

UNA REY

The Myth of Empty Country And the Story of 'Deadly' Glass



*In order for Country to be living, people need to be there.*¹
Yhonnie Scarce, 2020

AS FAR AS THE EYE WILL SEE

When British scientists were surveying international locations for their atomic tests in the early 1950s, they were looking for empty land, country devoid of human life. Culturally habituated to see what they wanted to see, they found what they wanted to find: 'empty' land and sea off the north-west coast and inland deserts of Australia which proved ideal for their clandestine military purposes. This 'find' echoed James Cook's 'discovery' when he claimed the 'empty land' of the Australian continent for the British Crown under Europe's international legal doctrine of *terra nullius* in 1770. In the mid-twentieth century, in the wake of their Second World War defeat in Singapore and the military power demonstrated at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the United Kingdom's aspiration was to keep the fire of Empire burning: keeping pace with the United States and Russia in their escalating arms race was a matter of urgency and Commonwealth honour.

Today, such misappropriations and misdirected ambitions are often massed together under the malevolent banner of colonialism. This unresolved and violent history between Australia's first people and British colonisers remains a cloud in its collective skies and a scar on its soil; a past complicated by the matrilineal rift between Britain and its bastard colony offspring with its own history of secrets, denials and dismissals. These muddy bloodlines and their b[lo]ody-politics intersect across modern Australia, with over four hundred unceded but effectively colonized Indigenous nations. It's a state of affairs that leaves much of the reconnaissance work to Indigenous artists whose inheritance has been so adversely impacted upon. This unfinished business on the internal borders of the home-front has become the primary remit for Generation X.

Fortified by the enduring time machine of "the Dreaming"² and her multicultural ancestry, Yhonnie Scarce's work spans these tensions, which feed her artistic practice with material and metaphorical force. A leading exemplar of contemporary Australia's political, cultural and aesthetic mediators, over the past decade she has amassed a body of work that holds each injustice up to the light, from colonial genocide to domestic slavery, "stolen children",³ land degradation and bodysnatching. Her 'arsenal' includes photography and the archive, vintage objects, ready-mades and exquisitely hand-crafted glass pieces. These elements are constantly expanded, recontextualized and reappropriated to shift the critical focus of the work.

WOOMERA

Scarce was born in 1973 in Woomera, a closed military complex in the northwest of South Australia. The Woomera township was established at the birth of the Cold War in 1947, by the Anglo-Australia Joint Project; it occupies Kokatha land, Scarce's maternal grandfather's Country. To the south, running to the edge of Spencer Gulf are the Nukunu lands of her maternal grandmother. The word "*woomera*" was imported from the Dharug language of the distant Blue Mountains in the Eora nation, which Sydney now occupies. Once widely used across Aboriginal Australia, the finely carved woomera or spear-thrower is an elegant example of industrial and aerodynamic design. A multi-purpose tool used for carrying, grinding and cutting, its most impressive function is to increase the range and speed of a spear in flight, enabling it to travel at up to 150kms an hour, significantly greater than an arrow fired from a compound bow. It is a poetic irony that "*woomera*" has become part of the technological lexicon, synonymous with long-range weapons testing and other covert military exercises.



THE RING OF MARALINGA

If Woomera carries a certain military mystique, Maralinga (from “thunder” in a southern Pitjantjatjara dialect) lingers in the public imagination as the site of the British nuclear tests, imposed on Australian territory during the grey zone of the Cold War, while postcolonial wars raged across Europe’s disintegrating empires. Australia’s involvement in the British tests (the detail and science of which was largely secret) was promoted as “in the national interest” as Britain retained its symbolic, Oedipal hold on the nation’s consciousness. Much of the obsequiousness was due to the ambitions of then Prime Minister Robert Menzies (later Sir), whose is remembered for his conservative values and ardent Anglophilia. When entering into this contract with Britain, he bypassed the Federal Cabinet in his eagerness to grant them carte-blanche access to the country and its “human guinea-pigs”, as journalist Frank Walker described Australian (military) victims of Britain’s nuclear testing regime. It was also convenient for Menzies and the British that Aboriginal Australians were not formally counted as citizens in the federal electorate until 1967. Menzies’ claim that the tests were conducted in the supposedly empty “vast spaces in the centre of Australia, and if it is to be said that however

groundlessly that there are risks... the greatest risk is that we may become inferior in potential military strength to the potential of the enemy,"⁴ was a campaign on the back of the long-held ('empty land') principle of *terra nullius*. One Menzies biographer cautioned that "irreverent anachronists lampoon his beliefs and highlight passages of Menzies' career in which his almost sentimental Britishness had regrettable overtones," but ignores Menzies' part in the British-Australian atomic tests. Here Menzies' own personal warning probably serves the record best: "you've got to be firm with the English. If you allow yourself to be used as a doormat they will trample all over you."⁵

