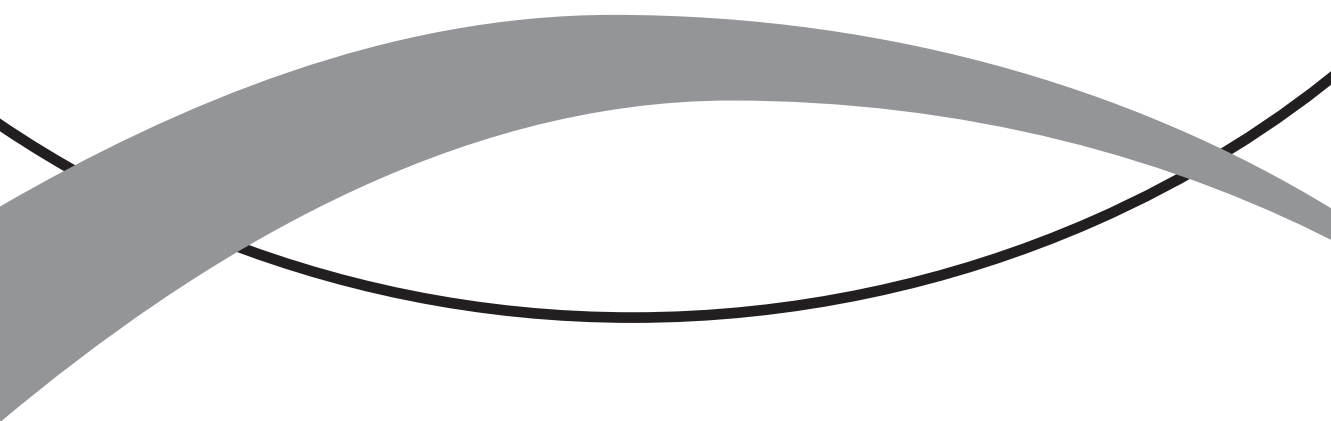


UNITING CHURCH STUDIES

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**UNITING CHURCH ENCOUNTERS
WITH THE MIDDLE EAST**

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Abbreviations

Documents

Hyperlinks are embedded in the full name and provide access to the full documents.

<i>AssMin</i>	Assembly Minutes
<i>BOU</i>	Basis of Union
<i>CS</i>	Covenanting Statement
<i>RP</i>	Revised Preamble
<i>UCMC</i>	The Uniting Church is a Multicultural Church
<i>UCAConst</i>	Uniting Church Constitution
<i>UCAREgs2025</i>	Uniting Church Regulations 2025
<i>UIW2</i>	Uniting in Worship 2

Institutions and Organisations

<i>UCA</i>	Uniting Church in Australia
<i>UAICC</i>	Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress
<i>WCC</i>	World Council of Churches
<i>ASC</i>	Assembly Standing Committee

This journal

This abbreviation can be used in bibliographical references to articles published in this Journal.

<i>UCS</i>	Uniting Church Studies
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Book Forum: Garry Worete Deverell's *Contemplating Country: More Gondwana Theology*

This issue's Book Forum engages the 2023 book, *Contemplating Country: More Gondwana Theology* by trawoolway man and leading Indigenous theologian, Garry Worete Deverell.¹ This is Deverell's second book on Indigenous theology following his 2018 book, *Gondwana Theology: A trawoolway man reflects on Christian Faith*.² *Contemplating Country* presents some of Deverell's further reflections on the notion of Country, decolonised treatments of some key Christian doctrines, and the persistence of colonial imaginations in the Australian Churches and their theologies. Deverell writes that the book's twelve chapters and Epilogue "present my attempts, within with a variety of settings and conversations, to give voice to the ever-new, ever-dynamic voice of the divine in these lands."³ The three respondents are Adam Couchman, Rebecca Lindsay and Naomi Wolfe. The Forum concludes with Deverell's own response to the three respondents. (Note that all quotations from *Contemplating Country* across the Forum are indicated by in-text page numbers.)

Two Trees: An Overly-generous Metaphor?

Adam Couchman

I was meandering along the path, a bright, sunny autumn day on unceded Yagera and Turbal Country. Foldup chairs in hand, approaching a place to sit, when I saw two trees standing tall, side by side. Two Ficus trees, Google tells me later on; my limited arboreal knowledge improved just that little bit. What struck me instantly wasn't their branches, their physical strength, or the gentle, mottled shade they provided over the surrounding area. Instead, it was the way their roots had interwoven one across the other. As I stood, momentarily taking in this unusual sight, I followed the long-tangled roots back from their individual ends to the source at the base of each trunk. How did they get this way? How did the roots know when to go over and when to go under?

With a bit of time, it was possible to trace the route each tree-tentacle had taken, recalling the mazes I would complete on restaurant placemats as a kid. Considering that both trees were about the same size, and their roots were one over the other, not dominated by one tree who had come late to the party and overrun the other, I figured that these two trees must have been planted at the same time. Twins sharing their environment who had managed to work out that growing together was the best way for them to exist in the world; how they would flourish, bloom, and thrive. Wanting to capture this moment I took a photo and then continued my journey, set up my chairs, and sat down to watch the game.

