

Article

Re-Turning to the Event of Colonisation in New South Wales

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Abstract: In this paper, I re-turn to the event of colonisation in New South Wales. I draw on the journal of my ancestor, David Collins, who came to New South Wales on the First Fleet in 1788 to take up the position of the colony's Judge Advocate and Secretary to Governor Phillip. Drawing on Collins' account of the first years of the colony, I contemplate the difficult interface between the Indigenous civilisation that existed in New South Wales prior to the event of colonisation, and the British newcomers' civilisation as it was thought and practiced in those first years of the colony. That im/possible interface still reverberates in the present, implicating me as a 6th-generation newcomer.

Keywords: event; re-turn; colonisation; response-ability; minor gesture; emergent listening

1. Re-Turning to the Event of Colonisation in New South Wales

My approach in this paper to the British colonisation of New South Wales¹ draws on Badiou's concept of event, among others, in order to provoke a different imagining of the colonial encounter. Events in history, Boyce observes, are generally discussed in terms of "impersonal economic and political forces, and the actions and reactions of kings, bishops and lords. Only the bravest historians have delved into the fraught field of inner meaning" (Boyce 2020a, p. 44). What I explore in this paper, is not so much "inner meaning," but meaning's collective and fragmented impact on our bodies, our actions, our imaginations, and our desires, our capacity to see, to hear, to feel, to touch and be touched—to sense the people and the land that we encounter. That impact endures over centuries.

The point of seeking to comprehend meaning's collective and fragmented impact through which past events were made thinkable and do-able, as I have set out to do here, is neither to redeem the perpetrators or to judge them, but to reconfigure our responsibilities/response-abilities, both then and now. Re-turning asks of us that we ponder anew who and what we are as participants in the event of colonisation. It asks of us that we re-configure our response-abilities, not just in the abstract, but in our bodies, in our relations with others and with the land itself (Davies 2021).

Barad (2014, p. 184) says of re-turning, "Responding—being responsible/response-able—to the thick tangles of spacetime-matterings that are threaded through us, the places and times from which we came but never arrived and never leave, is perhaps what re-turning is about." In this re-turn to the colonisation of New South Wales, I consider the im/possibilities of that early encounter. I begin by re-turning to the first years of the colony and I consider in what ways that event is still unfolding. The ongoing cruelty to the Indigenous people—the refusal to give them a voice, the brutal acts of incarceration and the ongoing destruction of Country necessitates that re-turn, in which we ask, collectively: what was that event, and what is it still?

As a 6th-generation newcomer, I am no longer simply a stranger to the land as my ancestors were. I am intimately connected to the land. I am permeated by it and it is permeated by me (Somerville 2020). My responsibility to it and its people is "a matter of the ability to respond. Listening for the response of the other and an obligation to be



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¹ New South Wales at that time extended along the east coast of the Australian continent from the northern-most to the southern-most tip, including the territories now known as Queensland, Victoria and Tasmania.

responsive to the other, who is not entirely separate from what we call the self" (Barad 2011, p. 69). In recognising that inseparability, I enter the event itself as a minor participant, that is, as a disruptive participant, confronting majority views.

The documentation I work with is from the journal of my ancestor, David Collins, who came to New South Wales on the First Fleet as the new colony's Judge Advocate and Secretary to the Governor.² His journal, *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales vols 1 & 2* (Collins [1798] 1975, offers a detailed account of the first twelve years of the colony). In my book *New Lives in an Old Land* (Davies 2019), I devote two chapters to David Collins' life; one deals with his years in Sydney as Judge Advocate, and the other with his time as Lieutenant Governor of Van Diemen's Land.

Collins' account of the first years of the colony offers rich material with which to contemplate the im/possible interface between the Indigenous civilisation that existed in New South Wales prior to the event of colonisation, and the British newcomers' civilisation, as it was thought and practiced by the newcomers. Some readers will find it controversial, or just plain wrong, to refer to the former as a civilisation, but following Gammage (2011) and Pascoe (2014), I believe it clearly meets all the criteria: urban settlements, social stratification, a form of government, agriculture, and a symbolic means of communication. So please bear with me if you can. This is not a majoritarian account, in which the dominant categories of being and knowing predominate. It is an intervention in a minor key, and as such it deliberately messes with established doxa through which the natural and social world is made to appear self-evident (Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Manning 2016). Work in a minor key is conceptual, it is emotional, it is poetic, and as such it is disruptive of established ways of thinking and writing.

My task, then, is not to re-iterate, or even refine the majoritarian account of what happened. Instead, I work in a minor key in an attempt to open up possibilities of thought and action in what Badiou might call a poetic intervention in that past (Badiou 2008; Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Manning 2016). The past is not set in stone, and it is never complete. Drawing on quantum physics, Barad (2010, p. 266) observes that "the past is always already open to change. There can never be complete redemption, but spacetime matter can be productively reconfigured, as im/possibilities are reworked". This paper is, then, a "minor gesture" (Manning 2016) toward that productive reconfiguring, as I attempt to make visible and revisable some of the misconceptions that inform current day articles of belief and practice. Those misconceptions are painfully evident in Collins' account of the early years.

