

Introduction

Unsettling ‘blood’s country’¹

Countrylink

On the train coming up from Sydney the sunset is alchemic – eucalypt leaves turn from green to gold. The train tracks are like veins, the train like pulsing blood. The rhythmic bump of train-on-track makes the horizon dance.

*South of my days’ circle, part of my blood’s country,
rises that tableland, high delicate outline
of bony slopes wincing under the winter,
low trees, blue-leaved and olive, outcropping granite –
clean, lean, hungry country.*

—Judith Wright, excerpt from
‘South of My Days’ (1953, p.30)

Running

She knows where the trees are. Without looking her body feels where to turn. She won’t trip or stumble because her legs remember the steep inclines and the sharp falls of the earth, the hard patches of dirt, the soft mud, the slight angular turns in the soil. Her face and throat remember the texture of the air, the smell, the sounds. When feet thump against earth this familiar, it’s not running, it’s rejoining.

The ‘Dale

I keep coming back. Each time I go on a research trip I catch the train from Newtown Station to Sydney’s Central Station, and then the Countrylink train for another eight-and-a-half-hour ride to Armidale. Dad picks me up at dinnertime, and I start again where I began, on that 35-acre block of land just outside of Armidale where I spent the first eighteen years of my life.

I know the shape of the little place where I grew up, which seems more significant somehow than knowing individual trees or rocks. I know the contours of the land – where gravity feels stronger, where feet become light or heavy. I know the smell of different seasons, and the sounds of birdsong in the wind float through me.

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I left home at eighteen, driven in part by a compulsion to escape that familiarity. I always loved the Armidale region, but there was nothing to keep me there. The university didn't have the course I wanted, my closest friends were moving to the cities and there was a fear among many of my peers that if you stayed too long in 'the Dale' you'd never leave. Such was the pull of this small city, just big enough to provide some job and study opportunities, but still stifling in that hometown way. Perhaps it is this combination of magnetism and claustrophobia that keeps me tied to the logic of return – that rubber-band effect which snaps me back and forward. I keep going over old ground, and those tracts of pastoral land marking out the distance between Sydney and Armidale now seem as familiar as the places themselves.

The idea of studying the region where I grew up seemed from the start to be an emotionally confronting and risky task, but I couldn't imagine writing with the same conviction about anything else. My closeness to the topic was unsettling. Was I too near to think clearly about the issues? Were there things in this place of my past which I might not want to discover?

I imagined the New England tableland region as a kind of parent in whose own life before and beyond me I had, up until now, been utterly uninterested. How, as an adult, do you approach someone you have already known for years as a child? How do you talk to them as well as listen? How do you respond to the stories of someone who is such an intimate part of your own stories?

My study of the New England tablelands has forced me to face troubling questions about my position in a place I claim to love. The following chapters explore experiences of contact between human and nonhuman life in New England places. I realised as I was writing this book that this contact involves, almost exclusively, introduced species. My own New England life-world has been distinctly non-Aboriginal. Over the following pages I challenge many divides between native and non-native life because of their lack of responsiveness to dynamic environments, and their overly simplistic approach to classifying life. But the idea that my New England experience has been almost entirely non-native raises a serious question about the colonising impact of the story I am writing. As Margaret Somerville asks: 'Does my story write out another story? Does it make room for multiple stories? Can your story be written here? Is it a postcolonial space?'²

This book aims toward dialogue rather than monologue,³ and I hope that it makes space for other tales situated in this rich region. If there is a question about the legitimacy of such a non-Aboriginal engagement within an Australian place, I respond that I cannot change the nature of my experience. The New England world I have written is the world in which I grew up. I cannot deny that my earliest experiences of love for animals were felt toward introduced species, nor that my strongest memories of being in a forest are not of eucalypts, but conifers. At the same time, love is not a zero-sum game. To acknowledge the world I came to love through being part of it is the basis from which I can acknowledge the love others bear toward their worlds of emplaced and encultured experience. In the era of the Anthropocene, an era of global environmental distress, I hope that

my journey into a beloved homeplace helps to sing up others' homeplaces and communicates the need to protect beloved spaces of habitation, for human and nonhuman, across the world.

Writing my story into place

Many philosophers have written on the importance of studying what you are closest to.⁴ In a move against the illusion of objectivity sustained by emotional distance, proximity is now a new kind of methodology: write about what you know, research what you have stakes in, be honest about your connections. This book is written in the spirit of this kind of faithfulness, where being true to place comes first.

Written with the aim of place fidelity, my goal has been to gain more knowledge through greater immersion in my own childhood life-world, to become more attuned to my home-place and its inhabitants. Philosopher Thomas Nagel writes of the way subjective engagement, rather than distorting reality, can actually bring one closer to the reality of experience as it is lived:

If the subjective character of experience is fully comprehensible only from one point of view, then any shift to greater objectivity – that is, less attachment to a specific viewpoint – does not take us nearer to the real nature of the phenomenon: it takes us farther away from it.⁵

Adherence to proximity as a kind of methodology is not just about writing the familiar. There is also an imperative of openness. Environmental philosopher Deborah Bird Rose defines openness as a vulnerability to transformative encounter:

To be open is to hold one's self available to others: one takes risks and becomes vulnerable. But this is also a fertile stance: one's own ground can become destabilised. In open dialogue one holds one's self available to be surprised, to be challenged, and to be changed.⁶