Maralinga lies six hundred kilometres west of Woomera, and twelve hundred kilometres north-west of Adelaide. It is well established in both Aboriginal knowledge and meteorological science that prevailing winds blow west to east across the inland of Australia. These are the wild 'westerlies' that can bring extreme dust-storms to coastal metropolitan areas. It is well documented, although still not widely known, that radioactive waste drifted and settled across vast tracts of Australia during the tests, in some instances reaching densely populated areas to the east, north and south. Baby-boomers remember there were weeks when they were not allowed to drink milk as tests revealed the existence of strontium-90, a carcinogenic radioactive isotope and bi-product of nuclear fission. In every atomic test, the immediate fallout area was on Aboriginal land (including Scarce's Kokatha land), and whether it was learnt at anti-uranium rallies in the 1970s or as global observers of the Chernobyl and Fukushima catastrophes, the world knows nuclear waste is a long-term environmental problem with a half-life outlasting the typical human lifespan. Less well-known are the proportionately higher rates of infant mortality, miscarriage, birth defects and premature death in Aboriginal communities in the path of the radioactive winds and from the contaminated soil. Scarce reifies these dead in her *Strontium-90* series, including *Fallout babies* (2016) and *Only a mother could love them* (2016), in which forensic glass pieces augment documentary photographs of the Woomera Cemetery.

Britain carried out twelve major atomic tests in Australia between 1952 and 1957, three on the Monte Bello Islands in northwest Western Australia beginning on 3 October 1952, two at Emu Field in central South Australia in 1953, and seven at Maralinga through 1956 to 1957. For a decade, 'minor' trials leaving toxic levels of plutonium, cobalt-60 and other radioactive waste were performed across Maralinga Tjarutja Country. Residual contamination ignores the arbitrarily mapped 'no-go' areas of ground-zero sites with their desolate, monumental titles: One Tree, Marcoo and The Breakaway (Operation Buffalo, September-October 1956), or Taranaki, the last and largest balloon-suspended blast of 26.6 kilotons on 9 October, (Operation Antler), in 1957.

DEADLY GLASS CLOUDS

Yhonnie Scarce is a mistress of scale, with an historian's sharp sense of duty to the past and a genealogist's responsibility to her ancestors. To date she has memorialized three of these atomic blasts – or rather, their victims – in grand suspended glass installations. *Thunder raining poison* (2015) was commissioned by The Art Gallery of South Australia for its inaugural 2015 Tarnanthi Festival of Contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art, a biennial event showcasing current practice and reviving works from the Indigenous art-historical archive. The work was later acquired by the National Gallery of Australia where it featured in *Defying Empire: Third National Indigenous Art Triennial* (2017). Directly inspired by the Breakaway blast, its form is modelled on "a dissipating cloud" of nuclear dust which drifted across Scarce's grandfather's Country.⁶

Thunder raining poison comprises two thousand transparent glass yams, the yam being a staple food for Aboriginal people and as such, a form invested with cultural and spiritual value. Iconographically and symbolically, the yam and other 'bush tucker' plants such as the bush banana and bush plum, along with their associated *Tjukurrpa* (Dreaming) sites are important subjects for Aboriginal artists, particularly women who traditionally held the comprehensive knowledge of the regularly harvested and managed bush gardens across Australia. It's a natural corollary that these distorted and distended plants signify human figures, internal organs, embryos or corpses in Scarce's ongoing body of work. Combined with clinical apparatus and alternating display modalities (scissors, beakers, mortuary trolleys and neo-natal cribs), the glass forms can imply mass graves of Aboriginal freedom fighters, victims of unauthorized medical tests, birth defects in irradiated babies or violated food chains due to mining activity. This sophisticated use of a deceptively fragile and deceptively beautiful medium sets Scarce apart from her senior countrymen and many of her peers. A composition between hand and breath, the alchemical, elemental process of glassblowing neatly fuses the maker to her material and her *métier* to meaning.

