

*On the train again: apparitions across the Nullarbor (to the spirit, not to the letter of Jimmie Durham)*

**Hamish Morgan**

My hand shaky and tremulous on an unsteady page on an Australian trans-continental train. Being thrown at random it would seem, forwards backwards and to the side; but this is nothing more than the interactions of landscape, rail, speed and springs: there is nothing random about it at all. That point in the railway line, that compression of the spring, lies in wait infinitely along the line. My writing like a seismograph, marking quite faithfully each bump and pivot, each predetermined interaction between the mechanical, physical, technological and intellectual. Not only the movement of the carriage, its sway and dip, but the bad music that constantly plays from tinny speakers above us; it rocks us all towards neurosis. The staff, too, weary from innumerable crossings of the Nullarbor and exuding boredom and disconnection, are in fact, our guides towards it. Their uniforms, nylon, shimmer. No sensual sashaying, just abrasive squeaking as they walk. Their waistcoats, wanting to appear as old-world train grandeur, read more as post-modern pastiche. Just like the dining car in fake art deco, that illusion of old worldly train romance is lost somewhere - everywhere - in the cheap vinyl aqua couches, the plastic light fittings and the dickey souvenir display glimmering above the overflowing rubbish bins. The dining car manager - tight, thin lips, boofed-up, brittle hair, her face aglow in peach foundation - gathers up your plastic meal before your last mouthful and dumps it in the bins. You feel ashamed for even existing within this space. In fact, you can't believe you're here. This can't be happening. Get me out of here.

Like many entrapped in post-modern pastiche, I'm waiting for the real to break through the frame, for the 'unaccountable remainder beyond the frame' to expose itself, for the cliché (of theory) to breakthrough the cliché (of practice). I'm waiting for the desert to fill the carriage with dust and saltbush, to leave no other room, no other vantage point, no peach foundation, no put-on-romance nor boofed-up pretensions; waiting, hoping for the interruption of nothing but the sensual expanse of the horizon to crowd out all possible thoughts, all possible time. But aren't we beyond this, this idea that the real is somehow out there, beyond our dickey and fleeting representations? Perhaps, *but in here*, perhaps not. Maybe it's worth remembering that sometimes all you've got to go on is what is happening around you, and sometimes that is far from ideal or desirable: the frame is sometimes unbearable, the writing rickety, the carriage full of far too much unselfconscious parody. But real though, nonetheless; maybe talking about it is what matters more than anything else. To work with what you've got, what's around you, to listen to what things, and movements, and experiences are saying: not to transcend but to write, as if the actuality of experience really mattered and determined what was possible. To get down and gritty with it.

Jimmie Durham has an awesome respect for the manifest reality of the world. Objects, spirits and memories matter as much as politics, dispossession and imposed limits. Each is real because - in its own way - it creates the human experience of the world, and invites and demands a series of interactions and counter-interactions. His respect and kinship with the world means that he collaborates with it rather than 'creates' it anew. Indeed, 'creation' is a word synonymous with the fragmented, individualistic and egocentric world of Western culture. Jimmie Durham asks,

Why is creativity so pervasive a concept today? To me, obviously, humans do not create things or creativity does not mean what our consensual understanding says it means. It implies an impossible total control of some bit of the universe by an individual person, a god-like (in a very Western concept of what a god might be) importance to the work and product of the individual. (Durham, 1993: 70)

Against this logic, Jimmie collaborates with and participates in the world, working as a sculptor with objects, with their material reality and manifest presence. He respects material reality prior to his engagement, transformation and reformation of it. As in his poem *Object*:

It must have been an odd object to begin with.

Now the ghosts of its uses  
Whisper around my head, tickle the tips  
Of my fingers. Weeds  
Reclaim with quick silence the beams, pillars,  
Doorways. Places change, and a small object  
Stands defiant in its placelessness.  
Durable because it contains intensely meanings  
Which it can no longer pour out. (Durham, 1993: 58)

Part of the work of the sculptor is to reshape objects and to make them speak in a new way (Durham, 1994: 69), the fingers are tickled and go towards the object; others are gathered up and joined in cunning and unlikely ways. There is no assumed control, rather the objects themselves have a say and nod towards a possible direction, thus interrupting any kind of mastery or self-sufficient 'creativity'. An ethical space of engagement and responsibility is opened up in this break with totality: things, bodies, experiences, politics invite play and relationship rather than absolute comprehension, determination and regulation. In the spirit of Jimmie Durham, I offer a writing that is more like sculpture; textures and shapes create outlines and suggest response, elements are stitched together in the hope of invoking new and 'durable' ways to 'pour out'.

