

# THE QUEST FOR THE NIGHT PARROT: ACTIVISM, EXTINCTION AND ALLEGORICAL INVESTIGATIONS

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## Abstract

In August 2019, the Western Australian State Government overturned traditional owner's appeals against development of a uranium mine at Yeelirrie, a remote location in Western Australia's Mid West. This decision was made despite EPA reports proving that development will render extinct stygofauna endemic to Yeelirrie and further endanger numerous other species. In response, activist groups and local communities coalesced, attempting to stave off or disrupt this development. As their activity has progressed, however, focus has turned to knowledge of Yeelirrie as the habitat of *Pezoporus occidentalis*, the night parrot. Long thought extinct, and almost mythological within Australian ornithology and environmental studies, recent evidence points to the bird's continued existence. In focusing upon this elusive bird, a research-based arts project entitled *The Quest for the Night Parrot*, has emerged. Whilst searching for evidence of the bird at Yeelirrie to halt Cameco's activity, this project engages with the history and practice of the hunt for the bird, positioning it as allegorical for the intersection of Western epistemology and traditional knowledge; the search extending beyond the outback into archives, legislation and fictionalised notions of outback and landscape. Enfolded within this project is an understanding that development will be deleterious to not only Yeelirrie's ecology, but the cultural knowledge embedded within Yeelirrie's environment. Moreover, it considers ways of maintaining knowledge through industry-caused disruption, seeking creative methodologies for archiving place. This paper introduces the case against Yeelirrie's development and *The Quest for the Night Parrot*, through which it considers theoretical and mythological underpinnings found within the clash between the mining industry and environmental/cultural conservation movements.

Keywords: Yeelirrie, night parrot, extinction, conservation, uranium mining

*The bird is endlessly alluring, but always just out of reach: 'lost' deep in the heart of the continent, in the vast, 'empty' wilderness of the inland. Its ways are a mystery. To*

*join the search is an adventure: romantic, challenging, foolhardy - to pursue the impossible dream.*

(Olsen 2017, p. 2)

Running through the *desert*, redefining the wor[ld] itself as you go.

Dodging and weaving through spinifex and the endemic *Atriplex yeelirrie*.

Stopping to rest beneath a casuarina, you're reminded that the soft, whispering wind through the spiny leaves are ancestors of the Tjiwarl people.

Listen to what they're saying.

What am I doing again? Ah yes! I'm on a quest, must keep moving.

Running, you dodge mining detritus; a hard hat and an array of equipment. People have been here.

You cross a dirt road, and reach a fence, each making lineal statements, abstract clues.

Looking up, there's rugged breakaways in the far distance. Beneath you the sand changes from red to white - calcrete, an indication of rich uranium.

Beneath that, stygofauna wriggle around in a completely different world.

Displeased with your search efforts, you stop to get off the train as it reaches its stop. Phone goes in pocket, your avatar paused in time, but the desert and your quest lives on. As you walk to work you wonder, is there even a night parrot in this stupid game?

There are few birds worldwide with a history and mythology as rich as that of *Pezoporus occidentalis*, more commonly known as the night parrot. Since John McDouall Stuart's 'discovery' of the bird in 1845, whilst accompanying Sturt on the doomed search for the inland sea, the 'ground parakeet' (as it was then deemed) has been many things: a specimen, a curse, a phantom, an obsession; the 'holy grail' of Australian ornithology. At present, however, the parrot is playing a new role, that of potential environmental saviour, as activists and associated artists engage with the parrot and its story as a way to halt, disrupt and hinder mining activities. This paper will introduce one of these engagements, *The Quest for the Night Parrot*, an ongoing research-based arts project that seeks to explore and investigate the bird beyond its physical existence and the search for it.

## THE YEELIRRIE CASE

Roughly 200km from where Stuart claimed his specimen, the night parrot could be the key to halting the development of a uranium mine at Yeelirrie, a remote site deep within Western Australia's Mid West. Located approximately 70km south-west of Wiluna, Yeelirrie is the site of one of Australia's largest undeveloped uranium deposits. This deposit was discovered in 1972, and the following years saw extensive exploration until 2012, when the site was acquired from BHP by Cameco, a Canadian firm and currently the world's largest publicly traded uranium company. Whilst Cameco currently holds the lease for Yeelirrie and seeks to develop the project upon market improvement, the site itself is covered by the Tjiwarl Native Title that was recognised in December 2016 (*Narrier v State of Western Australia* [2016] FCA 1519).

Should Yeelirrie's development take place, plans include an open-cut mine nine kilometre long and one and a half kilometre wide, which will necessitate the clearing of 2,422 hectares of native vegetation and result in approximately 36 million tons of radioactive tailings. In addition, and perhaps most crucial to the ecological case against development, is the impact this will have on groundwater levels. In order to supply the projected 8.7 million litres required daily, groundwater levels would drop by 50cm and take approximately 200 years to return to their normal level (URS 2015, 40). This groundwater is key, as it is home to the majority of species set to become extinct should Yeelirrie's development proceed (EPA 2016, 27).