2. Colonisation as Event

Badiou defines an event as a hazardous *encounter*, a becoming that changes everything: "The event is that hazardous supplement we call an encounter" (Badiou 2008, p. 188), and it "happens when the excluded part [of the dominant ideology] appears on the social scene, suddenly and drastically. It ruptures the appearance of normality, and it opens a space to rethink reality from the standpoint of its real basis in inconsistent multiplicity" (McLaverty-Robinson 2014).

The key to an event, or hazardous encounter, such as colonisation, as Badiou defines it, is movement that opens up humanity's dynamic multiplicity. Prior to the hazardous colonial encounter, the Indigenous custodians of the land had known and accommodated outsiders—other Indigenous groups with whom they met from time to time for ceremonial business, visitors from northern islands who stayed for limited periods of fishing or trade, and various explorers and researchers who had visited, and moved on. None of these encounters had violently disrupted their ways of knowing-in-being.³ Their civilisation,

² David Collins' child with Margaret Eddington was Eliza Eddington Collins. Eliza married James Cox, and their daughter, Margaret, married Henry Blomfield. Margaret and Henry's son, Euston Barrington Blomfield, was my mother's father (for details see Davies 2019, forthcoming).

³ I use this term, in preference to "understanding" following Barad (2007, p. 185), who argues that knowing and being cannot be separated

developed over more than 60,000 years, was open to difference, but secure in the long-term continuity of its own moorings.

For the newcomers, in the beginning, such movement, opening up humanity's multiplicity through recognising the excluded other, was not possible. And recent events suggest that political imagination is still in thrall to that original inability to be moved.

Events, as Badiou defined them, may take place over decades, and in this case, over centuries. The rupture that could have expanded the newcomers' view of humanity is yet to happen. The excluded part of humanity remained, and remains, excluded. What happens in an event, as Badiou defines it, is that the ways of knowing-in-being that have been invisible, and even unimaginable to the controlling hierarchy, erupt, and make themselves heard, generating creative flows. In this sense, the event of British colonisation from the newcomers' perspective is still to come.

3. The Newcomers' Intransigence

The newcomers' civilisation located itself as opposite to, and dominant over, those who were different, including those, such as convicts and servants, in its own midst. Face-to-face with humanity's dynamic multiplicity, the newcomers' knowing-in-being precluded the kind of rupture that for Badiou defines the event. They were intrepid travellers of the globe, taking control of whatever land would potentially increase the power of the British Empire. To the extent that they trusted in their God's providence, they believed they were safe in those adventures. His protection of them in their travels depended on whether they were doing what He wanted them to do (Davies 2019). Their very survival was thus an important indicator of the legitimacy of their actions, even when they were causing apparent great harm.

Their legitimacy was, further, underpinned by the interlinked binaries through which the British social order was made to make sense, at least from the perspective of the elite. Some of the binaries that structured the social-material order as they understood and practiced it were: See Table 1.

Table 1. Binaries that structure the social-material order.

<i>Dominant</i>	<i>Subordinate</i>
Human	Animal
Civilised	Savage
Christian	Heathen
Knowledge	Ignorance
White	Black
Culture	Nature
Citizen/landowner	Peasant/convict
Wealthy	Poor
Man	Woman
Reason	Emotion
Hierarchical order	Freedom/chaos
Individual	Collective

The dominant terms, together, signified what it was to be human. That understanding of human was etched in direct relation to what it was not—its subordinated other. The dominant term was constituted through collective abjection of the subordinate; each (elite) individual abjected any appearance in themselves of subordinate qualities (Shildrick 2002).⁴

The powerful effect of binary thought was vividly illustrated by Collins when the First Fleet left the Cape of Good Hope on its initial journey to New South Wales. He tells his reader of a Malay man running amuck at the Cape under the influence of opium, killing and maiming several people. So great was the fear of this man, he writes, that the soldiers

⁴ So far-reaching and endemic are those binaries in western thought, that some linguists have imagined them to be biologically determined (Friederici et al. 2017).

had been ordered to shoot any Malay person on sight. When the Malay man was captured he was “immediately consigned to the death he merited, being broken on the wheel, and his head and members severed after the execution, and distributed in different parts of the country” (Collins [1798] 1975, p. lxxxi).

