attempted as well for water hyacinth products from Lake Victoria (Jernelöv, 2017, p. 126).

As in Africa (Kitunda, 2018), the human relationship to water hyacinth in Asia has oscillated through several phases of attraction and repulsion. First carried to and spread throughout Asia for its aesthetic qualities, its practical effects upon fisheries, agriculture, and transport soon led to attempts to eradicate it – the 1917 Water Hyacinth Act, for example, banned its possession and cultivation in colonial Burma (Jernelöv, 2017, p. 120). However, in the postcolonial context, some continuing efforts of eradication have been complemented by endeavours of accommodation and

utilisation, as evident in Indonesia with the contrast of military uprooting in Lake Limboto (Figure 9) and government promotion in Lake Tondano. The complex entanglements of aesthetic inclinations (both colonial and postcolonial) and human livelihoods with what many regard as predominantly an ‘aquatic pest’ remain a testament to the ambiguous agency of a plant that has proliferated through its own artful and practical allure.

Weeds of the Sea in the Asia-Pacific

by Simon Foale

Sardines, scads, and small mackerels (often referred to as ‘small pelagic’ fish and in certain contexts as ‘fodder’ fish or even ‘trash’ fish) are sometimes described as ‘weeds of the sea’ because of their short lifespans, fast growth rates, high fecundity, and the resultant capacity of their populations to bounce back quickly after heavy fishing pressure. Small pelagic fish are becoming increasingly important for food security around the world, particularly as larger, less resilient (but often more desirable) species become (and stay) depleted (Pauly et al., 1998; Roeger et al., 2016). It also turns out that small weedy pelagics happen to be nutritionally superior to most larger fish species – they are particularly rich in Vitamin A, Vitamin B12, Calcium, Iron, and Zinc (Farmery et al., 2020).

Figure 11. A catch of the spotted sardinella, Langalanga Lagoon, Solomon Islands.



Spotted sardinella (*Amblygaster sirm*) an uncharismatic ‘weed fish’ is increasingly important for food security and livelihoods. Photo by Simon Foale, 2013.

Small pelagic fish can live in the open ocean, adjacent to coasts, and are also often found in estuaries. They form schools, which makes them easy to harvest. They tend to grow well in waters where nutrient levels are high (e.g. from upwellings or rivers), because their food (phytoplankton and the tiny crustaceans that eat phytoplankton) proliferate quickly in response to elevated nutrients (just as plants in a paddock or garden grow better with added fertiliser or compost).

Small pelagic fish are undervalued in many parts of the Asia-Pacific, including Australia, and particularly North Queensland, where people tend to prefer larger species, particularly reef fish. There is surprisingly little scientific attention focused on small pelagic fisheries, despite their immense importance for food security in poorer and more densely populated parts of the Asia-Pacific region such as Indonesia, Philippines, Cambodia, Vietnam, Burma, Bangladesh, and India.

Reef fish (Figure 12) are regarded as sexier by marine scientists and attract more research funding and, in turn, generate many more scientific publications – despite having vastly less importance as food on a regional scale (Clifton & Foale, 2017; Teh et al., 2013). This disturbing epistemological hegemony, in which coral reef-associated fish species are misleadingly touted to be critically important for food security in parts of the global economic periphery (AKA the ‘developing’ world) and attract scientific research attention disproportionate to their actual food security importance, could reasonably be critiqued through the lens of decoloniality – the science has become captive to a set of values that are profoundly rooted in a colonial ontology.

Figure 12. Regal Angelfish – one of the photogenic reef fish species



Regal Angelfish (*Pygoplites diacanthus*) has helped establish the ‘iconic’ status of coral reefs. Photo by Simon Foale, 1995.

Over the twentieth century, coral reefs transformed, in the Western imagination, from places of mystery and danger to objects of aesthetic consumption (Elias, 2019). With considerable assistance from emerging photographic technologies (Elias, 2019; Foale & Macintyre, 2005), the aesthetic value of coral reefs drove the development of a large, lucrative and politically powerful tourism industry, particularly in Queensland, Australia, where the Great Barrier Reef became an 'icon' and achieved World Heritage status. This impressive elevation in aesthetic (and economic – via tourism) value of tropical coral reefs has penetrated and profoundly shaped the sub-discipline of 'coral reef science', which includes the science of reef-associated fisheries. The aesthetic dimension can be seen to have 'colonised' and measurably distorted the ostensibly 'objective' science around coral reef fisheries through earnest and well-meaning spin, designed to attract research and conservation funding (Clifton & Foale, 2017).

