As if bunyips mattered ... Cross-cultural mytho-poetic beasts in Australian subaltern planning

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Reading mytho-poetic beasts into the landscape

The subaltern in planning refers to non-western or non-dominant approaches to planning. Planning is defined as a geographic construction and upholding of a community’s cultural and physical development. Subaltern planning is a common but unacknowledged form of planning by sub-dominant groups of a culture. It exists alongside the spoken practice of planning. Its ideas are often appropriated without acknowledgement, but unlike insurgency planning as posited by theorists such as Leonie Sandercock it rarely directly challenges the limitations of modernist planning practice. While the subaltern has strongly influenced the outcomes of planning, it speaks a generally unacknowledged and unwritten language (and therefore falls too often outside the rubric of academic analysis) because the poetic use of myth and story does not sit well within dominant, western planners’ notions of planning as rational, logical and scientific. So, subaltern planning is that undertaken by the community-based non-professional on a regular basis.

Subaltern planning is often not referred to as planning; however, it serves the same purposes as ‘capital P’ planning. Subaltern planning practices are also processes that map the land, determine living and settlement patterns, and express the culture of a society in a concrete way. One of the many examples of subaltern planning is the reading of mytho-poetic beasts into the landscape and the construction of their influence on culture and living patterns. Planning of land and place with mytho-poetic beasts in mind has a long tradition, not only within ancient cultures, but also within western modernist planning. As one way of reading, rather than of doing, three interpretations are proffered here: the place of the dragon in Feng Shui, the place of the fairy in city planning, and the place of the rainbow serpent in traditional Indigenous planning (dimly reflected in the legless lizards impasse of modernist planning for Gungahlin).

The dragon

Feng shui is about the flow of energies and their influence on a landscape. It was first mentioned over five thousand years ago in the Taoist book *Li Shu or The Book of Rites*. The rules for burial say that ‘the flow of energy dissipated by wind stops at the boundary of water’; that is, the Chinese words for wind — *feng* — and water — *shui*. So a good gravesite must have good feng shui:

often a spot referred to as a ‘dragon’s den’, a place where the natural and the beneficial feng shui forces of a mountain concentrate.

Feng shui refers to both the physical environment and the more mystical and abstract influences. It relies on: the five Chinese elements of metal, water, wood,
fire and earth; the Tai Chi of yin and yang; trigrams of the I Ching; and the Lo Shu diagram (or, in English, the magic nine square chart, a diagram possibly based on the markings of a turtle).

Feng shui is described as the art of placement, reflecting its geographic nature, and as the art of living in harmony, reflecting its more spiritual nature. There are a number of schools within this complex analysis. The interpretation useful to the argument presented in this article is that of the Form School of Feng Shui. The Form School was given written authority in the ninth century AD by Yang Yun-Sung who lived in southern China, a region full of spectacularly shaped mountains and hills. A landscape that reflects the four celestial animals in the right location will dictate the planning of any human habitation on any scale, whether a city, a house, or a desk. The four animals to be found in the landscape are the bird (or occasionally phoenix), tiger, tortoise, and most important of all — dragon. In broad terms, if the skyline in the east looks like a dragon, then the site is beneficial. Statues of dragons (however small) are also recommended to improve the Chi (good) flow of energies.

Feng shui practitioners are often referred to as geomancers or ‘interpreters of messages from the earth’. Approximately three thousand years ago, the Chinese applied the concepts of yin and yang to their city planning, so that the land, its topography and vegetation were respected in the design and construction of human habitations. Evelyn Lip gives a number of examples of ancient Chinese cities in which the: ‘feng shui theory of planning, Confucian ideals and ancient Chinese social and political hierarchy were clearly reflected in their plans’.

In a lecture entitled ‘Is there an Artificial God?’ Douglas Adams simplifies the principles of feng shui to that of accounting for dragons:

... go back to the issue of how you figure out how a room or a house should be designed, and instead of going through all the business of trying to work out the angles and trying to digest which genuine architectural principles you may want to take out of what may be a passing architectural fad, just ask yourself, ‘How would a dragon live here?’ We are used to thinking in terms of organic creatures; an organic creature may consist of an enormous complexity of all sorts of different variables that are beyond our ability to resolve, but we know how organic creatures live. We’ve never seen a dragon, but we’ve all got an idea of what a dragon is like, so we can say, ‘Well, if a dragon went through here, he’d get stuck just here and a little bit cross over there because he couldn’t see that and he’d wave his tail and knock that vase over’. You figure out how the dragon’s going to be happy here, and lo and behold, you’ve suddenly got a place that makes sense for other organic creatures, such as ourselves, to live in.