¹ Garry Worete Deverell, *Contemplating Country: More Gondwana Theology* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2023).

² Garry Worete Deverell, *Gondwana Theology: A Trawoolway man reflects on Christian Faith* (Reservoir: Morning Star Publishing, 2018).

³ Deverell, *Contemplating Country*, xix.



This environmental marvel brought to mind Garry Deverell's use of the "two trees" metaphor in *Contemplating Country*. Adapting Paul's metaphor from Romans 11 where the apostle considers the relationship between Jewish and Gentile peoples, Deverell uses this typology to consider the relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander theologies and colonial forms of Christianity. The relationship between the two trees is considered in four different ways.

- i One colonial plant
- ii Two plants entwined – an indigenous stump with colonial grafts
- iii Two plants entwined – a colonial stump with indigenous grafts.
- iv Two plants. An Indigenous tree and a colonial tree, growing side by side.⁴

Deverell wrestles with the ongoing relationship between Indigenous theologies and those that have been imported from other lands. How have they related to one another in the past? How do they continue to do so now? The typology is helpful, given its biblical precedent, yet raises a number of questions for me.

Are the two trees really incommensurable, given one of them is an introduced species: a kind of prickly pear choking out the native species, stealing its nutrients, suffocating them, making it near impossible for the native plants to survive? Does the typology itself need some nuance; given we aren't comparing apples

⁴ For this typology, see *Contemplating Country*, 12–16.

with apples, but quandongs with a bulldozer. Deverell points to the brutality with which Christianity was introduced here.

The colonial churches, and/or prominent members of those churches, both enabled and enacted the massacres, the removals, the enslavement, the incarcerations, the “reeducation,” and the wholesale destruction of Indigenous agriculture, language, kinship systems, cosmologies and spiritualities. The churches did this, but their shame at having done so has rendered them silent, especially insofar as the church speaks through its theological performance. (3-4)

Given this, I wonder if Deverell’s use of this metaphor is far too generous to colonial forms of Christianity. Perhaps this generosity points less to colonial brutality and more to Deverell himself. That generosity reflects Indigenous theologies and those peoples who continue to care for Country, and therefore Christ as Country, by grace-fully welcoming the very people who continuously rejected them over and over again. And yet that welcome persists.

Still, the metaphor might help in other ways, since Country shows remarkable ways of overcoming adversity. Could the comparison be found in the shoot of grass growing amongst the concrete; dividing the seemingly impenetrable construction, over time, with irrepressible persistence? Perhaps it’s in the natural growth that overruns an abandoned building; reclaiming the space stolen in the past, slowly redesigning an unnatural landscape, transforming it into something new. Or, to give some permission for more intentionality to be incorporated into our thinking, can the architectural “greening” of spaces help? Those new constructions that seek to blend the natural landscape with the artificial. I fear my colonial mindset is beginning to reveal itself.

Retaining Deverell’s “two trees” metaphor, and returning to the location of my photo above, the broader location offers a long-term vision of what might be and what might become of those type three and four theologies, given time and persistence. Immediately behind the two trees is a creek, once choked by the pollution of settler residents treating it like a rubbish dump. After ongoing efforts to rehabilitate the life source for both trees and broader environment alike, the health of the water source is visibly improving. There is work to be done, no doubt, but its recovery offers another small glimmer of hope to the world around it. The trees themselves contribute to this recovery. They continue to draw water from this water source. What other choice do they have? Yet, they also act as nature’s filtration and bodyguard, offering back to the creek protection from erosion when the storm waters rage through. Two trees partnering with the world around them, as their ancestors have done before them, to protect and improve land, water, and sky.

On the other side of the path, from where I stood to take the original photo, are local netball courts. Week in and week out, families congregate at this site to participate in ritual. It was why I was there that day. Every Saturday, the sounds of whistles, laughter, and a thousand “if you needs,” echo around this community space until, at the end of it all, the gathered community becomes the scattered community; sent back to their homes, schools, and workplaces, to the mundanity of everyday life. Until the next week, when the peel of the buzzer calls us all back to do it all again.

On one side of the trees, a suffering waterway slowly rebuilding itself, recovering from attempts at destruction, life that has thrived in that location for millennia gradually finding its home again. On the other side, slabs of concrete, floodlights, toilet blocks, and canteen, all imposed upon Country to support a game imported from the motherland. In a society that worships the gods of sport, here is a local parish.



In between it all, two trees stand tall; reaching to the sky like two priests invoking the Spirit(s) to descend upon Country and community gathered around them. Authentically being themselves yet quietly signalling to the world around the possibility of a different existence; two seemingly separate lifeforms living in symbiotic partnership. No one dominating the other. No one choking the other. No one more important than the other. Hope, unity, possibility.

Perhaps the “two trees” is the right metaphor after all.

For Deverell, the typology is not just theoretical, it is personal. Every day, he lives out the hope this theology offers to the churches in this land now called Australia.