This book is written on home ground, where my places of memory and warm familiarity are also places of colonial violence and dispossession. In the following pages I engage with this ambivalence on a personal level – with the deeply uncomfortable knowledge that my own 'blood country' has been stained with the blood of Aboriginal people. The places I carry with me through my life – those places which have become a part of me – are places that already belong to others, and which are now scarred by the violence of colonisation. Learning about this emplaced trauma has turned my home into 'something less familiar and less settled'.⁷

Travelling along bitumen that has been poured over Indigenous tracks,⁸ gazing at monuments which celebrate the violent foundations of a nation as the beginning of progress and civilisation, I am forced to acknowledge that this settler performance of a nation, with all its silences and delusions, both is and is not me.⁹

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Like Albert Memmi's coloniser who refuses to accept the unjust economic, political and moral conditions of colonialism, my life is still bound and determined by structural colonial relationships which advantage me (the coloniser) by disadvantaging Australia's Aboriginal peoples (the colonised). The is-/is-not-me conditions of settler identity arise from this structural predicament, because '(i)t is not easy to escape mentally from a concrete situation, to refuse its ideology while continuing to live with its actual relationships'.¹⁰

While Australia is often referred to as a postcolonial country, this does not mean that it is decolonised. Ann Curthoys makes the point that while 'the term "postcolonial" may refer to a critique of colonial forms of power and discourse', this is not the case in a settler society like Australia where there is no 'clear moment of decolonisation'.¹¹ This book is written with the goal of seeking out alternatives to continued violence and silence. It is aimed toward decolonisation, undertaken through 'the unravelling of assumed certainties and the re-imagining and re-negotiating of common futures'.¹² Here I take up the task of decolonising a home-place. Engaging with decolonising work in this personal mode promotes dual responsibilities for a beloved place: to acknowledge the violence of the past and to commit to a nonviolent future.

Decolonising a home-place

The process of decolonising a home-place involves 'seeing the familiar as strange',¹³ and rethinking established settler identities and behaviours. Part of this process is the development of a 'sentient education' – an attunement to place so that the landscape can speak its own stories.¹⁴ Instead of the settler monologue which silences voices of country, this book aims to create a space for dialogue, and to promote learning to listen to new sounds and songs. This is part of a more-than-human decolonisation.

Because the legacy of colonisation in Australia 'includes both genocide and ecocide'¹⁵ decolonisation must also involve healing steps to recuperate damaged Australian environments. Val Plumwood has observed that the concept of colonisation can be used to describe human relationships with nonhuman life at a general level, 'that the relationship between humans, or certain groups of them, and the more-than-human world might be aptly characterised as one of colonisation'.¹⁶ The decolonising aim of this work therefore extends to the more-than-human world, and aims to 'resituate humans in ecological terms and nonhumans in ethical terms'.¹⁷

In this book I have aimed toward an expanded ecological engagement with place through the beings that have been closest to me. Revisiting my childhood landscapes, I have often found myself deep in the vestiges of the remembered past. I sometimes wonder if I am writing about a place that no longer exists, an ethnography of what once was. But the memories are sustained in place, and seem to dance with the cadence of time: a collection of experience that flows along gullies, grows into trees, seeps into earth and rock. Margaret Somerville explains the feeling of immersion in a landscape rich with personal memory as

being like a dot painting, where each place of memory is a dot which 'can be entered at will to become the whole world'.¹⁸ The taste of New England lingers on my tongue through my own dots of time and place:

Wind at night blowing through the trees.
The smell of the air before rain.
Lightning.
Quiet.
Campfires.
Kookaburras laughing.
The light from the house shining in the middle of dark bush.
The green soccer fields in Armidale.
Snow.
Lying in the grass after too many glasses of red looking at the stars.
Distant blue hills.
Being alone.
Knowing the way.
My dog.
My father.
My brother.
My mother.

My memories form the foundation of this research. The intensely personal nature of this study has made it unapologetically subjective. But I hope that throughout the following pages readers find resonances with their own beloved places. Each dot of experience helps to make a life-world meaningful. I hope that my dots make spaces for others, and begin to map out tracks toward futures as yet undreamed.

Place breathes

The motivations for my research have been experiences of intimacy and personal belonging in the New England tablelands, in particular the areas around my childhood home near Armidale. Because of this inspiration, and my theoretical adherence to proximity as a kind of methodology, the book is grounded in the particularities of one specific place in the world. The intimate coordinates of the local are the lens through which I examine entangled ecological ethics in an era when humans are being asked to position themselves as a species with global, geological impacts – impacts that are often felt and made in the intimate spaces of everyday life. The feelings of homeliness and intimacy I question and celebrate in my study comes from a belonging born of connectivity. The borders of a place, like the borders of a body, are always porous. Place, like skin, breathes.

In contrast to separatist and parochial views of place, I hold the view that while places have integrity of composition, they are also necessarily

interdependent. To deny this in a globalised world breeds what Val Plumwood terms a 'false consciousness of place'.¹⁹ While global awareness is certainly important, at the same time, the local should not be negated by, or subsumed into, the universal. The contingencies of particular places, and the difference from one place and another, matter. Furthermore, moving beyond the narrow confines of localism, place-based studies have much to offer.

My own study seeks to use the tangible contingency of knowing one specific part of the world to investigate relationships between human and nonhuman lives in the world at large. I look at how understanding an environment as something composed of connectivities and sustained by intimacy may extend feelings of proximity which can lead to respect and care for the more-than-human world across the globe. This research aligns with the growing inter-disciplinary field of the ecological humanities which cuts across established binaries in Western thought to 'engage with connectivity and commitment' as modes of reasoning in a time of environmental crisis.²⁰

Bringing the Anthropocene home

There is much discussion and debate around the reasons why people feel disconnected from climate change and other extreme and precarious environmental conditions that characterise what it means to live in the era of the Anthropocene. This book is an attempt to bring the Anthropocene *home*, to localise the impacts of a rapidly changing world so that we can come to understand our own imbrication with, and responsibility to, severely compromised ecologies.