Collins assumed, without question, that the Malay man’s death (or perhaps even Malay men’s deaths) was merited. Yet he was at the same time appalled by the savage implements of torture that he saw at the prison:

Within the walls were to be seen (and seen with horror) six crosses for breaking criminals, a large gibbet, a spiked pole for impalements, wheels etc, etc together with a slight wooden building, erected for the reception of the ministers of justice upon execution days . . . The bodies of those broken on the wheel were exposed in different parts of the town, several instances of which, and some very recent ones, were still to be seen (Collins [1798] 1975, pp. lxxxi–lxxxii).

Despite this bloodthirsty display of savage instruments of torture, and of broken flesh displayed about the town, Collins had managed to enjoy his stay there. When they set sail, he reflected, without any apparent irony, that they were now leaving civilisation behind, along “with its pleasures, and its wealth, and its consequence” (Collins [1798] 1975, pp. lxxxv–lxxxvi) and travelling toward the land of “savages”:

It was natural to indulge at this moment a melancholy reflection which obtruded itself on my mind. The land behind us was the abode of a civilized people; that before us was the residence of savages. When, if ever, we might enjoy the commerce of the world, was doubtful and uncertain. The refreshments and pleasures of which we had so liberally partaken at the Cape, were to be exchanged for coarse fare and hard labour at New South Wales. All communication with families and friends now cut off, we were leaving the world behind us, to enter on a state unknown; and, as if it had been necessary to imprint this idea more strongly on our minds, and to render the sensation still more poignant, at the close of the evening we spoke (to) a ship from London. The metropolis of our native country, its pleasures, its wealth, and its consequence, thus accidentally presented to the mind, failed not to afford a most striking contrast with the object now principally in our view (Collins [1798] 1975, pp. lxxxv–lxxxvi).

The binary structure of Collins’ knowing-in-being made it possible for him to recoil from the savagery at the Cape while still seeing the perpetrators of such savagery as civilised. They belonged on the dominant side of the binary, and momentary lapses into savagery were judged to be necessary in the maintenance of order.

I will come back to judgment as a significant feature of the way the event of colonisation proceeded.

In establishing themselves as rightful residents and owners of the land, and displacing the local Indigenous inhabitants, the British did sometimes display an anthropological curiosity about what they perceived as exotic/savage tribes (Collins [1798] 1975; Davies 2017, 2019). While they might be interested in learning about them, however, and documenting their language and practices as Collins did in volume 2 of his *Account*, it was never a proposition to learn *from* them, except in times of dire need, such as explorers asking how to find food or water in order to survive (see, for example, Mitchell 1838, Sturt [1847] 1965, Sturt [1849] 1965). The possibility of disrupting British/Christian understandings of how to live was not a consideration, except for those rare individuals who ‘went bush’ as some convicts and emancipists did.⁵

⁵ “Emancipist” was the term for ex-convicts who had served their term, and for those committed to supporting them in the pursuit of a viable life. In the early years of the colony the newcomers divided themselves into the Emancipists and the Exclusives, a little like today’s division between Labor and Liberal/National. To the extent Labor is captured by Neoliberalism, however, it is left to the Greens and the Independents to stand up for emancipatory values.

The newcomers' orders from home⁶ were to be kind to the Indigenous people, and to enter into treaties with them that would legitimate the taking up and 'settling' of their land. They failed on both counts, bringing death and pestilence with them and taking up land through acts of war rather than treaty. It is significant still that the Indigenous custodians did not cede, and have never ceded, their sovereignty over the land. The act of cession is the assignment of property to another entity. In international law, it refers to land transferred by treaty.

4. The Problem of Judgment: The Newcomers' Orthodoxy

The event of the colonisation of New South Wales involved the encounter between these two profoundly different civilisations, the first, secure in its knowing-in-being and open to difference; the second, the newcomers, unable to recognise the possibility of the other becoming integral to their own knowing-in-being—not as subordinated others, but as integral to the possibilities and practices of self-hood. From the point of view of the newcomers, the Indigenous people must choose between becoming like them and serving them, or perishing; they could be befriended, and trained to become useful and obedient workers, in much the same way that convicts could be re-made, or animals trained. No matter how useful or how friendly, however, it was outside the scope of the newcomers' knowing-in-being to imagine that those people that they defined themselves as not being (that is, savage), could have knowledges and practices that could contribute to an invaluable extension and re-formation of their own understanding of what it was to be human.

Compounding the newcomers' incapacity to recognise and appreciate the civilisation that they encountered was the belief in and practice of judgment. Collins' position in the colony was that of Judge Advocate. His task was to make judgments—to administer the Law. His duty was to maintain the social and moral order as it was defined under the law. As Deleuze observes: "Christianity did not renounce power, but rather invented a new form of power as the Power to judge: the destiny of man is 'postponed' at the same time that judgment becomes a final authority" (Deleuze 1997, p. 127). Such judgment, he explains,

presupposes preexisting criteria (higher values), criteria that preexist for all time (to the infinity of time), so that it can neither apprehend what is new in an existing being, nor even sense the creation of a mode of existence . . . *Judgment prevents the emergence of any new mode of existence* (Deleuze 1997, pp. 134–35, my emphasis).