But the spin ignores, downplays, or denies the scientific truth about reef-associated fisheries, including their over-stated importance for food security (Tey et al., 2013) (especially relative to the above-mentioned, largely ignored 'weed fish' species) of Asian and Pacific human populations. These populations, as a result of their impoverishment by centuries of colonial exploitation, do not themselves have the leisure time or money to indulge in the aesthetic consumption of corals and myriad species of pretty but mostly nutritionally useless reef fish.

Decolonising reef fishery science will require a more historically and epistemologically reflexive understanding of the way the tourism industry and its values have influenced some of the reef science community's core paradigms and assumptions. This is especially important in Australia and other wealthy (and thus leisured) populations where a greater awareness is needed of the problems created when this particular social construction of science is projected across economic and cultural boundaries. Claude Levi-Strauss famously stated that 'The scientific mind does not so much provide the right answers as ask the right questions.' As carbon emissions, mostly produced by rich people (Hickel, et al., 2022), slowly kill reefs via coral bleaching, the 'weed fish' species will only increase in their importance for feeding the poor.

Casuarinas and Coconut Palms, Great Barrier Reef, Australia

by Celmara Pocock

Palm trees have been described as the 'prince of plants' (Gray 2018) and are strong colonial signifiers of the tropics. While diverse species of palm originate throughout the tropics, the cultivation, propagation, and transport of certain varieties are intimately linked with colonialism. Their global spread is driven by a triumvirate of commercialism, commodification, and symbolic connection to religion, nobility, and exotic pleasure (Gray, 2018). The quintessential coconut palm encapsulates all three:

their profitable crops have been commercialised and commodified in a range of products, and the trees themselves are a commodified symbol of the tropics. Thus, coconut palms are a synecdoche for utopian tropical islands, which are imagined as places of endless natural abundance and social harmony (Pocock et al., 2022).

Figure 13. *The resort on Hamilton Island, Great Barrier Reef*



The resort is distinctively surrounded by plantings of coconut palms. Photo by J. Jones, 2009. Copyright Commonwealth of Australia (GBRMPA).

The islands of the Great Barrier Reef, along the eastern seaboard of Australia were promoted as tropical idylls from the early twentieth century, but holidaymakers were often disappointed by the absence of naturally occurring coconut palms (Pocock, 2005). The islands were not the tropics they imagined. To fulfil this colonial imaginary, coconut palms were planted at key tourist locations along the mainland coast and on offshore islands, and by the mid-century, the resorts were readily recognisable by their clusters of palms amidst native vegetation. Today, naturalised populations of coconut palm have proliferated, and untended groves littered with fallen fronds and abandoned fruit are regarded as weeds (Central QLD Coast LandCare Network, 2023). While conservationists respond by weeding out these unwanted plants, anthropologists Richard Martin and David Trigger (2015) highlight how this can create conflict with local Aboriginal communities who have deliberately planted and tended coconuts as symbolic of relaxation and luxury. Such entanglements of colonial symbolism with Indigenous worldviews, highlight how coloniality becomes inherent in conservation management and tourism, and may even be enacted by Indigenous people.

While the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area is managed for its ‘natural’ attributes including the native vegetation of the islands, coconut palms dominate areas frequented by tourists. The proliferation of architecturally distinctive coconut palms meets the visual expectation of the tropics, but these radically altered landscapes trap tourists in a perpetual loop of colonial experience.

Figure 14. Tourist wearing a pith helmet, with coconut and palm tree among casuarinas



Tourist Chris Doyle wearing a pith helmet, itself a symbol of colonial exotic (Rovine, 2022), stands at the base of a coconut palm, holding its fruit while casuarinas dominate the background. Photo by R.M. Berryman, 1933. National Library of Australia.

