This chapter is a study in order and disorder, creation and destruction, viewed as separable but contingent events. Taking Indigenous Australian cultural heritages as the point of engagement, here configured as ancestral land and seascapes, this chapter explores the reflexive responsibility that defines Indigenous relationships with heritage – in contrast to a broadly configured settler-colonial ambivalence to such heritage. It also discusses a series of events that led to the destruction of an ancestral dugong maintenance site in the Gulf of Carpentaria, northern Australia – a place of cultural significance to the Marra and Yanyuwa people.¹

In considering how dispositions of responsive reflexivity, retreat and ambivalence co-exist within this context – and, more broadly, in relation to Australian Indigenous cultural heritages – this chapter lays bare the competing ontics that underscore and undermine heritage value, as well as efforts at safeguarding and ongoing sustenance of important heritage places in settler-colonial contexts. In the context of this chapter, ontics are those aspects of everyday life that take on physical, real or factual elements of existence; this may take the form of human action or place features.

Framing the discussion of heritage and destruction through a discourse of order and disorder, which aligns with the theme of local empiricism, this chapter then examines how it is that competing axiologies, or theories of values, have emerged in relation to Indigenous cultural heritages in Australia. The primary argument presented here is that axiological retreat, as a form of ambivalence or ‘failure to care’ exhibited by the state and neoliberal economies, is a destructive ontology that can lead to
the decline and loss of cultural heritage. Destructive ontologies rely upon the refusal to recognise one domain as made up of self-affirmed, legitimate, understandable and ordered elements and presences.

In Australia this translates to a denial of the integrity and empiricism of Indigenous land and seascapes as made up of ancestral beings. Finding ways to shift this destructive ontology is a prevailing challenge in settler-colonial contexts. What is needed is an axiological return, made all the more urgent by Heider’s caution that ‘[d]estruction is easy and can be very swift, while construction often involves a long and difficult process’ (Heider 2005, 11).

I begin this discussion with some reflection on the principles of ‘order and disorder’. An ordered state of being, in this context, occurs when heritage prevails and maintains a continued presence and relevance in a cultural group’s life at present. A disordered state is where this process is compromised, due to heritage being destroyed or erased – not only in a physical sense, but also in terms of censure around the social memories that support and sustain the ongoing health of cultural expressions. When these begin to decline or to face opposition, due to lack of opportunity to engage with heritage (through legislative alienation, physical alienation and cognitive erasure), then heritage itself is compromised and rendered disordered. It becomes out of sync with the people and cultural worlds that render it meaningful.

The view adopted here is that something has order as long as it is capable of self-restoration and relational pronouncement (in that it is known and declared). In those instances where incoming cultural agents impact negatively upon heritage – as witnessed, for example, in the colonial history of settler Australian interactions with Indigenous peoples’ cultural heritages – disordering occurs among an otherwise ordered, known and meaningful phenomenon: that is, the living heritage, as the country of Aboriginal Australians.

**Order and disorder in place**

Order and disorder, creation and destruction are brought together often in discussions of cultural heritage, reflecting situations whereby heritage that has endured is subject to threat and loss. Destruction, precipitated by ontologies of harm or ambivalence, is an ongoing reality for Indigenous people. A ledger of ruination and obliteration marks an expanding physical and political presence of the settler-colonial state across Indigenous homelands. This process began in 1788 and is accompanied by the creep
of its neoliberal economies of extraction (amplified in more recent decades by a nationwide booming resource industry); see Stoler for a discussion of ruination as a political project that ‘lays waste to certain peoples, relations and things that accumulate in specific places’ (Stoler 2012, 11).

Disorder in such contexts relies upon the existence of states of integrity – that is, an ordered cultural world in which people recognise and take inspiration from expressions, habits, practices and presences that verify their place in the world. Only that which is ordered can be disordered. In Australia this has been witnessed in the alienation of people from their ancestral homelands, the physical loss of place through extractive industries, the demolition of rock art sites, the erasure of landmarks as the bodies of ancestral beings and the desecration of sacred sites (see Burke and Smith 2010 and Smith and Ward 2000 for discussions of the broader conflicts regarding heritage).

For the purpose of this discussion, Indigenous cultural heritage is defined broadly as the geographical and spiritual cosmos within which the lives of Indigenous people take place and the context into which ancestral presences are etched. Places and the world of meaning through which an Indigenous people move are therefore expressions of cultural integrity and autonomy. Writ large across this heritage is an emotional geography – a world that triggers emotion as an affective state of consciousness, experienced in relational encounters with social memory, ancestral beings and contexts for identity projection. Places can make people feel healthy, relevant, happy, content and nurtured (see Davidson et al. 2005, Davidson and Milligan 2004, Kearney 2009, Seamon 2012, 2014). These contexts locate human life in a nested ecology. In this the human position is that small, central, nested domain from which individuals perceive the world through their own subjective experiences (Wimberley 2009, ix).

