

# Geographical Tensions: Running and Decolonizing

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On the morning of the 26<sup>th</sup> of January 2019 a few hundred people gathered by a memorial boulder in the Kings Domain on the periphery of Melbourne's famous Royal Botanical Gardens. Beneath the boulder lies the remains of twenty-eight unknown First Nations people who died as a result of the British Invasion of the Australian continent, which commenced in 1788 (Faulkhead and Berg 2010). The gathering was a continuation of the tradition started by William Cooper, who had first initiated the Day of Mourning on this date in 1938. January 26<sup>th</sup> is officially recognised as 'Australia Day,' yet, over the past few years, resistance to this day as a legitimate day of celebration, which connotes 'Australia's founding,' has become increasingly contested. The gathering at the Boulder though was a new step, initiated by activist Lidia Thorpe, and complements the protests later in the day, which bring the urban centre of Melbourne to a standstill. While the ceremonial fire was lit, and the lists of largely unacknowledged massacres were read out, morning joggers performed their exercise only a few meters away. Seemingly, none of the runners bothered to look up the small hill to see the gathering; none of them stopped their morning run to see what the gathering was all about. The confluence of these activities, on a cool summer's morning, brought into relief a moment of awareness and intention: does one seek to come to terms with the past, or, does one practice bodily and athletic discipline by going on one's morning run?

The purpose of this article is to explore the tensions of geography, sporting practice and cultural heritage. I engage with discourses of decolonizing the landscape and the social, cultural practice of long-distance running and training. I draw on my own experience as a long-distance runner and member of an athletic club (Richmond Harriers) in the city known as Melbourne in the country known as Australia. The modern city of Melbourne is on the lands of the Wurundjeri people and the Australian nation is founded on the dispossession and disempowerment of First Peoples' from their ownership of their land. Through this article, I seek to interject practices of running into discourses happening in other areas of mainstream debate. Long-distance running, its clubs, administration and practitioners, is intrinsically bound up with the landscape and thus, it is an important site for interrogating the manner in which the body interacts with the physical environment. Although amateur athletics is a bastion of Anglo-centric sporting values, I contest that a critical running practice can open fissures in a reading of the landscape: its histories, meanings and narratives. Rather than like the scene in the opening paragraph, running can be imbued with a knowledge of the Continent's geography, which acknowledges its violence and dispossession.

*Narcissism.* Long-distance running is a practice in which the body encounters and engages with the physical surroundings. Yet, much of running is obsessed with self-improvement and is dominated by an 'achievement' ideology (Bale). Amateur runners train through following strict schedules devised by coaches (or improvised) as a means of reaching personal bests. Runners seek to complete races of different distances in ever faster times and then mark their achievement through the wearing of a medal distributed by the race organiser or a t-shirt with 'Finisher' emblazoned across the front or back. Runners in mass-event, city-based marathons have their photographs taken by professional photographers during the race, which are available post-race. Lining up alongside professional athletes also provides amateur runners with a degree of reflected glory. This seemingly egalitarian participation sport, which is easily accessible to people of a wide range of

abilities, is structured around the implementing of strict hierarchies of athletes who are divided up into categories of age, gender, and, in shorter track events, abilities.

*Global capitalism.* To propel these amateur athletes to greater levels and faster times, there are any number of gadgets and apparel that can be purchased at great expense. The 'running industry' is made up of the exemplary drivers of sporting capitalism and neoliberalism: Adidas, Nike, Puma, etc. The clothing and shoe brands are complemented by the high-tech driven products of GPS watches, heart-rate monitors, and probably these are just the tip of the iceberg. That these brands 'call the shots' is evidenced in events, such as Nike's effort at training and facilitating 'their' athlete, Eliud Kipchoge, to break the two-hour marathon. Kipchoge was provided with pacers and other enabling conditions in order to break what is considered a scientific impossibility, much as a sub-4-minute mile was once considered impossible. The amateur runner who is bedecked in the latest Saucony, Nike or Adidas runners, over-priced activewear, and the latest iteration of a Garmin GPS watch and the elite, professional runner exist on a broad spectrum of ability: the latter is fast and has her or his costs covered; the former practices his sport in a manner that is both time- and financially-consuming. Some runners are capable of doing it modestly: the entry level to the sport is comparatively accessible. The time achieved becomes part of the measuring stick for determining the value of what one has invested in the practice of running.

This article, however, seeks to open up a critical space for running, where its practice is open to opportunities for 'introspection' (rather than narcissism) and an engagement with one's environment. Part of this is how the human engages with the non-human. That is, how does our awareness of non-human elements inform and mobilise our critical and creative practice, whether in running or other aspects of our everyday and often humdrum lives?