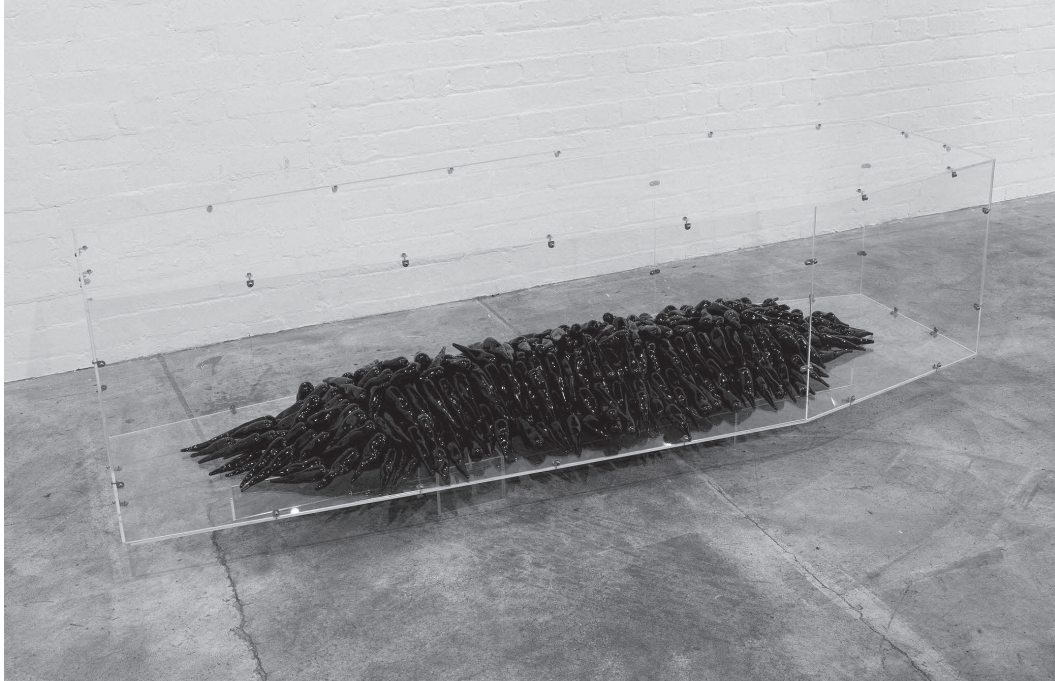
Scarce first visited Maralinga in 2014 and returned to visit the Breakaway site in 2015 with glassblowers from Adelaide's JamFactory. Her close working relationship developed over several years with specialist glassblowers is instrumental in realizing Scarce's large-scale productions increasingly in demand across the artworld, nationally and globally. Such cross-cultural and interdisciplinary collaborations, built on long-term trust, help promote a fuller appreciation of South Australia's history. For Scarce, intergenerational storytelling is central.⁷ On the barren, lifeless Breakaway explosion site the sand was subjected to such high temperatures that it vitrified into a dirty green glass. This 'glass story' is compelling, an indexical salute to Scarce, who resigned from her job as a university administrator to pursue a fine art degree with a major in glass, a move partly inspired by the hand-made glass curios she collected from second-hand stores and which are casually referenced in some of her own work. Little did she realize then that the nearby University of Adelaide Oliphant Building, named after Adelaide-born nuclear physicist Sir Marcus Oliphant, who worked on the development of atomic weapons in Britain during World War Two, would become intimately woven into her future art practice.

The sublime spectacle of an atomic bomb blast delivers high iconic value, leaving a haunting afterimage for anyone who witnessed the cataclysmic spectre. As the testimonials of military personnel and Aboriginal custodians declare in very different cultural terms, the power of the explosions was incomparable and mythological. Henry Carter's recollection is typical of the young RAAF defence recruits who were routinely ordered to turn their backs to, and then face the blast. "I pressed the palms of my hands into my eye sockets. At zero there was a blinding electric blue light of an intensity that I had not seen before or since... I realized I could see the bones of my hands... My body seemed first to be compressed, and then billowing like a balloon."⁸

AFTERBURN

The (Western Desert) Yankunytjatjara leader Yami Lester was a young boy when he experienced the effects of the Totem One atomic bomb explosion at Emu Field in 1953, which Scarce's *Death Zephyr* (2017) evokes in its horizontal curtain of clear and opaque glass yams, a mosaic of black and white. As Lester recalled, the explosion surpassed his world of knowledge, and could only be perceived as the ancestral serpent Wanambi beating the ground to make waterholes. Far to the northwest of Western Australia in Martu Country, Nyarri Nyarri Morgan has shared his similarly confronting