The Anthropocene is a troubling term for a disturbing era. As a species, humans have wielded such power, and caused such pervasive changes in the more-than-human world, that we are now classified as a 'geological agent' whose activities 'rival the great forces of Nature'.²¹ While the Anthropocene demands that we position ourselves and our behaviour within the larger context of the behaviour of our species, it does not implicate, or affect, all humans equally. The Anthropocene has been re-dubbed the Capitalocene because it is not the inevitable inheritance of the human biological species at large, but the sociogenic inheritance of an economic system that promotes exponential growth for the benefit of a tiny minority of the world's population.²²

The emergence of the Anthropocene is inextricable from a troubling history of colonial violence and invasion and its devastating impact on the more-than-human world. Imperial expansion involved the violent assault of Indigenous peoples and Indigenous ecologies across the globe, an attack that lay the groundwork for the environmental catastrophes we now face as a species. Discussions of environmental recuperation are therefore fundamentally entangled with issues of social justice, especially as climate change and other threatening prospects of our unstable era will disproportionately affect indigenous communities, and the poor more generally.

As I ponder relationships of responsibility and inheritance in a developed, colonial nation I am plagued by the uncomfortable awareness that I, a

settler-descended Australian, am implicated in this era's great unravelling, where the patterns and webs that sustain multispecies life on the planet are being unmade by recursive traumas. In this book I engage with Gregory Bateson's concept of 'the pattern that connects',²³ to explore what it means to live responsibly in an entangled world that is undergoing radical change. Bateson used the concept of the 'pattern that connects' to emphasise the vital importance of attending to connectivities in a relational world. Each of the journeys I undertake in the following pages follows a 'pattern of connection', to explore human entanglement with more-than-human life. Following Bateson, I chart the way humans and the more-than-human are at stake in each other, caught up in an intimate 'ecology of mind', where even the seemingly most individualistic parts of the self – thoughts, memories, and feelings – are interwoven with the places we inhabit, and so with the environmental future of the planet.

In many senses the emergence of the Anthropocene signals human neglect of entangled patterns of life that sustain places across the globe. Environmental philosopher and eco-feminist Val Plumwood used the term 'hyper-separation' to articulate the narcissism of a species disconnected from the conditions of their world. Plumwood implored people to treat their 'earth others' with respect, and sought to dismantle the dualistic hyper-separations which devalue nonhuman life and conceptually remove humans from their entangled position in a multispecies earth.

The designation of the 'Anthropocene' era is therefore paradoxical and contradictory. Anthropos, the species who has for so long regarded themselves to be outside and above the rest of the living world, have now been granted their own epoch, seeming to almost celebrate the narrow narcissistic loyalties that have led to the emergence of an era of unprecedented anthropogenic destruction. Yet the Anthropocene also forces a radical shift in how humans understand their relationship to the more-than-human world, as it prompts a geological imagination that positions our actions in the vast matrices of deep co-evolutionary time.

This book takes the Anthropocene as a productive paradox to develop new, creative modes of thinking with and for more-than-human life. In a time of great sadness and devastation, I am looking for hope in the creaturely languages I came to know as a child, and the lessons they might offer for how we are to live well among our earth others in a time of extinction and ongoing waves of loss. My search for meaning in this dark time has been born from childhood passion for the life-world I grew up in. Vinciane Despret has written on passion that it is not 'some parasitic supplement' rather 'it means to make an effort to become interested, to immerse oneself in the multitude of problems... It means to care'.²⁴ By tracing the 'pattern that connects'²⁵ through the entanglements that tie me to a place I have come to know and love – my New England home – I hope that I can communicate the vital importance of intimate and emplaced care for more-than-human life in a relational world where delicate patterns of interconnection are woven across the globe: an intimately entangled nest that nurtures the future of our own, and many other, species.

A relational New England

New England is a defined region, with its own character and eccentricities. While my study does engage with the individuality of the New England tableland region to some degree, it is, at heart, relational in its approach. Instead of focusing on essences, I am interested in encounters. Freya Mathews promotes encounter, instead of knowledge, as a way of relating to the world as responsive and alive.²⁶ My methodology of proximity is phenomenological, beginning with the 'life-world' – the everyday lived experience – and seeking understanding from within entangled positions in living, communicative systems.

I am also conscious of the arbitrary designation of the 'New England tablelands', and the mapping of such a region as part of a colonial cartography which appropriates Indigenous lands and uses imported measurements of place to calculate Aboriginal people out of their sovereign country.²⁷ These artificial regional boundaries are a violent assault against Aboriginal Australian Dreaming tracks which criss-cross the nation, transforming Indigenous country²⁸ into a 'checker-board grid of states'.²⁹ Because of this, the process of decolonising a home-place must seek to overcome or re-imagine colonial cartographies of 'a continent abstracted into a nation-state by the lines on a map'.³⁰

Rather than paint the reader a measured and mapped picture of this region – like an aerial photograph that captures each part at equal distance, and gives each form equal attention – this book is a subjective topography of place. I have written of the rich web of relationships that pattern place into the shapes and rhythms we come to know. The characteristics of the area that make it into the writing are those that are most relevant to my purpose of understanding relationships between human and nonhuman life. A pet dog in the outskirts of Armidale is given more attention than New England's historical New State movement, for instance. However, the process of defining something's relevance to the study has not been as easy or as simple as I initially suspected it would be. Particular historical encounters have shaped the region in intricate ways. An important lesson I have learned from this long research journey has been the ways the landscapes of the present are made from events in the past. This teaching has awakened me to the historical contingencies of my New England home.