So this piece of writing is a kind of participation with Jimmie Durham, a kind of conversation with his words, thoughts and actions. The writing is a hand-made object that draws on an experience, a friendship, a journey, a number of places, a series of stories, a number of books, a destructive history, a moment, a technology. It's not a perfect object, but like many hand-made things it does the job well enough within available means for a specific purpose. A whole series of available techniques and resources are joined together here, at times patchy, at times strong, but they are trying to say something whole and truthful and frightening to myself and to others. So a journey begins...

I said on the last trip 'never again.' But, here I am, the morning after an awkward and unrewarding sleep, upright in a chair. My fellow travellers shifted relentlessly, with increasing agitation, all night long in their *red kangaroo day/night* seats. Sort of like a fight between two mismatched and ungainly opponents, looking in vain for the other's weakness or soft spot; we jabbed, hooked, looked for places to land our limbs, grew exhausted without rest. Fitfully we tossed and turned, entered and abandoned the world of sleep and release. By 3am, strung out, spent, we resigned ourselves aimlessly to our lot. I saw a bloke look at the luggage rack above, wondering whether he could just climb up there, stretch out and go to sleep. A middle age man curled himself around a rubbish bin at the back of the carriage. A young woman from Germany tried lying down with her back on the seat of the chair, her legs up in the air, curling over the headrest. We rattled and rolled towards the Nullarbor in these strange and unlikely positions.

But staring out the window in the morning, having now left the rolling lines of sand-hills and gimlet gums and moved onto the Nullarbor's flat extensions, my mind, and that of my fellow travellers, has lightened and lifted from the night-time wrestle that left as all a little weary. The landscape is absorbing in its intense consistency, which, oddly enough, draws your attention to the singular details of things. My mind, cleaved opened by such expanse, actively engages with the minute differences - a bluebush in flower, a quartz vein in a granite rock, a patch of eroded earth - my mind flickers between the immense and the minute at once. The formerly insignificant takes on a new kind of depth, cast as it is against that awesome horizon and this maddening enclosure.

Through the play of light, and because of the reflective properties of the window, our little cabin is mirrored in the landscape. I watch myself, and others, and the internals of the compartment, moving, bouncing and warping on the landscape outside. The utterly banal interior - cheap plastic tables, faux art deco light fittings, grubby carpet - is cast upon those epic things that drift into the distance. Faux art deco light fittings glittering and hovering in the true blue Australian sky. Grotty couches in olive green and burgundy red rollicking on the Nullarbor. Young travellers wearing red and blue 'hoodies' with white *iPod* loops in their ears are suspended apparition-like between this world and the next, hanging like a Miró in the sky; lines and bubbles of primary colour fizzle out your eyes. These things are suspended and

trembling, visitating. I am 'seeing myself seeing' as I sit on said grotty couch levitating on the horizon, but this is not an image of thought for which I can obtain any certain distance; in fact all there is *is* distance. [1] Such immensity collapses inside and outside space, the real is reflected, the reflected is real, the banal and epic are compressed, they territorialise and deterritorialise on each other, to borrow a phrase from Deleuze (1987:10). Perhaps, even, chasing distance and space in epic proportions I have become a little deterritorialised myself, a little removed from the everyday world that contains and releases me.

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I was in Adelaide yesterday, after driving from Melbourne in treacherous heat. Treacherous, that is, for my little 1982 Subaru packed to the hilt with all our stuff (my girlfriend and I and our 15 month old daughter are moving to Geraldton in Western Australia, hence the train and the Nullarbor, this pursuit of a new reality). The car trembled a little as the temperature rose. I had a leaking manifold gasket that I had done a 'bush mechanic' repair job on a few hours before leaving. I should have been better prepared, less taken by the big picture. I kept imagining it blowing. I kept envisioning steaming 'coolant' forcing and opening up gaps; seeking out points of weakness in the seal, as I climbed the Adelaide hills in 40°C degree heat. It held though. I made it to Adelaide and I put the car on the train bound for Perth. I had a few hours to kill before the train left; my friend Mark Galliford picked me up. We went to the State Gallery of South Australia in the city and walked amongst the Biennale exhibition. Some beautiful works. A mallee root sculpture in the shape and scale of an urban drain, by James Darling and Lesley Forwood. The artists had stacked mallee roots so meticulously and carefully that they had created flat surfaces straight like concrete, but with the assembled texture of mallee roots; it filled one whole wall of a room. The red-brown density of the roots against a stark flat white wall. The smell of mallee roots and iron dry earth engulfed us as we entered the room, filled up all possible spaces; we were caught up in its density and scale.