I love the church and I love the Bible. I also love country. I love them all. I am in a vowed or religious relationship with each of them. I am bound to each of them in ways that could not be undone even if I sought, by some heroic act of the imagination, to do so. For each dwells, irrevocably, in both my history and my body. Each has inhabited and become part of me, such

that the boundaries between Bible, church, country, and my personal self, are impossible to delineate. (xviii)

Deverell extends a generous invitation to the rest of us, as privileged readers of his work, to sit and listen, under the shade of both trees, drawing upon the living waters of Country, and there to hear the voice of Christ in Country, and respectfully join in the songs of the ancestors.

Perhaps the visitors might eventually learn our song, and appreciate it for what it is, in its own integrity, rather than for what it can do to embellish the song of the visitors. Perhaps Bible and church might even learn to sign with us and add their voices in ways that harmonize with country. Perhaps they might then, finally, cease to be merely visitors. Maybe then, they will really belong. (xix)

Here, Christ in Country calls out to us “here if you need!”
We do need. More than ever before.

Conversations Around the Campfire

Rebecca Lindsay

Garry Deverell's *Contemplating Country* is infused with Country.⁵ Deverell begins with Country, and the book explores the “incurable” obsession with Country he identifies among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. He invites the Bible and Church to a campfire, to sit with and listen deeply to the stories, songs, and wisdom held in *place* across Australia (see xvii–xix). Given this, I begin by locating my reflection in place, drawing on Deverell's model of Acknowledgement that engages with the specificity of location (see 82–83). I live on Gadigal and Bidjigal Country and offer my thanks and respect to elders past and present for their care of this unceded land. This is where wattangaree (banksia) grows amidst the now critically endangered Eastern Suburbs Banksia Scrub.⁶ Not too far from where I write, the waves crash like thunder at Maroubra Beach and, when the season is right, burri burri (humpback whales) pass by on their journey along the coastline. I sit under a contemporary artwork that tells the story of local Kamay (Botany Bay) fishing.⁷ The signs of colonisation sit alongside me: the sports centre wall holding the artwork, roads, chatter in English, a leafblower. I write explicitly as someone who is non-Indigenous: a settler descendant and colonial inheritor who has benefited from the kinds of exploitation of Country that Deverell outlines. As a Christian, an ordained Minister of the Word in the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA), and a biblical scholar, I read *Contemplating Country* to listen for how I might understand the responsibilities of these identities on unceded Country, in colonised space. I find Deverell a conversation partner who brings sharp critique alongside generous invitation.

⁵ I capitalise Country as a sign of respect following the protocol found in many First Nations writings.

⁶ “Eastern Suburbs Banksia Scrub,” IndigiGrow, 2024. <https://indigigrow.com.au/eastern-suburbs-banksia-scrub>.

⁷ “Heffron Centre artworks shine a light on local Aboriginal history and tradition,” Randwick City Council, 2023. <https://www.randwick.nsw.gov.au/about-us/news/news-items/2023/april/heffron-centre-artworks-shine-a-light-on-local-aboriginal-history-and-tradition>

I first read this book when it was published in 2023. Returning to my notes from the time, I see that I highlighted Deverell's observation that he "assumes that whatever the damage done by colonists to country and to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and livelihood, there yet remains something that is good and of lasting value in the 'gospel' they brought with them over the seas" (xvii). I notice that my initial reading of the book was full of optimism, looking for how Deverell weaves his Christian faith with trawlwoolway epistemology and curious about what he would name as good and valuable in the Christian story. The possibility of hope I notice in *Contemplating Country*, is the possibility of hearing God's voice in and *through* place that is sovereign Indigenous country rather than colonised space (50).⁸ Such hope is not about a distant future, but about the possibility of transformation *now*, a transformation that requires settlers, like me, to un-learn ways of living which privilege human creatures and which abuse the earth.⁹ Deverell's writing provides ways in to such un-learning through theology and liturgy, including the analogy he presents between how Christians understand Christ and how Indigenous peoples understand Country (see 21–36). He also offers ways in to this through concrete action that churches might undertake, such as returning property gifted by the Crown and ongoing financial support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (see 124–125).

Rereading *Contemplating Country* in 2026, however, is painful. The book now bears witness within its text to the ongoing and tenacious hold that racism and colonialism have on the church and state in Australia. In 2023, when the book was published, the School of Indigenous Theology had been established at the University of Divinity, offering tertiary level theological education curated and shaped by Indigenous scholars (see 1–2). Deverell names the significance of this school for the formation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander theological imaginations and for the Australian church. In addition, the Albanese government had committed to support the Uluru Statement from the Heart in full, with Deverell linking the establishment of a Voice to parliament with hearing the sovereign voices of Country (see 21–22). I read now in the aftermath of the resounding rejection of this Voice in the October 2023 referendum. And I read now after the July 2024 disestablishment of the School of Indigenous Theology, along with the closure of vocational theological education provider Wontulp-Bi-Buya. As someone located within a theological institution of the UCA which is also part of a public university, I feel this sharply. There continues to be no permanent Aboriginal theologian on this (or any) theological faculty and so the critique of *Contemplating Country* moves directly into the heart of my own work of teaching and research (2). While I read excited by the ideas Deverell opens up, I concurrently read with discomfort, because I wonder where other voices like Deverell's will find welcome and formation. And I wonder how Australian theology can recognise ongoing racism and colonialism, both contrary to good news of a God who dwells among the marginalised, without centring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices?