In July 2010, in a cramped office overcrowded with books on the beautiful University of New England campus, I sat with English professor John Ryan, an expert in New England's local history and folklore, to talk about the place I was writing. We got onto the topic of the non-native deciduous street trees in Armidale, and he informed me that these had all been planted, pretty much, by one man: Alwyn Jones, in the 1950s.³¹

Looking out the window from the passenger seat of my parents' car as we drove home from the campus, I saw the landscape of my youth with new eyes. Every March, this historical moment, where a white man decided to paint an Indigenous landscape in the colours of England, replays. History returns through the bodies of imported botanies that glow orange and red in the autumn. These sorts of coalescences between human and nonhuman lives are central to my

understanding of the patterns of connection we share and make with the more-than-human world.

Fernand Braudel explains that natural history is not a mere backdrop to human action, something which can be introduced at the beginning of a historical account and then forgotten, to be left as a kind of material *terra nullius*,³² 'as if the flowers did not return each spring, as if flocks [of birds] were frozen in their migrations, and as if the ships did not have to sail on an actual sea, which changes as the seasons change'.³³ Alwyn Jones' returning autumn trees are the tangible expression of a collective agency, and New England's evocative tableland geography actively shapes the kinds of relationships which form between human and nonhuman lives.

A natureculture history of the tablelands

The New England tableland is a plateau that stretches from the Moonbi Range in lower New South Wales to the Queensland border. Its eastern edge is marked by an extremely deep, entrenched gorge system that cuts slices out of the country from Dauan Island in Northern Queensland to the Grampians in Western Victoria. This spectacular country of cliffs and waterfalls feels like a dramatically geometric end of the Earth. To the west the country levels into the northwest slopes where the dirt turns red and the land unfolds like a handkerchief flattening out to the horizon.

The New England tableland, like the rest of Australia, is narrated into being through an Indigenous creation story. The Dreaming story tells of Creator Beings who arose from the soil to shape the land and create the landscape. Before this time, the earth was a barren, empty plain, but beneath its surface were the Ancestors, 'sleeping in a state of potentiality'.³⁴ At this time humans were also asleep in embryonic forms in a state of proto-humanity. At a certain point the Creator Beings were disturbed and erupted from beneath the earth. They hunted, fought, danced, ran, made love and killed all over the country and their vibrant activity shaped the contours of the Australian landscape. I picture this time as an era of reverberation. After the volcanic explosions of rock the land kept shaking beneath the terribly powerful running-falling-warring-dancing of the enormous creators.

The first white man to 'discover' New England was the English explorer John Oxley. In the midst of a biting cold winter in 1818, Oxley did not envision giant Creator Beings thumping across country, digging out an escarpment before sinking back into Antipodean land forms. Nor did he imagine the shifting tectonic plates of Gondwanaland, breaking up the earth into puzzle pieces, 80 million years before his arrival.

To Oxley and his party, this landscape was a strange inversion of the Alpine-style peaks of Europe and North America. He recorded in his journal that it was an 'upside-down land' of 'natural phenomena' that defy 'all rule' and 'perplex us... greatly'.³⁵ Oxley's image of the tablelands was a case of 'double vision'.³⁶ He was incapable of seeing the escarpment except through the frame of Northern

hemisphere environments. Jay Arthur uses the term ‘double vision’ to describe a colonial condition of perceiving Australian land where the settler is aware of two places existing at the same time: ‘to see in this double vision the colonised landscape and the landscape of origin’.³⁷

As Oxley surveyed the sharp, rocky contours sliced into bush and backcountry, his eyes were foggy with an opaque vision of sublime peaks. In imperial European discourse mountains are pregnant with poetry and religion. Great adventurers embark on journeys of ascent, becoming closer to their Judeo-Christian sky-God. This backwards place must have seemed perverse. Simon Ryan explains that long before explorers entered Australia, in imagination the continent was ‘inverted, and representations of this imaginary place hinted at void’.³⁸ Did Oxley envision his society’s inevitable physical and metaphysical descent? As he experienced that almost psychotic vertigo of hovering on cliff edge by steep drop, did he imagine a fiery underworld, where cavities in rock spawn barbarity and savagery?

For Oxley the land was Antipodean, antithetical, yet uncannily familiar.³⁹ While reflecting on the escarpment Oxley exclaimed ‘[h]ow dreadful must the convulsion have been that formed these glens!’⁴⁰ The thunderous waterfalls, their resounding, immanent echo, the entire exalted scene was a ‘massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness’.⁴¹ Though familiar, in ‘an opaque and forgotten life’,⁴² the New England escarpment was threatening and destabilising.

After discovering the Aspley Falls near Walcha, Oxley remarked that he and his party were ‘lost in astonishment at the sight of this wonderful natural sublimity’.⁴³ Edmund Burke describes ‘astonishment’ as a ‘state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror’.⁴⁴ Yet the sublime is contained, a way of ‘compartmentalising the threatening’⁴⁵ by translating an uncanny Other into a stable Eurocentric code.⁴⁶ The voice of the Antipodean rock is muted by colonising words and thoughts.