The preoccupation with this visual tropical signifier, further disrupts and displaces the multisensory and embodied knowledge and appreciation of reef islands as particular and distinctive places. Such experiences were part of early tourist experiences where, living outdoors and sleeping under canvas, people were entangled in relationships with more-than-human island flora and fauna.

Before coconut palms dominated, endemic casuarinas (*Casuarina equisetifolia*) imprinted themselves on tourists’ perceptions and experiences. The fine delicate branches of casuarinas or she-oaks offered useful shade, their fallen needles created a carpet underfoot, and stands of trees framed tourist photographs (Pocock, 2002). And most evocatively, the gentle sigh of she-oaks lulled visitors to sleep and brought them pleasure and connection beyond colonial imaginaries of the tropics. These past experiences suggest it is possible to appreciate the tropics without reference to colonial signifiers and that embodied entanglements with the more-than-human may offer a pathway to decolonial tropical living in the future.

Figure 15. *Delicate branches of the casuarina, Great Barrier Reef*



The delicate branches of the casuarina are used to frame this promotional photograph of the Great Barrier Reef. Photo by J Fitzpatrick, 1951. National Archives of Australia.

Cutting: The Tenacious

Bad Fences Make Good Neighbours: Weedy Protests

by Kristin McBain-Rigg

Fences represent the borderlands of colonial rural Australia. The history of these fence lines is contentious as well as practical – from the mid-1800s some of the early fences used in rural Australian communities included ringlock wire or chain link fences, with different gauges of wire suited to keeping different kinds of animals in and others out; providing a strange foreign division of multispecies relations across the country (Pickard, 2010). Fences were used to keep colonial order – and stand as silent sentinels of the race for civilising a wild tropical land, dismissing the indigenous boundaries and borders and the linking networks that had existed for thousands of years prior to colonial invasion. These fences were more economical than shepherds in the colonies, laying waste to both human-human and human-nonhuman relations on some pastoral properties (Pickard, 2010).

My familiar childhood memories are filled with these relics that over the course of time had become bad fences for suburban properties – low, sagging chain fences, the kind that allowed free passage between neighbour’s yards, visibility across space, relationships across time. Fences that allowed us to see activities of others, to share in a community space that was demarcated only for the purposes of property boundaries – bureaucratic borderlands. Neighbours could converse across fences – and if, as Helliwell (1992) asserts, “good walls make bad neighbours” in the Gerai Dayak Longhouse of tropical Borneo, then the tropical communities of my childhood were formed around bad fences that made good neighbours.

Figure 16. *Where does she end, and we begin? Our old fence, shared with Pearl*



Photo by Kristin McBain-Rigg, 2017.

When I moved into my own home, I was fortunate enough to find two such ‘bad’ fences on the property. A young family at the back loved our ‘bad’ shared boundary because it allowed them to enjoy the view of our ‘rainforest’ type backyard – a rare treat in an urbanised location. On the side was Pearl – our elderly neighbour, who was the first to have lived on the block, in the home that she and her husband had built. Her yard was also a rare paradise in a sea of manicured lawns, a yard wild with ferns and a creeping bush we called ‘maiden’s blush’. These plants weighed heavily on the chain fence, which dipped and bowed along the boundary. We could see Pearl when she was in her yard, and she could see us in ours – we talked over the fence, felt safe with our young sons in the yard, and she felt safe that someone could look out for her, too. She taught me much about the plant life we shared, about life and relationships across multiple generations.

When Pearl died, her plants lived on as a testament to the life she had built and fostered. When new neighbours purchased the house, it was a hopeful time – a time to relate anew and share the knowledge passed by Pearl about how to cultivate the

rich abundance they had acquired. But this was not part of their plan – a complete clearing of the space and a chance to create a cultured, civilised yard (a manicured lawn). They tore down the chain fence to erect a high wooden fence between us, despite my protests; so, I insisted on taking a cutting of the maiden’s blush before its complete eradication. I cultivated the cutting, winding it through my own yard, to remember Pearl. The roots are now on my side of the new fence. The fence provides a solid climbing frame for it to grow on. The complete eradication of the plant is not possible...every time the neighbours try to cut it back, or kill it off, it comes back in a kind of weedy rhizomatic protest (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988).

