

**‘The ign’rant present’s all’:
acts of listening and silencing
in early colonial New South Wales**

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This study excavates divergent approaches to the British colonial project by analysing two artefacts created by British colonial officials living and working in Sydney during the long eighteenth century. Whilst a 1790 language notebook made by William Dawes can be understood as an act of listening, an 1823 poem by Barron Field constitutes an act of silencing. Ultimately, both approaches cannot be reconciled with the inherently perverse dynamics of settler colonialism. Dawes finds the dominant colonial narrative undone by lived reality. Field finds lived reality undone by the dominant colonial narrative.

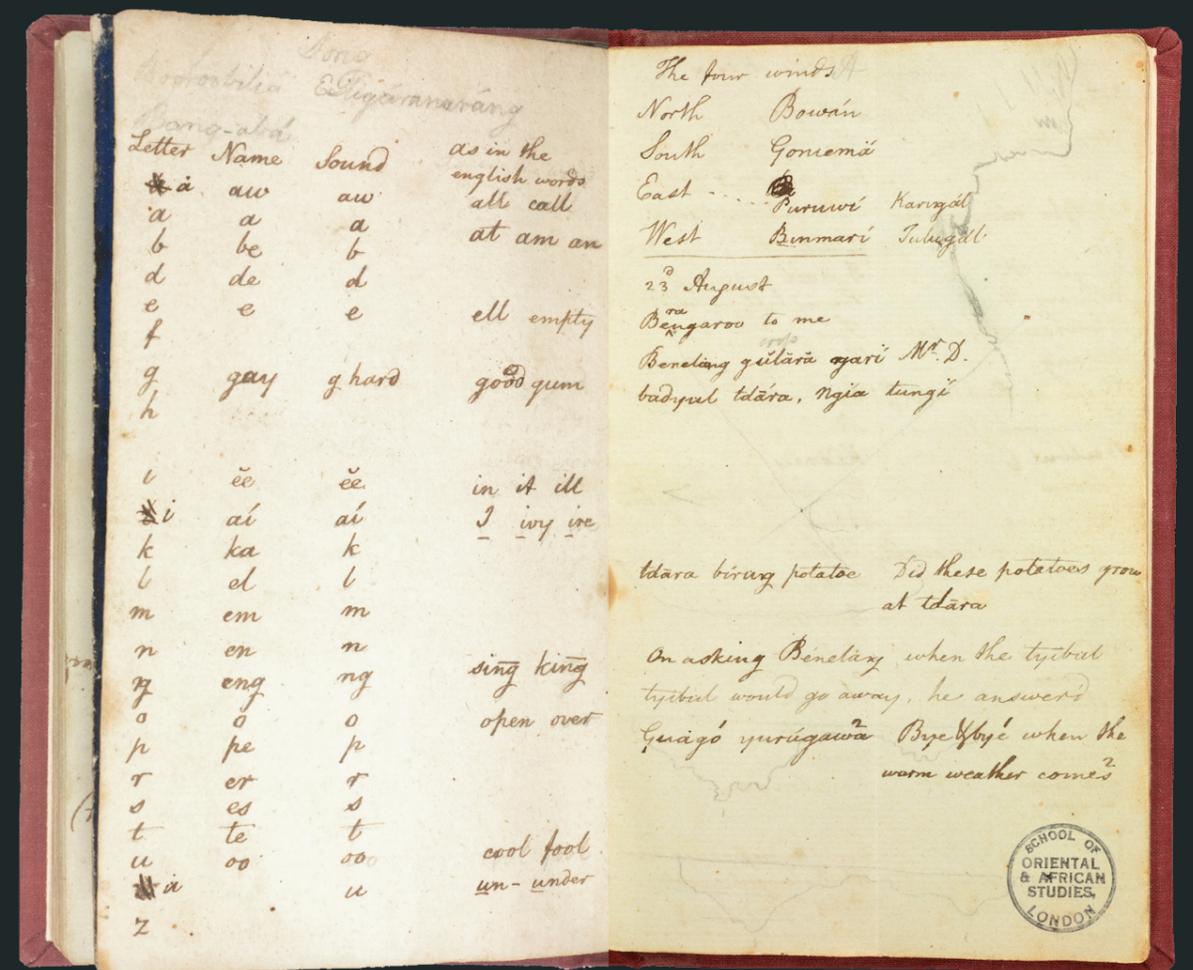


Figure 1. Extract from 'Vocabulary of the language of N.S Wales in the neighbourhood of Sydney. (Native and English)' in William Dawes' Notebooks on the Aboriginal Language of Sydney, 1790-91. (MS 41645 facsimile), p. 26. SOAS Library. ©SOAS.

Artefact 1., a notebook entitled 'Vocabulary of the language of N.S Wales in the neighbourhood of Sydney. (Native and English)' is one of several notebooks written and compiled in Sydney between 1790 and 1791 by the British colonial official William Dawes.¹ Born in Portsmouth in 1762, Dawes trained as a marine and was employed variously as an engineer, surveyor and astronomer.² In 1788, aged only 26, he sailed from Britain to Australia as part of the first wave of British settler colonists. During his relatively short residence in New South Wales,³ Dawes oversaw the building of an observatory in Sydney Cove,⁴ and spent a considerable amount of time with the Indigenous peoples whose land the British had invaded, making sustained records of his encounters in notebooks such as the one considered in this study. In addition to documenting linguistic data, Dawes wrote down snippets of conversations and made brief personal commentaries on local cultures, relationships and ethics. In its attempts to engage with Indigenous presence, Dawes' notebook is somewhat exceptional, stepping