In settler-colonial and intercultural spaces, place is endlessly reinterpreted in power struggles and through informal negotiations over their meaning and representation. In this vein, places can serve as powerful tools for furthering the political vision of certain groups or institutions; but they can also be destroyed. Cultural heritage that takes the form of important places is one way of anchoring cultural identities, verifying existence and ensuring tangible and intangible points of gathering and affection for cultural constituents. The creation of heritage is multifaceted and may rely on human or nonhuman agency. Creation precedes destruction: the latter obliterates the former. As such they are related states, yet require ontologies that are diametrically opposed. Disorder and destruction compromise existence through the collapse of local empiricism. They make regeneration difficult, if not impossible.
Order is understood here as a series of interactive states that lead to prospering, survival and ongoing interactions. Order evokes integrity in particular structural and functional properties, a concept that ensures the survival of functional properties for as long as they are called upon to support life. Disorder, on the other hand, invokes states of decline, disarray, damage or loss of elements important to the whole. Where cultural heritage is taken as our point of reflection, ordered states allow for the integrity of heritage to prevail. They ensure ongoing human relations (as creation, maintenance and safeguarding), while disorder brings about destruction in physical forms. It results in the erosion of social memories attached to heritage and generates conditions in which the wholeness of heritage, as held in webs of social, cultural and political meaning, begins to fall away.

Destruction rarely takes heed of creation’s deep time, nor makes any concession to the complex tangible and intangible conditions that give rise to human cultural heritage. It brings rapid decline and erasure to vital parts of human existence. Creation, by contrast, is often a long and difficult process, whether involving human labour and physical effort to construct or requiring generations upon generations of people sharing the orality of ancestral connections.

The distressing reality of disordering actions and the ontologies that facilitate the decline of cultural heritage is that its creation is often steeped so deeply in time that it evades a temporal stamp. Too often cultural heritage is simply understood as ‘having always been there’. The destructive ontologies explored throughout this chapter, both as ambivalence and as a failure to care, distinguish settler-colonial engagements and treatments of Indigenous cultural heritages. While a generalising statement, a case is made for this ambivalence as a condition of deep colonising.

The concept of ambivalence is introduced by Rose (Rose 1996a, 6), then expanded by Seton and Bradley to distinguish the process of conquest that remains embedded within the institutions and practices of the settler-colonial state (Seton and Bradley 2005, 33). Claiming the continent, under the British Crown and by dint of the Doctrine of Discovery in 1788, required the creation of a ‘ground zero’; a designification of what was in place and in turn a resignification of desirous imaginaries on to the landmass (Rose 2004, Kearney 2017). Bearing in mind this landmass is also configured as distinct Indigenous nations using more than 250 surviving Indigenous language groups, with many more at the point of initial colonisation, there are bound to be competing and contesting ontologies that exist in relation to heritage.
Local empiricism and law

Place is distinguished by local empiricism and order: inherent sets of relations that distinguish the meaning and substance of a place (Kearney 2017, 157). It is through incremental decline or the rapid assault of this order that it is prevented from enacting its own agency and liberties of rhythm are compromised. The local empiricism that gives rise to place is expressed through induction, causation and causal explanation, as grounded in place itself.

Induction – as the processes or actions that bring about or give rise to place – is a multifaceted concept. It may have tangible or intangible qualities, as processes of physical becoming or ancestral enlivening shape and inspire the place world. The induction of place order is an expression of how the world comes to be as it is; its ability to sustain and thrive is embroiled in relations of cause and effect, into which human life is recruited as kin, relational other, co-presence or agent of harm. The nature and effect of these relations are powerfully expressed through communicative events in place. These in turn articulate not only the character of place but also its biography, as populated by multifarious co-presences.

According to kincentric ecology, which distinguishes many Indigenous conceptions of place and cultural heritage as linked to land and seascapes, human life is one part of place’s local empiricism; it plays a role in the experience, rhythm and distinctiveness of place (see Salmón 2000). As co-presences and kin, this role is vital to maintaining the integrity of place order. When local empiricism is upheld, then integrity – defined as a form of coherence, holism and durability – converges into an order of resilience.