Figure 17. *Cutting across the border*

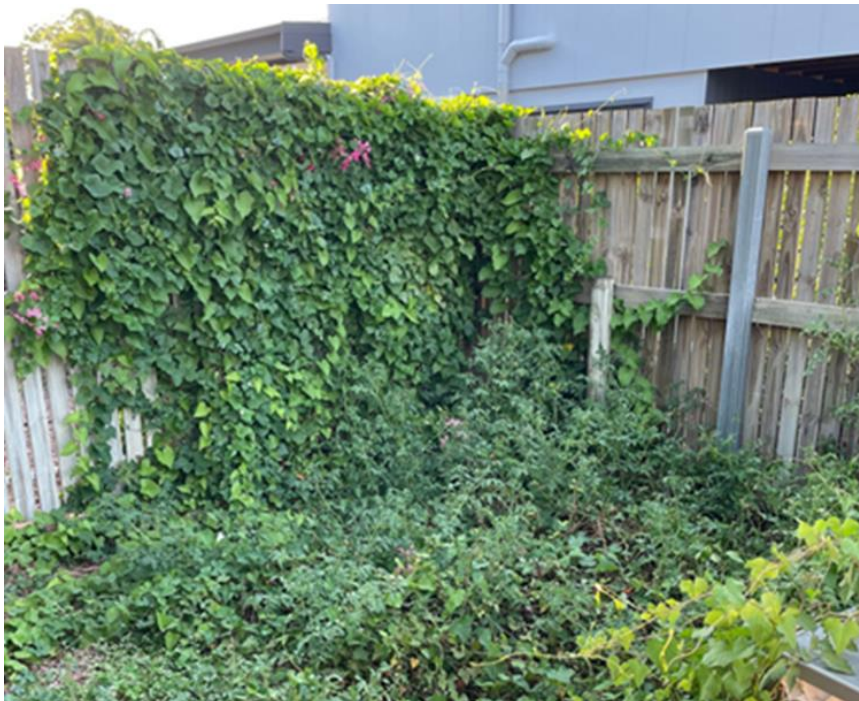


Photo by Kristin McBain-Rigg, 2022.

What might have been a good fence preventing further colonial expansion of weeds has quickly become a bad fence enabling such processes. The creeper continues its relentless life and maintains the memory of those who came before; it serves as a reminder of what may have become a wasteland lacking any trace of Pearl, our neighbour. Instead, our yards, linked by fences and plants, remodelled our social relations in ways that are more conducive to a continuous if somewhat agonistic sharing of Pearl’s memory that is what Luce Irigaray and Michael Marder (2016, pp. 215–16) might call dynamically ecological. As Kieran O’Mahony (2022) argues, “...ecologising memory and place is an important conceptual and ethical tool when considering the tensions of everyday human-nonhuman relations and their multiple

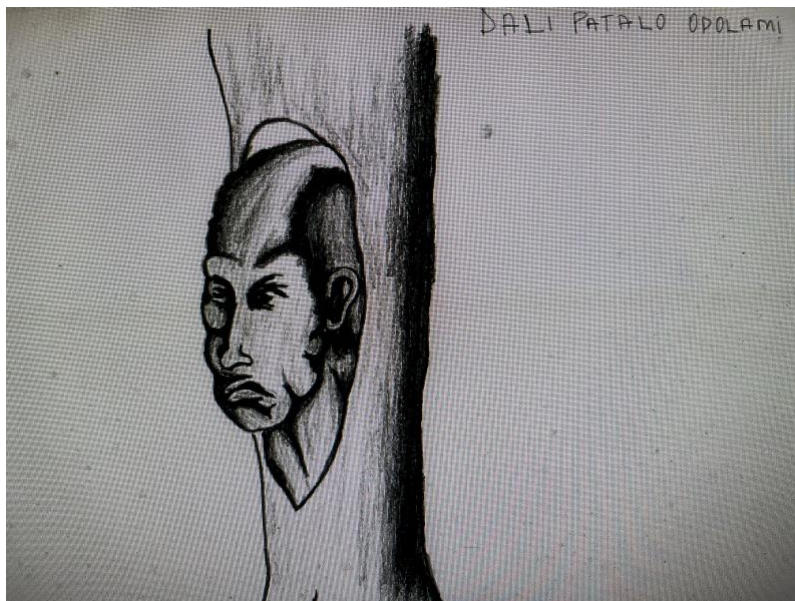
uncertain futures”, lending itself to a broader kind of relational decolonisation and rewilding of urban borderlands.

