

If Australian societies were, as Pascoe argues, on a 'movement towards agricultural reliance', was this same movement going on for over 50,000 years? If people devised these adaptations 50,000 years ago, have they been stuck in a time warp of 'lack of advancement' ever since? Why should we believe things would have necessarily gone any further along this 'trajectory' but for the fact that they were cataclysmically interrupted by European conquest in 1788 and later? If these shifts were 'advancement', as Pascoe says, does a failure to get any further over thousands of years mean that Aboriginal people were 'less advanced' than the rest of the world by 1788, perpetually treading water?

False assumptions and Eurocentric thinking underlie these questions. Unfortunately, they are directly encouraged by Pascoe's evolutionary scheme. There are better questions: What is wrong with a stable economic system that maintains the integrity of the environment and people's relationships with it, using minimal interference with natural cycles?⁶ Had people in fact achieved states of 'equilibrium' or settled relationships with the environment that enabled their stable continuation for extensive periods?⁷ Why should this be characterised as an unfinished project, as Pascoe suggests? Or was it in fact accomplished, bedded down for long eras, and adjusted to climatic and sea-level changes over centuries? Was not a minimal footprint in fact the key accomplishment?

Archaeologist Heather Builth prefers the latter understanding of the Lake Condah fish traps of Victoria's Western District: 'Indigenous people occupying the landscape of the Mount Eccles lava flow at the time of European contact had already achieved *sustainable development* by adapting appropriate extractive technology to an enhanced local ecological systems [sic].'⁸

Tom Griffiths again:

I think it's a mistake to treat the concept of agriculture as a timeless, stable, universal and preordained template, to apply a European hierarchical metaphor, an imperial measure of civilisation, to societies that defy imported classifications. One of the great insights delivered by that half-century of scholarship is that Aboriginal societies produced a civilisation quite unlike any other, one uniquely adapted to Australian elements and ecosystems.⁹

Pascoe's approach appears to resemble the old Eurocentric view held by the British conquerors of Aboriginal society. Those were the people who organised mass theft of Aboriginal country and many of whom justified the killing of people who resisted them, really out of greed and indifference, but often under an ideologi-

cal flag of social evolutionism. They assumed they had a right to profit from the 'survival of the fittest' and were the 'superior race'. The 'less advanced' had to make way for the 'more advanced'. Pascoe risks taking us back to that fatal shore by resurrecting the interpretation of differing levels of complexity and differing extents of intervention in the environment as degrees of advancement and evolution and cleverness and sophistication.

Innovation, conservation and Aboriginal religion

Pascoe's book is an essay in admiration of creativity and invention. Readers are encouraged to feel rushes of wonder for ingenious devices, for 'achievements'. This is dangerously close to a Western notion of culture focused on constant innovation, competition, progress and, in its lighter moments, gadgetry, gimmickry, smartness, novelty.

Classical Aboriginal societies were not so enamoured of the idea of human creativity and invention and were completely averse to the shallow glamour of novelty. In fact, they were hyper-conservative: change was generally frowned on very seriously, and new ways usually had to be sanctioned by developments in Dreaming mythology, or by introduced sacred ceremonies, or by having been 'found' (not created) in dreams and then sanctioned by elders. The fish traps of Brewarrina and eastern Cape York were not claimed as the ingenious works of human beings, but were regarded as having been put there in the Dreaming, by Dreamings. The Brewarrina traps are the creation of culture hero Baiame.¹⁰ There are many similar examples of ancient creations being attributed to non-human Dreamings, from the great shell mounds of Cape York Peninsula,¹¹ to the ancient pecked engravings at Helen Springs, Northern Territory (my own fieldwork).

Yir-Yoront people of CYP, many still living in the bush in the 1930s, made no watercraft. Given that their location was in the wetlands of the Mitchell River system and on the coast, this example stands out as evidence for the role of spiritual traditions in the adoption of technology:

Among the bush Yir Yoront the only means of water transport is a light wood log to which they cling in their constant swimming of rivers, salt creeks, and tidal inlets. These natives know that tribes forty-five miles [72 km] further north have a bark canoe. They know that these northern tribes can thus fish from mid-stream or out at sea, instead of clinging to the river banks and beaches, that they can cross coastal waters infested with crocodiles ...