Resilience as a capacity to sustain or adapt in the face of adversity, when bound to a kincentric view of life, requires both people and place to experience life simultaneously. The linking of resilience with kinship is echoed by Skolimowski’s concept of living in ‘right relations’ (Skolimowski 1993, 7). As an extension of this integrity, to be in a critical intimacy with place is to live in reverence, or ‘empathy fused with reverence’ (Skolimowski 1993, 7). He has further noted that ‘Living with reverence on the earth is to watch, notice and live in heightened contact’ (Skolimowski 1993, 7), conditions which support a kincentric ecology as well as the health of the land and sea as heritage.

Indigenous Australian cultures and heritages are grounded in the importance of country – that is, the land, seas and waters that hold the ancestral Law for Indigenous language groups. The land and sea form a canvas on to and through which ancestral activity is always present and
moving. It is the action of ancestral beings that shapes the very terms of existence for Indigenous groups. Rose writes of Indigenous homelands as country – that is, a ‘nourishing terrain’ and ‘a place that gives and receives life. Not just imagined or represented, it is lived in and lived with’ (Rose 1996b, 7). Many Indigenous people talk about country in the same way that they would refer to a person: they speak to country, sing to country, visit country, worry about country, feel sorry for country and long for country. People say that country knows, hears, smells, takes notice, takes care and is sorry or happy.

Country is therefore not a generalised or undifferentiated type of place. Rather, it is a living entity with a yesterday, today and tomorrow: it possesses a consciousness, and an enduring will towards life (Rose 1996b:7). Country is fathomed in equal parts through an understanding of tangible and intangible cultural expressions. Yet the act of separating these two forms is futile. It is at once both and all that is in between. Country is kin, language, Law, human and nonhuman; it is past and present; it is land, water, resources, elements and sentiency.

Country is the socially constructed and culturally delimited presence and scene for the everyday life in which Indigenous Australians – and, in the context of the following case study, Marra and Yanyuwa peoples in the Gulf of Carpentaria – find themselves operating. Local empiricism is found in country, and is expressed as the processes or actions that bring about or give rise to place. In this case such actions are those carried out by ancestral beings as they walked, crawled, slithered, climbed, flew and stopped on country; some left their mark, others their story, their bodies or remnants of their activity (Rose 2000, 104).

This is, in the first instance, a process of physical becoming and an enlivening of the world. It also contains vital knowledge and information, referred to by Marra and Yanyuwa as ‘Law’ – that is, an empiricism relating to how things sustain and thrive through relations of cause and effect. What follows is a description of such heritage and its destruction. This anchors the discussion within Marra and Yanyuwa country, and also within the wider scene of the settler-colonial state. It scopes out the very act of destruction as something that disregards the local empiricism of place and introduces disordered states.

Heritage destruction

This discussion takes its lead from Heider, who describes destruction as an action in which ‘one replaces an order with a lower degree of order,
or lack of order [disorder]’ (Heider 2005, 9). Destruction entails transformation to nothing (Heider 2005, 9–10), or equally the ruin of power and function and a consequent breaking into pieces (Heider 2005, 10). As noted above, Heider believes that ‘Destruction is easy and can be very swift, while construction often involves a long and difficult process’ (Heider 2005, 11). He has further observed that:

One can easily make disorder out of ordered entities; one can wreck them even if one has no idea what makes them work. For destruction the energy can be undirected and haphazard, for building up, it has to be guided.

(Heider 2005, 11).

To expand on this further, I now move to Marra country in northern Australia.

Marra country occupies the Limmen Bight in the Gulf of Carpentaria, northern Australia, while Yanyuwa country lies to the southwest of the Gulf. Both groups identify as saltwater people. Their respective countries are shaped by the acts and actions of ancestral beings who gave form and substance to their territories. Marra and Yanyuwa are distinct Indigenous language groups, although they share a long history of intermarriage and cultural exchange. This is often expressed in shared ceremonies, shared ancestral narratives and Dreaming pathways, travelled by spirit ancestors who moved through one territorial estate into the other. Dreaming, in the words of Indigenous Australian people, is a subtle and complex term (see Wolfe 1991). Dreaming pathways and places are often the travelling and stopping points for ancestral beings as they moved through country; they may often be distinguished by physical markers that are either the bodies of the ancestral beings, the objects they carried or the result of their actions (Hume 2000, Rose 2000; see also Griffiths 2018). According to many Aboriginal cosmologies, ancestral beings are not only responsible for shaping the land and sea: they are also what imbue it with significance and value.