Judgment was also pivotal, then, in preventing the rupture that would have enabled Indigenous people to become visible, imaginable and valued by the newcomers, expanding their understanding of what it was to be human. The event of colonisation was thus stymied by judgment, as well as by binary structures of knowing-in-being, and by the belief in providence. The newcomers to the land were unmoved by what they encountered as they proceeded to settle on the land. The event, in the beginning, was thus lopsided, generating massive disruption to one civilisation, while leaving the other unmoved, despite its bodily movement from one side of the globe to the other. The movement—the expanding understanding of humanity's multiplicity—was yet to take place.

5. Settling the Land

To settle has at least seven related meanings:

1. to put in order; arrange in a desired state or condition
2. to arrange or be arranged in in a fixed or comfortable position.
3. to come to rest or a halt.
4. to take up or cause to take up residence.
5. to establish or become established in a way of life, job, residence etc.
6. to migrate to and form a community; colonize.
7. to make or become quiet, calm or stable (Collins English Dictionary).

⁶ "Home" referred, even until the time of my childhood in the 1950s, to England, or more broadly, to Britain.

Some of the newcomers who sailed across the ocean on seven-month journeys into the unknown, were in search of the possibility of all of those elements of settling. For most, though, the journey was not a free choice; their home country had, in one way or another, deprived them of the possibility of being settled there in any of these senses. David Collins himself would have settled in England if only he could have secured employment there when the American War of Independence ended, and he was put on half-pay (Currey 2000; Davies 2019).

Only in item 6 of the definition of settling, above, is colonisation mentioned. This is the deep wrinkle, or fault in “settlement”. The Indigenous custodians of the land had lives that were settled, which they had developed over thousands of years—their lives were orderly, arranged in a comfortable way, enabling them to rest and halt, to create residences, to establish a way of life, to form communities and live lives that were quiet, calm and stable, with accepted borders that previous outsiders had recognised. While many of the British newcomers planned to return home, hoping for a settled life there, for those who stayed, the act of settling involved usurping, and unsettling, the lives and land of a deeply settled people.

6. Conflict

David Collins wrote:

In the course of this month [of February] several convicts came in from the woods; one in particular dangerously wounded with a spear, the others very much beaten and bruised by the natives. The wounded man had been employed cutting rushes for thatching, and one of the others was a convalescent from the hospital who went out to collect a few vegetables. All these people denied giving any provocation to the natives: it was, however, difficult to believe them; they well knew the consequences that would attend any acts of violence on their part, as it had been declared in public orders early in the month, that in forming the intended settlement, any act of cruelty to the natives being contrary to his Majesty’s most gracious intentions, the offenders would be subject to a criminal prosecution; and *they well knew that the natives themselves, however injured, could not contradict their assertions*. There was, however, too much reason to believe our people had been the aggressors, as the governor on his return from his excursion to Broken Bay, on landing at Camp Cove, found the natives there who had before frequently come up to him with confidence, unusually shy, and seemingly afraid of him and his party; and one, who after much invitation did venture to approach, pointed to some marks upon his shoulders, making signs they were caused by blows given with a stick. This, and their running away, whereas they had always before remained on the beach until people landed from the boats, were strong indications that the man had been beaten by some of our stragglers (Collins [1798] 1975, pp. 18–19, my emphasis).

So little was the word of the convicts trusted, and so much was it hoped that friendly relations with the Indigenous people could be established, that in this early conflict, the local people’s version was given preference, even while any account they might give would not be admissible in court, since the Colony’s Charter of Justice did not give them a right to speak. Collins’ lending of such weight to the Indigenous people’s version of events was not a weight he could have maintained in his courts.

Despite the sometimes fatal skirmishes, Collins also recorded peaceful exchanges:

... a party of natives in their canoes went alongside the *Sirius*, and some submitted to the operation of shaving: after which they landed on the western port of the cove, where they examined every thing they saw with the greatest attention, and went away peaceably, and apparently were not under any apprehension of resentment on our parts for the murders above-mentioned (Collins [1798] 1975, p. 24).

Some of the convicts struck up yet more convivial relations with the local people:

In one of the adjoining coves resided a family of them, who were visited by large parties of the convicts of both sexes on those days in which they were not wanted for labour, where they danced and sang with apparent good humour, and received such presents as they could afford to make them; but none of them would venture back with their visitors (Collins [1798] 1975, p. 29).

Nevertheless, hostile outbreaks continued through that first year and into the second, as did various attempts to establish a dialogue.