Stygofauna are small invertebrate creatures that live in groundwater and of the 73 species recorded at Yeelirrie, 11 are endemic to the site. Given the disruptive nature of the extractive process on groundwater levels, the mine's development places these species at risk of extinction. Further to this, Yeelirrie is home to *Atriplex yeelirrie*, an endemic species of saltbush, whose existence is also jeopardised by Cameco's plans. Despite the Western Australian Environmental Protection Agency recommending in August 2016 that the site's development should not proceed, State Government approval was rushed through just prior to the 2017 election. Similarly, just prior to the 2019 Federal Election and in further defiance of the EPA recommendations, then-Minister for the Environment, Melissa Price, signed off on Cameco's plans. Whilst this came with strict conditions for mitigating environmental impacts, this decision against the wishes of the traditional owners and the EPA, establishes a worrying precedent for future mining and exploration plans.

In light of this, however, activists from this coalescence of traditional owners and environmental groups have been participating in actions located at and around Yeelirrie,

in an attempt to raise awareness of the proposed development's negative impacts and garner wider support for their cause. Perhaps the most significant of these actions is the silent protest known as the Walkatjorra Walkabout, a month-long walk from Wiluna to Leonora that has hosted hundreds of local, national and international walkers over its eight years of operation. The walk is an opportunity to deeply experience this part of the world, to walk across the land of proposed Uranium extraction sites and learn from Traditional Owners. The walk is also an effective tool for community development and creative planning, linking activists against the mining of uranium from across the globe, solidifying local action groups and strengthening connections with members of the Tjiwarl community.

Whilst these protest actions align with global movements in condemnation of the proliferation of nuclear power, responses from Yeelirrie have emerged that are site-specific; that have seen a turn towards the spinifex, in search of the ornithological 'Holy Grail' – the elusive, and nigh-mythological night parrot, which could be one of the keys to halting Yeelirrie's development, and therefore the extinction of *Atriplex yeelirrie* and the myriad stygofauna that are at risk (Pyke and Ehrlich, 2014).

## THE NIGHT PARROT

There is a strange, hopeful serendipity to employing a bird that was long thought extinct as a means for saving other species. Indeed, for majority of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the night parrot no longer existed officially. From Stuart's discovery in 1845, the history of the bird is rich, with a memorable cast of characters, eerie occurrences, controversies and unbelievable luck, both good and bad. The night parrot story is so odd it verges at times on the supernatural, begging the consideration of the unquantifiable, another of those mysteries that pepper Australian histories. By way of a brief overview, the 1870s sees Frederick Andrews collect 22 specimens, that at present form the majority of those existing in museum collections (Pyke and Ehrlich, 2014; Black 2012, 277). Despite being mercilessly pursued, sightings become more infrequent, with the last confirmed sighting occurring in 1912, in the Nichol Springs area of the Western Australian Pilbara (Olsen 2018, 120). While reports of sightings trickle in – 94 in the 70 years that elapsed between substantiated claims – tangible proof is not found until 2000, with the chance discovery of a deceased specimen by the roadside in western Queensland.

This roadside corpse provides evidence of the continued existence of the parrot, but discovery of another deceased specimen in the same area in 2006 suggests the shrinking of the bird's habitat (McDougall et al. 2016, 199). Buttressing this supposition is evidence gathered in 2013, with the first recordings and photographs of a live specimen

taken in the region (Murphy et al. 2017a, 107; Murphy et al. 2017b, 858). Directly following this discovery, Bush Heritage, in coordination with the Queensland government, established the Pullen Pullen Reserve for the sole purpose of protecting what was then thought to be the only living night parrot specimens (Pickrell, 2016). The ornithology world was shocked, however, when a photograph was produced of another living specimen – approximately 2000km away, in Western Australia, extending the bird's habitat across the country to an undisclosed location thought to be close to Yeelirrie, with further photographs captured in the Kimberley region in 2017 and 2018 (Mills and Collins, 2017; Borello, 2018). Despite these sightings and deceased specimens, evidence has been in the form of photographs, recordings and nests – easily manipulated forms, as recent controversy has illustrated (Leseberg et al. 2019; Hamilton et al. 2017b; Jones et al. 2019).