Colonial New England

The very name of the region ‘New England’ demonstrates that the land was experienced, and still is understood, ‘in relation to another place’, ‘as a *second* experience’.⁴⁷ The naming of New England aligns with an assimilationist writing of place which defines land ‘in terms of colonial relationships that exhibit Eurocentricity and nostalgia for the European homeland’.⁴⁸ Deborah Bird Rose has observed that settlers conceived of themselves as ‘agents of disjunction’, and their intentions to create new societies and leave the old behind is signalled by their terminology of ‘new worlds’. At the same time as they seek to remake the world (*New*), settlers attempt to generate Antipodean continuities (*England*).⁴⁹

Val Plumwood argues that the process of colonisation in Australia began with this disjunctive naming, and that colonial naming practices were ‘both anthropocentric and Eurocentric, registering a monological or non-interactive relationship with a land conceived as passive and silent’.⁵⁰ Such colonial names signal a detachment from place because they fail to engage in dialogue with the

land. These names also write out Aboriginal place-names, and so begin a process of installing colonial histories while forgetting the Indigenous.⁵¹

An awareness of the many Aboriginal nations and language groups within New England instantly undermines the seemingly settled colonial cartography of the region. Overlapping the New England tablelands, but not entirely contained within its borders, are the Anaiwan, the Dhunghutti, the Kamilaroi, the Gumbaynggirr and the Ngarabal nations.

I am writing from within an amnesiac colonial culture, and I use the problematic name 'New England' throughout to refer to my home region. Rather than dispense with the name altogether, my analysis intends to highlight the unsettled qualities of the 'New England' title by acknowledging the performativity of settler belonging and its reliance on oppression and silence.⁵² Where colonial naming of New England induces settler amnesia, the process of researching this book has been a process of 'un-forgetting'.⁵³

I had the great privilege of meeting with some of New England's Aboriginal Elders to discuss with them their belonging. From these conversations I was awakened to a place and time that had previously been invisible to me. Even though I searched in gravel pits for stone artefacts as a child, and looked for the carved shape of shields in eucalypt trees, Aboriginal history seemed far away from my own life-world. When I spoke to the Elders in 2011, though, it became suddenly close.

In my high school years I attended Duval High, a local public school named after the mountain it sits behind – Mount Duval. Steve Widders, Aboriginal Elder and traditional descendant of the Anaiwan people, explained to me that Mount Duval has an Aboriginal name, but he has been unable to find out what the name means:

No one to my knowledge knows the Aboriginal name, and where it comes from, and what significance it had to Aboriginal people. Yet it's very synonymous with Armidale. Everybody relates Mt. Duval to Armidale, and that's named after a French explorer.

Steve's frustration at this loss is part of a larger distress at the destruction of Aboriginal culture in the region, particularly language and the connection to land. Being unable to give the Indigenous name of a landform is a violation of that intimate connection between Australian Aboriginal people and place – a connection which forms the foundation of identity. Steve explains: '[Aboriginal] people say, which hill do you come from? Which mountain's yours? What's your river? I can tell people I come from Mount Duval. I know the Aboriginal name of it, but I don't know the meaning of it'.

A mountain in whose shadow I studied for six years became a powerful symbol of colonisation. I could no longer pretend that the words 'Mount Duval' were endemic or perennial. I am personally implicated in a history of violence, and its aftermath of amnesia.⁵⁴

A harshly situated presence

With the task of decolonising a home-place comes a burden of responsibility for the past. The 'white man' of colonial New England feels much closer to me than the generalised white coloniser of Australia. As I spoke to the Elders about the specific and localised impacts of dispossession I *felt* for the first time that I had lived my life on stolen land. This moral claim of the past called me into a relationship of responsibility in the present.⁵⁵

Over a sandwich and a coffee in a little café in the mall in Armidale, Steve described the dispossession of Aboriginal people from the places I now call my homelands.

[T]he Aboriginal people had a real connection with the land, before the white man came. He started building here and they were relegated to reserves and missions. So you're not allowed to wander, you're not allowed to hunt your food, you're not allowed to go across the river to visit your other people there. You stay on this side. Because the squatters wanted to come and take the land, use it for their own purposes... That's how a lot of massacres happened. Because the people that were wanting to use it came and took possession of it, and they just killed the people who lived there, wouldn't allow them to hunt for their food.

The violent massacres of the New England frontier have scarred the land, leaving open wounds of cultural devastation.⁵⁶ The tablelands were invaded in the great pastoral expansion of New South Wales in the 1830s. The first squatters moved on to the tableland in 1832, and by 1839 the region was fully occupied.⁵⁷ Historian I.C. Campbell reports that the period from 1839 to 1842 was 'particularly violent:'

The districts beyond the limits of settlement were characterised by a significant absence of the more moderating influences of European society: women, families, school teachers and missionaries. It could be presumed that this section of the society would have been more likely to take a sympathetic interest in the native people, and also to maintain something of the restraint of civilisation over the white men, for even the most cultivated and gentlemanly proved themselves capable of great violence and brutality on the frontier...⁵⁸

This was a period known as the time of 'gentlemen squatters' with the region 'considered by far the most aristocratic part of New South Wales'.⁵⁹ As the squattocracy⁶⁰ constructed a 'new England' on Indigenous country they conformed to their own ideals of high society, while simultaneously slaughtering Aboriginal people, stealing their land and committing the most severe violations of human rights.

Deborah Bird Rose argues that decolonisation requires an ethical dialogue which recognises that both settler-descendent and Aboriginal Australians are

situated in the damaged places of colonisation.⁶¹ From the 'harshly situated presence'⁶² of being a settler in a wounded country, feelings of homeliness and belonging are unstable and problematic.