Collins, as Judge Advocate, was convinced that the sporadic hostility from the local people was most likely justifiable. But Governor Phillip wished to bring them under the control of British law—despite the fact that they were not recognised as people under that law, and could neither represent nor defend themselves. He initiated several punitive expeditions, which ended in failure when the culprits could not be found:

June 1788 The governor, however, on hearing that the two rushcutters had been killed, thought it absolutely necessary to endeavour to find out, and, if possible, secure the people who killed them; for which purpose he set off with a strong party well armed, and landed in the cove where their bodies had been found; whence he struck across the country to Botany Bay, where on the beach he saw about fifty canoes, but none of their owners. In a cove on the sea-side, between Botany Bay and Port Jackson, he suddenly fell in with a party of armed natives, in number between two and three hundred, men, women, and children. With these a friendly intercourse directly took place, and some spears, etc. were exchanged for hatchets; but the murderers of the rush-cutters, if they were amongst them, could not be discovered in the crowd. The governor hoped to have found the people still at the place where the men had been killed, in which case he would have endeavoured to secure some of them; but not having any fixed residence, they had, perhaps, left the spot immediately after glutting their sanguinary [bloodthirsty] resentment (Collins [1798] 1975, pp. 24–25).

As winter set in, the presence of the newcomers began to cause even greater harm and suffering to the Indigenous people. Habitat had been destroyed and their food supply seriously depleted by the newcomers, and their hunting instruments had been stolen by sailors intent on selling them as anthropological curiosities:

The cold weather which we had at this time of year was observed to affect our fishing, and the natives themselves appeared to be in great want. An old man belonging to them was found on the beach of one of the coves, almost starved to death.

The natives, who had been accustomed to assist our people in hauling the seine, and were content to wait for such reward as the person who had the direction of the boat thought proper to give them, either driven by hunger, or moved by some other cause, came down to the cove where they were fishing, and, perceiving that they had been more successful than usual, took by force about half of what had been brought on shore. They were all armed with spears and other weapons, and made their attack with some shew of method, having a party stationed in the rear with their spears poised, in readiness to throw, if any resistance had been made. To prevent this in future, it was ordered that a petty officer should go in the boats whenever they were sent down to the harbour (Collins [1798] 1975, pp. 28–29).

Conflict over food continued into the depths of winter. Quite unreasonably, the governor was outraged by the theft of a goat, not willing or able to take into account the extent to which the people's food sources had been plundered or destroyed by the newcomers:

On the 21st a party of natives landed from five canoes, near the point where the observatory was building, where, some of them engaging the attention of the officers and people at the observatory, the others attempted forcibly to take

off a goat from the people at the hospital; in which attempt finding themselves resisted by a seaman who happened to be present, they menaced him with their spears, and, on his retiring, killed the animal and took it off in a canoe, making off toward Lane Cove with much expedition. They were followed immediately by the governor, who got up with some of the party, but could neither recover the goat, nor meet with the people who had killed it (Collins [1798] 1975, p. 32).

This profound lack of reciprocity appeared to be without self-conscious reflection on the part of the governor; rather it was a habituated response from an unquestioned and unquestioning positioning of himself on the dominant side of the binary, as one who is fully human with the power to judge those positioned as less-than-human, that is, as less than white adult males. From that assumed ascendant positioning, in December, with the hostile encounters continuing, the governor judged that it was necessary to kidnap some of the Indigenous people in order to make a dialogue possible through learning their language, thus establishing the means to convince them, paradoxically, of the newcomers' good intentions. Intentions of course do not determine the act; intending to be kind, and even believing that one *is* kind, while depriving the recipients of freedom and destroying their land and livelihood, while giving them no rights at law, lies at the heart of this hazardous encounter between an ancient civilisation and the British newcomers.

7. Captivity

It being remarked with concern, that the natives were becoming every day more troublesome and hostile, several people having been wounded, and others, who were necessarily employed in the woods, driven in and much alarmed by them, the governor determined on endeavouring to seize and bring in to the settlement, one or two of those people, whose language it was become absolutely necessary to acquire, *that they might learn to distinguish friends from enemies*.

Accordingly on the 30th a young man was seized and brought up by Lieutenant Ball of the Supply, and Lieutenant George Johnston of the marines. A second was taken; but, after dragging into the water beyond his depth the man who seized him, he got clear off. The native who was secured was immediately on his landing led up to the governor's, where he was clothed, a slight iron or manacle put upon his wrist, and a trusty convict appointed to take care of him. A small hut had been previously built for his reception close to the guardhouse, wherein he and his keeper were locked up at night; and the following morning the convict reported, that he slept very well during the night, not offering to make any attempt to get away (Collins [1798] 1975, p. 40, my emphasis).

The idea that a captive might come to see his captors as his friends is a curious one; it can only make sense if the captive is defined as less-than-human.