At present, there have been no substantiated sightings of the night parrot at Yeelirrie. Despite this, there is still hope that it will be located there, for a number of reasons. Just north of Yeelirrie, in the Birriliburu Indigenous Protected area, rangers claim to have heard the parrot and sightings have been recorded north of Birriliburu, on the Mulga Downs pastoral station in 2005 (Davis and Metcalf, 2008). Additionally, there have been sightings *either side* of Yeelirrie; collection of the holotype in 1854 at Mt Farmer – some 260km west, as the parrot flies – and recent sightings at Matuwa (Lorna Glen) and Millrose Station, to the north-east of the site (Hamilton et al. 2017a). Further factors support inferences of the bird's presence at Yeelirrie, including claims from Traditional Owners that have heard the bird, and the shared environmental features across Yeelirrie and the locations of verified sightings. Paradoxically, however, Cameco seem to be unwittingly cultivating a night parrot habitat whilst waiting to break ground at the site, which rests within Yeelirrie Station. Cameco own this station but don't run cattle on it and as a result, vegetation – in particular, spinifex that night parrots have been found to roost in – has had an opportunity to flourish. Unless one is found, however, this habitat is set for disruption, if not destruction.

The Yeelirrie case highlights the contentious nature of environmental sustainability in relation to the extractive resource industry. As it stands, the extinctions Yeelirrie's development would cause are deemed permissible by both those engaging in the development and government representatives. Turning to the night parrot then becomes a necessity – as demonstrated with Pullen Pullen Reserve, substantive evidence of the bird's presence could see Yeelirrie subjected to similar environmental constraints, with industry forbidden and access limited to caretakers and researchers, preserving the site and those at-risk species. Given the bird's notoriously elusive nature, however, seeking it is akin to a feathered needle in the haystack of the outback. Aware of this, there is an arts project that has emerged from these engagements with Yeelirrie which seeks the

parrot further afield; in the archives, legislations and the fictionalised outback we have imagined into being.

## THE QUEST FOR THE NIGHT PARROT

*The Quest for the Night Parrot* is a research-based arts project that seeks to explore the allegorical nature of the night parrot and the corresponding story of the search for it. Whilst the project emerges from the very real ecological issues arising from the Yeelirrie development, it speaks to a much broader issue surrounding ecological awareness, sense of place - or lack thereof - and the creation, cultivation and cultivation of knowledge. By way of a somewhat heavy-handed and broad overview, *Quest* draws at its base from Plato's allegory of the cave, in which Socrates explores possibilities of obtaining knowledge and accessing a realm of true fact, one which supersedes that of lived experience and the senses. Upon escaping the cave, one of the prisoners encounters the Sun, which temporarily blinds him. Through time, his eyes adjust, and he comprehends that alternate reality outside the cave, but is faced with peril upon returning – blinded by the change of light, he appears harmed to those who remained inside. Despite the returnee's desire to share his experience with his fellow prisoners, they would kill him if he tried to pull them outside. We see in Plato's sun that sun which beats down on the plains, on the desert, on Yeelirrie.

The story of Invasion can be understood as an intersection of knowledge systems. Present prior was the Dreaming, which purposed every aspect of the physical world with the spiritual, layering the topography with significance and meaning. The arrival of Enlightenment thought and scientific rationalism was brutal in its initial dismissal of this, as colonialist practices repurposed the landscape as the birthplace of a national identity; the perceived taming of the natural world a triumphalist narrative premised upon the reassertion of Cartesian dualism.<sup>1</sup> Moving into the future, however, there is an active effort to distance ourselves from this exclusionary and fraught narrative, a process made difficult by its inextricable link to the natural environment and its centrality to a sense of self and place; acting as setting and character in the construction of our world.

Through this construction, the natural environment becomes partly fictionalised; in Australia, through positioning the outback and of sections of the country as wilderness. An exploration of the outback concept is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is

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<sup>1</sup> There is a rich and extensive body of literature pertaining to this, which considers this narrative from all angles. We wish to acknowledge this and encourage further study, but the narrow scope of this paper necessitates brevity.

constructed as an access point, through which an engagement with ‘authentic’ Australia is possible, offering spiritual awakening and an assertion of Australian identity, an aspect marketed through touristic and political rhetoric. Further to this, the perceived inextricability of Indigenous Australia and the environment presents a complex and fraught interaction, as the search for self in the outback becomes synonymous with a search for an alternate way forward, through an engagement with that which we once disregarded or destroyed. The ecological connotations of this are not lost, however, and become a pressing issue amidst the Anthropocene and the Sixth Great Extinction, where broad-ranging environmental change threatens habitats and species across the world. It has become increasingly pertinent to reconfigure our relationship with the natural world, to protect what we have before it is lost.