Deverell begins *Contemplating Country* with two key assumptions. The first is Christian complicity in the damage of the (ongoing) colonial project. The second is that Indigenous wisdom embodies understandings of God, humanity, and place that Christian theological traditions ought to take note of. Neither of these assumptions are strangers in Uniting Church theology. In 1986, for example, Rev Dr Gondarra wrote that

⁸ My notebook shows that that I followed *Contemplating Country* with a rereading of his interlocutor: Chelsea Watego, *Another Day in the Colony*. (University of Queensland Press, 2021), Ch 6.

⁹ For example, Deverell's engagement with Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Bauman's *daidirri* and with Paul's concept of *kenosis*. Deverell, *Contemplating Country*, 46–53, 121–27.

“we Aboriginal leaders (or Christian leaders) are called to plant Christ in this Aboriginal Australian ‘fertile soil,’ rather than transplant our western forms of Christianity”, noting his understanding that God “is our God who has lived with us in history.”¹⁰ The UCA often points to the covenantal relationship between itself and the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress, and revision to the Preamble to the church’s constitution, both of which acknowledge the role of the UCA in colonisation. Yet, Deverell’s two assumptions still seem challenging within the UCA. One of the questions this raises, then, is what is needed for the church to move from provisional knowing to embodied practice?

The answer to this question centres around power and control: Where is God found? How is God revealed? Who contributes to and interprets Christian tradition? Deverell argues that non-Indigenous theologies seek to control how God is understood. He asks, “How are settler Christians – they who have empowered and enriched themselves at the expense of Indigenous people – going to let that power go?” (123). Contemplating power and control lead to the question of what constitutes a sacred text and which texts might bear witness to God for Christians. For Deverell, the “primary ‘text’” is Country (34). The question I hear in this is where am I, as a non-Indigenous Christian, willing to acknowledge resonance of Christ, even when this is outside my own understanding and outside of the biblical texts.

As a biblical scholar, I do find provocative Deverell’s identification of “texts” as “possibly the least important part of the whole mix,” noting that this comment is made in relation to Aboriginal liturgical Christology (34). I resonate with Deverell as he highlights the messiness of the biblical collection. The biblical texts are formed as oral traditions (re)shaped through changing historical contexts and in dialogue with each other. Deverell reminds me of this and of the multiplicity of voices collected together across time and diverse contexts in the stories of the Bible (see 35). This multiplicity is also present in biblical interpretation, which does not have one, singular lineage. Alongside Deverell, biblical scholars from other emplaced contexts name a similar challenge to white/western/settler imaginaries whose interpretive frameworks seek to lay boundaries around orthodoxy.¹¹ Accompanied by these others, I hear in Deverell a critique and reminder to settler biblical interpreters (and theologians) that their (our) voice is only one interpretive voice among many. This is furthered through Deverell laying out the multiplicity of Aboriginal approaches to engaging biblical texts and theologies, even as he identifies colonial thinking within some of these approaches (see 12–16). Deverell writes,

I prefer to let stories and traditions sit side by side like acquaintances around that campfire I talked about in the introduction to this volume. If we sit there long enough, if we return to each other at the campfire again and again, if we listen carefully to the songs that are most close and dear and sing them out of the depths of our vulnerability, we might find that we love each other: not despite the polyvalence of our songs but because of that polyvalence (120).

Polyvalent interpretation, however, only goes so far. Deverell points repeatedly to the importance of justice as an outworking of theology and biblical interpretation. Who “we” read the Bible with and how “we” see

¹⁰ Rev Dr Gondarra, *Series of Reflections on Aboriginal Theology*. (Bethel Presbytery, Northern Synod of the Uniting Church in Australia, 1986), 14, 21.

¹¹ Examples include the work of Jione Havea, Kwok Pui Lan, Chin Ming Stephen Lim, and Monical Jyostna Melanchthon.

ourselves reflected in the texts depends on the standpoint from which “we” read.¹² This reading location matters. Deverell challenges his readers to consider the impact of race, class, and other elements of identity on where we read texts from and to consider who we then read *for*. It seems clear to me that Deverell does not want to be *the* voice of Indigenous theology. But he names clearly the challenge for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander theologians in finding welcome, space, and audience for theology that begins with Indigenous epistemology, with *Country*. There is a challenge here for my own teaching and writing, as well as for the wider UCA. In a time of revisiting how our denominational theological colleges are structured, what attention will we give to theological formation that is authentically grown and led by First Nations members of the church?

