A Geographer's way of seeing—
Geographical imaginaries and political realities

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This article is an edited version of a keynote presentation to the 2002 Annual Conference, Geography—Making a difference: See change in action, Geography Teachers' Association of Victoria Inc.

Geography—as both discipline and phenomenon—shapes how people imagine themselves. In Australian schools, geographical study is critically important to developing a civic imagination capable of dealing with the challenges of the future. It is also fundamental to understanding where we have come from; where we are, and why, and what we might become.

The need for civic literacy in geography has rarely been more urgent than in this period where the time-space compression of globalisation is widely seen as portending the end of history and geography. Neo-liberal rationalism in governments and bureaucracies pursues the annihilation of geography and its replacement with the level playing fields of free trade and formal equality, even though we face circumstances where geography shapes every aspect of political, economic and social experience. Regional inequality, rural crisis, natural hazards, border protection, environmental conservation, sustainability, climate change, resource and tourism industry issues are all issues that have great currency in the political and economic life of the nation—and they are all issues of geography.

Geographical illiteracy in political and bureaucratic circles, and civic leaders' failure of geographical imagination imposes a significant burden on the nation, its communities, environments and neighbours. My own experience in professional geography leads me to advocate the centrality of geographical imagination as a civic value in Australia. "Border pedagogy" and "marginal research" offer students inspirational opportunities to pursue the important values of social justice, economic equity, ecological sustainability and cultural diversity (Howitt 2001). As geography teachers, we nurture and expect critical engagement with the world around us. Ultimately, I want to suggest that our task as teachers is to construct opportunities for our students, our colleagues and ourselves, to engage in the work of decolonisation and justice building wherever we are.

Deep colonising or decolonisation? Good intentions are not enough!

Deborah Rose (1999) uses the term "deep colonising" to discuss the circumstances that characterises many post-colonial situations. As Rose sees, it:

In Australia, as in other settler societies, many ... practices [of colonisation] are embedded in the institutions that are meant to reverse the processes of colonisation. Colonising practices embedded within decolonising institutions must not be understood simply as negligible side effects of essentially benign endeavours (Rose 1999: 182).

Historically, education was a tool of colonisation in Australia. Government and mission schools were instrumental in the extinction of Indigenous languages, and many were participants in the separation of Indigenous children from their families. Even with the best of intent, education can exemplify the deep colonisation that Rose refers to. In fact, benign intent is one of the most pernicious of deep colonising practices because it reinforces and naturalises the patronising authority of the dominant culture. We need to reflect critically on our own classroom practices to avoid simply repeating the reprehensible patterns of the past.

Likewise, academic research has long been complicit in the construction of well-intended racist discourses. We might identify the role of other disciplines—anthropologists, for example, were critical in shaping
policies of "protection" and "integration"; archaeologists were important in shaping (and later re-shaping) the popular images of "stone age" peoples and Aboriginal peoples' heritage as "relics" of national significance—but geographers need to recognise and move beyond our own discipline's roles as an instrument of paternalistic, racialised discourses. Geography's colonial encounter creates for the discipline a compromised genealogy in Australia:

_The work of the geographer goes hand in hand with that of the pioneer ... No work can be more productive ... than one which has for its object the perfection of the knowledge we already possess of "our great land"; the existence and distribution of its natural resources; the natural advantages offered to the settlement on Australian shores of numbers of the white race, and the preservation and civilisation of the various indigenous races (Marin la Meslee 1885: ix)._

Geographers' well-intentioned advocacy of "our great land" was foundational of a geographical imagination that saw Australian environments as "empty, unknown, and waiting for (white) settlement" (Howitt & Jackson 1998: 159). Even dissenting figures such as Griffith Taylor, widely credited as the "father" of academic geography in Australia, contributed to the racialised discourse of geography with his use of environmental determinism to demonstrate why large areas of the continent were unsuitable for "white" settlement (e.g. Head 2000: 44–54).

**Border pedagogy—teaching geography in and of the borderlands**

Achieving public recognition of geography teaching as a central civic value requires us to work in the awkward borders around the taken-for-granted certainties of the dominant culture of Australia. For generations the authoritative voice shaping the nation's geographical imagination also held sway in primary and secondary classrooms. Captain Cook "discovered" Australia! Aborigines were "primitive nomads"! Australia's unique landscapes were produced through isolation from anthropogenic influences!

