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# Someone's 'Terra Nullius': Studying Lost Topographies in Oodgeroo Noonuccal's 'We Are Going'

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Homes are not topographical and mere works of machinery and craftsmanship based on habitats built by means of bricks and walls. Homes are ideological constructions, based on the idea of familiarity of experience achieved by means of the unification of the physical empirical substance of the construction of habitable space and the psychological, spiritual, and greater cultural sense of habitation of the individual who inhabits the same physical space. The de-familiarisation and distortion of the already established uniformed unification of the physical habitat and the mental habitat creates the scenario of un-housed-ness and a sense of non-being. Colonial superstructure deconstructs native history, culture, identity, and goes to the extent of erasing the same by virtue of dehumanizing the native individual, and tries to locate the past of the native land as a non-entity, a tabula rasa, and legitimizes its 'discovery' by itself. Western imperialism 'dis-covered' Australia like the places of African continent and went on to perpetuate its own laws and disciplines of civilization by a complete negation of the pre-colonial world of cultural heritage and history. Dehumanization of the native is a precondition to imperialism and its justification of the colonial violence inflicted on the native. The subjugation and silencing of the Australian pre-colonial Aboriginal oral history and its cultural fecundity follow the characteristic narrative of imperialism.

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Sincerely Aboriginal Australia's case is no exception when seen and reflected in terms of a comparative study of other narratives of Western imperialisms in other parts of the world. The dehumanization of the native and the silencing of the pre-colonial native traditions differ from other spaces of colonial encounters across the globe only in kind and methods and not much in degree. Australia was a settler's colony, and therefore there is a case of the settlement of the European diasporas who would naturally find themselves de-territorialized and un-housed. And there will be on their part a natural inclination of making out of the foreign and alien habitat a habitable unification of the physical, mental, and cultural Home. Thus another natural inclination of the new settlers would understandably appear to be of metamorphosing the alien land into habitable home. However, this needed a methodological apparatus which we define as the universal case of de-constructing the native home in order to build a home of the settlers. And there lies the unnaturalness in the methodology of construction of the settler's home, and there lies in Australia's case a unique case of imperial narrative where the settler's physical de-territorialization from his native world forces him to re-construct in the alien world a habitable home by virtue of re-territorialization and an aggressive de-constructing of the native Aboriginal cultural home, while on the other hand the native Aboriginals suffer no physical de-territorialization and roam homeless and un-housed without any further possibility of re-territorialization. Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Kath Walker) is an Aboriginal voice and activist who presents an elegy of lost homes and known topographies, and tries to paint silenced narratives of the home-less-ness of the native tribes in 'We Are Going' and thereby functions as the native trying to 'write back', and the same tries to establish the story of dehumanization and marginalization of the rightful owners of the so called 'Terra Nullius'.

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To begin with, Oodgeroo's 'We Are Going' is an elegy, elegiac in the mourning for the loss of homelands, for being a stranger in the native land, for suffering estrangement and alienation of a tribe which is forced to dwell in ignominy and silence in the context of colonial encounter. The poem's evaluation can run in many ways, and all such variations of interpretations run together in congeniality to form a unified whole of mourning the loss of the habitable space and establishing at the same time the silenced histories of the past which definitely procures the phenomenon of 'writing back'. The poem mourns the absence, and at the same time pours in the memory of the pre-colonial past to form a view of the Australian topography that does not get referred to in the colonial narrative of the continent's history, or gets rejected and silenced following the basic features of white man's dominion. It presents through vanished realities the truth of the cultural memory of the Aboriginal past, and tries to locate through the absence of such ways and traditions of the native folk the prevalent presence of the same. Thereby it is a reflection on the subjugation of the land and its people on one hand, and on the other it tries to locate the spectacle of native Australia de-familiarizing itself, since a land or an inhabited topography gains a character by the people that populates and inhabits the same. This is not a mere poem of the retelling of the trauma of dislocation of Aborigines. This is at the same time a poem about the continual unnatural dislocation of Australia itself which is made to come as subjugated by being polished and re-constructed according to the norms of foreign laws and disciplines of 'civilization' and 'modernity'. On the other hand, beside this interplay of man's and nature's dislocation and re-ramification, there exists in the poem an underlying anti-colonial Aboriginal historiography which tries to re-establish the past unified oneness ---- native traditions and customs, its mythology, its unification of the larger physical nature existing outside and the inner