So, my argument is that as we become more and more scientifically literate, it’s worth remembering that the fictions with which we previously populated our world may have some function that it’s worth trying to understand and preserve the essential components of, rather than throwing the baby out with the bath water ... a precise parallel to the entities we create around ourselves to inform and shape our lives and enable us to work and live together. Therefore I would argue that though there isn’t an actual God, there is an artificial God, and we should probably bear that in mind.

Generally, in China and in other Asian countries the dragon has played a major role in the planning of cities and homes. Dragons are also reflected in subaltern
Australian planning. When I worked in the ACT Planning Authority on religious infrastructure provision, I collaborated with a Taiwanese Chinese Buddhist group and another planner to simplify the feng shui siting requirements of a proposed temple in Gungahlin. However, when we found a suitable site (hill behind, water in front, facing east), the Planning Authority was still unable to grasp why such land should be reserved for the use of a temple, and the group took their substantial funding and generous aspirations elsewhere. It will be a while before location guidelines in planning authorities provide for the sense of dragons in the landscape. Nevertheless, subaltern planning practice is alive and well, not only among Chinese and religious practitioners but also in many western homes and offices. Generally, these practices do not seek to challenge the western planning orthodoxy; practitioners do not protest when new suburbs are located badly. Instead, feng shui practices sit outside of the limits and overcome the constraints of western planning, by retro-fitting water features along with the notion of dragons.

The fairy

In Australia at the beginning of the twentieth century, there was a strong general interest in reviving old mythology though art and place, and in making links to the spiritual, reflected in Pre-Raphaelite and art nouveau movements. The fairy was adopted by many, from Rudolf Steiner in his system of education through to Arthur Rackham in his many illustrations. In Peter Pan, a popular pantomime of the time, as Tinkerbell lies dying the audience is asked to ‘Clap if you believe in fairies’, and to thunderous applause the fairy recovers. By the 1960s the fairy had fallen out of favour and the pantomime lost its popularity as Australian audiences booed the dying Tinkerbell. Judy Wells suggests that the fairy motif ‘echoes the sense of loss experienced during the late 19th century expansion of the city. It was an imaginative response to the displacement of the natural from cities and town’. In her unpublished doctoral thesis, Jenny McFarlane rereads modernist art as inspired by the fairy and discusses the impact of the fairy in the culture and planning of Australia. She talks of the theosophical planning at Lane Cove based on the role of the fairy, and of a jewelled cross that was buried to signify this new spirituality in the early 1930s.

In the early twentieth century of Australia, there was a swell of both feminism and theosophy. Many women rejected Christianity for more occult ideas of religion that included those of Isis and fairy. Those attracted to theosophy were ‘in the court of the faerie queen’ (in reference to Queen Elizabeth’s personified hope for religious reform). The fairy was the icon for magic and change, especially for women.

Theosophy and Steiner’s adaptation of ‘anthroposophy’ were popular. In 1910, the Victorian Spiritualist Union showed the spirit drawings of English theosophist Georgiana Houghton in Melbourne. She commented that her work was drawn by seven archangels and she was only the medium, indicating the acceptable type of ‘thought forms’ and ‘spirit messages’ that continued to ‘swirl around in much late nineteenth-century western art’.

One recognised proponent of the fairy in Australian planning is the architect and artist, Marion Mahony Griffin, who worked in the first half of the twentieth
century. She formed ‘a professional, personal, and intellectual partnership’ with Walter Burley Griffin. Their combined interest in landscape architecture and ideal of a place where ‘everyone lived at home with nature and each other’ was reflected in their commitment to ‘the Christian occult Anthroposophical Society’ and general interest in theosophy.

The Griffins’ major contributions to planning in Australia were the city of Canberra, the towns of Leeton and Griffith in New South Wales, and Castlecrag in Sydney, in which they pioneered environmental design (based upon existing terrain rather than a superimposed grid plan). They were interested in planning that ‘would free the spirit of the beholder’. Mahony Griffin’s architectural drawings exhibited in 1914 at the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects in Melbourne were highly coloured and used gold on silk rather than paper. Peter Proudfoot suggests that the planning for Canberra was based on the crystal, water, and luminous light, and that such a sacred and ancient cosmological schema was the basis for the Griffins’ drawings for Canberra. Certainly a notion of the spirit pervaded.

Among ACT planners, a mythology persists that the first suburbs of Canberra were planned to accommodate ‘the wives’, referring to the wives of the chief engineer and of the architect, Burley Griffin, and their belief in fairies. For instance, the need for small areas for fairies to dance in — fairy rings — has been used to explain the many little green patches between groups of houses around Ainslie. In her unpublished diary, *The Magic of America*, Mahony Griffin says that the same faculty that allows us to believe in fairies also allows for creativity and original work, reminding us of the importance of the imagination.