An undercurrent of belonging is implicit in many of the arguments presented throughout this book because my discussion is located in a place where I feel my strongest sense of ease and homeliness. Despite this affective quality I use the term belonging with caution in relation to my own being in New England because I resist the way it has been conceptualised in the past. The 'belonging' of the coloniser often continues the amnesiac processes of colonisation that usurp Indigenous lands and relationships to country.⁶³

I feel it necessary to contrast my own understanding of belonging with what I regard to be the incommensurate belonging of Indigenous Australians – an Aboriginal belonging which is grounded in ceremony and spirituality. Indigenous scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson describes this fundamental difference of place relations between the Aboriginal and the non-Aboriginal:

Our ontological relationship to land, the ways that country is constitutive of us, and therefore the inalienable nature of our relation to land, marks a radical, indeed incommensurable, difference between us and the non-Indigenous. This ontological relation to land constitutes a subject position that we do not share, and which cannot be shared, with the postcolonial subject whose sense of belonging in this place is tied to migrancy.⁶⁴

I acknowledge and accept this position, and share Baden Offord's feeling that the incommensurate ontological belonging of Indigenous Australians is 'something that needs immediate and unreserved acknowledgement',⁶⁵ but that 'the ontological belonging of Indigenous Australians, while incommensurable, does not sit in denial to my sense of belonging'.⁶⁶ My own feelings of belonging in New England do not seem to me to constitute an ontological state of being of the country, but instead are grounded in relational processes of connectivity.

Inspired by the work of Gregory Bateson, my relational approach to place is predicated on the notion that organism-and-its-environment are an inseparable unit – the unit of survival.⁶⁷ This interconnection reveals the vital importance of place to survival, but also the ultimate permeability of self to place. My own experience of growing up in New England follows this logic of connectivity and mutualism. Belonging is not a fixed state, but a movement toward intimacy, connectivity and commitment.

Poet and author Mark Tredinnick's regard of his settler position in his own home-place, the Blue Mountains region near Sydney, resonates strongly with me. He writes: 'I want . . . to belong very deeply here, and I know I never will . . . and I know that that matters less than the attempt to belong, which is an attempt . . . to grow intimate'.⁶⁸ If belonging is understood as a sovereign Indigenous relationship to land, then I do not belong, but this does not obviate my intimate and encompassing experience of being in place. My work attempts to write place in a post-humanist mode. Tredinnick observes, in the introduction of his monograph:

There is a kind of literature that practices... ecological imagination, and we call it nature writing... In those books, most of them consisting of essays (lyric and personal), places come alive on the pages... In Australia, where I live, there is no tradition yet of such writing.⁶⁹

My writing of my homeland attempts this ecological imagining, where words trace over place, responsive to its cadences, and in dialogue with the many voices which inhabit it.

Chapter outline and theoretical background

In contrast to conventional travel writing that moves from place to place, this book holds place constant and travels across the great domains of life. The book is divided into five parts, each of which explore genres of more-than-human encounter – Stone, Trees, Animals, Water, Sky. I write from the contact zones between species, where flesh meets fur, and skin touches bark, and combine personal tales of encounter with cultural, historical and environmental narratives to make sense of an entangled and relational world.

My study draws on many disciplines including cultural studies, postcolonial theory, Australian studies, biology, media and communications theory, cognitive psychology, human geography, anthropology and environmental philosophy. In response to the complexities of place, I draw on multiple theoretical frameworks. This fits the model described by Margaret Somerville as ‘trans-disciplinary research’.⁷⁰ Such a model does not keep the shape of each discipline, but instead lets disciplinary boundaries become perturbed and interpenetrated. While different chapters emphasise different theoretical modes, all develop around themes of permeability, connectivity and proximity.

More-than-human memory

Throughout *Transdisciplinary Journeys* I emphasise the importance of recuperation through memory in the goal of decolonising a home-place. This involves the remembrance not only of the mass human and nonhuman losses through colonisation, but also remembering and restoring counter-colonial relationships with the land. At the heart of this ethics of remembering is an attention to organic modes of memory beyond human worlds. Inspired by Bateson’s concept of an ‘ecology of mind’ that locates human thought in the complex interactions of wider systems, I approach memory as something that is shared across human and nonhuman bodies, part of an ecology of living thoughts in a dynamic living world.

Recounting personal narratives built on autobiographical memory, I have attempted to situate my own memory within multispecies ecologies in order to recuperate my childhood wonder at nonhuman life, believing that it reflects an openness to be challenged and taught by the world which is so central to the decolonising project.⁷¹

By associating this openness with childhood, by no means do I wish to suggest that responsiveness to more-than-human agency is somehow childish.⁷² Nor am I trying to romanticise a universal innocent child. Instead I am remembering my very real and often painful fleshly material interactions with the New England world I understood to be alive and communicative. Such attunement to nonhuman voices comes from a willingness to be immersed in the more-than-human worlds that penetrate our own. These cross-species ties are severed by 'adult' concepts of modernity built on human exceptionalism. In my goal to restore youthful engagements with the world I am reminded of feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray's lament for the child within who becomes exiled in adulthood:

I leave the girl in her preferred landscape with her winged and furry friends. Being thus immersed in life was her consolation, her happiness. She demanded nothing more.