The invitation for the church to sit at the campfire and listen, as named by Deverell, has been long and persistent. In seeking that church and theology might hear the voices of Country, he follows others such as Rev Dr Gondarra, Charles Harris, Denise Champion, and Anne Pattel-Gray. My own experience of sitting at the campfire includes often getting it wrong. In an earlier volume of *Uniting Church Studies*, I engaged with Deverell’s work on the revised Preamble.¹³ In this article, I engaged chapter 9 of *Contemplating Country* using the concept of colonising innocence, essentially ways that colonial thinking gets into everything, reinscribing colonial hierarchies even into movements that seek to think and act differently.¹⁴ After its publication, Deverell and I shared lunch and he pointed out to me some of the ways that my writing did the very thing I sought to critique. Towards the end of *Contemplating Country*, Deverell observes that

To be frank, the settler churches don’t know what they don’t know, and what they think they know is proving quite inadequate in the face of the damage they’ve done since they arrived here. We can help with that (126).

I’d like to hope that I, and we, can accept that help; that settler Christians might listen with humility and curiosity, renouncing supremacy and acknowledging wisdom embodied in place over thousands of years. It seems to me that sitting around the campfire listening to stories is just the place we might expect Christ to be present, not in a romanticised way, but in a deep, painful, listening towards just actions that embody the songs and stories that are shared.

From Visiting to Belonging: Country, Theology, and the Gift of Listening in Garry Deverell’s *Contemplating Country*

Naomi Wolfe

There are only a small number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander theologians writing in Australia today. Among them, Garry Worete Deverell stands as one of the most influential, sustained, and creative voices. For more than two decades he has invited churches, theological colleges, and Christian communities to

¹² For example, in interpreting Matthew 20:1–16. See Deverell, *Contemplating Country*, 128–33.

¹³ See Rebecca Lindsay, “Colonising Innocence and the Revised Preamble: Between Celebration and Critique” *Uniting Church Studies*, 26, no. 2 (2024): 31–42.

¹⁴ See Alissa Macoun, “Colonising White Innocence: Complicity and Critical Encounters” in *The Limits of Settler Colonial Reconciliation: Non-Indigenous People and the Responsibility to Engage*, ed. Sarah Maddison, Tom Clark and Ravi de Costa. (Springer, 2016): 85–102.

think differently about God, Country, scripture, justice, and belonging. Through his teaching, preaching, activism, and writing, Deverell has helped create space for Aboriginal theology to emerge as a recognised and vital conversation within Australian Christianity. This has been a challenge for Deverell as much as for those listening to him.

Contemplating Country: More Gondwana Theology continues that work and builds upon his early book, *Gondwana Theology*. Deverell brings together a collection of essays addressing Christology, the Trinity, scripture, ecology, reconciliation, colonialism, and church life. Yet to describe the book simply in terms of its topics risks missing its deeper significance. This is not only a book about theology. It is a book about what becomes possible when theology begins from Country rather than from a distant idea of Europe; when Aboriginal ways of knowing, being, and doing are considered not as objects of theological reflection but as sources of theological wisdom in their own right.

The book arrives at a significant time in Australian theological life. Across churches, universities, and theological colleges there is increasing discussion of reconciliation, truth-telling, Indigenous self-determination, and decolonisation. Yet too often these conversations remain confined to strategic plans, policy documents, or symbolic gestures that seem to flourish and die under whims of compliance, interest, and commitment. Deverell offers something different by demonstrating what theology itself can look like when it is undertaken from Indigenous locations, histories, and relationships. In doing so, he contributes to a growing body of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander theological scholarship and practice that is reshaping and renewing how theology is imagined and practised in Australia.

One of the book's most important contributions is its claim that Country is not only a background to theological reflection but a theological category in its own right. For Deverell, Country is alive, relational, storied, and sacred. Country teaches. Country forms identity. Country calls people into responsibilities of care and reciprocity with the human and the non-human. Through the book, Deverell returns frequently to the conviction that Country is adept of revealing truths about God, humanity, and creation. This approach challenges assumptions deeply embedded within many Western theological traditions, where theology has often benefited abstraction, universality, and detachment from place and relationship.

The importance of this should not be underestimated. Deverell is not simply adding Indigenous examples to an existing theological framework. Rather, he is inviting readers to re-examine where theological knowledge comes from and how it is formed. In the book's introduction he describes Country, church, and scripture gathering around a campfire, learning to listen to one another. It is a powerful image that captures the spirit of the whole book. Rather than establishing a hierarchy between these sources of wisdom, he seeks a conversation in which each can be heard, and each can contribute to a deeper understanding of divine presence and purpose.

This commitment shapes every chapter. Whether discussing the Trinity, Christ, ecological responsibility, or reconciliation, Deverell always returns to themes of relationship, belonging, responsibility, and care. The chapter on Christ as Country is particularly significant for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. Here he advances one of the most original contributions of contemporary Aboriginal theology by exploring how Christ might be understood through Indigenous understandings of place, kinship, and relationality. Christ is

not considered as an abstract doctrinal concept, but as one who gathers, nourishes, sustains, and reconciles relationships in ways analogous to Country itself. The result is neither a rejection of Christian traditions nor a simple contextualisation of European theology. Instead, it is a genuinely Aboriginal theological reflection that emerges from the encounter between Indigenous knowledge traditions and Christian faith.

