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Life and death in Australian 'heartlands': pastoralism, ecology and rethinking the outback

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Abstract

Australian outback mythology is frequently invoked in attempts to unify Australians and smooth over differences. This is accomplished by appeals to shared heritage and shared cultural and economic interests. To a significant extent outback mythology is associated with the extensive grazing industries of the inland and north of Australia. Through association with a mythology of national origins, pastoral land use has been important in both national building in Australia and in generating a sense of settler belonging. The positive cultural association of pastoralism, however, have come under intensifying criticism since the 1980s from environmentalists and others. Drawing on ecologically based nationalism, critics of pastoralism draw on outback mythology to emphasise a geography of death in the inland caused by grazing and to articulate alternative inland geographies grounded in ecological thinking. These politics of nation building highlight

new forms of long standing tensions between the outback as both rural heartland and wilderness in national origin stories, the role of land use practices in struggles over who and what "belongs", and the roles of mythology in struggles over resources. These visions of the inland are however limited by frontier thinking and the boundaries and disjunctures this creates. The variety of connections between land and peoples are not part of these visions. In Sack's terms (*Homo Geographicus: A Framework for Action, Awareness and Moral Concern*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1997) the morality of these geographies of the inland is questionable as they render the inland opaque and prevent "seeing through to the real". Protagonists in these debates and researchers must grapple with the reality and diversity of connections and disconnections between land and people to create moral geographies of the inland and grounded conversations beyond mythology.



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