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encounter, in filmmaker Lynette Wallworth's virtual reality artwork *Collisions* (2017).⁹ Both eye-witnesses described a greasy black mist darkening the horizon; in Lester's account the heavy cloud slowly rolled through the camp of men, women and children, where "the older men waved their woomeras at the cloud, trying to scare off this *Mamu* [devil-spirit]." ¹⁰ The Martu likewise could only comprehend the terrible phenomena, which left death and sickness in its wake, as some all-powerful and punitive ancestral force. Lester partially lost his eyesight within days of the black mist, and eventually became totally blind. Countless reports were presented by witnesses and victims during the Australian government's McClelland Royal Commission (1984-85) into the British nuclear tests, (many reprised in Walker's exposé on Maralinga), but despite the anecdotal evidence from survivors and the high frequency of cancers and premature deaths, no criminal charges were laid against any of Britain's leaders. Token clean-ups have been attempted by the Australian government, but unsurprisingly much of the Maralinga Tjarutja Country, handed back to its Aboriginal owners in 1985 under the Land Rights Act, remains toxic wasteland — though this description is inadequate for the original custodians who continue to cherish their homeland.¹¹

The Official Secrets Act signed by military servicemen meant the true extent of human exposure to tests and contaminated equipment was not revealed until decades later. For Aboriginal people, cultural taboos that prevent speaking names — and inhabiting places — of the recently deceased further compounded the staggering task of accounting for the sick and the dead, let alone getting a public hearing when directives from the state were simply that there were no Aboriginals in the shadow of nuclear fallout. The human and environmental implications of an uneven partnership between a major empire at its end and minor Australian nation are slowly being exposed and interrogated by Scarce and others, but as the late Aboriginal poet and activist Oodgeroo Noonuccal wrote in her poem, *No More Boomerang* (1966), chemical warfare is colour blind:

*Lay down the woomera,
Lay down the waddy.
Now we got atom-bomb,
End everybody.*¹²

BRUTAL FRONTIERS

Intergenerational trauma and the wholesale loss, grief and anger associated with colonization — as well as resilience and resistance — are frequently addressed by Indigenous contemporary artists and curators with impunity, but semantics and "resistance to using the term 'massacre'" still frustrates Scarce.¹³ One frequent creative strategy which Australian Indigenous curator Hetti Perkins flags is using visual subterfuge, "seductive beauty" (and well-targeted curatorial hyperbole) to "draw... us into [their] tender trap."¹⁴ Situated within the museum or the contemporary art space, this is what audiences have come to expect, to be treated to a history lesson but often without brute confrontation. The recognition of Australia's 'Frontier Wars'¹⁵ (from c.1820) and the range and extent of massacres across the country into the early twentieth century is a history that can no longer be repressed, but public monuments to these conflicts are yet to be realized; historians such as Henry Reynolds and Lyndall Ryan, who undertook ground-breaking work on Tasmania's nineteenth century genocide and more recently led the digital mapping project (Colonial Frontier Massacres, Australia 1780-1930) are archiving knowledge of this violence across the country. But wars — 'history wars', 'culture wars', wars of words — continue to be fought over terminology and definitions: massacre and genocide, self-defence and ignorance.¹⁶

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Global comparisons can be powerful tools to interrogate national histories. In 2008, Scarce travelled to Berlin and was struck by the visibility and therapeutic value of memorials to victims and survivors of The Holocaust. The contrast with her homeland was stark. Compelled by a fascination/repulsion for brutalist, military aesthetics, Scarce and collaborating partner Lisa Radford travelled on a photographic field trip through the northern winter of 2018/19 in pursuit of monuments and monumental iconoclasm, from Socialist Republic anarchy to industrial, nuclear accident. An ongoing investigation, *The Image is Not Nothing (Concrete Archives)* (2021–), is being exhibited as a curatorial project as part of the 2021 Adelaide Festival, while her collaboration with architectural firm Edition Office won the 2019 National Gallery of Victoria's Architecture Commission. *In Absence* (2019) in the Gallery's courtyard, borrows the clean force and bulwark-verve of Brutalist form, sensitized to its garden surroundings and inspired by traditional eel-traps. Blackened by burning, the internal core of the monumental key-like structure seeps tear-like droplets of glass yams.