outside dominant colonial discourse. Artefact 2., a poem entitled 'On Reading the Controversy Between Lord Byron and Mr Bowles',⁵ was published in 1823 by Barron Field, another British colonial official who sailed from Britain to New South Wales to live and work in the settlement of Sydney. He was employed in 1817 as the judge of the Supreme Court of Civil Judicature of New South Wales but like Dawes, left colonial Australia relatively soon afterwards in 1824.⁶ In his spare time Field fancied himself a man of letters, and in 1819 he published *First Fruits of Australian Poetry*, the first book of poetry published in colonial Australia.⁷ 'On Reading the Controversy' appears in the second edition of this volume and in contrast to Dawes' notebook speaks very much from within the dominant colonial discourse.

In the opening pages of Dawes' notebook, listening is foregrounded quite literally. Phonemes of the Sydney language are recorded in a matrix handwritten in cursive script. Dawes records 'Letter', 'Name', 'Sound', and how to generate such sounds 'as in the

English words'.⁸ There are corrections marked with inked scrawls; visible traces of the author grasping towards aural accuracy as he interacts with the people who come to visit him in his observatory. Adjacent to the phonetic records, half-effaced pencil markings trace outlines of what resemble aerial rendering of coastlines or landforms. Dawes is invested in attuning to the physical environment and situating himself within it. Superimposed on the pencil outlines are translations of multiple reactively recorded words and phrases relating to that environment: 'North wind', 'South wind', 'East wind', 'West wind', 'did these potatoes grow at tdāra', 'bye & bye, when the warm weather comes'.⁹ The juxtaposition of these seemingly unrelated translations betrays the responsive approach adopted in Dawes' attempt to understand the Sydney language. The palimpsestic structure of the notebook charts multiple present moments where Dawes marks his attempts at listening in ink and graphite, never settling on a final and definitive interpretation.

The subsequent pages list Sydney language words in alphabetical order according to Dawes' romanized phonetic renderings of them, as well as English translations of the terms.

⁸ Dawes, 'Vocabulary', p. 26.

⁹ Dawes, 'Vocabulary', p. 26.

¹⁰ Dawes, 'Vocabulary', p. 27.

¹¹ Dawes, 'Vocabulary', p. 27.

¹² Dawes, 'Vocabulary', p. 39.