Mark and I continued further into the softly lit room and found Loraine Connelly-Northerly's sculpture of fencing wire, barbed wire, chicken wire - all the rusted remnants of European farming - formed into intricate webs that seemed to catch and hold driftwood like fragments of fence post, and of landscape and history. All those thoughts of time in suspense, things left hanging, joined together with twists and barbs and knots, gathered intensely on our minds. Slowly rusting and entwining remnants caught up in one another, creating gaps and lines and fallen boundaries. Framed against a gallery wall, the past and present, inside and outside, the urban and rural all loop and twitch on each other.

Wandering, Mark and I head for the florescent space of Alfredo and Isabel Aquilizan's sculpture of one foot cubed bricks of household stuff stacked on top of each other, scores of them stacked, with a door. You enter the 'room' without a roof, and smile and mutter at the stuff rising twelve feet high - kids' toys, old running shoes, stacks of magazines, instant coffee containers, DVD player empty boxes, clothes in neat stacks, old sleeping baags - all compressed into a cube, always something filling any possible gap: a child's doll, a plastic cup, a box of empty pens. Material objects and throw-away items sucking - like a vacuum - all possible space. Mark says, 'It looks like your car.' All that stuff compressed into a shape, a mould; I slipped shoes and books and my daughter's toys into any available gap, pressed them against the windows of my car. Kids' toys and worn down shoes sped through the country and slowly into those bone dry Adelaide hills, our compressed everyday shifting across the country and traversing the landscape.

Mark and I grab a coffee. He talked about a time when he was 18. He took off from Adelaide on an old motorbike up to Port Augusta. He then followed the track that runs along the trans-continental railway, heading for Cook, a tiny outpost halfway between Port Augusta and Kalgoorlie. It was used as a re-fuelling and watering post for the Indian Pacific train. He came across fettlers camps along the way. Men in little camps alongside the tracks, they were employed to travel along a section of track and replace any rotten red gum or jarrah sleepers, Mark was saying. They'd prise up the tracks with sturdy crowbars, remove the old sleeper and settle in a new one. They would get supplies, 'they called them tea and sugar carts,' Mark said, once a week. They were a fairly motley-crew, swore like troopers, drank prodigiously, but they were good to Mark. They'd put V8 motors in the 'section cars' and speed along the track,

gunning them. Mark wanted to go to Maralinga to check out the lizard and reptile population. He was mad keen on lizards. 'I used to know every lizard in Australia!' he said, 'I used to be able to spot them on rocks on the side of the road as I drove by at 100km an hour, 20/20 vision I had. Now, I can't see shit.'

Mark would travel north of Adelaide to the Flinders Rangers or onto the Nullarbor and go on lizard hunting trips. He'd walk around at night with a torch looking for Knobbed-tailed geckos.

'I was the Knobbed-tailed geckos man [Mark was part of a reptile society in Adelaide]. It makes me feel old [he's forty-five]. I can remember all this stuff, the fettlers and that, it was only twenty odd years ago, things change so fast. Have I told you the Maralinga story?'

'No, I don't think so. Maralinga, the place where they did the nuclear bomb tests?' I asked.

'I'm sure I have told you that story,' he replies looking me in the eyes and then beginning, 'I wanted to check out the lizards in a claypan at Maralinga, I organised it with a policeman. He met me at the gate; I left my motor-bike and got in his Toyota. Huge bloke, a massive Federal cop who patrolled Maralinga. You know it was all shut up, with cyclone fencing and warning signs. He drove me in, it was quite a way, must have been a fair way, can't really remember how far, but it was a long way. He stopped the Toyota at a clay-pan, here you go he said, go for your life.'