The artist's intention is solidly articulated with *In Absence*, making visible the architectural and agricultural expressions of pre-contact Indigenous Australians, notably the work of Bunurong writer and public intellectual Bruce Pascoe. Pascoe's work, especially his popular, award-winning book *Dark Emu: Aboriginal Australia and the birth of agriculture* (2014), refutes the assumption that Indigenous populations were a "nomadic hunter-gather" culture, and argues instead that low-impact architecture has been long-term on the Australian continent. Australian historian Bill Gammage's, *The Biggest Estate on Earth* (2011) made comparable claims of highly strategic Indigenous land management systems across the country, including regular 'mosaic'-style burning of bush and grassland. Both drew heavily from colonial records (journals, artworks) in their research, and both have generated considerable debate as the nation addresses, or ignores, the perils of climate change and ecological rupture.

BIRMINGHAM BOMBS, WOOMERA ROCKETS AND WURUNDJERI LANDS

Yhonnie Scarce would have returned to Birmingham at the beginning of 2021 to complete her residency at Ikon Gallery in Birmingham had COVID-19 not forced her to stay in Australia. She planned to research the documents of Cold War invention located in the University of Birmingham archives, along with advanced glass-making technologies at the University of Wolverhampton's state-of-the-art glassblowing facilities. Bristol University is active in researching nuclear fusion technology with its utopian promise of unlimited, carbon-neutral energy, and the city has a long tradition of technological innovation, manufacturing and industrial production. It was also where in 1940, under the heavy German bombing raids of the 'Birmingham Blitz', that prominent physicists and expatriate Germans Otto Frisch and Rudolph Peierls wrote their Memorandum on the construction of nuclear weapons based on the separation of uranium isotopes. Developing the "practically irresistible super-bomb" was a matter of urgency, and they were transparent about the risks of windborne radioactivity and "large numbers" of civilian deaths.¹⁷ As Scarce says, "They [Frisch and Peierls] were aware of the danger of the nuclear atom when they began, but continued to work on it anyway. Not long after that came the Manhattan Project – and Hiroshima, Nagasaki and Maralinga. When you think of weapons of mass destruction, it all... started in Birmingham."¹⁸

Cloud Chamber (2020) is Scarce's third majestic mushroom-cloud work, created on her return from the United Kingdom. The science embedded in the title—the cloud chamber—is a device used to detect ionizing particles, technology developed in the late nineteenth century by Scottish physicist Charles Thomson Rees Wilson. Hanging from a grid-formation in the north-facing end of

TarraWarra Museum of Art's spacious complex like a palatial chandelier, *Cloud Chamber* embodies the human and ecological casualties associated with the Breakaway atomic blast, Maralinga's grand-finale. A *memento-mori* of the first order, the installation is part of the Ikon Gallery/TarraWarra Museum of Art's post-COVID-19 lockdown summer exhibition, *Looking Glass* (with Waanyi artist and previous Ikon resident, Judy Watson). Set against the cool concrete architecture and grand clean lines of glass, *Cloud Chamber's* discreet wall-text explains the impact of British-Australian nuclear testing to the viewer. Framed by the sky, luxuriant grapevines and the rolling hills of the affluent Yarra Valley, occupied by Wurundjeri ancestors since the last Ice Age and colonized by Victorian pastoralists and vigneron from the mid-nineteenth century, it is hard to reconcile the lavish abundance of one privileged agricultural inheritance with the decimated heart of Maralinga Tjarutja country, a food bowl scarcely evident to outsider eyes, but a clean and sustaining source of energy for hundreds of generations.

Though its peak as a missile testing site was over by the time Scarce was born in Woomera there was a population of around 4,000 people, a quarter of them American and Australian defence personnel; her father was among a minority of civilian workers employed by the Department of Infrastructure. By the early 1970s, Woomera was being developed as a key strategic aeronautical surveillance site, along with the US base at Pine Gap (near Alice Springs), which became operational in 1969–70. The radio-controlled target drones GAF Jindivik and its prototype, the GAF Pika (from Aboriginal words for "the hunted one" and "flier" respectively) were trialed as early as 1952, and today advanced defence drones and solar-electric aircraft are the latest technologies to be piloted at Woomera. It was where Australia's first satellite was launched in 1967, the same year a landmark referendum voted in favour of counting Aboriginal people as citizens in the national census and granting federal parliament powers to make laws relating to Aboriginal people. Another brief chapter in Woomera's story made international headlines when the federal government placed asylum seekers into detention at the euphemistically named Woomera Immigration Reception and Processing Centre between 1999 and 2003, which then closed due to accusations of human rights abuses.