Again we must convince the minds of children, warped by the superficialities of our present day thinking, that they are surrounded not only by a world that they can see and hear and touch with their physical senses…but are also surrounded by another world, the world of causes just as diverse, just as rich, just as full of adventure, which they can learn to perceive and in perceiving to enter, and in entering to become a creator in this realm of criterion, the world of life.

For the same faculty which enables one to see the fairies is a faculty which enables one to do original work in all human realms, and to transform our community, so rich in toys and tools, into a civilisation thereby attaining great and worthwhile ends. For this, human beings must develop their spiritual powers of perception, the basis of a new form which will enable them to know causes as precisely as at present they know effects … if they [her students] wanted to be among the geniuses in their work, they must be ready to develop that kind of thinking which would someday enable them to see the fairies.

There are certainly indications in Mahony Griffin’s diary and in Proudfoot’s work that public open space — at least Canberra’s — was made to be imbued with magic and spirits. Mahony Griffin’s writing on the importance of the idea of fairies shows a glimpse of a way that mytho-poetic beasts could enter western planning. At the very least, the primacy of the landscape and its more spiritual qualities in the planning is clear. The Griffins were ‘at once public-spirited and ecological, spiritual and non-materialistic, and in tune with the essential rhythms of the land’. 
The rainbow serpent

Much of white Australia’s knowledge of the role of mythology, epitomised by the rainbow serpent, in Indigenous society comes from anthropologists. For example, Strehlow’s classic study emphasises that ‘Aboriginal religion was a religion for men and women living in a land which had never ceased being inhabited by supernatural beings’. Similarly, the Berndts say religious rituals pervade traditional Aboriginal life. The Dreaming (or Dreamtime) is the sacred source of all life, and the key to physical and spiritual survival. Mythic beings and spirit children act as intermediaries, bringing life from out of the Dreaming. So slithers the rainbow serpent, as a key mythic being across many Indigenous cultures, into the explanation and planning of the Australian landscape.

The Butchulla people from Fraser Island refer to Beeral as their god and, although never mentioned, his sign is the rainbow. His son is Yindingie, the serpent or carpet snake. The two were often combined into the rainbow serpent, spoken of as Yindingie. Yindingie’s codes for behaviour and safety of place were still being taught from elders to young people in the 1960s. He is also credited with leaving a footprint in the rocks of Bauple Mountain and one in Urangan in Hervey Bay. As the Butchulla people ask, ‘Who but Yindingie could take a step like that?’

The Maung people from North Goulburn Island of the far north Northern Territory tell a tale reflected across tribal groups of Arnhem Land: when a noise disturbs the Rainbow Snake, Ambidj, he eats all the tribe. Heavy with people, he crosses to the mainland, leaving a deep groove, that forms what is now unimaginatively called ‘Number Two Sandy Creek’. Unusually, however, the rainbow snake is killed and his stomach’s contents are freed. His body now marks a large waterhole named Ingana.

There are countless examples, popularised in the white mind by books such as Bruce Chatwin’s *Songlines*. The rainbow serpent moves across the Australian landscape, creating and mapping key formations — not only to prevent getting lost, but also to reinforce and maintain cultural knowledges. Traditionally, Indigenous people have used their art to represent ‘a mobile and purposeful play between statements of identity, mapping and narrative, sacred symbol and formal pattern’.

An aside on the problem of tradition

Tradition, like history, is only interpreted by individuals of the present. It is an ever-changing feast that both reflects and responds to present-day requirements. Western notions of democratic representation mean we often assume that one person can speak on behalf of a cultural group. Both notions have been applied monolithically, especially in the case of Australian Indigenous/white relations. These have become more complicated because of a white yearning for a simple black past. Elizabeth Povinelli in collecting Indigenous evidence for native title claims shows how whites require Indigenous Australians to tell an impossible story of unity across time and culture rather than the more partial truth about themselves. Individuals are asked to speak on behalf of an Indigenous Australia that constructs mythological links to land, and are rewarded for doing so with (at
least promises of) status and land. She suggests that white Australians need such Indigenous stories to ‘ghost’ our own mythic longings.26

With the best of intentions, we require a construction of truth, a creation of story as unchanging, independent of the complex realities. Perhaps white Australia wants Indigenous people to show a cultural closeness to tradition and history that the settler culture has lost. No matter how carefully reconciliation is approached, there is always a danger of treading with racist feet. But this is not a reason to ignore or downplay the importance of Indigenous history in Australia; it is just a reason to be aware that every journey leaves its footprints. The records we have of traditional Indigenous evidence, whether through story, painting or other art, are predicated on an impossible western demand for purity and authenticity that along the way constructs a false image and may in the end limit the opportunity for reconciliation. Nevertheless, this evidence is what both Indigenous and white Australia has to work with; as with any exercise in communication we resort to a partial and distorted truth in the hope that this can still lead to useful disclosure that furthers a diverse Australian community’s cultural development.

