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**Desiring Missions:
The Exploratory Urge and its Ideological Background Radiation**



Figure 1. The author's shadow on the top of Uluru, Central Australian Desert.

In this essay I consider some possible conflicts between the desiring imagination and the persuasive power of reason, at the threshold of new territories or domains.¹ The imagination is stirred by the promise of new experience and knowledge, extended agency or increased wealth, desires often aroused by the unknown or unfamiliar. History suggests that we are also excited by contingencies to be negotiated, battled and subdued, from hostile nature to competing human interests. Many incursions into so-called new worlds, originally spurred by visionary desire, have evolved into programs of acquisition and domination, deploying unforeseen combinations of intellectual, economic and military power.

The legacy of such actions is named, generically and metaphorically, in my title. "Background radiation" is a term borrowed from astrophysics, where it refers to the cosmic background radiation subsiding throughout the universe after the Big Bang.² Here I adapt it to describe the cultural fall-out from humanity's grand projects. This, I suggest, lingers, permeating the collective imagination. It is "ideological" in that our grand projects tend to be reframed in the light of their consequences, revealing previously suppressed ideological biases. These biases are inferred, too, in the interest aroused from ideologically-explicit "counter" positions: as with post-colonialism or environmentalism in the case of certain examples in this essay. Finally, responding to the legacy of humanity's grand projects by showing caution about certain kinds of progressiveness (say, scientific, or nationalistic) will likely be interpreted as an ideological stance (anti-scientific, or unpatriotic) especially by those for whom such progressiveness is inevitable or beyond question.

The ideological background radiation poses difficulties for the proposer of any grand project today, now that the power of technologically-enhanced human agency is becoming better understood; meaning that promises of reward are irresistibly followed by questions about undesirable consequences. Perhaps this is as it should be. If we possess the instrumental power to irrevocably alter the physical and cultural conditions on which everyone depends, then it is more vital than ever that the desiring imagination is tempered with judgement.

My focus in this essay is on the trope of the real, but larger-than-life domain which seems open to any reading projected onto it, and any kind of exploitation that can be afforded. (Here, "larger-than-life" means "larger than the life of whoever is projecting their desires"). The imagination alone might be satisfied with visualizations, virtual realities, or art, but the existence of actual, vast, empty spaces evokes the possibility of experiencing the "other" corporeally, possessing it materially. I propose that certain aspects of disposition which come into play in threshold situations lend similar, conflictual characteristics to many different human actions, whatever the explicitly stated goal of crossing a particular threshold. I am particularly interested in some often elided commonalities between scientific knowledge seeking, territorial expansion, and patriotic expression.

Even as we project imagined destinies, we are unable to escape fundamental limitations, such as the need for physical health and shelter. We are reluctant to let go of perceived advantages such as mobility or power of dominion (which means we won't go anywhere without vehicles, tools and weapons). More subtly, we are emboldened by assurances grounded in the past. We hold to customs, beliefs and ideologies, habits of mind and forms of expression, whether or not they are appropriate to new circumstances. I propose that both colonialism and early space exploration show that, when we project into a potentially exciting and dangerous new realm, we also, often, forget aspects of our own dispositions. This forgetting seems to be selective, as though invoked to block out the effects of the ideological background radiation, so that excited, desiring minds can have free rein.

In my exploration of these ideas I first reflect on my own walks in the Australian desert, which could have been an imaginative escape were I not sensitized to my own

"share" of the ideological background radiation, left in the wake of British colonialism. I discuss some examples from literature: Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas*, and H. G. Wells's *The First Men in the Moon*. Via fictional protagonists, each of these authors shows the imagination in its encounter with the new or other, and in obvious conflict with some deeper wisdom, implied or made explicit. I'm interested in how, strung out across history, these works trace the cultural incorporation of the fall-out from European imperialism and colonialism. I compare these literary, artistic incorporations with two of the founding doctrines of colonialism: *terra nullius*, and manifest destiny.

My final example is an early exposition of the *Apollo 11* Moon landing, in which NASA's micro-managed public relations effort around the *Apollo* programme comes together with the conflicted ethos of *National Geographic* magazine. The magazine's coverage of this particular grand project suggests that something like an ideological background radiation does indeed exist, for with it we witness various interested parties negotiating a field of many possible readings, whilst also wanting to stake their claim in humanity's first truly cosmic gesture.