Mark got out and wandered around, looked under logs and rocks, didn't find much. He started to walk back, as he came close he could see that the cop was naked, lying face up, flat out on the clay-pan.

'I circled from a distance, trying to make as much noise as possible so that he would know I was coming. It took ages. Finally, he got the point, put his overalls back on. You wouldn't fucking believe it, this massive cop; I was so little, 18, skinny, scared shitless. I got in the Toyota, huddled against the window, making myself as absent as possible. I looked out the window, shitting myself. I turned towards him at one point, he had his fucking old fella out! Just sitting there. I was so scared, didn't know what to do, I was only eighteen. I got back to the bike, didn't look back, took off at a million miles an hour. Got back to the fettlers camp, told them. They screamed: "We'll fucking kill 'im, the bastard!" Oh man, I was so scared, so young, eighteen you know, didn't know what to do.'

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In 1953, the first two bombs, codenamed Operation Totem, were exploded at Emu Field, a claypan 320 kilometres north of Maralinga... It had severe effects on the Anangu. At Wallatinna to the north-east, the property nearest Emu and lying in the centre of the fallout path, a black mist with a metallic smell enveloped camp sites. It was unlike anything Anangu had ever experienced. It caused stomach pains, vomiting, choking, coughing, diarrhoea, rashes, peeling skin, headaches, and sore and running eyes. Within days, old and frail members of the group had died. Over the next year, almost 20 people camping in the region also died... The fallout over hunting grounds was far above the recommended safe level. So afterwards Anangu were eating contaminated game... [Yami Lester] wrote in his autobiography [about the incident], 'When I was a young boy living in the desert, the ground shook and a black mist came up from the south and covered our camp. The older people said they'd never seen anything like it before, and in the months that followed many people were sick and many died. I don't like to think about it now, but one of those people was my uncle, and he was very sick before he died. There were sores all over his body and they looked full of pus. The sun used to worry his eyes too... Almost everyone at Wallatinna had something wrong with their eyes. And they still do. All those Wallatinna people have eye problems. I was one of those people, and later on I lost my sight and my life was changed for ever.' (Yalata and Oakvale Communities, 2009: 39)

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Mark dropped me off at the railway station. Still boyish at forty-five, he wanted to check out the train. We saw all the cars, stacked carefully, on the trailers behind. We saw the Subaru.

‘Look at it,’ he said, ‘just like that sculpture.’

I felt strangely exposed, all our stuff crammed to the roof, pressed against the windows; our everyday lives laid bare.

‘The fettlers living out there, living on tea and biscuits and grog, used to wait for the train to go by; they’d all piff rocks at the fancy flash cars on the double-decker trailers behind the Indian Pacific train - see if they could break a few windscreens, unbelievable!’ he said.

We walked around the terminal. ‘Lots of people, but a good crowd,’ Mark reckoned. ‘Yeah, all the oldies will be in the sleepers (expensive), all us lot will be in the seats (cheap),’ I added. They called us to board. Mark came with me, wanted to ‘check it all out.’

‘Smells like wet nappies already,’ he said with a mad grin on his face as we entered the carriage. ‘I was only eighteen – like these blokes,’ pointing to some fresh-faced open-to-the-world Scandinavians with *iPods* and a ukulele. ‘Unbelievable! The bloke was huge. You’d report it nowadays, but back then...’

We said our goodbyes. The train departed, rolled and rocked on towards the Nullarbor.

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#### The Pom Pom Incident.

8.4.85 In light of the assurances being passed on to the Prime Minister by the AWTSC about the adequacy of Range security [at Maralinga] and Aboriginal safety, the unexpected and untimely appearance of the Milpuddie family at the site of the Marcoo crater was ‘seen to be extremely serious incident... which had the potential to stop the tests.’ It did not...

8.4.86 On the morning of Tuesday 14 May 1957, Captain R Marquer... was informed by a group of engineers that there were Aborigines in the ‘dirty’ area. Captain Marquer went to the decontamination centre and saw a male Aborigine approaching from the direction of the crater formed by the explosion at Marcoo during the Buffalo tests [at Maralinga] in 1956. He radioed to base and remained with the Aborigine until security and health physics representatives arrived. Sargent F Smith of the Health Physics Group drove to the Marcoo site... and collected the rest of the party - a woman, two children and two dogs. They were monitored and showered in the health physics caravan to remove contamination, which was not considered to be harmful. The Milpuddies were transported by vehicle to the mission at Yalata on the same day...