Transcribers of place: Indigenous art and western plans

Black painting

The white evidence collected shows that stories were traditionally remembered in Indigenous society through songs and art. Paintings are highly stylised with many hidden and symbolic meanings. A half-oval can represent a person sitting down, a number of such symbols around a circle could be a meeting around a fire, or a waterhole, or indeed any meaning assigned to it by its creator and their select company. Meandering designs can represent physical tracks or creeks as well as the mythic travels of ancestral beings. Howard Morphy gives an example of the same painting interpreted both as a story about Dreaming ancestors creating the land, and as an everyday map to show the route of a recent trip.27 An explanation of such a map/painting may or may not be given to ‘outsiders’, depending on the level of sacredness of such material: ‘Significance of designs, for whom, and prepared by whom, is vital in understanding Aboriginal art right through this Continent’.28

One example of the detailed differences of meaning and their importance formed a major exhibition by the National Gallery of Australia in 1997. The painters of the Wagilag sisters’ story (1937–1997) showed the range of interpretations given to the story over time and over place. In brief, the Wagilag sisters and children are eaten by Wititj, the Olive Python, vomited up and brought back to life by itchy caterpillars. The snake eats them again and then leaves impressions in the ground when he falls from the favour of the other great snakes. The exhibition brought together artists from across Arnhem Land of differing Yolngu moieties. There are a great number of similarities across the four generations and ten or so moieties that indicate the strong influence of elder dictates in the manner of the paintings: ‘Painting is crucially a performance of knowledge, inheritance, and the assertion of authority’.29

The Arnhem Land painting tradition relies upon an elder or a djunggayi, ‘who carries managerial or custodial responsibility for a person’s land and the related
stories and ritual’. The painter responsible for the ‘full account of the primary narratives to which their country refers’ gets permission from his or her djunggayi to be able to paint the story’s interpretation. Ground rules establish continuity and stability as well as the authority of their forebears — core narratives dictate that the art always show the great Snake encircling the Sisters, footprints, triangular imprints that hold the circular forms of the Snake’s heart and cloaca, lines of itchy caterpillars, and the black circle of the waterhole. Other elements — sand, palm, clouds, stars, moon, dogs, and so on — are more variable, depending upon who holds the current right to paint the full narrative.

The paintings demonstrate the Yolngu explanation of variation within a stable cosmology. One painting can have multiple viewpoints, for example, aerial, planar or wrapped, consistent with Yolngu epistemologies:

in which a multiplicity of ways of reading or explaining natural and social phenomena is fundamental … dependent upon who is interpreting what, and for whom, and the degree to which ‘meaning’ may or may not be enunciated.

Indigenous art becomes what Karel Kupka refers to as ‘painted literature’. Art, at least in the Yolngu’s case, describes belief systems, interprets the natural and social worlds, activates sacred and secular accounts of nature and culture, and confirms the structures of social life and the social status of the painter. But the art is also sold as aesthetic artefacts, so that ‘he’s bridging, building the bridges and creating this one [Wititj], that is his Mother … bridging this reconciliation. To both worlds, Aboriginal society taking it up into white society, this one, Wititj’.

Superficial readings of Aboriginal art involve the attribution of attitudes of map-making and aerial views to the dots. Howard Morphy puts it simply: ‘Aboriginal paintings are maps of the land’. Yet, as with most practices, there are more layers of meaning on offer that are as dependent upon the expertise and authority of the viewer as upon the artist. The secret meaning is the least accessible, the most hidden from view. Alongside this collaborative cultural construction of traditional Indigenous art sits a capitalist world hungry for the popularity of (and only maybe for the associated education on reconciliation from) the work of celebrated individuals.

Thus the anthropological interpretation, which has been generally used to understand the role of art and mythological beasts in Indigenous culture, is slowly changing. Perhaps it is time for other professionals to interact with the original stories of Australia, and to offer their own reconciled re-interpretations. While it has become fashionable to talk about map-making and Indigenous art, the western map-making planner has had rare opportunity to interact with such cultural offerings.

White planning

All maps are full of conventions and distortions. Western planners also create highly stylised designs with hidden symbolic meaning as part of their urban and regional planning process. For instance, colours take on especial significance to the select group of a planning agency. In the ACT Planning Authority, at least during the early 1990s while I was there, yellow meant community services such as libraries and halls, but included emergency and religious institutions; blue was
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for commercial and retail enterprises. Such colours were placed carefully into the design after much community discussion and overall agreement, but it remained for the chief planner — the djunggayi by another name — to dictate or change the details of exactly where and what each colour represented. Just as traditional Indigenous artists hold information on their land and culture, so too are expert planners the geographic information holders of western culture. Not only do maps tell us where to put things, they also tell us about dominant society and its aspirations.