¹³ For a brilliant discussion of silences and silencing in history, see Trouillot, Michel-Rolph, *Silencing the*

In addition to broadly utilitarian descriptors such as 'yesterday', 'two', 'skin', 'father', Dawes records value-laden concepts.¹⁰ He translates 'B̄irong or M̄iron' as 'Belonging', which is prefaced by a spring-like correction,¹¹ again indicating Dawes' attempts to listen closely and edit his interpretations in light of new understanding. Whilst 'Belonging' is a polysemic term, it is reasonable to assume that Dawes records it in this instance as an abstract noun rather than a verb given that he later records another term 'N̄alar̄in̄ji' as 'Ours, Belonging to us'.¹² In any case, what is notable here is that Dawes is not merely interested in linguistic data which aids extraction of resources for colonial gain, but rather that which is emotionally and culturally resonant. On subsequent pages, visual and aural openness are further indicated through the deliberate placement of blank space left for future records of information: the form of the notebook itself is then conducive to an active, working and unresolved engagement with Indigenous voices.

If Dawes' notebook can be characterised by its acts of listening and formal openness, 'On Reading the Controversy' is best understood through its acts of silencing and formal enclosure.¹³ The

¹ William Dawes, 'Vocabulary of the language of N.S Wales in the neighbourhood of Sydney. (Native and English)' in *William Dawes' Notebooks on the Aboriginal Language of Sydney, 1790-91*. (MS 41645 facsimile) (London: SOAS, University of London, 2009), pp. 25-48.

² William Dawes' Notebooks on the Aboriginal Language of Sydney, 1790-91. (MS 41645 facsimile) (London: SOAS, University of London, 2009), vii.

³ Dawes left Australia three years later in 1791, see Phyllis Mander-Jones, 'Dawes, William (1762-1836)' in *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1966), pp. 297-298.

⁴ William Dawes' Notebooks on the Aboriginal Language of Sydney, 1790-91, vii.

⁵ Barron Field, 'On Reading the Controversy Between Lord Byron and Mr Bowles' in *First Fruits of Australian Poetry* (Sydney: 1823)

⁶ David Higgins, 'Writing to Colonial Australia: Barron Field and Charles Lamb', *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 32 (2010), pp. 219-33 (p. 221).

⁷ Higgins, p. 221.

poem, comprised of 32 lines of roughly uniform length, breathes only in its erratic caesura and often clumsy line breaks, saturating the white space of the page with a singular, obstinate voice. The opening lines of the poem parallel the opening pages of Dawes' notebook in so far as they address the physical environment of New South Wales. However, Field's narrator adopts a very different attitude to his locale:

Whether a ship's poetic?—Bowles
would own,
If here he dwelt, where Nature is
prosaic,
Unpicturesque, unmusical, and where
Nature-reflecting Art is not yet born;¹⁴

In having his narrator ask, 'Whether a ship's poetic?', Field immediately forces a connection between colonial New South Wales and established, metropolitan British cultural discourse. The question alludes to a protracted aesthetic spat played out in print between William Lisle Bowles and Lord Byron from 1819 to 1826.¹⁵ Crudely put, Bowles argued that the 'poetic beauty' of a ship depends 'not on art, but nature.'¹⁶ Byron criticised Bowles' position, claiming instead that the "poetry" of the

"Ship" does *not* depend on [nature] but 'confers its own poetry upon the waters—and heightens *theirs*.'¹⁷ Field's speaker suggests that this debate is complicated by his observations in New South Wales; 'here' it is proclaimed, it is necessarily the case that a ship is poetic because 'Nature is prosaic, / Unpicturesque, unmusical' and 'Nature-reflecting Art is not yet born'.

On one level the narrator's derision of the Australian sights and sounds he encounters as 'prosaic', 'Unpicturesque' and 'unmusical' may offer a sincere reflection of Field's own subjective inability to comprehend an alien empirical environment and his place in it. Yet, more importantly, these dismissals constitute an act of silencing. The environment has no right of reply in the text and is instead used instrumentally, subsumed as a mere abstract, negative premise in Field's argument in support of Byron's position.

