

Terra Nullius was the colonial legal doctrine that allowed the taking over of land that was considered empty (null, unused, unoccupied) and therefore better deserving of the stewardship of a productive power. It is an astonishingly powerful concept: even as it raises indignation in all right-minded people today, we are left inhabiting a world which is in large tracts the legacy of this movement of the imagination, this injunction to be fruitful and make the land multiply. Australia and Israel are obvious contemporary examples, but so are the depictions of once deserted landscapes built over with green, thriving communities that are so prevalent in the brochures of Pakistani developers. In each of these cases, what is at issue is not simply the claim to occupy, as in the right to possess what was once empty, but the very definition of emptiness, of nullity, of scale.

David Alesworth's embroidered colonial maps, on carpets that were themselves once maps of some imaginary garden or heavenly geometry, are palimpsests that lead us to the both the contingency of these markings and to their violence: artistic, creative, brutalising and ephemeral. Processes of decay mark the lives of their fraying, fibrous surfaces. This is no romance of colonial Karachi or Lahore, a sepia-tinted wistful gaze towards the civilised streets of a trading city built by the British. The puckered thread of the map refuses to blend into the weave of the carpet, it floats above it, the surface below resisting the uncomfortable superimposition. No comforting beauty emerges: instead we see a destructive overwriting that mirrors the relation of map to territory, of colonial geography to colonised land, of fantasy to fantasised.

This is also vastly different from the related colonial doctrine of the civilising mission, as that endeavour sought to transform an existing and flawed humanity, to raise it the threshold of life. It assumed the existence of life, albeit in a flawed form. For *Terra Nullius* to operate, the colonial eye had to everywhere watch out for desert, for impenetrable jungle, for unmarked and unmapped territory. Cartography produced not only this surveying gaze, but marked out its negative, its absences as spaces to be filled, river sources to be discovered, land to be turned over and traversed. But this in turn produced a way of imagining one's presence in the world, along with a picture of the world as globe. In Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), the character Marlow says:

"At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth, and when I saw one that looked particularly inviting on a map (but they all look like that) I would put my finger on it and say, When I grow up I will go there."

The invitation to adventure is not from the charted terrain, but from the blank spaces. They call to us, paradoxically because they are empty, while demanding of us that we map them. Is this not the same imagination which impels science fiction, where it speculatively encounters the unknown as an extension of human imagination and territory? Isiah Lavender III, in *Race in American Science Fiction* (2011), argues that this genre is *essentially* an expression of the anxiety of race as it came to the forefront of modern consciousness. Without reducing

race to coloniality, we can see the line running through a certain enterprise of governance that is justified and given internal coherence by a prospect of empty land, uncivilized beliefs, and racial inferiority.

An early British map of Karachi, then, on one of David Alesworth's carpets is not simply a marking out, but at the same time and more importantly an erasure. It is a drawing of boundaries and topographies that violate and supplant the land they depict. In one corner of a map we see the words "ruins of the old English factory". This factory was set up in the late 18th century along with others along the region to produce textiles and goods for export to Britain: it was closed very soon thereafter, in response to the protests of local people. What were these protests? What manner of life can we imagine that confronted with the prospect of work, investment and industry, rejected it outright?

There are relations to the land that cannot be given in cartographic form, cannot be set out in land deeds. First people in Australia have rights to land which do not regard the value of its mineral deposits, of its legal status. The land, or features of the landscape, have relations of kinship, ancestry, animism (to use a vocabulary of insufficient terms from anthropology).