Possibilities for reconciliation?

In this sense, traditional Indigenous artists and contemporary Australian planners have both served the same purposes in the same manner. They are transcribers of place. They are the keepers of the maps that interpret land and land use. They are holders of arcane knowledge kept alive through a notion of expertise, community consultation, and through ceremony. Both depend upon a mythological and culturally specific significance with hidden layers of understanding that vary with the expertise of the viewer: in Indigenous art, the reading of land and of story differs; in white plans, the role of the compass, for instance, indicates a whole history of north/south relations where north is always on top. Both have a notion of scale: one reflects mythological proportions, the other geographic relations. While one has been labelled art, the other professes itself as a science of rationality that mostly lies outside ‘the messy complexities of reality’. The traditional land knowledge of Indigenous groups is represented through their art, as a form of mapping culture. Indigenous mapping skills have been long recognised; an 1858 report noted that Indigenous children in Victoria’s education system ‘are very quick … in geography by mapping’. Perhaps the difference of planning labels — black art, white science — merely reflects the power of the colonised dichotomy.

But white planners impose humans on terra nullius (the tabula rasa of land); Indigenous painters conversely impose land on humans. Indigenous plans give animals as much importance as humans. The unifier of Indigenous art and plans is a discourse over land, myth and history. The unifier of white plans is land, development and the future. There are differing white and Indigenous understandings of the land and how we should relate to it. Is there a possibility for reconciliation (a moving towards each other’s cultures)? What role might Australia’s mytho-poetic beast, the bunyip, play in such an imagined reconciliation?

The Bunyip

The bunyip is a bird! The Australian bittern (Botaurus poiciloptilus) is also known as the brown bittern, bullbird, or bunyip. It lives in swamps or lagoons in southeastern Australia from Fraser Island in Queensland to Ceduna in South Australia. Its call is unusual: ‘a note of distant foghorn with no start or finish — a deep “woomph”, repeated up to thirty times, heard from afar; thought to have inspired aboriginal “bunyip” legends’. More commonly, of course, the bunyip is Australia’s yeti monster. It is wild nature, living in swamps. It exists in tales to scare children or to explain the terrible. It continues across many Indigenous
Australian legends and has been adopted by white Australia as a common, if childish, monster. It could become a symbol for a more universal Australian monster, as it reconciles not only Indigenous and white stories of the bush, but also white Europeans to the wilder nature of Australia.

In Fraser Island, the bunyip is called the Melong by the Butchulla people. Moonie Jarl from Fraser Island introduces their legends:

The Melong of our stories, for instance, would be the witch in fairy stories ... The super-human animal, which in my father’s stories was called Melong, might well be what some people refer to as the ‘Bunyip’ ... you know there is a bad swamp there; a Melong lives there!42

While the Melong is scary, he also plays heroic parts in other Butchulla legends. He is ‘the spirit of darkness and punisher of all wrong-doers’.43 He returns stolen goods through the use of magic fire and creates the platypus by sitting on a water rat that had been stealing the duck’s eggs.44 Wandi’s (Olga Miller) accompanying illustrations, like most traditional work, tell the story and map the land in the same picture. They are based on symbols and designs that hold special meaning to the Butchulla people. Such designs were sometimes woven or stained from local rushes and berries or drawn with the coloured sands of Fraser Island in yellow, red, black, bluey-grey and orange.45

There are many such bunyip-like figures in Indigenous Australian legends. Not all can be attributed to the brown bittern, as many ‘bunyips’ are found outside of southeastern Australia. The Yawuru people from the Broome area of Western Australia talk of the Wadaba or Gumbun, a yeti-like creature who lives in the mangroves and is to be avoided.46 The Yalanji people of Cape York in northern Queensland fear Turramulli, the giant who towers above the trees and eats any large animal, including people. His ‘wonk, wonk’ is heard in swamps and ‘sounds like distant thunder’. Perhaps the range of the bittern was once much greater, although the Jalanji say the sound is imitated still in swamps by large green bullfrogs, as a warning.47

Thus the bunyip, in one form or another, has a respectable Indigenous history across Australia. But it is unusual in that it has crossed the gaps between both Indigenous and white cultures and between art and science. ‘Bunyip’ has become the anglicised generic for such creatures, originally coming from the Wergaia language of western Victoria and first recorded in 1845.48 The bunyip was first sketched by whites in the mid-nineteenth century and looked a little like a nine-metre-long, two-legged emu/goanna cross. It was referred to as the Challicum bunyip after the property near Fiery Creek near Ararat where an outline of the bunyip had been maintained by the Djapwurrong people.49