The first captive was Arabanou. He was treated with kindness of the sort the Governor and his officers might deploy in taming a wild dog. They washed him, cut his hair and beard, and dressed him up in British dress. They fed him large quantities of food at a side table to the governor's dining table. Arabanou was civil and affable and appeared to make friends with his captors, who displayed their friendly intentions to the local Indigenous people by taking him for a walk on a lead, imagining it was useful to show them that he was alive and well.

During Arabanou's captivity smallpox began to ravage his people, causing widespread death. Even then Collins writes as if he still believes that the presence of the newcomers is of unquestionable benefit to the people. The harm they have done them is but an "evil impression" which must be undone. In April 1789:

... either in excavations of the rock, or lying upon the beaches and points of the different coves they had been in, [they found] the bodies of many of the wretched natives of this country. The cause of this mortality remained unknown until a family was brought up, and the disorder pronounced to have been smallpox. It

was not a desirable circumstance to introduce a disorder into the colony which was raging with such fatal violence among the natives of the country; but the saving of the lives of any of these people was an object of no small importance, *as the knowledge of our humanity, and the benefits we might render them, would, it was hoped, do away the evil impressions they had received of us* (Collins [1798] 1975, p. 53, my emphasis).

Of those people they brought in, two children survived; a girl who then lived with the clergyman's wife, and a boy who went to live with the surgeon, Mr White. Arabanoo's deep distress at so many people dying surprised his captors since it did not accord with their idea of what it was to be savage:

From the first hour of the introduction of the boy and girl into the settlement, it was feared that the native [Arabanoo] who had been so instrumental in bringing them in, and whose attention to them during their illness excited the admiration of every one that witnessed it, would be attacked by the same disorder; as on his person were found none of those traces of its ravages which are frequently left behind. It happened as the fears of everyone predicted; he fell victim to the disease in eight days after he was seized with it, to the great regret of everyone *who had witnessed how little of the savage was found in his manner, and how quickly he was substituting in its place a docile, affable, and truly amiable deportment* (Collins [1798] 1975, p. 54, my emphasis).

In terms of the event, as Badiou defines it, Arabanoo had been expanding his people's knowledge, increasing the multiplicity of ways of knowing-in-being that were available to them. From the newcomers' point of view, he was shedding some of his savagery to the extent that he could show some desirable signs of becoming *like* them—the only viable trajectory they could envisage for him, albeit one in which he could never be one of them.

After Arabanoo's death, the experiment was repeated with the capture of Bennillong and Cole-by⁷. Cole-by soon escaped, but Bennillong demonstrated, for a while at least, the same willingness as Arabanoo to discover more about the newcomers:

He soon came to regard the principle Europeans as his friends. He addressed Phillip as *Beanga* (father) and in turn liked to be called *Doorooow* (son). Collins was *Babunna* (brother). But unlike Arabanoo Bennillong was not content to be a captive, and in May 1790 he tricked his attendant, jumped from a water barrel over the paling fence around the governor's house, and disappeared (Currey 2000, p. 89).

When he was later sighted with a group of his people at South Head, the governor made haste to go there to meet up with him. It was September 1790. Governor Phillip approached the men with great friendliness and unarmed. Bennillong expressed great pleasure, in particular, in seeing David Collins again. He began to introduce his companions, but trouble struck quickly, when the governor stepped forward toward Wille-me-ring, with his arms outstretched:

The savage not understanding this civility, and perhaps thinking he was going to seize him as a prisoner, lifted a spear from the grass with his foot, and fixing it on his throwing stick, in an instant darted it at the governor. The spear entered a little above the collar bone, and had been discharged with such force, that the barb of it came through on the other side (Collins [1798] 1975, p. 111).

The governor's party made a hasty retreat. After breaking off the very long spear, and firing shots from the boat, they rowed for two hours back to the settlement. The wound was not fatal, and Phillip ventured out again after two weeks. He was at great pains to assure Bennillong that he desired no retribution, except for the punishment of Wille-me-ring. He ignored Bennillong's repeated assurances that he and Cole-by had already severely

⁷ I am using the spelling Collins adopted in his journal.

punished him. Judgment, in the governor's view, could not be the prerogative of a savage, no matter that he was a respected leader among his people.

Bennillong's accommodation of the newcomers did not work out well for him in the end; he later travelled with the newcomers to London, and found on his return that he belonged nowhere, no longer positioned by his people as their respected leader, and having no viable place among the newcomers.

Despite the initial superficially friendly relations with Bennillong, the conflict intensified over the ensuing months, and in December the governor was bent upon violent retribution after Pe-mul-wy fiercely attacked a convict whom the governor judged to be innocent:

As the attack on this man was wanton, and entirely unprovoked on the part of McIntire . . . the governor determined to punish the offender, who it was understood resorted with his tribe above the head of Botany Bay. He therefore directed that an armed party from the garrison should march thither, and *either destroy or make prisoners* of six persons (if practicable) of that tribe to which the aggressor belonged, carefully avoiding to offer any injury to either women or children (Collins [1798] 1975, p. 118, my emphasis).