8.4.90 Yalata was the culmination of a journey begun by the Milpuddies about 12 months before when they set off from the Everard Ranges for Ooldea not knowing that Aboriginal people had been moved from there [to make way for the nuclear bomb tests]. They had followed the traditional rock hole route towards Ooldea, a route which the Native Patrol Officers had assured their superiors was no longer used by Aborigines. [2]

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The landscape extends in a plane of consistent intensity. The shrubs of grey-green saltbush less than knee-high tremble as the train hammers past. The sky to the south holds gatherings of clouds; grey-blue masses that hang, suspended above the landscape. Like ‘bubbles of sense adrift’, as Lyotard said somewhere (1984). All those thoughts of time in suspense, things left hanging, hovering, joined together, dense against the landscape, gather intensely; awesomely so.

Every five-hundred meters there is a yellow sign on a stake that marks the passage of a pipeline underneath. Perhaps they’re fibre optics for telecommunications. Every twenty seconds or so

there's another little marker. The day unfolds with this seemingly endless emergence of yellow markers; time, speed and distance issue. I think of the team that laid the communications line, hammering in a marker every five-hundred meters, signalling the end, the beginning, marked in time, with an unrelenting rhythm of hammer blows. I see each marker and hear the blows of the hammer that embedded the stake, ringing in synch, marking the line, and time, gravitating into silence beneath those 'bubbles of sense adrift'.

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The Sargent Smith Incident.

9.4.23 While performing duties as a member of the ARDU (Australian Radiation Detection Unit) after the second Antler explosion... Smith was recorded as receiving a dose of 3.9r. This was above the maximum permissible dose of 3r in any three-month period at Maralinga.

9.4.25 Smith entered the GZ area in the belief that he would not encounter hazardous levels of fallout along the track he was following. However, no one realised that at about the time of the firing the wind structure had changed. The upper winds remained constant but the winds very near the ground reversed direction, unexpectedly depositing fallout towards Taranaki. The instrument Smith was using to monitor radiation went off scale between two scheduled readings. He thought the instrument was unserviceable. After making radio contact with the Health Physics Group he was told to leave the area immediately. This he did but, rather than retracing his steps towards the known safe area, he went by a route which took him along the edge of the fallout. On returning to the decontamination centre, the dosimeter was found to show a reading in excess of 3r and his film badge recorded 3.9r. He was taken off radiation duty for the approved time ...

9.4.26 Smith was the first to discover that the cloud had moved in a direction different to the one expected...

9.4.27 This incident serves to illustrate the point that, however well operations were planned, it was always possible that something could go wrong. (Royal Commission, 1985: 386-87)

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Driving to Adelaide I couldn't help think of the future of the landscape, the horizon of our time, of the 'nation'. Perhaps it was that hastily patched gasket that separated oil and water, fuel and air, a seal between two surfaces that kept the whole machine running. I couldn't help imagining it bursting, cracking, as I climbed the bone dry hills and denuded paddocks on what was, according to Mark, the fourteenth day in a row over thirty five degrees, a record for any capital city in the world. 'It's going to put us on the map!' Mark said. 'Tell your Premier we ain't no back-water,' he said ecstatically. [3]

I cross the Murray River. It is green. The banks eroded, stark cliffs; like a desolate concrete drain massively out of scale. Mark tells me of the wetlands that once fringed the Murray mouth for miles before it merged with the ocean. I saw them long ago, as a child I recalled, and in *Storm Boy*. But now, Mark continues, all the reeds are dead, the wetlands a claypan, the river a drain.

The landscape unfolds with intense certainty, stretching off to meet the infinite. I sit in the middle of a trans-continental train, rolling, rocking; being articulated by the nexus of landscape and suspension spring, these components engage, exchange: the occupants shift and roll with this rhythm. I lose my breath in this landscape, it fills the carriage.

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General Effect of the Nuclear Bombs

3.1.19 The Underlying principle of all nuclear explosives... is that, on a weight by weight basis, they are able to liberate much greater quantities of energy than is possible with conventional chemical explosives.