The bunyip was initially treated by whites as a serious subject for scientific investigation, and vestiges of such status still remain. The explorer Hamilton Hume recorded the discovery of an unidentified creature’s large bones near Lake Bathurst, New South Wales, in 1818. An escaped convict who lived with Victorian-based Indigenous Australians between 1803 and 1835 recorded bunyip sightings, describing it as being about the size of a full-grown calf with dusky-grey feathers and saying the natives considered the animal something supernatural.50 An unusual skull was found on the Murrumbidgee River in New South Wales in 1846 and put on exhibition in the Australian Museum, Sydney as
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a ‘bunyip skull’ (although, this may have been an early exercise in museum marketing).51 Most recently, new evidence for the bunyip’s existence has been located through Kakadu rock art near Wongewongen, Northern Territory. A 235-centimetre painting of a large tapir-like animal with long hair and accompanying pouch was found, thought by palaeontologists to represent a Palorchestes, a prehistoric animal that became extinct 18,000 years ago. The Kapirigi, traditional owners of the Gagudju Association Kakadu, describe it more simply as ‘an animal out of the dreaming’.52 The Palorchestes seems a ripe candidate for the origins of the bunyip.

The bunyip quickly moved from science to the stuff of literature. According to the National Museum, ‘This people-eating monster of Aboriginal legend has been keenly adopted by non-Aboriginal artists and writers’.53 The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature lists several such authors: E Lloyd in A Visit to the Antipodes (1846); William Westgarth in Australia Felix (1848); G C Mundy in Our Antipodes (1852); Joseph Furphy in Such is Life; and Steele Rudd in On Our Selection. The bunyip also appears as the main character, rather than a passing reference in many later books: J A Barry’s Steve Brown’s Bunyip (1893), Charles Fenner’s Bunyips and Billabongs (1933); Charles Barrett’s The Bunyip and other Mythological Monsters and Legends (1946); as well as having its own Australian pantomime ‘The Bunyip’, first staged in Sydney by Ella Airlie in 1916.54 When W C Wentworth suggested the establishment of a colonial peerage in 1853, the concept was quickly ridiculed as a ‘bunyip aristocracy’, a term coined by Daniel Deniehy.55 Bunyip Bluegum is the name of a koala character of Norman Lindsay’s Magic Pudding, and the short story ‘The Bunyip of Barney’s Elbow’ was published in the Bulletin in 1946 and reprinted in story collections of 1956 and 1965.56

Just as fairies and witches became the stuff of European children’s tales, so too has the bunyip. Ethel Pedley’s classic 1899 children’s tale, Dot and the Kangaroo, has a terrifying sound of the bunyip bellowing in gully darkness. In the early 1900s, the bunyip was illustrated by both May Gibbs and Ida Rentoul Outhwaite. The bunyip is still immortalised in poetry and song: in the 1980s the Australian Broadcasting Corporation produced songs and dance tunes by Michael Atherton, including a children’s song with the chorus: ‘It’s a bunyip, a bunyip with a bite, so don’t go on walks while it stalks, through the bush at night … it’s got a big appetite’.57 The bunyip is also found in contemporary children’s literature: The Monster that ate Canberra or The Bunyip of Berkeley’s Creek, to name just a couple. In the latter, written by Jenny Wagner and illustrated by Ron Brooks, the bunyip, who is wondering about his appearance, meets a scientist:

The man was busy with a notebook and pencil, and did not look at the bunyip. ‘Sh,’ he said, ‘I’m busy.’ The bunyip waited for a long time, and then he said, very slowly and clearly, ‘Can you please tell me what bunyips look like?’ ‘Yes,’ said the man, without looking up. ‘Bunyips don’t look like anything.’ ‘Like nothing?’ said the bunyip. ‘Like nothing at all,’ said the man. ‘Are you sure?’ said the bunyip. ‘Quite sure,’ said the man, and looked right through him. ‘Bunyips simply don’t exist.’58

This is an attitude that encapsulates the problem of contemporary science and technology when it tries to talk to Indigenous mythology, even one as cross-culturally compromised as the bunyip. But if we continue to ignore this land’s
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mythology, if we don’t plan for such wild nature, we are in danger of being consumed by it. In The Monster that ate Canberra, a shortsighted bunyip leaves his billabong because it had become the dumping ground for rubbish from the smoggy city. He chomps his way through the great public buildings of Canberra’s modernism, eating the Academy of Science as pie, the National Library as iced birthday cake, and the stale Parliament House to, unsuccessfully, overcome his indigestion. The official response to the bunyip is to administratively pass the buck and put him on trial. Along with other Australian animals, he had never bothered to learn English, so does not defend himself, and is placed in a zoo.59 The metaphor hardly needs explanation, demonstrating perhaps the original inhabitants’ attitudes to western knowledge and power (although do not forget that the bunyip is short sighted and motivated by hunger) as well as the western officialdom’s response to the ‘problem of the Aborigine’.