The oblique and opaque ways in which Indigenous presence is addressed by Field's narrator constitutes another more significant act of silencing which stands in stark contrast to the close listening in Dawes' notebook. On a

basic level, nowhere in the first four lines of the poem (or in the entire poem for that matter) does Field's narrator refer explicitly to there actually being an existing Indigenous population in the region. This is despite the fact that he is making claims about these peoples, for example by asserting that 'here' 'Nature-reflecting Art is not yet born'. The operation of this line deserves closer attention. In setting up the poem in terms of the British aesthetic 'Controversy Between Lord Byron and Mr Bowles', Field tacitly transplants culturally and environmentally specific philosophical assumptions into a different context where these assumptions are not necessarily applicable. More precisely, Field's speaker assumes that there is a universal, robust and coherent ontological distinction between 'art' and 'nature'. Indeed, the contention that 'here' 'Nature-reflecting Art is not yet born' effectively precludes the ontological possibility that 'nature' and 'art' are in fact one and the same. Moreover, it implies that Indigenous forms of knowledge are less developed and thus inferior to those of European colonists.

This dual erasure and silencing of Indigenous presence in the verse is best understood as a form of expedient epistemic violence which operates in

tandem with acts of literal violence inflicted on Indigenous peoples by British colonists in early colonial New South Wales.¹⁸ Illegitimately invading a landmass and claiming a right to occupy it necessitated not only the use of instrumental terror against Indigenous peoples from the outset but narrative justifications for such actions. The paradoxical doctrine of *terra nullius*, or nobody's land, which essentially rendered non-agriculturist Indigenous peoples as incapable of ownership or even non-existent,¹⁹ not only animates 'On Reading the Controversy' but also acted as an implicit (then later explicit) premise underpinning British colonial policy in New South Wales. As Justine Clemens highlights, it is not merely coincidental that Field's poetry should be complicit in such epistemic violence when he was the first judge to formalise the long-established performative use of *terra nullius* in Australia in law.²⁰

Where 'On Reading the Controversy' enacts forms of colonial violence, 'Vocabulary of the language of N.S Wales' listens to Indigenous responses to such colonial violence, revealing the inherent perversity of settler colonial narrativization. Patyegarang, a 15-year-old girl who became Dawes' main language teacher and features heavily throughout the

Past: *Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015).

14 Barron Field, 'On Reading the Controversy Between Lord Byron and Mr Bowles' in *First Fruits of Australian Poetry* (Sydney: 1823), p. 14 (ll. 1-4).

15 George Gordon Byron, *Lord Byron: The Complete Miscellaneous Prose*, ed. Andrew Nicholson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 120.

16 William Lisle Bowles and Thomas Campbell, *The Invariable Principles of Poetry: In a Letter Addressed to Thomas Campbell, Esq; Occasioned by Some Critical Observations in his Specimens of British Poets, Particularly Relating to the Poetical Character of Pope* (London, 1819), p. 11.

17 Byron, p. 130.

18 Lyndall Ryan, *Colonial Frontier Massacres in Australia* (Newcastle: University of Newcastle, 2017-2020), <<https://c21ch.newcastle.edu.au/colonialmassacres/timeline.php>> [accessed 1/2/2021]. Funded by ARC: DP 140100399.

19 Thomas H. Ford and Justin Clemens, 'Barron Field's Terra Nullius Operation', *Australian Humanities Review*, 65 (2019), pp. 1-19 (p. 7).