The significance of *Contemplating Country* becomes even clearer when situated within the wider development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander theology in Australia. Deverell's work stands alongside that of scholars such as Aunty Anne Pattel-Gray, Chris Budden, Uncle Graham Paulson, Aunty Denise Champion, Uncle Ray Minniecon, and Aunty Lee Miena Skye, all of whom have sought to articulate Christian faith from Indigenous perspectives and there are others such as myself who are also on the journey of decolonising faith and belief.

Aunty Anne Pattel-Gray has long argued that Aboriginal theology must start with Aboriginal voices, experiences, and ways of knowing. Her work revealed the ways Australian colonial assumptions have shaped theological education and church life while insisting that Indigenous peoples are not simply recipients of theology but makers of theology. Deverell's work builds upon this foundation. Like Pattel-Gray, he challenges the assumption that Western theology is culturally neutral. Yet he also moves further than this by demonstrating what theology looks like when Country itself becomes an active conversation partner. Similarly, Chris Budden's *Following Jesus in Invaded Space* challenged Australian Christians to acknowledge that discipleship occurs on land marked by invasion, dispossession, and ongoing colonial relationships. Budden argued that Christian faith of non-Indigenous peoples in Australia can no longer avoid challenging these realities. Deverell extends this conversation by asking what might be possible when churches move beyond acknowledgement towards genuine learning from Aboriginal relationships with Country, community, and creation.

A particularly important conversation partner for this volume is Mark G. Brett's *Indigenous Rights and the Legacies of the Bible: From Moses to Mabo*. Brett establishes that the Bible has never had a singular legacy in colonial contexts. It has been used to justify dispossession and cultural destruction, yet it has also provided resources for Indigenous resistance, survival, and the articulation of rights. Rather than rejecting scripture, Brett invites readers to engage critically with its complex and contested inheritances.

A similar tension lies at the heart of Deverell's project. He is acutely aware of the role churches have played in the colonisation of Aboriginal peoples. Throughout the book he names the violence, dispossession, and theological assumptions that come with the colonial project. Yet, like Brett, he refuses to conclude that Christianity is thus irredeemably colonial. Instead, he asks what happens when scripture is read from Country, through Indigenous histories, relationships, and experiences. In doing so, he demonstrates that the question is not whether Indigenous peoples can encounter the Bible, but how the Bible itself might be heard differently when encountered through Indigenous ways of knowing and being.

Read together, Brett and Deverell point towards an emerging Australian theological conversation in which Indigenous peoples are no longer positioned as subjects of theological reflection but as theologians, interpreters, and custodians of wisdom. Both insist that Indigenous knowledge traditions have much to contribute to contemporary Christian thought and that the future of theology in Australia depends upon making space for, and taking these traditions seriously.

I believe that this book is particularly important for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers. Deverell gifts to us a powerful affirmation that Indigenous cultures, histories, and spiritual traditions are not obstacles to Christian faith but sources of theological insight. For many Aboriginal Christians who continue to navigate the legacies of missionisation, assimilation, and ecclesial paternalism, this affirmation remains deeply significant. The book shows that Aboriginal identity and Christian discipleship need not exist in tension. Rather, Indigenous ways of understanding Country, kinship, and responsibility can deepen and enrich Christian faith.

At the same time, the book speaks powerfully to non-Indigenous readers. For descendants of long-term settlers, *Contemplating Country* offers both a challenge and an invitation. It asks them to confront the realities of colonisation and the involvement of churches in that history. Yet it also offers a pathway towards more honest and respectful relationships that are grounded in listening, humility, and shared responsibility. For more recent migrants, many of whom bring their own histories of colonisation, displacement, or marginalisation, this book provides an important introduction to the First Peoples of the lands on which they now live and worship. It encourages newcomers to understand belonging not as ownership but as relationship.

One of the book's greatest strengths is that it refuses simplistic oppositions between Indigenous and Western traditions. While some readers may approach the volume expecting a clear rejection of Christianity or Western theology, they will find something much more nuanced. Deverell does not shy away from critiques of the colonial forms of Christianity and the assumptions that have accompanied them. Yet his work is also infused by a deep love for scripture and the church. He writes not as someone seeking to abandon Christian faith but as someone yearning and seeking to reimagine it more faithfully within the context of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Australia.

For this reason, *Contemplating Country* should be read not only as a challenge to Western theology but also as a gift to it. Aboriginal theology offers insights that Western traditions have often neglected: attentiveness to place, relational accountability, ecological responsibility, kinship, reciprocity, and the recognition that knowledge is formed within community rather than possessed by isolated individuals. These are not exclusively Aboriginal concerns, but Aboriginal traditions often hold them with a depth and understanding that Western theological traditions have struggled to sustain.