So how does the bunyip fare as a forerunner in the icon’s race for reconciliation? There are a number of problems. The deeper layers of the bunyip’s indigenous meanings are only briefly glimpsed in tales such as the Butchulla’s and, in any case, should perhaps not be widely accessed. And it can be argued that the white bunyip’s gradual deterioration from an object of science to the stuff of children’s tales has lessened its status as potential icon. Yet in a brave new world, where the education of children is the most important cultural task and science has been dissected as a puppet of colonialism, this would not be viewed as deterioration but as cause for celebration. More critically, there are few other mythological beasts that have been adopted by both Indigenous and settler cultures, nor that epitomise such a unique Australianess. The bunyip wins the race as the only contestant.

As if … (a conclusion)

Perhaps this article all too truly reflects Gary Hall’s critique of cultural studies as being ‘at the crossroads of magic and positivism’.60 Perhaps too it unconsciously emerges from the cultural soup at the same time as Allen Carlson describes relations between Native American and white landscape fictions, mythological descriptions and cultural embeddedness, in his book on aesthetics and the environment.61 This conclusion attempts an instrumental reversal of more usual academic and intellectual thought that focuses upon the idea and its justification through evidence. An instrumental approach works on the basis that it does not matter whether it is true (or even whether the explanation is sufficient), it is about the consequences of the idea — if the consequences are good, then the idea should be adopted. Just as Douglas Adams argues for an artificial god, I would argue (at least) for an artificial bunyip. Whether we give credence to bunyips’ existence or their iconic status is immaterial. An Australia that planned as if bunyips mattered would indicate much about the positive development of Australia’s culture.

If we are to take the idea of reconciliation seriously, then white Australia needs to move towards a more Indigenous understanding of land just as much as Indigenous Australia needs to proffer or, at least, model such cultural knowledge. Reconciliation implies that white planning needs to develop from the Christian, scientific notions of tabula rasa to adopt a more multi-perspective, multi-layered approach. In traditional Indigenous planning:
country was an idea interchangeable with ancestry; there was no divide between representations of land and of people, hence no ‘landscape’ in the western sense of an abstract scene waiting to be filled.62

Is a merging of these two styles possible and can it lead to a reconciliation? Or do we simply stay within the power-plays of those who believe in records (whether white or Indigenous)? Is there a part the land plays in being labelled and interpreted that leads to a similar technique of description? Does the land remember the foot of the conquistador? If it remembers the foot of the rainbow serpent, then do we unearth a pre-Christian garden of Eden?

Just as the wider issue of habitat preservation in environmental circles has relied upon the promotional positives of native animals, koalas and bilbies being prime examples, so too could the development of good planning rely upon the better qualities of our own mytho-poetic beast — that the bunyip is widely understood and commonly appreciated, even if not real, cute or furry. We don’t have to believe in bunyips, just in what their created existence could imply for changes in practice. If our plans were made as if bunyips mattered, we could ironically perhaps inhabit a more human and cultured place that acknowledges the creatures of our collective thoughts. While Mahony Griffin refers to her time’s culturally structured fairy notion of the numinous, the same could apply now to the bunyip. To adapt her words, ‘if planners want to be among the geniuses in their work, they must be ready to develop that kind of thinking which would someday enable them to see bunyips’.

Determining the description of our own planning beast could become and direct the process of reconciliation and cultural identity formation. Determining the preferred habitat for such a creature would determine the philosophical value we place on differing elements of the environment, whilst removing the NIMBY element of such debates. If the contemporary seriousness of such debates could be mitigated by the sense of play and creative influence indicated by the idea of bunyips, then perhaps we would all be more involved in the shaping of our culture and our habitations.

Can we civilise (in Mahony Griffin’s use of this word) western planning with mytho-poetic beasts? Can we subvert ‘capital P’ planning with the subaltern? The process of reading the influence of mythic beasts into the landscape is perhaps most commonly understood in the adoption of feng shui in western subaltern planning for (mostly individual) human habitations. In Australia, if the beast of choice is the rainbow serpent, we ignore white culture; if a celtic fairy, we ignore Indigenous culture. This article, along with the National Library of Australia, suggests the Indigenous bunyip has been widely adopted by white Australia and is the best symbol of reconciliation.