The place to which this chapter turns its attention, and the instance of heritage destruction that occurred there, is important for Marra and Yanyuwa alike. This site and its features resonate potently with the saltwater sensibilities and heritages of both Indigenous groups. The place in question is Wunubarryi. It is a dugong maintenance site, located some 7 km southeast of the Limmen river, in the Northern Territory (Bradley 1997, 2000) (Fig. 11.1).

Wunubarryi (referred to in Western nomenclature as Mount Young) is an important Dugong Dreaming place; Marra and Yanyuwa share in its control and use. Yanyuwa have a series of closely related
Dreaming places, including one for the Lone Male Dugong (*jiyamirama*) at Wungunda, on the southern bank of the mouth of the Crooked river, and another at Wirdiwirdila, a small island in the Wearyan river. Places such as these are linked through the logic and practice of a saltwater kincentric ecology. In the description of site destruction presented here, I have opted to describe the place of Wunubarryi in its fullest sense – that is, the form it took prior to destruction. This present perfect form is designed to reflect the integrity that is Wunubarryi’s empiricism and law, derived from its ancestral linkages.

To the east of the hill that comprises Wunubarryi lay a number of quartzite outcrops ‘which look remarkably like semi-submerged dugong with a back and snout out of the water’ (Bradley 1997, 202) (Fig.11.2). These rocks are a herd of dugongs and a single dolphin, stranded on dry

**Figure 11.1** Map of Wunubarryi, in the Gulf of Carpentaria, Northern Territory, Australia. Details are provided of the dugong herd and lone dolphin at Wunubarryi. Map design by Fiona Brady.
land by a receding king tide (bambiliwa) during the Dreaming, the time of ancestral creation.

The dugong herd at Wunubarryi includes several large rocks, partially buried, which are male and female dugongs. It is the female dugongs with which Marra and Yanyuwa engage directly in the act of maintenance and ritual engagement (Bradley 1988, 111–12, Bradley 1997, 200–1). When men wish to perform these rituals – it has traditionally been the domain of men to undertake these – they approach the Dugong Dreaming herd and brush down the body of the female dugongs with leafy branches (Bradley 1988, 111; Bradley 1997, 202).

Upon a visit to Wunubarryi in the early 1980s, anthropologist John Bradley recorded several hammerstones laying in close proximity to and alongside the female dugongs. He noted that the practice, as explained to him by Marra men, involved a hammerstone being lifted up and brought down upon the body of the female dugong. Some of the female dugongs were recorded at this time as having deep grooves and depressions across their backs, indicating that the rites of maintenance were of ‘some antiquity’ (Bradley 1997, 203). Marra men recalled that at the same time as the hammerstones struck the dugong’s body, the names of dugong hunting localities along the coast and in the area of the Sir Edward Pellew Islands of the southwest Gulf of Carpentaria were called out by those in attendance. According to Bradley, ‘every fragment of rock that comes off a dugong stone, for example, is a potential dugong’ (Bradley 1997, 205). He provides a translated example of this calling out as follows:
You dugongs, listen to me, you will come out from here and you will travel to Wuthanda (McArthur River mouth), Liwujujuluwa (Crooked river mouth), Lidambuwa (Sharkers Point) and Bulubuluwiji (Wearyan river mouth). Listen to these words that I am telling you!

(Bradley 1988, 112)

Another recitation, recorded previously by Bradley in 1985, conveys the relational substance of this place and the terms of human engagement:

Yes, I am here, jungkayi [guardian] for you dugong, listen to me, come out from here and go. Yes, go! Go from here! Arise up and go to the sea grass! To Walkanjawalkarri and Manukulungku, Munuli, yes, and eastwards to Kaluwangarra and Ngurruwirririla, Wijiwijila and Rrawali, yes, and then on to Babalungku, Aburri, Wurruwiji, Wuthuwuthari, Wumarndu, Warriwiyala, Wuburrnyarrangka and Mangururrungurr, yes, and arise and go to Kuluwurra, Wuthanda, Wanakurla, Wudambuwa, Liwujujuluwa, Lidambuwa, yes, and Warrkungka, Lukuthikuthila, Libankuwa, Maruwanmala, Bulubuluwiji. Yes, go, I am here jungkayi, you dugong are my mother Go! Go! I am telling you.