20 Ford and Clemens, p. 9.

notebook, makes it crystal clear how the local population feels about British settlement in the following extract from the notebook:

D. Mínyin gūlara eóra?	Why are the b. m. [black men] angry?
P. Inyám ŋal wí w. m.	Because the white men are settled here.
P. Tyérun kamarigál	The kamarigals are afraid.
D. Mínyin tyérun k_gál?	Why are the k_ afraid?
P. Gunin	Because of the Guns. ²¹

The very real threat of colonial violence never strays far from the details recorded in the notebook and continues to make itself apparent in the linguistic data collected by Dawes. For example, on the page following the extract above, Dawes notes how Patyegarang clarifies a ‘difference between speaking of we two and we three’, using the example of ‘a white man beat us three’, ‘a white man beat us two’.²² Such details also nestle jarringly amid moments of apparent personal connection. Dawes gives a translation for ‘you winked at

me’²³ and later records Patyegarang telling him, ‘Kamarāta, beriadinye: My friend, he sings about you.’,²⁴ amplifying the absurdity of colonial inhumanity under the auspices of humanity.

It is also important to note that whilst Dawes engages in such acts of close listening, he nevertheless remains a coloniser and cannot be absolved from his complicity in forms of colonial violence. For example, when he tells Patyegarang ‘if she would wash herself often, she would become white’,²⁵ he makes an implicit, racist appeal to his perceived white supremacy. Whether or not this comment is made in jest, it must be considered in light of the contemporaneous instrumental violence employed by colonists in defending their claim to occupy New South Wales,²⁶ as well as more recent hagiographical scholarship which consistently neglects to mention Dawes’ own racism and deep personal flaws.²⁷ Yet, the notebook does give voice to Patyegarang’s defiant response to Dawes’ comment: ‘Tyerabárrbowaryaou: I shall not become white.’²⁸

In the fragmentary records of

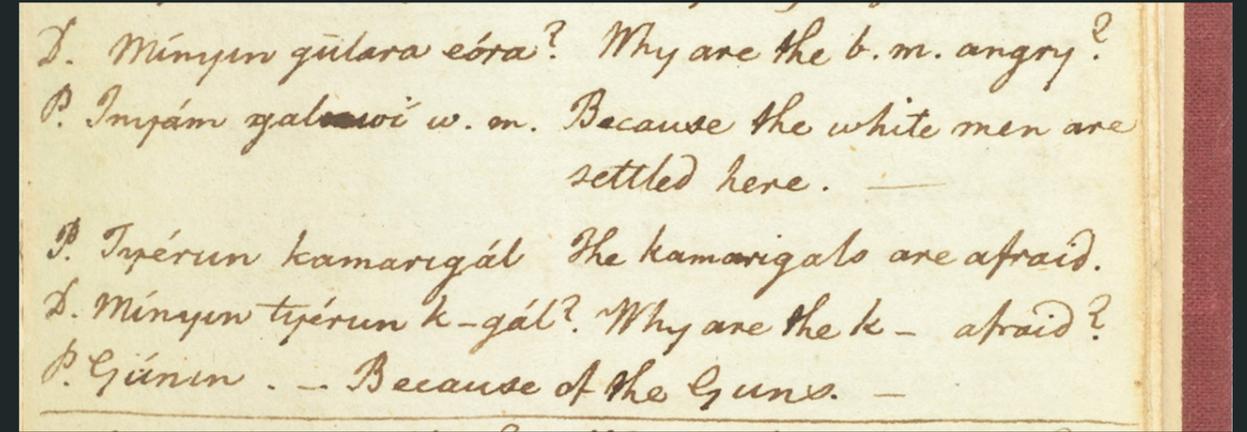


Figure 2. Extract from ‘Vocabulary of the language of N.S Wales in the neighbourhood of Sydney. (Native and English)’ in William Dawes’ Notebooks on the Aboriginal Language of Sydney, 1790–91. (MS 41645 facsimile), p. 42. SOAS Library. ©SOAS.

²¹ Dawes, ‘Vocabulary’, p. 42.

²² Dawes, ‘Vocabulary’, p. 43.

²³ Dawes, ‘Vocabulary’, p. 34.

²⁴ Dawes, ‘Vocabulary’, p. 40.

²⁵ Dawes, ‘Vocabulary’, p. 35.