A Tree as a Disturbing Political Space, Papua New Guinea

by Michael Wood

Tropicality, according to colonial imaginaries, may refer us to a discourse that constructs the tropical world and its rainforests as the West’s environmental other and “the White man’s grave” (Stepan, cited in Clayton & Bowd, 2006, p. 208). But among those living and working in Papua New Guinea’s logging concessions, environmental otherness is only one quality of their relationship with the rainforests. Most residents are temporarily or permanently at home in such an environment as they attempt to transform it into a marketable commodity that can fulfil imagined promises of affluent modernity and development held by Iban, Malaysian Chinese, Filipinos, Mubami, Kamula, and others who live in these logging concessions.

Figure 18. Sketch of a *dali patalo* man



Sketch by Bape Ewala Wawade, 1997.

Figures 18, 19 and 20 show us some aspects of one of these other residents of logging concessions. These particular residents are called in Kamula, *dali patalo*, and are known in PNG tok pisin as *masalai* or ‘bush spirits’. Figure 18 shows a *dali patalo* man emerging from a tree. Some Kamula say the tall canopy-piercing trees the *dali patalo* like to live in are manifestations of the *dali patalo* themselves and the sketch outlines some elements of this possibility. The link between the manifest tree and the typically unseen spirit is also expressed in the name *dali patalo* where *dali* is the Kamula word for tree. The tree can also be explained as a ‘likeness’ or ‘copy’ of the *dali patalo*’s

body. The Kamula word for these relationships of similarity can also be used to translate ‘spirit’.

Figure 19 shows us what was said to be the house of some *dali patalo*. The tree had not been cut down by the chain-saw operators even though it was located dangerously close to a set of roads that made up a sharp ninety-degree T junction. As we were looking at the tree a Kamula acquaintance suggested the tree was the likeness of the actual house of the *dali patalo*. Located in an unseen component of the world, this house was understood to be the same as a Kamula house.

Figure 19. Home of the *dali patalo* at a T junction



Wawoi Guavi logging concession, Papua New Guinea. Photo by Michael Wood, 2011

The tree was not logged out of respect for the *dali patalo* who lived there. The residents were thought by some Kamula to get angry at the destruction of their homes by the logging workers. They were said to respond to such attacks on their homes by making

trees fall on the chain-saw operators sometimes killing or injuring them. The *dali patalo* did this as they were doing their own logging in their unseen world. This was not a repudiation of the destructive power of logging, but a repositioning of that power as fully under the control of the victims of logging who used their new power to retaliate for the loss of their homes and their dispossession and exile from the rainforest.

The home in the photograph can be understood as a permitted “intermediate disturbance” (Kirksey & Chao, 2022, p. 16) to logging. The preservation of the *dali patalo*'s tree was endorsed by the logging company, but the tree was dangerously positioned on a T-junction that potentially threatened all drivers who used the junction. Moreover, the *dali patalo* and the tree were empowered by this protection, since both were able to manifest a new dangerous out-of-place destructive power

This repositioning and empowering of the *dali patalo* also involves the fusion of industrial logging with relations of production involved in hunting. The same people who now could log and kill ordinary humans working in the concession were also known to help the Kamula by hunting in their world in parallel with Kamula hunters. This conjunction of manifest and unseen hunter was often profoundly productive (see Figure 20), but in the case of logging, relations between the seen and unseen actors were more antagonistic and violent.

Figure 20. Sketch of a *dali patalo* hunting



Sketch by Bape Ewala Wawade, 1997.

Such a situation is significantly defined by a colonising industrial logging and a strongly, often causally, related vision of parallel logging in the unseen world where

dali patalo log in their own world without any Asians or other types of people present. A feature of industrial logging in PNG is that it is often managed by Malaysian Chinese and employs Asian workers. Some Kamula accounts of the *dali patalo* provide a rather different vision of how logging might be undertaken.