(Tommy Nawurrungu, speaking in 1985, cited in Bradley 1997, 202)

Wunubarryi is associated in the fullest sense with the maintenance and fecundity of dugongs throughout the Gulf of Carpentaria. To Marra and Yanyuwa, Wunubarryi is wirrimalaru – a term that denotes a status that translates to being a powerful place, one that combines the attributes of high position with spiritual, symbolic and political power. The term is used in reference to ancestral Dreamings, ceremonies, sacred objects, individual people, groups of people and places. Places considered wirrimalaru are of great importance to Marra and Yanyuwa, as they represent ‘country that is always strong, strong forever’ (Gordon Lansen, pers. comm., 20 September 2002).

In 1976 the Dugong Dreaming at Wunubarryi was desecrated. The white leaseholders of what was then Nathan River Pastoral Station, a non-Indigenous land holding which incorporated Wunubarryi within its limits, dug out two of the female dugongs while constructing a four-wheel drive track through the area (Bradley 1997, 203). News of this destruction made its way to the Marra and Yanyuwa, and was received with great distress. People’s concern was primarily directed at the effects of this desecration on the health of the dugong population in the Gulf of Carpentaria (Bradley 1997, 203).
The road being constructed also cut through a nearby Kunabibi ground. The Kunabibi is a ceremony dedicated to the celebration of ritual estates, reinforcing ancestral substance as linked to country of the Mermaid (a-Marrarabarna) and the Whirlwind Rainbow Serpent (Walalu) Dreamings (Bradley with Yanyuwa Families 2017, 117, 470). Kunabibi is a regional ceremony practised across a number of different language groups throughout Australia. Each group has their own variant of the ceremony, but groups often gathered to perform Kunabibi collectively with neighbours. In coming together, ritual practice would combine the discrete practices of each group in a large-scale ceremony involving men and women, and ceremony grounds for men and women (John Bradley, pers. comm., 20 July 2018).

Wunubarryi was a place where regional groups would come together to perform Kunabibi at a Marra-centric Kunabibi ground. The ceremony grounds of both men and women at Wunubarryi were desecrated by the road construction in 1976. This particular ceremony ground dated from the mid-1950s and represented the very last Marra-specific Kunabibi site in the region (John Bradley, pers. comm., 20 July 2018).

The Marra and Yanyuwa peoples found out about the 1976 desecration of Wunubarryi some time later, during sacred site recordings with heritage consultant Dehne McLaughlin (McLaughlin 1978). This site destruction was locally condemned, and gained public mention in the 1977 Borroloola Land Claim hearings (John Bradley, pers. comm., 20 July 2018). The Land Claim hearings marked the beginnings of a political history involving the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976. The Wunubarryi desecration was detailed in the Land Claim hearings, along with other cases of deliberate destruction of sacred sites across Yanyuwa and Marra country, including the desecration of log coffin burials within a cave on South West Island, in the Gulf of Carpentaria. This amounted to evidence of the harm done by White Australians to Aboriginal lands and waters throughout the region, while also conveying the roles and obligations of a kincentric ecology across these territories. Recognising the emotional harms caused by site destruction and the disregard of Indigenous cultural heritages was one part of the Land Claim process, in which the enduring nature of this kincentric ecology is the fundamental justification for the return of land rights.

The second desecration of Wunubarryi occurred in 1984. News of this reached the community much more quickly, for it occurred at a time when Indigenous people, emboldened by the results of regional Land Claims, began to move once again across their country, scrutinising the activities of pastoralists and leaseholders. In this instance the pastoralist upgraded
the existing road (as cleared in 1976), again moving the already relocated female dugongs and digging further through the ceremony ground. In the case of the 1976 desecration nothing could be done, due to a lack of lawful provisions that would require the non-Indigenous leaseholders to consult with Marra over works in the area. By the time of the second violation, however, the Aboriginal Sacred Sites Authority—an independent statutory authority responsible for overseeing the protection of Aboriginal sacred sites in the Northern Territory—had come into existence. It had registered the area of Wunubarryi as a sacred site, yet no prosecutions occurred because the person who committed the secondary act was no longer in the Northern Territory, and his whereabouts were not known.

In 1984 Tommy Reilly Nawurrungu, a senior Marra man, recorded the following comments with anthropologist John Bradley:

Today when I saw those dugong by the graded road I was very sorry. We don't mind people putting a road away from the ceremony place, but we do not want the road by the ceremony. It is no use saying sorry about the place after they dig it up. They should find out first. Man comes sneaking in just like him stealing a car, as if there is no person owning this country.