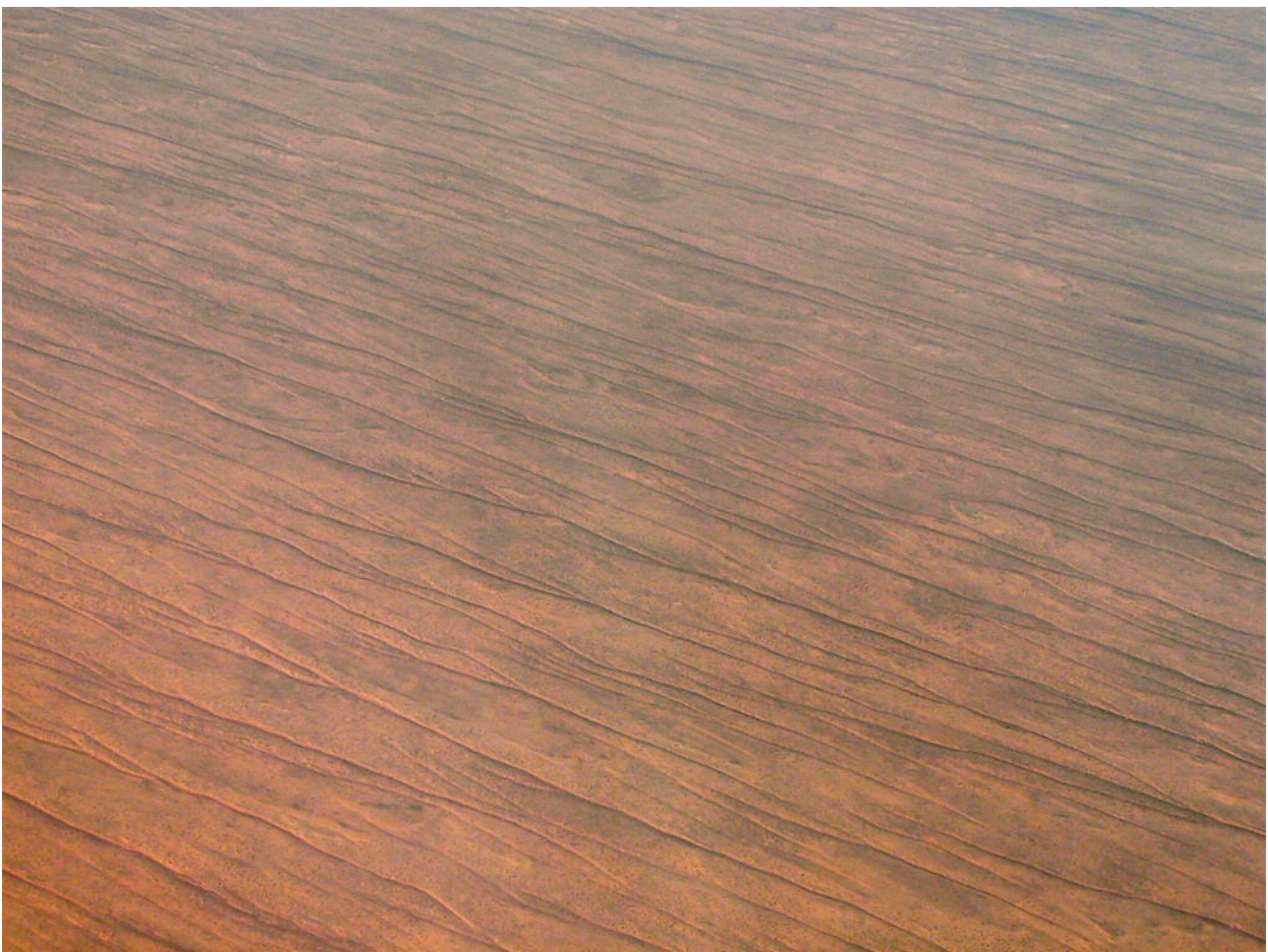


Figure 2. Aerial photograph of the Central Australian Desert.