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tribal nature which developed an inscrutable oneness with the inhabited space and landscape ---- existing between Australia's land and its age-old tribes. Read from other perspectives, the poem also presents the wholeness and fecundity of the unified ecological and humanitarian universe of Australia getting continually disjointed and deconstructed.

Australia's 'discovery' by the Whites 'covered' the Aboriginal past under thick blankets of colonial repression. This de-characterized and re-characterized not merely the land according to the ways of the Whiteman, but also its people, as right in the first line of Oodgeroo's 'We Are Going' we come across the tales of the old Aboriginal structures which previously characterised not only their land but also, with oneness of the same, their 'selves' are deconstructed and how the natural owners of the land have suffered an unnatural alienation and homelessness and turned in their own native land a distant 'They'. Oodgeroo further writes:

They came in to the little town  
A semi-naked band subdued and silent  
All that remained of their tribe.  
They came here to the place of their old bora ground  
Where now the many white men hurry about like ants.  
Notice of the estate agent reads: 'Rubbish May Be Tipped Here'.  
Now it half covers the traces of the old bora ring.  
'We are as strangers here now, but the white tribe are the  
strangers...'<sup>1</sup>

Oodgeroo's lines reflect two important aspects of the colonial encounter together. Firstly, the Aboriginals, turned into a distant 'they' are placed as direct foil to the condition of the 'white men' who find ease and homely spontaneity in the supposed foreign space 'hurry[ing] about like ants', while the natives are subjugated and

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made 'strange' as the old pre-colonial world of communion existing between the native folk and their land --- with its known topography, its cultural characterisation of the larger nature, its totemic and mythical ramifications of the known space --- is somehow disturbed and distorted, and the same de-familiarization of the greater outer world leads to the overwhelming question of a crisis of identity, of being 'strange' without physical dislocation. This in turn has many dimensions. On one level this can be looked at as a case of the larger topographical space getting altered and thereby the inhabitants are culturally dislocated and turned 'homeless', while at another level it is the native tribe's subjugation which has resulted in the greater distortion of the landscapes without. The result is not merely geological and spaciological subversion, but to bring our second contention, this is a subversion of the colonial kind, a spectacle of the possessor of the land being made crippled and forced to follow foreign norms even when the foreign ones are 'strangers'. This brings before our eyes the spectacle of colonial Manichaeism that Fanon talked about as he went on to characterize truthfully the nature and scope of the coloniser/colonized relationship:

The settler's town is a well-fed town, an easy-going town; its belly is always full of good things....

The native town is a hungry town, starved of bread, of meat, of shoes, of coal, of light. The native town is a crouching village, a town on its knees, a town wallowing in the mire.<sup>2</sup>

Fanon's truthful portrayal coupled with Oodgeroo's mournful depiction of the 'semi-naked' Aboriginal folk testifies to the Manichaeian nature of colonial encounters and places the Australian case as part of the universal saga of colonial repression.

As the poem moves forward there is a continuation of the recurring pattern of mournful representation of a known topography turned

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emotionally and culturally ‘strange’ to the Aboriginals. The line ‘Notice of the estate agent reads: “Rubbish May Be Tipped Here”’, beside the last remnants of the ‘Bora’ ring (a place associated with the native initiation ceremony) is a clear metaphorical and metonymic representation of the nature and scope of the subversion of the native cultural and religious rituals and the associated ideas involved with the land. Oodgeroo shows the Eurocentric il-legalization and disfiguring of the Aboriginal homeland and legitimisation of the same as a means of disciplining the topography and modernizing by creating civil amenities. This essentially takes away the natural flavour of the land and the inhabitants, and Western civilization did not merely disfigure the land, but deemed its inhabitants as non-existent, and the same gave them the rationale to impose its own laws on a the land and its people, as Colin Bourke and Helen Cox confirm:

The British sought to extend their laws to the land now called Australia and its Aboriginal inhabitants....