But what became of her exiled in 'adult life'? In 'society'? In the 'city'?⁷³

In part I have written this book to call up my own rural childhood where it was easy to talk to a dog, to feel the will of a tree or to be swayed in the arms of a river. I do not want the place of my youth – a place which 'holds childhood motionless in its arms'⁷⁴ – to slip into oblivion. I seek to keep my New England tableland home with the magic of its stones, trees, animals, waters and skies in the world of the living – a part of the living world.

Notes

- 1 Judith Wright uses the term 'blood's country' in her poem 'South of My Days', about feelings of belonging in her New England tablelands home. I have adopted the term here because it captures the problematic nature of settler belonging in rural Australia, in lands stained with Aboriginal blood. Many of Judith Wright's works engage with the ambivalence of finding belonging in a country scarred by the violent dispossession of Aboriginal Australians.
- 2 M. Somerville, *Body/Landscape Journals* (North Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 1999), 5.
- 3 Deborah Bird Rose discusses the distinction between monological and dialogical ethics of engagement in *Reports from a Wild Country* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2004), 19–23.
- 4 Stephen Muecke asks, 'If we are passionate about what we do, then our expressions should perform or at least embody some of the passion. Why do people pull back from their natural forces in order to demonstrate a more measured objective response?' ('What the Cassowary Does Not Need To Know', *Australian Humanities Review* 39–40 (2006): www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/archive/Issue-September-2006/muecke.html). Similar concerns are raised by Karen Barad in *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), Bruno Latour in *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1999) and *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2001), and Thomas Nagel in 'What Is It Like to Be a Bat?', *The Philosophical Review* Vol. LXXXIII, no. 4 (October 1974), 435–450.
- 5 T. Nagel, 'What Is It Like', 444–445.
- 6 D. Rose, *Wild Country*, 22.

- 7 K. Gelder and J. M. Jacobs, *Uncanny Australia: Sacredness and Identity in a Postcolonial Nation* (Carlton South, Melbourne University Press, 1998), xiv. Gelder and Jacobs use the term 'uncanny' to describe this experience as part of the modern Australian condition 'where what is "ours" may also be "theirs", and vice versa'. They write: 'In an uncanny Australia, one's place is always already another's place and the issue of possession is never complete, never entirely settled' (138).
- 8 See Stephen Muecke's *No Road (Bitumen All the Way)* (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1997), for an extended meditation on this idea. This concept is discussed in greater detail in Part 1: Stone Country.
- 9 See Chapter 1 for a more in-depth discussion of these ideas.
- 10 A. Memmi, *The Colonizer and Colonized* (New York: Orion Press, 1965), 20.
- 11 A. Curthoys, 'An Uneasy Conversation: The Multicultural and the Indigenous', in *Race, Colour and Identity in Australia and New Zealand*, eds. John Docker and Gerhard Fischer (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2000), 32.
- 12 S. Biermann, 'Knowledge, Power and Decolonisation: Implication for Non-Indigenous Scholars, Researchers and Educators', in *Indigenous Philosophies and Critical Education*, ed. George J. Sefa Dei (New York: Peter Lang, 2011), 394.
- 13 R. Garbutt, S. Biermann and B. Offord, 'Into the Borderlands: Unruly Pedagogy, Tactile Theory and the Decolonising Nation', *Critical Arts* 26, no. 1 (2012): 63.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 63.
- 15 D. Rose, *Wild Country*, 35.
- 16 V. Plumwood, 'Decolonising Relationships with Nature', *Philosophy, Activism, Nature* 2 (2002): 8.
- 17 V. Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (London: Routledge, 2002), 8.
- 18 M. Somerville, *Body/Landscape*, 16.
- 19 V. Plumwood, 'Shadow Places and the Politics of Dwelling', *Australian Humanities Review* 44 (March 2008): www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/archive/Issue-March-2008/plumwood.html.
- 20 D. Rose and L. Robin, 'The Ecological Humanities in Action: An Invitation', *Australian Humanities Review* 31–32 (April 2004), 1: www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/archive/Issue-April-2004/rose.html.
- 21 W. Steffen, P. Crutzen and J. McNeill, 'The Anthropocene: Are Humans Now Overwhelming the Great Forces of Nature?' *Ambio* 36, 8 (2007): 614.
- 22 J. W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (London and New York: Verso Books, 2015).
- 23 G. Bateson, *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1979).
- 24 V. Despret, 'The Body We Care for: Figures of Anthro-zoo-genesis', *Body and Society* 10, no. 2–3 (2004): 111–134.
- 25 G. Bateson, *Mind and Nature*.
- 26 See F. Mathews, *For Love of Matter: A Contemporary Panpsychism*, Chapter Four, 'The Priority of Encounter over Knowledge' (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 73–88. I adopt the idea of encounter as the methodological framework for Chapter 2.
- 27 Liz Ferrier describes colonisation as a spatial practice, and cartography or mapmaking as a colonising activity, in 'Mapping the Space of the Other: Transformations of Space in Postcolonial Fiction and Postmodern Theory' (PhD thesis, University of Queensland, 1990).
- 28 Deborah Bird Rose offers the following definition of Aboriginal country: 'Country is multi-dimensional – it consists of people, animals, plants, Dreamings; underground, earth, soils, minerals and waters, surface water, and air. There is sea country and land country; in some areas people talk about sky country. Country has origins and a future; it exists both in and through time', in *Nourishing Terrains: Australian Aboriginal Views of Landscape and Wilderness* (Canberra: Australian Heritage Commission, 1996), 8.