²⁶ Colin Tatz, ‘Confronting Australian genocide’, *Aboriginal History*, 25 (2001), pp. 16–36 (p. 20).

²⁷ For a discussion of this issue see Cassandra Pybus, ‘Not Fit for Your Protection or an Honest Man’s Company’: A Transnational Perspective on the Sainly William Dawes’ in *History Australia*, 6 (2009), pp. 121–27.

²⁸ Dawes, ‘Vocabulary’, p. 35.

these particular encounters, it is possible to glimpse the fraught entanglement of the personal and the global. Slippages between jest and genocide reveal the contradictory and asymmetrical foundations of Dawes and Patyegarang's relationship. Intimacy, exploitation and resistance co-exist uncomfortably throughout the language lists. Further down the same page Dawes' vocabulary list reads, 'Tyelkála: To embrace. To hug', 'Tóana: To court. To make love to.', and 'Tyérun: To run away.'²⁹ The radically lop-sided colonial power dynamic and desire for understanding and human connection that jostle throughout the notebook cannot ultimately be reconciled in any obvious way.

Indeed, Dawes' alleged initial refusal to participate in a disproportionately large-scale and violent punitive expedition against the local Bidjigal clan, organised by Governor Phillip in late 1790, gives an indication of his struggle to reconcile his dual position as coloniser and close listener.³⁰ Dawes did eventually participate in the (ultimately failed) reprisal attempt³¹

but later made it clear to Governor Phillip that he regretted having been persuaded to take part and would not do so again in the future.³² These remarks, as well as other allegations of Dawes' misconduct, drove a wedge between Dawes and the Governor which widened into irredeemable hostility.³³ By December 1791 Dawes had left New South Wales, having been effectively forced out of the colony by Governor Phillip, and was shipped back to Britain with his notebooks.

By the time Barron Field arrived in Sydney in 1817, Dawes' work on the Sydney language had been all but erased from colonial memory.³⁴ Ongoing anti-colonial resistance to British occupation of the Sydney area by Indigenous activists such as Pemulwuy (who had prompted Governor Phillip's 1790 punitive expedition),³⁵ ultraviolent colonial reprisals by the British³⁶ and smallpox contagion had resulted in the decimation of local Indigenous populations.³⁷ Expedient narrativization of this ongoing genocide was necessary to justify colonial conduct in New South Wales.

²⁹ Dawes, 'Vocabulary', p. 35.

³⁰ William Dawes' *Notebooks on the Aboriginal Language of Sydney, 1790-91.*, vii.

³¹ Watkin Tench and Tim F. Flannery, *1788: Comprising A Narrative of the Expedition to Botany Bay and A Complete Account of the Settlement at Port Jackson* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 1996), p. 170.

³² Pybus, 'Not Fit for Your Protection or an Honest Man's Company', p. 122.

³³ Dawes had been illicitly hoarding food rations bought from convicts, see Pybus, 'Not Fit for Your Protection or an Honest Man's Company', p. 122-23.

³⁴ William Shelley, 'Public Education in N.S.W. before 1848: Letter of 6 October 1814' in *Journal and Proceedings of the Royal Australian Historical Society XXXVI (iii)*, p.152.

³⁵ Tench, p. 165.

³⁶ Ryan, *Colonial Frontier Massacres in Australia*, [accessed 1/2/2021].

³⁷ Tatz, pp. 16-36.

The acts of silencing in Field's 'On Reading the Controversy' operate within this enduring context. However, they are not singular or unambiguous in this regard.

This becomes clear in the erasure of Indigenous historical presence which is performed in the first half of the poem. New South Wales is declared 'A land without antiquities, with one / And only one, poor spot of classic ground, / (That on which Cook first landed).'³⁸ The narrator continues:

Where's no past tense; the ign'rant
present's all
Or only great by the All hail, hereafter!
One foot of Future's glass should rest
on Past,
Where Hist'ry is not, Prophecy is
guess³⁹

The poetic persona brands New South Wales as timeless ('the ign'rant present's all'); weaponizing time as a means to trivialize the contemporary decimation of Indigenous peoples. The perceived contrast between Indigenous absence of history and British historical presence is further amplified through a somewhat heavy-handed allusion

³⁸ Field, p. 14 (ll. 5-7).