Perhaps western culture is starting to plan for the bunyip — ‘swamps’ (the presumed and preferred habitat of bunyips) have become ‘wetlands’, indicating their valued change. But white Australians do not have places we avoid, places we leave for a wilder and more dangerous nature. We still think we can colonise everywhere and everything — even unbuildable places become wildernesses to trek or mountains to conquer. There is no imagined unvisited place that lies in the language of mythology. Despite Ross Gibson’s book on the same,63 we have no recognised ‘badlands’. As Chris Wallace-Crabbe asked almost twenty years ago:
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Could any Australian lay hold of an uninhabited stretch of landscape in this way, getting a grip on its phenomena and their meanings together? ... It may be that we await an Aboriginal landscape perceiver of genius to depict and persuade ... 64

Rather than leaving enough space for the bunyip, we are rapidly filling up the small spaces left by the fairy and bulldozing the hills of dragons. The rainbow snake is being pushed out of the landscape and into the safer pages of books about the Dreamtime, a time now removed (instead of co-existing). If we don’t start taking the idea of the bunyip seriously, we expunge our last chance for intrusions of the non-scientific into our cultured constructions. Without the bunyip, our world is a poorer place. An Australia that planned as if bunyips mattered would be a reconciled Australia with a deeper understanding of land encapsulated in a cross-cultural approach that (conf)used both art and planning. So, if you believe in the idea of bunyips, clap your hands.
Notes to pp 11–19

As if bunyips mattered … Cross-cultural mytho-poetic beasts in Australian subaltern planning

Tamsin Kerr

1 An earlier version of this paper was presented to the University of Newcastle’s Inter-Cultural Studies Conference in June 2003.


3 See Carol Mazur, Easy Feng Shui, Australian Publishing Company, Sydney, nd (1995?).

4 See Nan Hai Guan, Kanyu Xue Yuan Li (The original theory of feng shui), Hong Kong, 1971, p 75 cited in Evelyn Lip, Feng Shui for Business, Heian International, Union City, CA.


7 Personal communication Joan Kerr, written up in a Scoop review of the University of Queensland, saying that the Easter Bunny had taken the place of the fairy by the Australian 1960s, 2003.


10 A reference to the theosophist’s faerie queen herself, Annie Besant who with Charles Leadbeater wrote Thought Forms.


14 Rubbo, op. cit., p 123.


16 Discussed at a number of RAIPA ACT meetings and personal communications Alison Burton, then Acting Chief Planner 1994.


18 ibid., pp 229–34.

19 Rubbo, op. cit., p 130.


22 The Butchulla territory included Fraser Island, Double Island Pont, Tin Can Bay, Bauple Mountain and Burrum Heads. To the north lay the Wuka Wuka, to the south the Gubbi Gubbi (or Guvie Guvie). Butchulla is the spelling used by Moonie Jarl (aka Wilf Reeves) in The Legends of Moonie Jarl, Jacaranda Press, Brisbane, 1964. It is now commonly spelt ‘Badtjala’ and geographically refers mainly to K’gari or Fraser Island.
Notes to pp 19–24

23 Moonie Jarl (aka Wilf Reeves and Olga Miller), ibid., p 18.
25 Mary Eagle, ‘Traditions of Representing the Land in Aboriginal Art’ in Art & Australia: Icons and Identities, vol 37, no 2, 1999, p 244.
28 Berndt, op. cit., p 413.
30 ibid., p 23.
31 ibid.
33 Lendon, op. cit., p 32.
35 Lendon, op. cit., p 36.
36 Andy Waytjuku quoted in Caruana and Lendon, op. cit., p 130.
37 Morphy, op. cit., p 103.
38 Which in turn distort the notion of tradition, just as Povinelli warns.
43 ibid., p 36.
44 ibid., p 35.
45 Moonie Jarl (‘Teller of Tales’ — Wilf Reeves) and Wandi (‘the Wild Duck’ — Olga Miller) were bother and sister living in Maryborough. Theirs is an interesting cross-cultural history — their mother is the daughter of Reverend Gribble, an Anglican missionary based on Fraser Island and their father an elder of the Butchulla tribe living on Fraser Island. Their father ‘a head-man of the Butchulla’ (but unnamed), along with ‘other leaders of the Butchulla people’, taught his children their legends and the art of illustrating them.
47 Information adapted from Kimberley Aboriginal Folk Stories based on storytelling from nine traditional elders.
48 See Percy Tresize and Dick Roughsey, Turramulli the Giant, Quinkin Fontana Picture Lions Collins, Sydney, 1982.
49 National Museum of Australia, op. cit., p 6. They go on to explain: ‘Descriptions of it vary

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greatly: some give it a frightful human head and an animal body; some emphasise its threat to humans and its loud booming at night. It is said to inhabit inland rivers, swamps and billabongs’.
56 In which ‘spine-chilling cries’ are heard near Mudgee, but ultimately ‘the Yahoo was never heard again … gone to join the bunyip and other impossible terrors’.
57 The bunyip is also described in this ‘Radam Scadam’ tape as having ‘the head of a seal, and the tail of an eel’.
59 Michael Salmon (writer and illustrator), *The Monster that ate Canberra*, Summit Press, Canberra, nd (1981?).
62 Eagle, op. cit., p 236.
63 Ross Gibson, *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 2002.