3.1.25 At the instant of explosion everything in the vicinity of the bomb is vaporised. The fission products, bomb residues, structures and natural objects are drawn up and vaporised in the fireball that forms on detonation...

3.1.27 As the fireball cools, it sheds some of its heavier radioactive particles locally; lighter particulate is carried further afield by prevailing winds and subsequently is deposited as radioactive fallout.

3.1.29 ... the amount of radioactivity produced by an atomic bomb can be extremely large... the smaller radioactive particles that do not fall to the ground locally are carried well beyond the range of blast destruction; indeed, some very fine fallout particles are carried around the world by the wind before they reach the ground. (Royal Commission, 1985: 24-25)

But other underlying principles create nuclear bombs as well. A cabinet Minister of the Menzies government, in power at the time, suggested that the tests were 'a challenge to Australian men to show that the pioneering spirit of their forefathers who developed our country is still the driving force of achievement' and that 'between us, we shall help to build the defences of the free world, and make historic advances in harnessing the forces of nature' (Royal Commission, 1985: 15).

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I sit on this trans-continental nightmare. I glimpse the past and future in one terrible moment empowered by insomnia, neurotic guides, boofed up pretensions and public service announcements through squealing speakers. Is it any wonder that I find myself endlessly waiting for the really real to show itself by itself? But maybe it already has, and maybe it is too grotesque and terrible to listen to, to comprehend, to know, to embody: is this why we dare not speak of truth, make it the unaccountable beyond certitude? Is this why we 'create' truth in the realm of the epic, as the unanswerable question of the horizon (that lies in wait, out-there, that will release us from this world) rather than collaborate with the banal and 'dirty' truth that surrounds us? Jimmie Durham grits his teeth and shows us truth in all its wondrous and grotesque formations, he embodies this, collaborates with it and suggests a future that is inhabitable precisely because he is truthful about it.

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#### Protection by Time, Distance and Shielding

3.4.5 A person's dose depends not only on the dose rate to which they are exposed but also to the duration of the exposure... Advice is given on the maximum permissible level that person may receive over a specified period, in line with the prevailing ICRP or similar recommendations. The time permitted for work in that area can then be calculated. The accumulated dose for the period would be measured by a personal dosimeter or film badge.

3.3.20 One disadvantage of the film badge is that it records dose to a specific area. Many wearers pin the film badge to the chest, others at the waist, above the gonads. (Royal Commission, 1985: 37)

Hamish Morgan has recently moved to the small Aboriginal Community of Ululla with his young family. He has started a small business 'Narrative Connections' and works on various projects in the Wiluna area. His most recent project was working in collaboration with FORM on a prison art

project at the Geraldton Regional Prison entitle *Tjukurrpa Kanyininpa* , go to [www.form.net.au](http://www.form.net.au). He also works part-time with the Combined Universities Centre for Rural Health in Geraldton on their cross-cultural exchange programs for Health undergraduates and lecturers. [edgeofdesert@gmail.com](mailto:edgeofdesert@gmail.com)

Notes.

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1. It was by 'seeing oneself seeing' that the bound self-reflecting subject could gain mastery of the world. Rodolphe Gasché argues that this notion secured 'modern metaphysics as a metaphysics of subjectivity' - of a metaphysics of self-presence and self-reflection (Gasché, 1986: 14). Gasché explains: 'By lifting the ego out of its immediate entanglement in the world and by thematizing the subject of thought itself [i.e. the self-reflective subject], Descartes established the apodictic [incontestable] certainty of self as a result of the clarity and distinctiveness with which it perceives itself. Through self-reflection, the self - the ego, the subject - is put on its own feet, set free from all unmediated relation to being' (13). The thinking self-reflective subject is free to self-reflect on the world, unencumbered by mediations. This is what Latour has described as, 'a mind isolated inside its own mind striving to gain access to an absolute certainty about the laws of the world outside' (Latour, 1997: xi).

2. The Report of the Royal Commission into the British Nuclear Tests in Australia, vol. 1 (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1985), 319-20. Hereafter quoted in text as Royal Commission, 1985.

3 This is in reference to a comment the Victorian Premier, John Brumby, made in relation to Adelaide. The comment was made in the context of the controversial dredging of Melbourne's port; Brumby claimed that Victoria would end up 'a back water like Adelaide' if it didn't dredge its port.

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