(John Bradley, ethnographic field notes, pers. comm., 20 July 2018)

In 1984 Dulu Burranda, another senior Marra man, struggled to come to terms with the events, exclaiming ‘We never came from anywhere else, we come from here. How can they do this to our country?’ (John Bradley, ethnographic field notes, pers. comm., 20 July 2018). Some years later, in 2002, I spoke with Yanyuwa elders about earlier events at Wunubarryi. Annie Karrakayn reflected on the social memories linked to this place:

My father would go hit the stone and dugong would go and run out all over the country. But they been killem that place, those white-fellas, they been separating the land and sea, for them it’s nothing, just empty. But I think they are jealous and greedy ones, can’t see all one mob, land and sea, all area belong to us people. That place is dugong, but when they killem [it’s because] nobody don’t do anything that’s good for us around here.

(Annie Karrakayn, pers. comm., 3 October 2002)

In 2018, while travelling and working in the Limmen National Park with Indigenous landowners, discussions of site destruction at Wunubarryi
emerged once again. The Nathan River Pastoral Station was converted to a national park in 2012, becoming part of the extensive Limmen National Park. In a series of conversations with the senior Marra man David Barrett, it became clear that the social memories of this destruction of place remain strong: people still express disbelief that such events were allowed to occur. David has grown up in the region and now works as an Indigenous sea ranger there, conducting regional management and safeguarding to ensure the health and wellbeing of his sea country. Now aged 32, he was not even born when either of the desecrations took place at Wunubarryi, yet his knowledge of these events, and his exasperation at the disregard shown for Indigenous people’s cultural heritage more broadly, are evident when he reflects:

The problem keeps going today, charter companies take tourists all over the place, and they even come in on choppers. They pay nothing to be there and the helicopters land right there, right near that place [Wunubarryi]. Those charter people just make up stories for tourists about what’s there. They don’t care about the real story or anything else, they just mess it all up over and over again. I think it all started with that old pastoralist, that whitefella who dug out the dugongs at Wunubarryi. He did that just to build a fishing track. Since then nothing’s really changed, same old story. But it’s a beautiful place out there, yeah, really something.

(David Barrett, pers. comm., 4 July 2018)

So how is it that, in the face of ancestral importance and great cultural meaning, the desecration of the dugong herd and dolphin at Wunubarryi and the destruction of the Kunabibi ceremony ground could occur? The complications in this case are that these events took place against a backdrop of enduring settler-colonialism. The incidents were supported by white settler/leaseholder ignorance, a lack of political and legal safeguards and a condition of geographical isolation, removing any surveillance that might have helped to prevent such destructive acts. In this part of the Gulf of Carpentaria, Indigenous and non-Indigenous residents live alongside one another; their histories have been interwoven since the early nineteenth century, in a complex mix of violent and amicable terms. A pattern of resistance, accommodation and entanglement in Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations distinguishes this part of Australia, as it does elsewhere.

Yet the prevailing ontics (habits of action and expression) of everyday life have ensured white dominance and control over the lands and
waters. Despite land rights legislation being instated during this time, Indigenous groups have still had to pursue their rights through the provisions of the settler-colonial state. I propose that the destruction of Wunubarryi was an act, or a sequence of actions, of settler-colonial ambivalence – part of a long chain in destructive ontics that are linked to coloniality. Such ambivalence transmutes into a form of violence in its commitment to axiological retreat that is a failure to care. Axiological retreat, as I explore it here, invokes principles of disregard and moral disengagement at a level so normalised that the question of care passes into oblivion for those who enact the violence, and for the systems that ultimately support them.

**Destructive ontologies and responsive reflexivity**

Wunubarryi and the Marra and Yanyuwa kin that care for this place carry testimonies of violence. The ethnographic record of cultural wounding for Indigenous Australians (see Kearney 2014, 2017) is a densely packed account of physical and cultural harms. These include the dispossession of rights to lands, waters and heritage – and, since 1788, the tireless pursuit of rights and provisions to safeguard the cultural expressions, ways of knowing and of being. Testimonies of violence have been given in families and communities, trials and commissions, through films and even in solitude (Weine 2006, xiii). Testimonies of violence and harm demonstrate the power of speech acts for those who have lived through disordering events, and the importance of those aspects of life that have been fundamentally rearranged through destructive acts. As testimonies, speech acts that demarcate the destruction of heritage and place value are powerful; they resist silencing and emphasise remembering by retrieving and sharing memories of ‘what has happened’. Marra and Yanyuwa testimonies of what has occurred at Wunubarryi are evidence of this. In this case, however, it is not only the testimony of humans that recounts the destruction of heritage, but also the testimony of the place itself.