This was the authoritative voice of texts; of learned men of scholarship; of those who knew—and knew best. The authority of stories such as the Captain Cook story is precisely the authority that we try to unsettle when we set ourselves the classroom task of "trying to introduce there to our students who are here (McDowell 1994: 245). Yet, even this image reinforces the absence of the often exoticised "other" from the "in here" of our classrooms. We need to challenge this, and the "border pedagogy" of Henry Giroux offers an excellent starting point to challenge traditional teaching. His approach allows the taken-for-granted borders between people, groups, places and things, to be "challenged, crossed and refugured" (Giroux 1992: 212, also 1993, 1994, Giroux and Trend 1992). Following his lead, we can offer students opportunities to reflect critically on their places in the world, and the places and meanings created by others is precisely the challenge of developing their geographical imaginations and to explore new intellectual spaces and new visions of possible landscapes.

Good geography teachers are, by definition, "border intellectuals" constantly looking for ways to encourage students to engage critically with the world around them at various scales and to think critically about their own place in the world and its environmental, social, political, cultural and economic processes.

My own experience has been in working with students to create a conceptual toolkit for resource management that occurs within the borderlands of cross-cultural spaces. My third year undergraduate course Resource Management aims to render visible much that is conventionally left invisible in resource management education (see Howitt 2001). It explores the proposition that we must rethink resource management in order to make resource management decisions more accountable to four core values—social justice, ecological sustainability, economic equity and cultural diversity. I also try to open up another borderland for many students—that of Indigenous Australia. Our investigations of Indigenous rights in resource management systems put much public debate about native title, stolen generations, mining impacts and so on into new perspectives. Students are required to debate the practical, ethical and intellectual imperatives for a conceptual framework. Role plays confront students with processes of cross-cultural negotiations, personal research links issues of social justice to students' preferred employment paths and a final assignment asks students to reflect on what they think they have learned in the course—all create a dynamic that opens up some uncomfortable, liminal spaces. Their responses to this theory-building task are often inspirational.

The final assessment in Resource Management asks students to exercise their geographical imagination in responding to the challenge to demonstrate what they have learned with great innovation. The challenge of assessing this sort of work is significant. We often simply assume that written text is sufficient to reflect student learning. Yet this is an assumption we must allow our students to challenge. There should be no mould that restricts the scope of the geographical imagination. The strength of a disciplinary framework does not lie in its ability to constrain ideas within explicit limits, but in its ability to provide a vantage point from which ideas can be put together in new ways coherently and rigorously.
Teaching in the borderlands outside the classroom

Unfortunately, only a few Indigenous students can access such courses through universities. Although Macquarie has a relatively high level of Indigenous participation, most students are currently completing a small number of specialised programs in Community Management and Early Childhood Education, and changes to Abstudy funding has reduced Indigenous participation in degree programs across Australia. I teach a version of the Resource Management course in one of these programs and have run joint role plays with students from the two courses with good effect, but limiting my teaching to university classrooms would greatly limit my ability to contribute to the construction of transgressive recognition spaces.

In Australia, repression of Indigenous identities has taken many forms through the years (see Australia 1997, Tatz 1999), but suppression of Indigenous languages and restricted access to education have both been well-documented mechanisms of Indigenous marginalisation and disadvantage. Although there are now policies aimed at retention of and support for Indigenous and community languages in Australia, one of the legacies of our colonial past is a complete reliance on English to teach geography. For students from Indigenous and non-English-speaking backgrounds, this reflects and reinforces colonial power relations even when we appear to pursue education for justice and understanding. Increasing participation and retention rates in an education system that is structurally flawed does not produce decolonisation. Rather, it reinforces the idea that the “colonial-we” have something that the “colonised-they” must acquire to achieve their potential. Having privileged “book learning”, “science” and “scholarship”, even the most liberal universities struggle with knowledge that fails to conform. I am always conscious that the term “discipline” in the context of deep colonising practices of universities is an ironically ambiguous term. In disciplining thought, we risk continuously constructing a hall of mirrors that affirms what we already think we know. We replace the pedagogical ideal of dialogue with a thinly disguised monologue. Again, Rose provides a powerful image of this situation:

A critical feature of the system is the “other” never gets to talk back on its own terms. The communication is all one way, and the pole of power refuses to receive the feedback that would cause it to change itself, or to open itself to dialogue. (Rose 1999: 176-177).

This is the antithesis of Giroux’s “border pedagogy” and Freire’s “education as the practice of freedom” (1976; 1972). Yet it is perhaps quite close to pedagogical practices that are common in geography classrooms around the nation when things get tough, or when we are not self-consciously “teaching”. This is the well-intentioned teacher deciding what their students need. It is also the well-intentioned government framing genocidal policies because hegemonic values insist they are good for poor, disempowered people. This is the expert, unwilling to listen to non-experts for fear of losing their accredited expertise. This is the intruding frontier colonising and dismissing the value of the borderlands of coexistence and complexity.