Fundamental to this vision is the assumption that certain trees and *dali patalo* are ontologically unstable and, therefore, transformable into each other (Vilacca, 2005). It is these assumptions that inform any adequate account of the tree surviving in the wrong place, making it powerful and dangerous to people (as in Figure 19). The tree is not an autonomous oasis of 'non-Western' decoloniality, but one entangled with contemporary capitalism involving the co-occurrence of different types of conflicting and shifting powers that are shuttled between the manifest and unseen aspects of the world. Describing such entanglements involves outlining context-specific politics whereby various entities have gained new powers from their conflicts and transformations so that a protected, but misplaced, tree can threaten workers and coerce them into slowing down at a T junction. However, the logging concession contains other conjunctions of roads, trees, and *dali patalo* in ways that can generate quite different political relationships and possibilities.

Conclusion: Picturing Transformative Weeds

A visual exploration of weeds, as things 'out of place', can tell us much about coloniality and decoloniality in the tropical world. The images in this photo-essay have highlighted some of the tensions, contradictory views, and ambivalences that humans and other forms of life have about their weedy co-residents. We have also presented images of accommodations and alliances with such co-residents.

While weeds are often defined as 'out of place' colonisers, the way they come to matter as 'out of' and 'in' place is currently largely defined by radical environmental changes that emerge from climate change and often barely regulated natural resource extraction. In such contexts, weeds can sometimes lend support to different lifeforms, within a multispecies political community. Their fertility makes them valuable sources of multispecies sustenance – including as food for human thought.

Yet, in the lush fecundity of the tropics, too much fertility sometimes becomes problematic, replacing relationality across difference with endlessly reproduced sameness. Infertility is generally considered bad and fertility good, but too much fertility is often feared, and so a war on weeds, defined as 'invasive species', ensues – an endless battle against the diverse fecundity of the tropics.

At the same time, as the contributors to this essay reveal, a concern with weedy lifeforms, especially in the tropics, can lead to a questioning of the strict opposition

that is sometimes made between the colonial weeds and the decolonial endemic. Our images tend to highlight, and thereby encourage, complex diversity and its local politics as the way forward to resolving some of our current problems concerning the future of the tropics.

We began this essay by expressing reservations about a form of multispecies research that tends to 'weed out' the human by focusing exclusively on 'other-than-human' relations. In co-creating this essay, the contributors seek to offer an approach in which the human and more-than-human are always taken together – immersed in, and straining against, unequal power relations. Through this collection of short narratives about our own personal and research relationships with 'weedy' lifeforms, the co-creators of this photo-essay offer an alternative to approaches based on bounded categories and strict oppositions. Decolonisation is understood as always necessarily engaged with colonial pasts and presents, but a future in which there is neither coloniality nor decoloniality can be envisioned through a continuous process of weeding the inequalities and injustices among humans, and among humans and more-than-humans in multispecies relationships.

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Greg Acciaioli is currently a senior honorary research fellow at The University of Western Australia, where he lectured in Anthropology for 29 years. Born of European migrant stock in California, he became a migrant himself to Australia as a postgraduate student at the Australian National University. Although his engagement with Indonesia began with his PhD research in Central Sulawesi, Indonesia, marrying a woman from that research site, the plain surrounding Lake Lindu, has led to long stints of non-research-oriented residence there and thus being declared a member of the local community. His concern with the dilemmas of inland fisheries in Indonesia has stemmed from this hybrid personal and academic experience of life at Lindu. He has worked with the Alliance of Archipelagic Indigenous peoples (Aliansi Masyarakat Adat Nusantara or AMAN) to promote co-management of national parks in Indonesia and has also worked on the issue of accommodating stateless Bajau Laut in marine parks in Sabah, Malaysia.