Wunubarryi offers a non-verbal account of destruction that serves as testimony to the effects of harm. The physical evidence of destruction as scars – and the subsequent harms this caused to the dugong populations in the Gulf of Carpentaria, and to the emotional wellbeing of Marra and Yanyuwa – highlight the interconnectivity of a single destructive act in a kincentric ecology. As Salmón has noted, ‘Life in any environment is viable only when humans view their surroundings as kin; that their
mutual roles are essential for survival’ (Salmón 2000, 1332). In a striking analogy, he adds that ‘If one aspect of the lasso is removed, the integrity of the circle is threatened and all other aspects are weakened’ (Salmón 2000, 1329).

Responsiveness to the testimonies of destroyed places may also express what Albrecht describes as ‘solastalgia’ (Albrecht 2006). Conveying the intimacy of heritage destruction and its effects on the lives of those responsible for such heritage very closely, solastalgia describes the ‘pain or sickness caused by the loss of, or inability to derive solace from, the present state of one’s home environment’ (Albrecht 2006, 35). The enduring quality of Marra and Yanyuwa social memories born of the destruction of Wunubarryi and the harms done to this dugong herd, dolphin and the neighbouring Kunabibi ground, speak to a deeply held sadness connected to loss. As Albrecht has perceived, ‘Solastalgia exists when there is recognition that the beloved place in which one resides is under assault (physical desolation)’ (Albrecht 2006, 35).

In this instance Marra and Yanyuwa may not reside permanently at Wunubarryi, but their kin do: that is, the ancestral dugongs and dolphin. This is home in the broadest sense of the word that is country, a homeland within which lie all the elements of Marra and Yanyuwa Law. Albrecht has commented that ‘Solastalgia is the lived experience of the loss of value of the present and is manifest in a feeling of dislocation, of being undermined by forces that destroy the potential for solace to be derived from the immediate and given’ (Albrecht 2006, 35). In this instance, a form of value nihilism has fuelled the destructive ontologies of non-Indigenous place relations. This has taken hold as a failure to care for the integrity and value of Wunubarryi; in this instance decisive care is mediated only by the effect to which self-interest is under threat. The consequential harms of unearthing the female dugongs were in this case sufficiently diffused so as to restrict the likelihood of care and consequence for non-Indigenous perpetrators. Did the pastoralist know of the dugongs? Certainly these were known about in the case of the second wave of destruction in 1984, which thus represents a ‘failure to care’ and a willful axiological retreat. To enact harm to this place in the second instance pushes the destructive ontology into the realm of moral disengagement, expressed as ambivalence and axiological retreat in settler-colonial apprehensions of Indigenous cultural heritage.

The dispositions of responsive reflexivity, retreat and ambivalence co-exist within the context of Wunubarryi and, more broadly, of Australian Indigenous cultural heritages and the settler state. These lay bare the competing ontics that underscore and undermine heritage
value, and efforts at safeguarding Indigenous places of importance. These are distinguished by two orientations towards heritage and the place world. The first is that of responsive reflexivity; the second is unresponsive reflexivity.

Responsive reflexivity involves fully engaging reflexive self-awareness, and in doing so acknowledging reflexivity beyond the self. In this case, the condition of knowing the self increases the likelihood of seeing and knowing the existences of others, human or otherwise. In the case of destruction and disorder, this reflexive awareness is extended to imagine and to witness more fully the experiences of that which is harmed. Unresponsive reflexivity stops at the self; it denies an expanding reflexive awareness to include other beings and dispositions of consequence and importance. In sum, it manifests as unwillingness to imagine the lived experience of destruction and disorder, a lack of commitment to witnessing such events and lingering encounters and, sadly, a denial of their harmful effects altogether.

In the first instance, namely responsive reflexivity, responsiveness is receptiveness to the acknowledgement of value, harm and sensitivity to their causation. This might be expressed as an empathic response or a drive to remediate and mitigate against further harm. Responsive reflexivity heavily involves and implicates the human in the causation of harm, even as it draws on human witnesses (or kin) to acknowledge and therefore through response alleviate the suffering of place. In contrast, unresponsive reflexivity – as characterising the non-Indigenous protagonists’ orientation in this case study – is characterised by passivity, even in the face of exposure to or knowledge of place harm.

As an act of choice, this unresponsive reflexivity represents a distant form of witnessing. A person may avail themselves of it to recognise harm to a lesser or greater degree, but he or she will opt out from a dialogic encounter as one that prompts reflection. The witness may be unmoved to care or act in response, instead availing himself or herself only to the position of ‘knowing about’ place harm. Such a position may cause an individual or group of people to locate place harm as secondary to the interests of people, or as something inevitable and part of a ‘modern world system’. It may be cast as an unfortunate outcome, or a necessary burden to be carried by distant cultural others.