Enter the night parrot. In positioning the bird and the historical and contemporary searches for it allegorically, it becomes a way to explore this meeting of knowledge systems; a permeable, bird-sized border between ways of understanding the natural environment and our place within it. Night parrot narratives provide an entry point; in Martu dreaming, the night parrot exists within being seen – a being that avoids all others and cannot be found. In an oxymoronic fashion, its absence confirms its presence. In contrast, the European narrative is one of seeking empirical proof of the parrot’s existence; the necessary evidence and live specimens that would warrant its inclusion into a scientific tradition rooted in fact. But what are we to do with a bird this elusive, when evidence is sparse and as shown in recent controversy surrounding 2013 discoveries, can be manipulated? The Martu narrative speaks to an ecological awareness beyond the necessity of proof, the need to preserve the environment because the parrot is there, without making itself known. This correlates to that which fuels current searches – the bird is presumed present, warranting protection of its habitat. But without proof of this, there is no need for protection because there will be no loss. The search for the bird presents an opportunity and a necessity to consider that outside of a traditional Western epistemology, in a consideration of local, traditional knowledge and amateur science.

As this project evolves, it investigates literal and figurative manifestations of the night parrot, in the hope that the different methods of engagement both with ecology and the knowledge it represents can provide a way forward. By extending the search for the bird into the archives, it seeks historical precedents that have served as consciousness-raising events, characters or creatures. Similarly, it seeks the parrot amidst legislation – the hunt for loopholes and footnotes upon which an ecological case may be advanced becoming synonymous with the real-life search for the bird. In this manner, just as the bird seemed to ‘unextinct’ itself, there is hope that night parrot conservation measures, such as that demonstrated at Pullen Pullen, can inadvertently act to protect other species. In addition

to protecting species, there is scope for this conservation action to extend to knowledge of the bird, the broader natural environment and the cultural knowledge encoded within. This is in itself a complex issue concerning the conservation of knowledge. In this case of Yeelirrie, this is an issue of concern, given the site's location within the Seven Sisters Dreaming. Given the lack of cultural rehabilitation protocols in developmental processes and guidelines, there is a need for an academic and cultural focus on this issue. As it stands, however, there is a need to find unique and adaptable ways in which this knowledge can be archived in an accessible and authentic manner.

The major outcome of this project thus far has been the development of a video game, *The Quest for the Night Parrot*. Originally developed for Manila Biennale 2020, circumstances have arisen which have put the Biennale on hold. As such, this work will be presented in 2020 at Leonora, near Yeelirrie, and in both Melbourne and New Zealand, with a view for further exhibition and an associated publication exploring thematic and conceptual aspects of the game and the night parrot allegory. Just as works such as Brett Leavy's *Virtual Songlines* project, the *Tjinari* game and a number of others have sought to digitise Indigenous culture in a productive, preservative and transmissible manner, similarly to online archival projects managed by institutions such as the State Library of Western Australia, *Quest* seeks to digitally preserve the search for the night parrot at Yeelirrie and provide a way to explore the night parrot allegory through a digital simulacrum.

Within *Quest*, an unnamed protagonist explores the outback, in search of a night parrot. There is no real purpose to the avatar's journey – although the parrot is sought, and there are hints of its presence, it is never located. The avatar's primary role becomes traversing the landscape, the three-dimensional character becoming a medium through which to engage with an outback phenomenology. Understanding the outback as a location once literal, mythologised and constructed, the landscape within the game is reflective of this. Based on Yeelirrie, and constructed through photographs and videos taken at the site, as the avatar traverse the land, it begins to change – geological landmarks fade in and out, signs of human presence and industry are encountered, manifested through dongas, machinery, fences, detritus discarded by those who once populated the area: hard hats by the side of the road, hi-vis vests hanging in trees and so on. In this sense, the sight of these items serves to reassert the perceived absence that characterises the outback, that which characterises a settler engagement with it and plays on anxieties surrounding openness and survival.

Furthermore, as the avatar trawls the landscape, it changes from day to night. Seasons change; the sparsity of the Dry, with the crackle of heat and the breeze through the casuarinas accompanying the steady, soft rhythm of footfalls. By contrast, the endless

rain of the Wet sees the surrounds become a sea of green, teeming with life, all of which is accompanied by and comprised of field recordings from Yeelirrie. *Quest* has emerged from very real conservation issues and sought originally to raise awareness of Yeelirrie and the resident species facing extinction. Whilst acknowledging the somewhat limited role it can play in this, it seeks to invite users to the site of the struggle against industry, in the hope that the game's immersive nature engages them if not in action against development, then at least in consideration of how we construct, consider and interact with the natural environment.

As this project continues, it will manifest itself in different forms. In this, we see it extending beyond Yeelirrie, becoming a way to contribute to and engage in discourse surrounding the creation and transmission of environmental knowledge. Furthermore, we see it as a way of acknowledging the elusive nature of this – as in the Martu dreaming, that a lack of visibility does not mean that something is gone. *Quest* and the allegory of the night parrot serves to highlight that we must cultivate and conserve, lest we lose something without realising.

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