How does our pedagogy in school Geography shape up as “border pedagogy”? In our work, whom do we valorise as “audience”, and what sort of audience do we really want? Do we encourage a diverse expression of geographical imagination, or do we seek to discipline our students’ imaginations to fit with the hidden curriculum of power, privilege and conventional interpretations. To what extent do we simply accept the audience that walks through the classroom door? And to what extent are we able (and willing) to challenge the structures that continue to create social inequity and geographical unevenness? How often do we challenge ourselves to explore very different sort of “teachings”?

Applied peoples’ geography: lessons from marginal research

The other element of my own professional life is research. David Harvey’s notion of an “applied peoples’ geography” (1984: 9), has long appealed to me:

The geography we make must be a peoples’ geography, not based on pious universalisms, ideals, and good intents, but a more mundane enterprise that reflects earthly interests, and claims, that confronts ideologies and prejudice as they really are, that faithfully mirrors the complex weave of competition, struggle, and cooperation within the shifting social and physical landscapes of the twentieth century … The geographical studies we make are necessarily part of that complex of conflictual social processes that give birth to new geographical landscapes. Geographers cannot remain neutral (Harvey 1984: 7).

My applied geographical research has generally evolved as a co-construction of knowledge and understanding and a simultaneous exercise in building the capacity of community organisations to do their own research, their own social analysis, and to frame their own strategic responses to the circumstances they face. Let me illustrate with examples from three overlapping aspects of my recent work around the edges of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia—mining, social impact assessment and treaty-building. My work has focused on how these fields might contribute to the task of decolonisation.

December 2002 Interaction 9
Mining has long been instrumental in the dispossession and oppression of Indigenous people in Australia. The interface between transnational resource companies and Aboriginal communities has been one of my core concerns since the late-1970s. Much of my work on mining and its impacts on Aboriginal people has faced the challenge of trying to decolonise the dominant vision of regional development as centred on the narrative of remote mine development—either positively or negatively—and to displace the mining corporation from its central place in regional development stories. The teaching task, then, has continued to be to find ways of imagining decentred regional narratives that re-place the narrative core with the polyphony of local concerns, contextualised across scales.

In my impact assessment work, I have suggested that three criteria are fundamental to securing empowering outcomes from SIA research. The methods adopted must be empowering in themselves, participatory in terms of the affected groups, and interventionist. In many ways, these criteria contradict the “scientific” ideal of objectivity, but affirm the idea of applied science. There is no simple, objective criterion for measuring “impacts”. And there can be no justification for identifying negative impacts and not seeking to intervene in them. As I put it some time ago:

A learned report which documents carefully the direction and speed with which a community is being flushed down the drain by a flood of negative impacts is hardly an adequate response in terms of the Harvey manifesto (Howitt 1993: 131).

One is drawn to field-based teaching approaches to put this sort of research into place, because the task is not just a matter of collecting and analysing data, but of working with affected community groups to achieve a shared understanding of their concerns, likely consequences and appropriate responses to impact scenarios. It is also a matter of working with (or perhaps on) development proponents to achieve a degree of recognition of consequences, meanings and possible alternatives. On the ground, however, the affected peoples needed assistance to understand the likely issues, information on which to frame their requirements for safety programs, compensatory procedures, and their own decision-making processes.

A large part of our task in reviewing the Alice Springs to Darwin railway (see Howitt and Jackson 2000) was to educate government decision-makers and engineers who looked at the traditional country of people like these women and saw empty space. In this process one can see the landscape being reinscribed as terra nullius, despite the judicial recognition of native title. Viewed from Canberra or Darwin or Adelaide, it was easy to imagine that the proposed railway would traverse an empty landscape. Yet, for the Aboriginal people associated with these areas, the landscape is already full. It is a landscape full of named places. Teaching this to the engineers was just as important in our study as was the documentation of safety issues and framing recommendations for action.

In contributing to Native Title negotiations, for example in South Australia, other challenges arise (see Agius et al 2001). Following preliminary meetings with representatives of government and the pastoral and mining industries, the Aboriginal Legal Rights Movement convened an historic meeting of native title claimant groups in Port Augusta to consider the proposal that we proceed towards a negotiated settlement of native title claims, rather than relying on legal resolution in the courts. The Aboriginal vision for a negotiated settlement includes a number of key principles—acceptance of the principles of Aboriginal laws, acceptance of non-extinguishment of native title as a basis for discussion, and affirmation that native title interests have a right to negotiate with interests who wish to use land in which native title is claimed.