Although that bloodthirsty excursion failed, the mood had turned by the end of that second year, to one of outrage, and inevitably thence to war. Resistance to the newcomers' usurpation of their land, and resistance to the destruction of their lives in relation to that land, was regarded by the newcomers as an intolerable intrusion on their capacity to settle.

8. How Might We Make Sense of This Event of Colonisation?

The newcomers, unlike all previous outsiders, were not just passing through. Past strangers had brought something new—a word, an idea, an artefact, a practice, and then moved on, leaving the social order of the local people intact. The newcomers arriving in 1788 not only meant to stay, but were intent, in their very ignorance, on destroying the existing hierarchies and values of the Indigenous people, to whom they offered no legitimate place. They were the subordinated others who might be made use of, and otherwise tolerated, as long as they did not interfere with the newcomers' assertion of their unquestioned faith in the dominant value of their own knowing-in-being, backed up as it was by their belief in Providence, the underpinning of their knowing-in-being in binary structures and in the practices of judgment ordained in their homeland. Many of the uses that the newcomers made of the indigenous people were abominable, and while there is no space here to enumerate those abominations, which included rape, enslavement and slaughter, I recommend the reader to Foley's *Biting the Clouds* (Foley 2020), a book that confronts some of the historical amnesia concerning the horrors perpetrated by the newcomers.

For the newcomers, the Indigenous people had been categorised and dismissed as savage even before they arrived. As savages, they had nothing new to bring to the knowing-in-being of humanity, except in its service. To this extent, the act of colonisation, for the British, was a non-event, or, perhaps, an event still waiting to happen.

When a newly dominant group, such as the British newcomers, allows no form of knowing-in-being but its own, and holds to that position for more than 230 years, it is time, Badiou would suggest, for a poetic disruption: "when the situation is saturated by its own norm, when its self-calculation is relentlessly inscribed in the norm, and when there is no longer any void between knowledge and prediction, it is necessary to be ready, *poetically*, for the outside-of-self" (Badiou 2008, p. 41). The coming into being of the unknowable requires an intervention that names the situation outside the repetitions and reiterations that have served to hold everything the same. A majoritarian account is incapable of serving that purpose. For the newcomers to unlock their intransigence, and their inability to expand the multiplicity of their knowing-in-being, there needs to be a new naming, a minoritarian naming:

this naming is *always* poetic: to name a supplement, a chance, something incalculable, it is necessary to draw from the void of sense, in the absence of established significations, and to the peril of language . . . the poetic name of the event is that which throws us outside ourselves (Badiou 2008, pp. 41–42 emphasis in original).

And this is the responsibility now, of the descendants of the newcomers, to allow themselves to be thrown outside themselves, to turn the tables in the event, to puncture a hole in the orthodox repetitions of the past and present: “The poetic articulation of the event does not bring the event about once and for all or in any kind of totality: the power of the truth distributed by the event in a situation does not exhaust all of this situation” (Badiou 2008, pp. 56–57). It is a struggle that will go on, rupturing old doxa, and reworking past, present and future.

Perhaps predictably, the resistance to the ongoing work of disrupting old certainties is as fierce as it ever was. The instant unreflected refusal of the Indigenous Referendum Council’s *Uluru statement from the heart* (Referendum Council 2017) on the part of successive Australian Prime Ministers was and is a continuation of that original incapacity to move outside the already known, and to multiply possible ways of knowing-in-being. That resistance also takes place in relentless, ignorant, mean-minded attacks. When the Victorian deputy chief health officer, for example, drew attention in a tweet to the parallels between the current pandemic and the plague of smallpox that decimated the Indigenous people in the first years of the colony, she was fiercely smacked down by members of government:

Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton solemnly declared [she] was ‘unfit’ for her job in the public service, saying ‘she should go’. Victoria’s opposition leader, Michael O’Brien, dismissed her reflection as ‘woke political commentary’. Former Victorian Liberal leader Matthew Guy labelled [her] ‘a complete fruitcake’, her tweet proof that Victoria was being governed by ‘hard left nutters’ . . . [the insults continued . . .]

The prime minister soon weighed in to the chorus of outrage, telling 2GB’s Alan Jones he found her comments ‘very disappointing’. ‘She clearly wouldn’t get the job as chief historian (Boyce 2020b, p. 5).

In Deleuzian terms, such steadfast holding on to the dominant orthodoxies can become in itself a sickness:

The ‘Bad’ or sickly life is an exhausted and degenerating mode of existence, one that judges life from the perspective of its sickness, that devaluates life in the name of ‘higher’ values. The ‘Good’ or healthy life, by contrast, is an overflowing and ascending form of existence, a mode of life that is able to transform itself depending on the forces it encounters, always increasing the power to live, always opening up new possibilities of life (Smith 1997, pp. xiv–xv).