The Woomera Rocket Range, now known as the RAAF Woomera Range Complex covers over 122,000 square kilometres of land belonging to six Aboriginal language groups in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands. Scarce is still coming to terms with the fluke of her inheritance: "it's a strange place to be born," she notes, (the family moved to Adelaide when Scarce was still a young girl), and she spent years in Ceduna on the west coast of South Australia with family, but Woomera remains under her skin. Accustomed to the forty-three degree Celsius dry heat (not unlike a glass furnace), for Scarce the military outpost remains a matrix of unsettling histories — the local 'trophy park' of abandoned weaponry not far from the graves of so many of her people. On location early 2021 conceptualizing a new work for a forthcoming survey at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art in Melbourne, Scarce is wry about a situation in which her autonomy 'on Country' is compromised and her skills in handling red tape are tested. Commonwealth restrictions on public access within the Woomera Range Complex mean Scarce's artistic research, arguably her birthright, is increasingly laced with bureaucracy. It is another reminder of colonial mapping, manning and manipulating Indigenous sovereignty.

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Notes

¹ Note that “Country” as a capitalized, proper noun is in regular usage to refer to Aboriginal people’s traditional or custodial homelands. Being “on Country” is shorthand for clan estates, inherited through ancestry and identification with local language groups. “Country” also implies the sentient landscape and metaphysical world-view of Indigenous Australians, often referred to as “the Dreaming”. Quote from the artist in an interview, Hetti Perkins: Judy Watson and Yhonnie Scarce, *Looking Glass* (exhib. cat.), TarraWarra Museum of Arts, 2020, p. 62

² “Dreaming” (*tjukurrpa* in several Western Desert languages) is a broad encompassing term that refers to creation-times and Aboriginal ancestral law including material, social, cultural, spiritual and metaphysical knowledge and belief systems. The temporalities of “the Dreaming” include past, present and future

³ The “Stolen Generations” or “Stolen Children” refers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children forcibly removed from their families between 1910 and 1970 under the Australian government’s assimilationist policies. State and Church were instrumental in placing children into domestic servitude, foster families or institutional ‘homes’

⁴ Frank Walker, *Maralinga: The Chilling Expose of Our Secret Nuclear Shame and Betrayal of Our Troops and Country*, Sydney: Hachette Australia, 2014, p. 66

⁵ Allan Martin, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/menzies-sir-robert-gordon-bob-11111>; accessed 30 January 2021

⁶ For the artist’s full account of the work see ‘Defying Empire: 3rd National Indigenous Art Triennial’; <https://nga.gov.au/defyingempire/artists.cfm?artistirn=42884>; accessed 21 January 2021

⁷ Author communication with the artist, 29 January 2021

⁸ Walker, p. 25

⁹ See Nici Cumpston and Una Rey, ‘Collisions: The Martu Respond to Maralinga’, *Artlink* 37: 2, 2017

¹⁰ Walker, p. 62

¹¹ See writer-director Larissa Behrendt’s film *Maralinga Tjarutja*, (2020) by Blackfella Films, for the Pitjantjatjara perspective on this history and their ongoing management of their land

¹² Widely published in collections, anthologies and online, originally as, Kath Walker, *The Dawn is at Hand*, Brisbane: Jacaranda Press, 1966, pp. 26–27. See the full poem; <http://www.staff.vu.edu.au/syson/1002/oodgeroo.html>

¹³ Watson and Scarce, *Looking Glass*, p. 59

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 10

¹⁵ The Australian ‘Frontier Wars’ is a term applied by some historians and others to violent conflicts between Indigenous people and white settlers following the British colonization of Australia

¹⁶ The ‘History Wars’ etc., which were at their height at the turn of the twenty-first century, were sparked by scepticism towards accounts of the ‘frontier wars’ that had gained increasing attention since the 1980s. While the dispute was heated, the scepticism was driven by ideological concerns that failed to sustain their claim. Seen in a broader perspective, they were a manifestation of a post-Western culture war that is ongoing and global in reach

¹⁷ Otto Frisch and Rudolph Peierls, ‘Frisch-Peierls Memorandum’; see <https://www.atomicheritage.org/key-documents/frisch-peierls-memorandum>

¹⁸ Debika Ray, ‘Glass Artist Yhonnie Scarce shines a light on the oppression of Aboriginal people’, Crafts Council / Stories; <https://www.craftscouncil.org.uk/stories/glass-artist-yhonnie-scarce-shines-light-oppression-aboriginal-people>; accessed 26 January 2021

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