For those involved in theological education, the implications are significant. Deverell's work reminds us that decolonisation is not simply about adding Aboriginal content to existing curricula or structures. It demands deeper questions about what forms knowledge, whose knowledge is recognised, and what forms of wisdom theological education gets to cultivate. His work challenges institutions to move beyond inclusion towards transformation.

Ultimately, *Contemplating Country* is a book about belonging. It asks whether Christianity in Australia will continue to imagine itself as a visitor who refuses to learn the language of the land on which it stands, or whether it might finally learn to listen. Deverell does not suggest any easy answers. Instead, he models the difficult and ongoing work of bringing Country, scripture, church, and community into conversation. He is not asking the reader to do anything that he isn't doing himself.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers, this book offers affirmation, challenge, and theological possibility. For settlers, it offers an invitation to truth-telling and deeper listening. For migrants, it provides a pathway towards understanding and respectful belonging. For the churches, it offers both prophetic critique and profound hope.

More than anything, *Contemplating Country* reminds us that theology in Australia cannot be separated from Country. Deverell's continuing work lies in helping the church imagine what becomes possible when it finally begins there.

I read this book not simply as a reviewer but as a fellow Aboriginal theologian. As a trawlwoolway woman who has spent many years working in theological education, I recognise in Deverell's writing many of the tensions, hopes, and questions that have shaped our community, and my own journey. His commitment to bringing Country, scripture, and church into conversation resonates deeply with my own conviction that theology in Australia must begin by listening to the lands and peoples upon which our churches stand. I am particularly grateful for the way Deverell refuses both the rejection of Christianity and the uncritical acceptance of its colonial forms. Instead, he models the difficult work of holding Aboriginal identity, Christian faith, justice, and belonging together – and at times it is brutally difficult. At a time when many institutions are speaking about reconciliation and decolonisation, *Contemplating Country* offers something more substantial: an example of what Aboriginal theology actually looks like when it is allowed to speak in its own voice. For that reason, this book is not only an important contribution to Australian theology; it is also a source of encouragement for those of us seeking to help shape a more honest, relational, and Country-centred future for the church.

Milaythina Niyakara: country as a source for theological imagination

Garry Worete Deverell

I thank the editors of this edition of *Uniting Church Studies* for affording me the opportunity to contribute, in the company of esteemed colleagues, to this review of my 2023 volume, *Contemplating Country*. I am grateful to Naomi Wolfe for recognising that *Contemplating Country* is primarily concerned with

what becomes possible when theology begins from Country rather than from a distant idea of Europe; when Aboriginal ways of knowing, being, and doing are considered not as objects of theological reflection but as sources of theological wisdom in their own right.

For that is indeed what I was trying to do, and in two senses. I first wanted to take seriously the irrefutable fact that Australian theological thinking continues to be dominated by an imagination that comes from post-reformation europe. In contrast to pre-reformation theological tradition – which routinely saw the non-human world as a sacred text with at least as much authority as Bible and church tradition – european theology of the colonial era did away with that sensibility. From Calvin onwards, and with increasing

intensity, the voice of the Spirit was confined to that found in bible and church council. But her voice in the vast cosmic biosphere beyond these categories was either ignored or demonized. It is the contention of my theological project that this was a misstep that goes far beyond abstract methodological consequence. It is a misstep that has produced catastrophic real-world consequences, not least for Australia. For we now find ourselves, native and settler alike, at the brink of environmental apocalypse. And Aboriginal peoples continue to bear the sins of settler colonists in the form of disproportionate rates of suicide, imprisonment, unwellness, poverty, unemployment, and so on. All because Christian Australia refused to hear the voice and call of the Spirit in the non-human world.

More positively I wanted to propose that any Australian reclamation of the spiritual voice of the non-human world would need to listen to Aboriginal wisdom traditions. For Aboriginal wisdom traditions enjoy spiritual seniority in this place. These traditions have been developed through a long and persistently attentive engagement with the ways in which life/spirit unfolds and reinscribes itself in the uniqueness of this country's ecosystems. My specific contribution, in the book we are reviewing, is to call Christian theology to listen to the Spirit who speaks within the narratives of life, death, and resurrection not only of bible and church, but also of this *place*. In trawloolway terms, this is an encouragement towards *niyakara milaythina*, a theological imagination with the contemplation of place, of country, at its centre. The book seeks to positively describe some of what country seeks to teach, and to create analogies from this teaching into the more dominant forms of settler theology. For I am certainly not wanting to throw away everything, willy nilly, that settlers bring with them. Rather, I am seeking to sort the yams from the weeds and find sources of theological sustenance which are able to support the moral and spiritual wellness of country and people, native and settler, both.

One should never conclude, of course, that I am content to elaborate an 'Aboriginal' theology as a mere adjunct to settler theology. I am grateful to Bec Lindsay for noticing that my project is more radical than that, calling for a root-and-branch refiguring of Christian theology as a whole, a refiguring that invites settler theology to renounce its conscious and unconscious claims to epistemic supremacy in this place. I do, indeed, want to destabilise the hierarchies of both knowledge and institutional power that settler theologians continue to practice and take for granted. Bec responds to this desire with her own, quite moving, prayer or intention:

I'd like to hope that . . . settler Christians might listen with humility and curiosity, renouncing supremacy and acknowledging wisdom embodied in place over thousands of years.

