

A

Absenceⁱ

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Absence is “the state of not being somewhere”; “a lack of existence.”¹ More-than-human absences - dislocation, extinction, non-recognition and so on – are rooted in processual corporality.² More than a theoretical concept or the antonym of presence, absence is a corporeal, emotional phenomenon, articulated in concrete political and cultural registers³. “Like the play of shadows,”⁴ absences send ripples of new subjectivities through what remains present. “Presence and absence obtrude themselves first and perhaps most palpably in the phenomenon of naming.”⁵ My concern is the Western Australian (WA) government’s re-naming of the dingo (*Canis dingo*) as a wild dog (*Canis familiaris*). Despite their iconic native status, erasure of *Canis dingo* renders it a ghost species: absent, non-existent and disposable.

Dingoes epitomise a “split between our idealised homeplace and the places delineated by our ecological footprint.”⁶ The oldest known Australian dingo fossil dates from c3450 years ago, though dingoes may have been introduced from Asia earlier. The name “dingo” is an Indigenous Dharug term, from the Sydney area. Dingoes are spirit guides for many Indigenous Australians; part of the Dreaming or totemic way of life in-country, signified in tracks, sites, stories, songs and ceremonies.⁷ As messengers communicating with the spirit- or upper-world, they teach about family and group relations, change and adaptation, but also about “shadow aspects” of mortality.⁸ Embedded within a multispecies kinship system, dingo deaths are located in Indigenous relationships of mutuality.

Since dingoes interbreed with domestic dogs, there is much debate over whether dingoes are a separate species (*Canis dingo*) or simply a wild dog (*Canis familiaris*).⁹ An apex predator, dingoes predate small mammals in addition to domestic animals and livestock.

Unsurprisingly, the pastoral industry has lobbied for strong management of dingoes, as in the *National Wild Dog Action Plan*,¹⁰ which defines dingoes as wild dogs to be baited, shot and so on. Many graziers believe they have a mandate to kill dingoes/wild dogs: to eradicate a damaging pest.¹¹

¹ Cambridge Dictionary, “Absence.”

² Frers, “The Matter of Absence.”

³ Bille, Hastrup, and Sørensen, “Introduction,” 13.

⁴ McCorristine, and Adams, “Ghost Species,” 6.

⁵ Casey, “Presence and Absence,” 560.

⁶ Plumwood, “Shadow Places,” 139.

⁷ Rose, *Dingo Makes Us Human; Wild Dog Dreaming*.

⁸ Wildspeak, “Dingo.”

⁹ Smith et al., “Taxonomic Status”; Jackson et al., “The Wayward Dog.”

¹⁰ WoolProducers, *Action Plan*.

¹¹ Barrass, “The Grandmother with a Gun.”

That absence has presence has long been discussed by scholars including Heidegger, who regards absence of identity as a fall into inauthenticity, and Sokolowski, who draws attention to the power of naming in the interplay of absence and presence.¹² Derrida's work discusses both absence and non-human animals.¹³ For Derrida, meaning is not in a thing, but in what it is not. Hence, "to give anything an identity, to say what it is, is necessarily to say what it is not. ...[To] say that a quality is present depends upon implying what is absent."¹⁴ In making present wild dogs, the WA government makes absent or erases dingoes. The name is "always already under erasure"¹⁵: ~~dingo~~. Erase the name; erase the species. Yet, full and final erasure lies beyond human control: a trace always remains.¹⁶ Dingoes disappear behind the curtains of language. Death lurks in the shadows.

The absence of dingoes is mediated in WA by acts of classification. "Feral domestic dogs, dingoes and dingo hybrids" are classed as wild dogs¹⁷ whose status is specified as pests under S22 of the *Biosecurity and Agriculture Management Act 2007*. Dingoes were classed as "unprotected native fauna" in 1984 under the *Wildlife Conservation Act 1950*. In 2018 the WA Environment Minister proposed an exemption under S9(2) of the 2016 *Biodiversity Conservation Act*, to declare dingoes "not to be fauna for the purposes of the Act,"¹⁸ where fauna is an animal either belonging to a "native species" (present in Australia before 1400CE) or determined by the Minister as fauna. Given undisputable evidence of dingoes in Australia some 4000 years ago, the Minister then declared dingoes as native wildlife. They were, however, reclassified as wild dogs, a national "Category 5, Extreme" species, and declared exempt, under S271 of the Act, from activities (including taking) designed to protect fauna. The identity politics of transforming *Canis dingo* into *Canis familiaris* effectively erases dingoes as a species, even though some 59% of wild dogs in WA have tested as genetically pure dingoes.¹⁹ Moreover, the *Exemptions Order*²⁰ permits the killing of dingoes using snares, traps, crossbows, explosives and toxic substances. There is some irony in the IUCN Red Listing (2008-2018) of dingoes as "vulnerable."²¹

Re-naming *Canis dingo* as *Canis familiaris* demonstrates inherent relationships between identity, presence and absence. But language alone does not make possible what is named.²² Absence is performed by methods of "taking" which render it a virtual dimension of presence, premised on "imagining a country without dingoes and setting out to accomplish it."²³ The argument for erasing dingoes is primarily economic: loss of livestock "assets."²⁴ However, Action Plans tend to ignore or minimise the ecosystemic role of dingoes. Their absence as apex predators permits irruption of foxes, feral cats, rabbits and kangaroos, in turn contributing to endangerment of small mammals and overgrazing respectively. Absences have empirical consequences.

¹² Heidegger, *Being and Time*; Sokolowski, *Presence and Absence*.

¹³ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*; *The Animal*; *The Beast and the Sovereign*.

¹⁴ Burr, *Introduction to Social Constructionism*, 107.

¹⁵ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, lxxxiii.

¹⁶ Derrida, *The Animal*, 136.

¹⁷ WA Wild Dog, *Action Plan*, 10.

¹⁸ DPAW, *Dingoes*.

¹⁹ DPIRD, *Wild Dogs*.

²⁰ WA Parliament, *Exemptions Order*.

²¹ IUCN, *Red List*.

²² Casey, "Presence and Absence," 575.

²³ Rose, *Wild Dog Dreaming*, 86.

²⁴ WA Wild Dog, *Action Plan*, 2.

“Deciding what life forms count ... involves a politics of representation, a means of making certain bodies present and others absent.”²⁵ Dingoes in WA have been dumped in a legal black hole which renders them absent: inexistent. If a body does not exist, it does not possess rights and, as the 2018 Exemption Order demonstrates in WA, it can be violently erased with impunity. Yet absence does not inevitably mean not present. Ecosystems from which dingoes have been erased are haunted by agency of their absence. Dingoes illustrate not only the lived experience of absence, but also the absence of presence as co-existent with the presence of absence.

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²⁵ McCorristine and Adams, “Ghost Species,” 7.

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ⁱ Hillier, Jean. “Absence.” *An A to Z of Shadow Places Concepts* (2020).

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