Despite Aboriginal resistance England declared itself the sovereign or ruler of Australia. The established legal doctrine that enabled it to do this is known as terra nullius....

Australia was declared to be a land that was not occupied by a people with settled laws. In legal effect, it was terra nullius.<sup>3</sup>

The next few lines of Oodgeroo’s ‘We Are Going’ can be seen as the postcolonial act of re-memembering the lost identity and identification with the land on the part of the native. She writes:

We belong here, we are of the old ways.

We are the corroboree and the bora ground,

We are the old ceremonies, the laws of the elders.<sup>4</sup>

It is from here that the concept of space and memory, of mourning the lost topographies finds a new aspect of historical space. Oodgeroo now tries to employ the knowledge of the Aboriginal past and their

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pre-colonial rituals as a medium of alternative historiography. The poem becomes a representation of the Aboriginal concept of time and space, the Aboriginal beliefs regarding the land. This works as a pattern which is counter-discursive to the Eurocentric claims of the 'terra nullius'. There is flurry of nature imagery and images of the age-old customs and Aboriginal forms of customs which were practiced as laws, the ones which got rejected by the colonial aggressors. Unlike basic European concept of linear time and compartmentalization of the landscapes by means of categorizations of 'sacred', 'civil', and so on, the Aboriginal concept of their inhabited topography and land is one of a unified uniformity beyond the basic laws and disciplines of the Western world. The images approve of the religious history of the tribes and their beliefs, and function to portray how this oneness with nature and the unified whole of Man being Nature and the Landscape is lost under the colonial rule. There are references to the 'Dream Time' or 'The Dreaming', the eagles, the kangaroos, the 'hunting and the laughter', 'corroboree'<sup>5</sup> which all recur as items of historical documentation of the neglected past of the Aborigines. Bill Edwards notes the significance of the land in Aboriginal thought:

The whole landscape is conceived as having been formed through the activities of the Spirit Beings. The whole environment is viewed as the arena in which the dramatic events of The Dreaming were and are enacted. The continent is dotted with significant sites associated with stories, for example, places where Spirit Beings first emerged, where they performed a ceremony or where they died and re-entered the earth. It is criss-crossed with the tracks of the Spirit Beings as they travelled from site to site.... In one sense, all land is a sacred site....

Western ideas about reality and religion are based largely on the

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general acceptance of dichotomies between natural and cultural, material and spiritual, past and present, secular and sacred, subject and object....<sup>6</sup>

However, the Aboriginal beliefs never made any distinction of the Western kind. To them all nature, its attributes, rocks, are extensions of the human being, and therefore the distortion of the land and alteration based on subject and object (which is basic to Eurocentric appropriation and characteristically representative of the colonial encounter) not merely distorts the land, but the native identity. Thus to be homeless for the native Aborigines is a potential homelessness of the larger habitat, and landscape of Australia. Thus when the poetic voice proclaims:

We are nature and the past, all the old ways  
Gone now and scattered...<sup>7</sup>

---- it is a case of mutual subjugation and dismemberment, a turning of tribe into no land's man, and a painful metamorphosis of a land into a land belonging to none. This is a loss of mutual addressing and homes.