Responsive reflexivity and unresponsive reflexivity both involve consciousness of actions, events and even change as a form of witnessing. Yet these actions and harms are processed through very different axiologies and may lead to very different ontologies in people and place relations. Where heritage destruction occurs and disorder takes hold, human life
is drawn into a relational encounter in which response and non-response might appear to be two options. Responsive reflexivity is juxtaposed by unresponsive reflexivity, yet it exists as one part on a continuum of engagement. Here reflexivity is treated as that state of being in which the self is encountered as a communal actor, consistently problematised in relation to something or someone else (Finlay 2003; Gough 2003).

It is the distinction between ‘having knowledge of’ and ‘having faith in the claim of consequence’ that is pertinent to this discussion of destructive ontologies. To ‘have knowledge of place harm’ is akin to spectatorship; a situation in which witnessing involves the knowledge or even perhaps observation of harm, yet an enduring separation between the effects of that harm and the continuation of certain forms of life. Consequential harms may be overlooked, justified, diminished or even denied by spectators in this mode of unresponsive reflexivity.

Witnessing of the intimate kind and ‘having faith’ in the occurrence of harm brings an altogether different response. This may be a vivid awareness of circumstances, as is the case with Wunubarryi and the worrying effects of its destruction on the health of dugong populations throughout the Gulf, or the health of Marra and Yanyuwa kin who are connected to this place. For Indigenous owners of heritage, people come to feel and embody the harm done to places such as Wunubarryi, while seeking out epistemological frameworks for describing it. So they also are drawn to care, and thus express dissent, anger, sadness or longing at what has occurred. Intimate forms of witnessing have at their core a sense of responsibility. Such responsibility throws open the limits of obligation, care, culpability and investment in something greater than human life.

**Final thoughts on axiological return**

One way of shrinking the gap, within which heritage destruction as a failure to care occurs, is to balance the concern for human rights with that of human responsibility, or radically to replace the former with the latter as a new framework for configuring rights, accountability and action. Responsibility is associated with the ways in which dependencies and interactions are mediated, on terms that not only protect and provide for the human right to life, but fully enact responsibility in the protection and caring for all life – configured here as the co-presences that culminate in a culturally distinct place world. Instead of the human right to ‘do as they wish’ being paramount, there is instead an overriding
responsibility to support the conditions by which all else experiences its freedom as a form of internal order and local empiricism. These ‘relations of interdependence’ have been described by Rose as bearing responsibilities for others (Rose 2008, 110).

Emphasising responsibility is about enhancing relational awareness and recognition as to the intercultural worlds in which we exist, particularly in the settler-colonial scene that is Australia. The establishment of responsibility returns this discussion to a wider realm of kinship. Human roles and responsibility are derived from relational ontologies and awareness, and it is kinship that structures cycles of responsibility (Pierotti 2008, 185). By this we mean kinship as something pervasive, a concept greater than people’s biological and social relationships to one another and inclusive of all and any elements of the place world in which humans are one element. A kincentric ecology functions in accordance with multifarious agents that extend beyond human life, thus enlarging our perceptual selves and the capacity to see other agents and presences of consequence. Kincentricity compels the awareness that other agents and co-presences possess and demand rights through their inherent character and order.

Seeking pathways to an axiological return, in which kinship between people and place is found, and inspired, is the final objective here. This requires a reflective discussion on the principles and relational commitments essential to kincentric ecology, as a heuristic and practical device aimed at redressing heritage destructions worldwide. Most importantly the challenge of how these principles can be lived and re-entered into the normative practice of everyday place interactions among cultural and ethnic groups worldwide, as inclusive of Indigenous and non-Indigenous identities, should be engaged. In concluding, it is proposed that kincentric ecology provides the most substantial epistemology for realising ontological and axiological shifts in human conceptualisations and relationships with place. In so doing they expand the scope of care to include heritage as the encompassing context into which human life is projected, reflected and affirmed.

Note

1. A dugong is an aquatic mammal found on the coasts of the Indian Ocean from eastern Africa to northern Australia. Maintenance sites or ‘increase’ sites are locations tied to a particular species or phenomena that requires ‘activating’. The literature on ‘increase’ habits reveals a range of human practices designed to aid the increase process, including the stacking of stones, the striking or brushing of rock surfaces, painting and repainting of rock art, building of shrines or the bearing of stone objects on the body (see McNiven 2016, 197).
References