A good or healthy life is one that does not cling to outmoded strategies for closing down thought. A healthy life is responsible—able to examine the source of its own limitations. And it is response-able, able to listen and to be affected (Davies 2014, 2016). It is able to initiate change in a minor key.

Again and again, those who work toward the changes that might come about if such responsibilities and response-abilities were enacted, are caught in a cruel optimism (Berlant 2011). Governments initiate talk about treaties, they apologise for past wrongs, they initiate inquiry after inquiry into Black deaths in custody, and into the disproportionate incarceration of Indigenous youth. Yet the Black deaths in custody continue and Indigenous youth are still disproportionately incarcerated. And the ongoing destruction of sacred sites continues to undermine the possibility of a creative encounter that might unlock the impasse that colonisation wrought.

In 2020, Sussan Ley, the Federal Minister for the Environment, was informed that the sacred Juukan Gorge caves were going to be blown up by the Rio Tinto miners. She did nothing to intervene (Brown 2020, p. 5). Further, she expressed her support for a plan to heighten the wall of Sydney’s Warragamba dam by 14 metres. If this were to go ahead:

An area of 4700 hectares of World Heritage-listed Blue Mountains National Parks would be inundated . . . The wild rivers of the southern Blue Mountains are home to 48 threatened animal and plant species, ancient river valleys, rare dry rainforests and hundreds of indigenous cultural sites . . . The power of singing the Country into being in sacred ceremony and songline over and over again since time immemorial, will be gone forever (Somerville 2020, pp. 187, 190).

The intransigence of government in its pursuit of actions damaging to the Indigenous people is wearying, it is pitiful, and it is dastardly.

It is the ongoing and arbitrary violence and death still meted out to Indigenous people in custody that has served to galvanise the Australian Black Lives Matter protests. The newly elected Indigenous member of Senate, Lidia Thorpe writes:

Since the conclusion of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody in 1991, there have been 441 Blak deaths in custody⁸ . . . For 240 years, Aboriginal people have demanded justice for those who have been killed. We show up, we protest, we say their names, we show their faces. I've lost count of how many families I've personally supported through their grief. It is a shame it took a Black death in custody in another country for this nation to take a meaningful look at what's happening in our own backyard. But now you know, do not look away (Thorpe 2020, p. 5).

9. Do Not Look Away

There are not two sides here, of wrongdoers and wronged, but a multiplicity of meanings and actions through which lives are made to make sense. The binaries in the newcomers' orthodoxy, as they shaped colonial lives, served to keep the newcomers not only ignorant of anyone different from themselves, but ignorant of the land-care strategies they could have learned from the original custodians of the land. Those strategies may well have prevented the terrifying and unprecedented bushfires that seared the country in the first months of 2020. The practices of care of the land as they had been developed over 60–80,000 years have much to offer in the face of climate change. But the newcomers are still not listening. If the land could sing, now, it might borrow the opening words of Vincent Lingiari's song, *Gurindji Blues*: "Poor bugger me" . . .

In 2020, this land is suffering as never before. From an Indigenous perspective, climate action and justice for Indigenous people cannot be separated (Thorpe 2020). If the newcomers are to re-work their orthodoxies, they need to begin by listening—listening carefully to what the early colonists said and did in their innocence, their ignorance, and their intransigence. They need to listen not in terms of what they already know but open themselves to the reverberations of difference in the present, giving space to the event's rupture, bringing movement to their own thoughts, feelings and actions. In thus re-turning to the event of colonisation, in discovering ways to be response-able, they may open new, much needed ways of knowing-in-being.

Emergent listening involves a capacity to respond; it demands the use of all our senses, and a willingness to encounter the not-yet-known, to hear what we do not yet understand, and to hear how we are each implicated in what happened, and what happens still. To engage in such listening means making ourselves vulnerable to others in their difference; it means thinking and writing against the grain of majoritarian thinking. Australians need, in short, to be open to multiplicities and to the process of becoming different. Descendants of the newcomers do not need to produce already made solutions out of what they know already; they need to listen, to think, to feel, to talk, to write, to listen some more, to change, and to participate in the emergent understanding that will come from that process of listening. They will invent, in a minor key, the means of disrupting majoritarian views,

⁸ This is the preferred spelling of Black among many First Nations People

and in time they may discover together how to take care of each other, and to take care of country, and thence, to take care of the planet.

And as Thorpe says: “As custodians of this land for thousands of years, we understand that the health of the community is only as strong as the health of our environment. Caring for Country is at the heart of who we are as Aboriginal people—knowledge that, when shared, enriches all our lives” (Thorpe 2020, p. 5).

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