³⁹ Field, p. 14 (ll. 13-16).

⁴⁰ 'Greater than both, by the all-hail hereafter! / Thy letters have transported me beyond / This ignorant present, and I feel now / The future in the instant.' (1.5.60-63), William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. Kenneth Muir (London: Bloomsbury, 1997).

⁴¹ Higgins, p. 226.

⁴² Field, p. 14 (l. 10).

⁴³ Field, p. 14 (l. 27).

⁴⁴ Field, p. 14 (l. 19).

⁴⁵ Field, p. 14 (ll. 28-29).

to Shakespeare's *Lady Macbeth*.⁴⁰ Yet, as David Higgins highlights, the allusion to *Lady Macbeth* betrays an ambivalence towards the colonial project.⁴¹ In branding New South Wales as timeless and devoid of history, there is no guarantee of a coherent or stable colonial future; 'Where Hist'ry is not, Prophecy is guess.' In the earlier line 'We've nothing left us but anticipation',⁴² ambiguity plagues that 'anticipation'. Without an existing historical presence to build on, a feeling of dislocation prevails.

Field's speaker seeks refuge from a colonial space forcibly bereft of content and form by turning in the second half of the poem to his 'home wand'ring phantasy.'⁴³ He seeks to allay his malaise (whilst continuing to reinforce the supposed inhumanity of the Indigenous population) through the "'news of human kind'"⁴⁴ brought by British ships. The ships themselves offer the speaker a tangible trace of the metropolitan, Christian society he yearns for: the 'tall anch'ring masts, a three-spir'd minster / Vane-crown'd; her bell our only half-hour chimes.'⁴⁵ Ultimately however, the visiting ships cannot compensate for the isolation

the speaker feels and his appeals to British cultural discourse⁴⁶ serve only to fuel his obstinacy and myopia. In the end the speaker dreams foremost of escape from New South Wales via a ship whose ‘wings will bear me from this prose-dull land.’⁴⁷ Shortly after the poem was published, Barron Field’s wish for escape came true when he boarded a ship bound for Britain in 1824.

In wholly different ways then, both ‘Vocabulary of the language of N.S Wales’ and ‘On Reading the Controversy’ demonstrate failures to find stability or coherence in New South Wales. Acts of listening and silencing both prove only to amplify the inherently violent origins and perverse narrativization of settler colonialism. Dawes finds the dominant colonial narrative undone by lived reality. Field finds lived reality undone by the dominant colonial narrative. Given the ongoing systemic and environmental racism,⁴⁸ as well as mass ecocide,⁴⁹ wrought by settler late liberalism, making the historical workings of early settler colonialism more transparent for reflection is not only of academic interest but politically urgent. Enduring silences

and perverse narrativization must be unlearned and undone, leaving space for close listening today.

⁴⁶ For a discussion of Field’s extensive reliance on allusion throughout his corpus, see Justin Clemens, ‘First Fruits of a Barron Field’ in *Critical Quarterly*, 61 (2019), pp. 18–36.

⁴⁷ Field, p. 14 (l. 32)., this line is itself an imitation of a passage from Byron’s letter on the “poetry” of the “Ship”: ‘Even an old boat keel upwards wrecked upon the barren sand—is a “poetical” object... ..whilst a long extent of sand & unbroken water without the boat would be—as like dull prose as any pamphlet lately published.’, Byron, *Lord Byron: The Complete Miscellaneous Prose*, p. 130.

⁴⁸ Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), pp. 45–48.

⁴⁹ Charles Massy, ‘The Ard, The Ant and the Anthropocene’, *Granta* (Autumn 2020), p. 34.