Athletics, on the Australian continent, is largely connected to its modern incarnation as an amateur sport imbued with the spirit of Olympism. This involves competing fairly, without pay, and doing one's best. Ron Clarke, a former running great, articulates Olympism as "encouraging the young to incorporate exercise and goal setting into their individual lifestyles" and helping them to realise that "the most important thing in life is not the triumph but the struggle" (Clarke 1999, p.71). The club I run with, Richmond Harriers, follows what is increasingly an anachronistic model of 'amateurism.' Some of our training routes we use purposely follow the routes used by Clarke and other notable runners. The prevailing athletics ethos and culture is one which has been inherited from an unabashed colonial perspective. Women's marathon running was frowned upon (Bale). In the realm of the Olympics and Commonwealth Games, Australia's greatest 400m runner, Cathy Freeman, was chastised for proudly waving both the Aboriginal and the (British) Australian flag.

*Dispossession.* The establishment of Melbourne is a key part of the creation of the modern nation of Australia. Boyce writes, "Between 1835 and 1838 alone, more land and more people were conquered than in the preceding half-century. By the end of the 1840s, squatters had seized nearly twenty million hectares of the most productive and best-watered Aboriginal homelands, comprising most of the grasslands in what

are now Victoria, New South Wales, South Australia and southern Queensland. It was ‘one of the fastest land occupations in the history of empires’ (Boyce 2011, p.xiii).” In regard to Melbourne, Presland writes: for tens of thousands of years before the arrival of Europeans, the area of Melbourne was Aboriginal land. But the home of these original inhabitants was a vastly different place to that we can see today. The landscapes created by ancestral beings in the period called the ‘dreaming’, and encountered for the first time at the beginning of the nineteenth century, have been changed out of sight by 170 years of European settlement (2008, p.5).

Colonization of the Australian continent is an ongoing process. The Federation of the Australian nation did not end efforts to undermine First Nations peoples and their cultural practices. Clare Land articulates the need for a ‘fresh approach’ in considering and implementing collaborations between First Nations and Non-First Nations peoples. She writes,

The lingering injustices of colonization and the need for a fresh approach to righting them are nowhere better reflected than in the Fourth World conditions, morbidity and mortality of Indigenous people in settler nations. The Indigenous experience within wealthy settler colonial nations such as Australia, the USA, Aotearoa/New Zealand and Canada is one of continuing colonization in which a particular process of genocide is proceeding, and against which Indigenous peoples’ struggle is one for survival as peoples. (Land 2015, p.3).

For Neuemaier and Schaffer, ‘decolonizing’ “calls upon Anglo-European academic readers, viewers, and critics [and runners] to acknowledge the impact of Australia’s colonial past as a violent history of oppression [and] to engage with alternative ways of knowing, and to adapt counter-strategies of resistance which do not cultivate the comforting position of redemptive empathy and identification, but which [...] enforce a process of self-questioning and unsettlement, calling for a renewed ethical response” (2014 p.ix).

Sport is deeply implicated in the mythology of the ‘modern nation state of Australia.’ I use quotation marks here to assert that this nation is not unified; is not ‘finished’ but is subject to contestation and negotiation. Many of the supposedly fundamental and basic aspects of the imagined Australian nation are increasingly subject to sharp rebuke: the flag, the date of founding and the national anthem. Sport within colonial, white-Australia has perpetuated and strengthened colonial links, provided a means for global prominence and, at times, an opportunity for (short-lived and misguided) self-congratulation at becoming ‘reconciled’ with ‘Indigenous Australia.’ Sport often becomes a symbolic reference point for the achievements of Indigenous Australians; yet, the achievements of great athletes, such as Cathy Freeman, Nicky Winmar, Adam Goodes, and many others, often serve as a means to gloss over the broader and wider problems afflicting First Nations peoples. Moreover, the discourse on the success of Indigenous athletes is highly critiqued by First Nations peoples (Heiss 2018).

While sport is implicated in the creation of colonial Australia and the image of white Australia, it is worth asking whether sport, and its varieties, is capable of being a part of the discourse and practice of 'decolonizing' Australia. Or, at least 'establishing a critical dialogue with colonialism.'

The decolonizing of common Australian culture is in progress. It is an emerging practice: something nascent and fluid. Efforts at decolonization are contentious and met with resistance. The literary landscape of Australia is increasingly contested by the voices and perspectives of First Nations authors. Here, I largely choose to use the term 'First Nations' rather than 'Indigenous' or 'Aboriginal:' the former is increasingly being chosen by First Nations peoples; the latter two have strong roots in an uncritical settler gaze. 'Blak' is also used. Among these authors, Melissa Lucashenko calls 'whiteness into question' (2018) or 'problematizes whiteness' through her use of her language's terms for a white-person – *dugai*. Lucashenko, in *Too Much Lip* (2018) for example, deals with the urban contemporary of reclaiming ownership of land and culture, while Alexis Wright draws on the mythological for structuring her novels, such as *Carpentaria*. The rapper, Briggs, has used his lyrics and popular music to galvanise momentum to resist the celebration of 'Australia Day' on January 26<sup>th</sup>. Robbie Thorpe and others have held ongoing protests of the Stolenwealth Games, while the more media-savvy and polite face of Stan Grant has provided an Indigenous critique of Australia's national anthem, which he argues has no resonance with Aboriginal Australia.