The work has involved putting forward ways of achieving a vision of decolonisation of South Australia. Our fundamental challenge to all involved, including native title claimants along with government, pastoralists and miners, has been to imagine the social, political and ecological landscapes of South Australia with recognition of native title. How might we re-construct the state with native title built in, rather than excluded?

Our vision has been refined and understood through an iterative process of meetings, debate and challenge. Throughout the process the temptation has been to tell people why this was a good vision that they should accept. It is so easy to fall into the traps of paternalism and didactic pedagogy. But we’ve been blessed with team members who have reminded us that it is we who have to listen, to respond, to reshape, to include. In moving towards the construction of new scales of inter-tribal cooperation and governance in this process, our task was to present the raw materials for others to refine, not to do the deal and deliver it as the best we could achieve.
Harnessing the new geographical imaginaries and facing the political realities

Toni Morrison's image of a literary "freedom to narrate the world" (1993:64) parallels geography's quite literal construction of the colonial world through maps and data, and its current concerns with global scale change. In Australia, the dual "others" of hostile environments and incomprehensible Indigenous peoples have long haunted the dominant culture's geographical imagination. Images of hostile climates and environments, frontier social relations, external threats from the "north" (and now from the "Middle East" to our north-west) are deeply embedded in Australian imaginaries and shape the political realities on the ground, not only during election campaigns, but in everyday life around issues of coexistence, sustainability and border protection. The exclusive nature of Australian universities is hardly surprising when one recognises the extent to which an imaginary of exclusion has underpinned Australian policy settings for a century or more. The White Australia policy sought to exclude non-white migrants from entry until it was finally repealed in 1973. Labour laws, curfews and pass laws, education regulations, health regulations and mission policies all disciplined Aboriginal people to conform or be excluded. Economic policy sought to exclude imports. Industrial policy sought to exclude non-union members from closed shops. And universities excluded those outside the elite (with a few exceptions for scholarship "winners" admitted on merit). Dramatic reform to provide open access to tertiary education in the early-1970s has since been whittled away by governments of the left and right. The inclusive visions of multiculturalism and reconciliation have been unsettled by a white backlash and the willingness of the major political parties to engage in the wedge politics of fear and exclusion (Langton 1997).

As Jacques Derrida reminds us in his compelling discussion of monolingualism, language, education and recognition create ambiguous routes to overcoming oppression and marginalisation (Derrida 1998). Education, literacy and professional standing offer individuals a ticket out of social disadvantage. But the journey is hard. Like all travel, it offers glimpses of what might be. It forces reflection on what was. It creates new identities and unsettles old assumptions about the boundaries around us. At the same time as education offers the skills, knowledge, understanding, networks and opportunities that allow individuals to escape the constraints of their context, they also place conditions on access to the transformational space.

For many Aboriginal students, for example, university education demands separation from family for long periods, relocation away from country, withdrawal from various social and cultural obligations and commitments. School education insists that Indigenous students engage with a vision that is often somebody else's—and assessment is based not on their ability to engage and critique, but their ability to repeat and accept. In previous eras these were precisely the procedures used by governments and missionaries to undermine cultures of sovereign Indigenous identities. The process of individuation through education affirms the need to conform to external rather than internally defined criteria of value, excellence, achievement and contribution. Fragmenting collective rights (and the responsibilities that give rise to the web of relationships we gloss as "culture") and reconstituting them as individual rights is not recognition. It was, and remains, the imposition of a dominant imaginary on those whose dispossession underpins systems of domination.

The challenge facing geography teachers, it seems to me, is to work on the sorts of skill building, vision and understanding that equips our students' geographical imaginings to see and achieve new geographies in which the values of social justice, economic equity, ecological sustainability and cultural diversity are the foundations of social relations rather than a threat to established patterns of privilege and "stability". Unsettling the well-established borders around school geography to pursue a border pedagogy and draw in the work of marginal research seems to me to be fundamental to realising the vocation of nurturing our students' geographical imaginings in ways that challenge the myopia of those who would deny the civic value of geographic literacy and imagination.

Geography's teachers and researchers should take on the challenge of addressing the intellectual, social, economic and environmental consequences of "deep colonising". We have the tools, the materials, and the capacity to seriously begin decolonising the geographical imagination we foster through our teaching. In educating for justice and sustainability, it is simply not enough to integrate environmental, socio-cultural and political-economic perspectives with our students. We must also overcome multiple fractures within our schools and universities and between education processes and marginalised and excluded groups.
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The office will reopen Monday, January 13, 2003.

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We wish all our GTAV friends and colleagues a very safe and joyful Christmas.