Simon Foale is an Associate Professor teaching anthropology in the College of Arts, Society and Education at James Cook University, Australia. Simon's research interests range between political ecology, the anthropology of development and the history and philosophy of science. His primary geographic focus is coastal Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and the Western Pacific. His disciplinary and geographic interests are in large part a consequence of having been born in pre-independence Solomon Islands (to white Australian parents). That first-hand experience and knowledge of the deeply exploitative character of the colonial state, combined with a post-graduate education in anthropology, makes the ongoing struggle against capitalist extractivism and race-based discrimination all the more serious for him. Simon is also an active unionist.

Rosita Henry is a Professor in anthropology in the College of Arts, Society and Education at James Cook University. She reflexively positions herself as a weedy product of colonialism, whose forebears were both colonisers *and* decolonisers. Rosita attempts to work against coloniality by researching colonial, anti-colonial and

decolonial relations between people and places across tropical Australia and the Pacific as expressed in cultural festivals, the politics of belonging and emplacement, cultural heritage, material culture, land tenure frictions, and state bureaucratic effects. Rosita is author of the book *Performing Place, Practicing Memory: Indigenous Australians, Hippies and the State* (Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books, 2012) and *A True Child of Papua New Guinea: Memoir of a Life in Two Worlds* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland Press, 2019).

Debbi Long is a CIS-gendered woman of acknowledged convict and immigrant Anglo-Celtic heritage, and unacknowledged First Nations heritage. She was born on Wiradjeri country, raised on Yuin Country, and after more than four decades of living in other parts of Australia and overseas, has returned to Yuin country to live in a four-generation family compound. Her research as a medical anthropologist, hospital ethnographer and health systems analyst has included clinical governance and health management, multidisciplinary clinical team communication, and development health and the SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals). Her current life/research interests, framed by the permaculture ethics of “Earth Care, People Care, Fair Share”, incorporate health in areas such as permaculture and food security, sustainable housing techniques, and i/Indigenous knowledges, with an overarching focus on resource equity and decolonisation. She has a PhD in Anthropology.

Kristin McBain-Rigg is a non-Indigenous (white) female anthropologist who works with rural, remote and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to improve health outcomes by seeking to decolonise biomedical systems and the ways we educate health practitioners throughout Northern Queensland. She is employed as a Senior Lecturer in the College of Public Health, Medical and Veterinary Sciences at James Cook University. She has a PhD in Anthropology.

Celmara Pocock is Director of the Centre for Heritage+Culture, and a Professor of anthropology teaching heritage studies at the University of Southern Queensland. Her decolonial and anti-colonial positionality is shaped by her experiences of migration and queerness, and a longterm commitment to working with and for Australian First Nations. This manifests in research that focuses on social and community approaches to understanding the environment, including, aesthetics and senses of place; storytelling and emotion; and the intersections between heritage and tourism. Human relationships with the environment are core to her work, and her monograph *Visitor Encounters with the Great Barrier Reef: Aesthetics, Heritage, and the Senses* was published by Routledge in 2020.

Helen Ramoutsaki is a PhD page and performing poet-natural historian, practice-embedded researcher and educator of English-Welsh-Irish birth heritage. My experiences living, working and birthing in England and on Crete, and my more than

twenty years as a settler on Kuku Yalanji Kubirriwarra bubu in the Wet Tropics of Far North Queensland, have revealed to me the complexities of relative privilege, the tensions of differential regard and the value of being responsive to others. I am grateful to those who, not in an academic context, have trusted me with glimpses into story/place/language/culture that are not mine to pass on but that have enriched my deepening immersion in places and communities. My fascination with natural history and my love of wordcraft motivate my practice as a poet, natural historian and photojournalistic photographer compiling transdisciplinary creative natural histories. I also collaborate with my grandmother alter-ego, MC Nannarchy, who writes and performs ludically-serious raps concerning attitudes and ethics within the more-than-human world, with a focus on ethical tropical sustainability and the work of the multispecies gardening collective in our backyard habitat patch.

Michael Wood is a white anthropologist and adjunct with the College of Arts, Society and Education at James Cook University. He grew up in British, Australian and American colonies and has since worked, for a long time, with Kamula speakers in Papua New Guinea mainly on their complex engagement with industrial logging. More recently he has become interested in understanding how the Kamula have been subject to colonizing violence from their neighbours and how this violence has generated new forms of power that now influence the lives of the Kamula. He has a PhD in Anthropology.