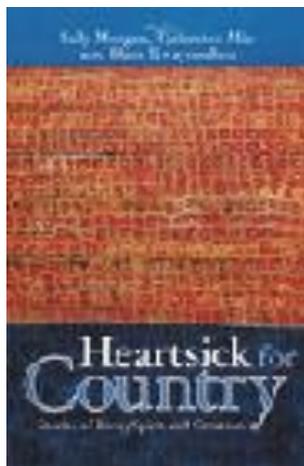


*Heartsick for Country: Stories of Love, Spirit and Creation* edited by Sally Morgan, Tjalaminu Mia and Blaze Kwaymullina. North Fremantle, WA: Fremantle Press, 2008, pp. 278, AUD \$27.95 Paperback, ISBN: 9781921361111.



*Heartsick for Country: Stories of Love, Spirit and Creation* is a collection of essays and stories by Indigenous Australian academics, authors and activists, which speak of a unique and life-sustaining relationship between people and country, in the context of increasing environmental degradation. Edited by a group from the University of Western Australia, including Sally Morgan, many of the authors belong to the Nyungar (Noongar) and the Palyku peoples of Western Australia. However, those belonging to the Bardi, the Indjarbandi, the Martujarra, the Whadjuck, and the Ballardong Nyungar of Western Australia are also represented, as are the Tanganekald and Meintangk peoples of the south-east of South Australia; the Trawulwuy peoples of north-east Tasmania; the Worrimia peoples of the Karuah River area of New South Wales; and the Gumilaroi peoples of the western plains of New South Wales. This diversity provides a variety of perspectives on the relations between Indigeneity and country – musings on the past, both personal and historical; fierce polemic on the wanton destruction of country; and stories of the ancestral creative spirits which, as a non-Indigenous reader, it is a privilege to encounter. The purpose of the book is described as the fulfilment of ‘the need to speak of deeper things, and to share what is often only shared among Indigenous people’ (7). A lament for country, both elegiac and politically engaged, the collection draws together many voices speaking on a unified theme, whereby ‘[e]ach contributor’s voice represents an ancient continuum, a way of being in the world that forged a mutually nourishing relationship between people and country that sustained succeeding generations for millennia.’ (6-7).

Published by independent Fremantle Press, a publisher with a strong Indigenous Titles list, *Heartsick for Country* follows a similar volume produced by the same editors and publishers in 2007, entitled *Speaking from the Heart: Stories of Life, Family and Country*. Though not a spectacularly unique contribution to Indigenous Australian writing, publication of the present collection, among recent others, is demonstrative of a swelling crescendo of Indigenous voices in the Australian political and literary landscape. These are voices which speak on issues of environmental, heritage and land management, beyond the minutiae of native title jurisprudence, reaching toward a more spiritually enlivened comprehension of Indigenous relationships to country. Many of the writers here assert both a spiritual and corporeal connection – ‘I am my country’ – in which country is not defined by mere geography, but is spiritually enlivened: ‘It is the whole of reality, a living story that forms and informs all existence. Country is alive, and more than alive – it is life itself...’ (9).

The collection opens with an introductory contribution by Indigenous lawyer Ambelin Kwaymullina, entitled ‘A Land of Many Countries’, which describes the land, in contrast to the depiction of a ‘wilderness’ by Cook and his compatriots, as ‘a culturally managed landscape’ (11). The term ‘country’ is used quite particularly, as a means of describing the holism of a traditional Indigenous reality, in which people, land, sea, air, flora and fauna are inextricably connected. Sally Morgan’s contribution, which compares the straight lines drawn by the coloniser, and the ‘rivers and hills and

the curves of the land' followed by Indigenous peoples (262), reiterates Kwaymullina's comparison of the creation stories, (literally) grounded in specific locations, and Jill Milroy's depiction of 'the story nomads' – the British settlers, who 'wander about in other people's stories, mucking them up and changing the endings...[arriving] too late to understand what the story is about':

The first thing the *story nomads* do when they arrive somewhere is to begin to order the 'landscape' to establish their 'view' of country, what they want to see in their field of vision, and what they want to exclude. What they really do is *disorder* country, removing it from its own story... (32).

This inversion of the pejorative description of Indigenous peoples as nomadic adroitly repositions the British colonisers as global wanderers, on voyages animated by a pursuit of the fantastical 'Great Southern Land', rather than a receptiveness to the ancient and inhabited country upon which they alighted. To these invaders, who 'could no longer feel their Mother's heart as it beat beneath the green lands of their home', Kwaymullina suggests that the country was empty and meaningless (11-12). For Indigenous peoples, however, the life-giving stories of country are a birthright to be fought for: 'You fellas, whitefellas, put us in the back all the time, like we've got no language for the land. But we've got the story for the land' (23).

In a conversational style evocative of oral storytelling traditions, the book meanders through the country of its various contributors, pausing to tell the creation story of the Rainbow Serpent, the *Waakal*; the story of *Djindalade*, the spirit woman from the Dreaming who resides in the sky, as the Milky Way; and the poignant stories in the poetry of Greg Lehman. It also incorporates important political and legal critique, detailing the tiresome lack of funding for Indigenous parties in native title litigation and associated settlements, and providing insightful suggestions for more cooperative social and environmental policies. Ultimately, the authors assert understandings of country which are both enlightening and instructive for non-Indigenous readers, and a reminder of the ancient memory and wisdom of a land that Indigenous peoples not only inhabit, but of which they are an integral part.

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