- 29 K. Bentrerrak, S. Muecke and P. Roe, *Reading the Country: Introduction to Nomadology*, (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1984), 219.
- 30 S. Cooke, *Speaking the Earth's Languages: A Theory for Australian-Chilean Postcolonial Poetics* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2003), 5.
- 31 John Ryan, personal communication, 11 July 2010. For more on Alwyn Jones, see Chapter 4.
- 32 Val Plumwood argues that the presentation of the world as a material terra nullius is part of the reduction of nonhuman life in sado-dispassionate rationalist thought, and part of human colonisation of the nonhuman world. For more on this see V. Plumwood, 'Journey to the Heart of Stone', in *Culture, Creativity and Environment: New Environmentalist Criticism*, eds. F. Becket and T. Gifford (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2005), 18. These ideas are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 1.
- 33 F. Braudel, *On History*, trans. Sarah Mathews (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 3.
- 34 M. Graham, 'Some Thoughts about the Philosophical Underpinnings of Aboriginal Worldviews', *Australian Humanities Review* 45 (2008).
- 35 J. Oxley, *Journals of Two Expeditions into the Interior of New South Wales, by order of the British Government in the Years 1817–18, 1820*, reprint, eBooks@Adelaide, 10 November 2012, <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/o/oxley/john/o95j/part2.html>.
- 36 'Double vision' is a concept introduced by J. M. Arthur in his *The Default Country: A Lexical Cartography of Twentieth-Century Australia* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2003). Ross Gibson also describes the settler experience of Australia as 'oddly doubled' in *South of the West: Postcolonialism and the Narrative Construction of Australia* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), x.
- 37 J. Arthur, *Default Country*, 27.
- 38 S. Ryan, *The Cartographic Eye: How Explorers Saw Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 17.
- 39 'Uncanny' is a translation of Sigmund Freud's notion of the 'Unheimlich' which refers to an instance where something is familiar yet foreign at the same time – resulting in a feeling of it being uncomfortably strange. The term 'Antipodean' has been used to similar effect.
- 40 J. Oxley, *Journals of Two Expeditions*.
- 41 J. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. L. S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 2.
- 42 *Ibid.*, 2.
- 43 J. Oxley, *Journals of Two Expeditions*, 299.
- 44 E. Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757; reprint edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 57.
- 45 S. Ryan, *Cartographic Eye*, 84.
- 46 *Ibid.*, 85.
- 47 J. Arthur, *Default Country*, 27.
- 48 V. Plumwood, 'Decolonising Relationships with Nature', 23.
- 49 D. Rose, *Wild Country*, 57.
- 50 V. Plumwood, 'Decolonising Relationships with Nature', 23.
- 51 This process is described in great detail in Chapter 1.
- 52 See Chapter 1 for an extended discussion of these ideas.
- 53 R. Garbutt, S. Biermann and B. Offord, 'Into the Borderlands', 68.
- 54 See Chapters 1 and 2 for an extended meditation on this idea.
- 55 D. Rose, *Wild Country*, 30–31.
- 56 For more discussion on this see Chapter 2.
- 57 I. McBryde, *Records of Times Past: Ethnohistorical Essays on the Culture and Ecology of the New England Tribes* (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1978), 7.

- 58 I. Campbell, *Social Backgrounds and Relations with the Aborigines*, Armidale and District Historical Society, 1971, cited in G. Blomfield, *Baal Belbora – The End of Dancing: The Agony of the British Invasion of the Ancient People of Three Rivers, the Hastings, the Manning & the Macleay*, in *New South Wales* (Alternative Publishing Co-Operative: Sydney, 1981).
- 59 I. McBryde, *Records of Times Past*, 4.
- 60 'Squattocracy' is a term used to describe wealthy and prestigious livestock graziers. In New England the squattocracy dominated colonial society and have had a strong historical and social impact on the pastoral region.
- 61 D. Rose, *Wild Country*, 21–22.
- 62 *Ibid.*, 22.
- 63 See Chapter 1 for an extended discussion of these ideas.
- 64 A. Moreton-Robinson, 'I Still Call Australia Home: Indigenous Belonging and Place in a White Postcolonising Society', in *Uprootings/Regroundings: Questions of Home and Migration*, eds. S. Ahmed, C. Castañeda, A.-M. Fortier and M. Sheller (Oxford: Berg, 2003), 31.
- 65 B. Offord, 'Landscapes of Exile (and Narratives on the Trauma of Belonging)', in *Landscapes of Exile: Once Perilous, Now Safe*, eds. A. Haebich and B. Offord (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2008), 8.
- 66 B. Offord, 'Landscapes of Exile', 8.
- 67 G. Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing, 1972), 491.
- 68 M. Tredinnick, *The Blue Plateau: A Landscape Memoir* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 2009), 237.
- 69 *Ibid.*, 7.
- 70 M. Somerville, 'Towards Universities for the Twenty-First Century', *Higher Education in Europe* 16, no. 1 (1991): 79–86.
- 71 Jane Bennett observes that experiencing the world as enchanted is akin to 'a momentary return to childhood joie de vivre' in *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings and Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 104. Similarly, Freya Mathews describes childhood landscapes as 'intensely animistic' and explores ways we might 're-enter the terrain of enchantment' in *For Love of Matter*, 1 and 22.
- 72 Val Plumwood observes that the association of an enchanted world and nonhuman intentionality with childhood (both evolutionarily and personally) 'speaks volumes about the instrumental reductionism we have normalized as adult life' (*Heart of Stone*, 22).
- 73 L. Irigiray, 'Animal Compassion', in *Animal Philosophy: Essential Readings in Continental Thought*, eds. M. Calarco and P. Atterton (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 196.
- 74 G. Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 8.