For it remains the case, as Bec acknowledges in her essay, that there is no place in the theological schools and institutions of this country for the making and teaching of Christian theologies generated by Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people. At best, we get to be guest lecturers to share titbits of knowledge that are taken to be permanently adjacent to 'real', meaning settler, theology and therefore an optional extra. At worst, our knowledges are appropriated by settler theologians and taught within their own, settler, frameworks. Naomi understands me very well when she says,

Deverell's work reminds us that decolonisation is not simply about adding Aboriginal content to existing curricula or structures. It demands deeper questions about what forms knowledge,

whose knowledge is recognised, and what forms of wisdom theological education gets to cultivate. His work challenges institutions to move beyond inclusion towards transformation.

Yes indeed. Not adding, transforming. Root and branch.

Which leads me, finally, to Adam Couchman's fascinating meditation on trees, soil and roots. I read his contribution not so much as a critique, but as a poetic response seeking to mirror the dominance of story and metaphor in my theological writing. Here he works his way through the root, tree and soil metaphor that I employ, with apologies to St Paul, in chapter 1 of *Contemplating Country*. Here Adam does not seek to hide his questions, his lack of knowing, from us. He shares with the reader something of the pilgrimage he is on as he wonders out loud. I love this. Settler theology which is comfortable with its vulnerability in the face of mystery, and with its provisionality in the face of epistemic polyvalence, is precisely the kind of theology which might be capable of sitting with us at the campfire, on country, to learn some new songs. My rejoinder to Adam, offered in all humility, is that the Spirit may not 'descend' from above when invoked by his priestly trees: not *only* from above, that is. The Spirit may also 'ascend' from the earth below, from landscape, from the mycelium networks of terranean interconnection that make us, for all our difference, one.

Adam Couchman is Academic Dean at St Francis College and a lecturer, teaching theology and liturgy. His PhD in 2024 on Jesus as a worshipper in the light of the creeds was recently published in under the title *Liturgia Dei: Worshiping the Worshipping God*. Beyond liturgical theology, his research interests have also included Salvation Army sacramentality, Gregory of Nyssa, and Christian holiness. He previously served for seventeen years as an Officer in The Salvation Army.

Naomi Wolfe is a historian and theologian whose teaching and research focus on Indigenous and ancient histories. She is Dean of Learning and Teaching at the University of Divinity and an academic at Australian Catholic University for nearly three decades. A trawloolway Aboriginal woman of Jewish German and Irish heritage, Naomi lives and works on Wurundjeri Country in Melbourne. Her research explores decolonising curriculum, Indigenous pedagogies and theology, cross-cultural formation, Second Temple history, and collaborative learning.

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Garry Worete Deverell is a trawloolway man from northern trawwerner/Tasmania and an Anglican priest. He serves on the boards of both Six Rivers Aboriginal Corporation and the National Indigenous Ecumenical Council. He loves to walk on country, communing with his ancestors and learning from feathered, scaled and furred cousins.



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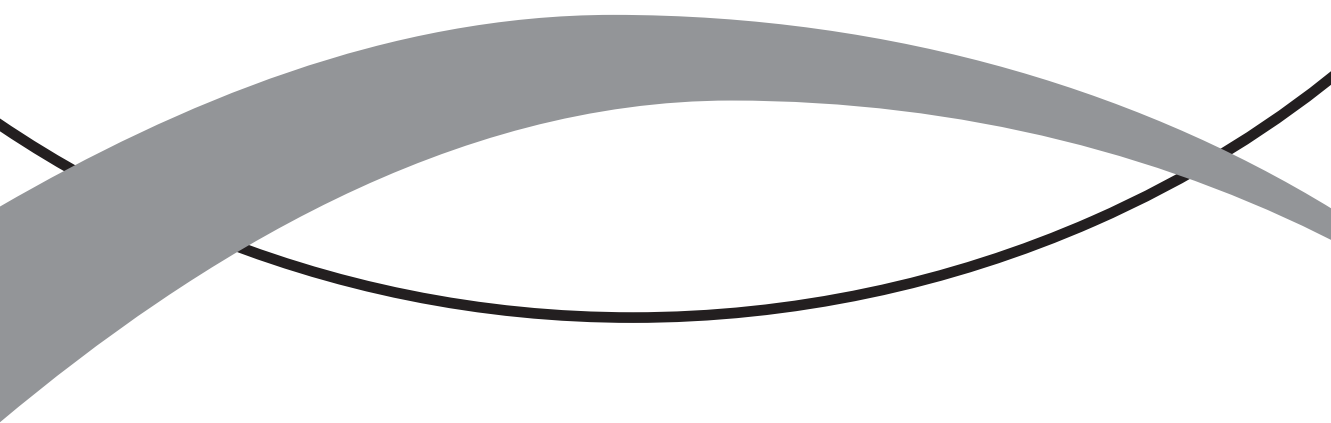
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