*The river.* The establishment of Melbourne is based on the geographical meeting point of what is now known as Port Phillip Bay and the Yarra River. The original name for the bay is Naarm and the river is Birrarung: meaning 'river of mists.' The river is one of the city's primary recreational and amateur sporting spaces. In the modern city's early development, it was utilised as both 'water supply and drain' (Watson 1988, p.79). The straightening of the river, as well as the flattening of Batman's Hill, were two of the main marks of human intervention in the landscape (Presland 2008). Novelist Tony Birch has written of the ongoing significance of the river for First Nations peoples in present day Melbourne (Birch 2015). Aboriginal uses and management of the landscape of present-day Melbourne had been more subtle and, to use a more contemporary term, 'sustainable.' Finding connections between settler and Indigenous uses of land and attitudes towards land is a part of the decolonizing process. Just as authors such, as Lucashenko and Blay (2015), have done so through fiction and hiking, respectively, so it can be performed by those who enjoy the city of 'Melbourne' as a site of recreation.

On any given day, runners and joggers run along the banks of the Yarra. They share the space with cyclists who commute to and from work. Along the inner city stretch of the Yarra are many of the city's key landmarks: the Arts Centre, the NGV Ian Potter, Federation Square, the Tennis Centre (Rod Laver Arena). On the western side of Queens Bridge are the denser commercial zones featuring 'Southbank', Hamer Hall (concert venue), Crown Casino and South Wharf Direct Factory Outlet.

The river passes under Queens Bridge, upon which tourists clog the pavement in order to take selfies with the Melbourne Cricket Ground, the river and the Botanical Gardens as a backdrop. The footpath

itself is cramped with recently installed bollards, which appeared not long after cars were used as a weapon in attacks in London and Melbourne itself. To complement the city's most vital public square is Birrarung Marr, which was established as part of Australia's celebrations of the nation's centenary. The naming of this open recreational space and some art installations is a subtle nod to the city's Indigenous history. The sculptures representing shields and the imagery of the Kulin nations, however, compete against much other visual clutter. Now and then, small tourist groups participate in tours led by the Koorie Heritage Trust, during which young guides explain the city's cultural heritage. Birrarung Marr, however, remains for many simply a feature of the pathway connecting Flinders Street Station to the major sporting venues of the MCG or Rod Laver Arena.

Just to the south of the river are the Botanical Gardens, the perimeter of which is used as The Tan running track. Like the bicycle paths along the river, this track is the inner city's most popular venue for recreational running. These gardens provide an idyllic and manicured setting for domestic and international tourists. Their initial founding provided a means for the settlers to be surrounded by environs reminiscent of 'the Mother Country.' The Botanical Gardens feature plants from throughout the world, of which native plants are only a small part. The Gardens' curators, are, however, slowly incorporating more native flora as a result of better appreciating their utility in water conservation. In the presence of some 1,200 introduced species of flora (Presland 2008, p.12), native vegetation sometimes feels 'exotic' for its rarity.

Part of the current site of the Botanical Gardens was also used as a 'school for Aborigines,' established by George Langhorne. First Nations peoples would also gather along the Birrarung during the early years of the city's founding, before being forcibly moved to Corranderk, some 65 north east of the city. A tree and a small plaque within the grounds of the Gardens are a minor acknowledgment of the Gardens' role in the British dispossession of Aboriginal lands. The Gardens, which form the context for urban recreation, largely continue to foster an inchoate colonial nostalgia and longing.

The Birrarung and the Yarra is a contested site for the present day imagining of the city known by many as Melbourne and for others as Naarm. Locals and tourists alike are largely ignorant of the modern city's ancient and recent First Nations ownership and claims to this part of Kulin Country. The use of the banks of the Birrarung for running, cycling and the river itself for rowing, is another part of the multiple layers of Aboriginal dispossession. Running along these banks, while being focussed on developing one's fitness, is another part of the process of forgetting the city's Aboriginal heritage and its possible future. Libby Porter, writing on the politics of cultural heritage in the context of North West Victoria, could well be speaking about the more limited scope for 'claims to Aboriginal space' in inner city Melbourne: "Enduring colonial tropes about cultural loss and degradation amongst Victorian Aboriginal communities continually surface in locally specific (post)colonial relations, serving to limit the locations where Aboriginal rights and interests are seen to have legitimacy in state-based decision-making processes" (2006 p.356).

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Colonisation is not always a clearly violent act involving conflict and confrontation. It happens while we enjoy the privileges of recreation expressed through sports, such as running. The landscapes in which running, and other sports, are performed may appear as generic 'world cities' are intricately related to processes of colonisation and erasure. Melbourne is one such space. The erasure of its Aboriginal ownership has been fostered through the city's trajectory as 'the sporting capital of the world' and its reputation as being 'the world's most liveable city.' Running though, as an environment-oriented sport, is capable of facilitating a critical engagement with the cultural and political geography of its performance. Decolonizing one's running or sporting practice involves being aware of the privileges one enjoys; part of this privilege is regarding the landscape as plain and secular and free of trauma. An awareness of the ongoing violence against First Nations peoples and the landscape of Naarm-Melbourne is an essential part of 'decolonizing' oneself; it may begin with an act of running or recreation, but it is also applicable to all other aspects of everyday life.

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