Oodgeroo's 'We Are Going' is elegiac since it mourns mutual subjugation and subversion resulting in mutual de-territorialization of the empirically living Aboriginal tribes and the spiritually living landscape. However, one thing must be pointed out before we conclude. The poem is no harmless elegy. This is a plane of historical documentation, a means of translating oral narratives of the Aboriginal conception of time and space associated with their homelands, a way of scripting the same to develop an alternative realm of historical consciousness and historical space. This historically manifests too a unified ecology of mysticism uniting nature and man as a single whole. The same historiography allows Oodgeroo to locate the distinct world of cultural and philosophical



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heritage of the native indigenous Australia against the racist and Eurocentric modelling of the same as available in literary spaces such as A.D. Hope's 'Australia'<sup>8</sup>. This duly manifests Sally Morgan's desire to write a history of the tribes of Australia. Oodgeroo's 'We Are Going' is thus definitely a political and emotional commentary on the 'discovery' of Australia, and it duly reciprocates to the cause of re-'discovering' the same land and the topography to be someone's 'terra nullius'.

**Notes:**

<sup>1</sup>Oodgeroo Noonuccal, "We Are Going", 26th January, 2014 <[http://famouspoetsandpoems.com/poets/oodgeroo\\_noonuccal/poems/4601](http://famouspoetsandpoems.com/poets/oodgeroo_noonuccal/poems/4601)>

<sup>2</sup>Frantz Fanon, "Concerning Violence", *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (London: Penguin Classics, 1967, 2001) 30.

<sup>3</sup>Colin Bourke and Helen Cox, "Two Laws: One Land", Colin Bourke, Eleanor Bourke, and Bill Edwards ed. *Aboriginal Australia* (Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 2002) 56.

<sup>4</sup>Oodgeroo Noonuccal, "We Are Going", 26th January, 2014 <[http://famouspoetsandpoems.com/poets/oodgeroo\\_noonuccal/poems/4601](http://famouspoetsandpoems.com/poets/oodgeroo_noonuccal/poems/4601)>

<sup>5</sup>Corroboree is part of the Australian Aboriginal ritualistic design where the Aborigines interact through dance, costume, and music with Dreamtime or The Dreaming.

<sup>6</sup>Bill Edwards, "Living and Dreaming", Colin Bourke, Eleanor Bourke, and Bill Edwards ed. *Aboriginal Australia* (Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 2002) 81.

<sup>7</sup>Oodgeroo Noonuccal, "We Are Going", 26th January, 2014 <[http://famouspoetsandpoems.com/poets/oodgeroo\\_noonuccal/poems/4601](http://famouspoetsandpoems.com/poets/oodgeroo_noonuccal/poems/4601)>

<sup>8</sup>A.D. Hope's famous poem depicts Australia as a barren spectacle and a land having no sign of what European civilization called 'civilization'. Hope's representation of Australia is stereotypically representative of the ways of Western discourses on the Australian land and indigenous tribes. He wrote:

A nation of trees, drab green and desolate grey  
In the field uniform of modern wars  
Darkens her hills, those endless, outstretched paws  
Of Sphinx demolished or stone lion worn away.  
They call her a young country, but they lie:  
She is the last of lands, the emptiest,  
A woman beyond her change of life, a breast  
Still tender but within the womb is dry.

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Without songs, architecture, history...

A.D. Hope, "Australia", 26th January, 2014,

<<http://johnwatsonsite.com/MyClassNotes/Topics/Poetry/Australia%20AD%20Hope.html>>

<sup>9</sup>Sally Morgan thought it necessary to write a history of the natives from the point of view of the oppressed, thus intending to voice the untold past that would sloganize rebellion of the anti-colonial kind and tell the true story of invasion and violence of Western imperialism by writing back to the centre which termed the deconstruction of native history and culture as 'discovery'. Morgan famously wrote:

I want to write the history of my own family... there's almost nothing written from a personal point of view about Aboriginal people. All our history is about the white man. No one knows what it was like for us. A lot of our history has been lost, people have been too frightened to say anything. There's a lot of history we can't even get at... I just want to tell a little bit of the other side of the story.

Sally Morgan, *My Place* (Fremantle, Western Australia: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1987)163-64.

Oodgeroo poetically records remnants of the silenced remnants of Aboriginal history.