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Understanding place through narrative: Changing the places we love and who we are with stories

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Once upon a time, a young girl found a stone in a dry creek bed on her family's farm. It was pitted and worn and seemed to nestle into the palm of her hand as though it had been made for her, or at least for someone with a hand the same size as her's. Stones don't occur naturally on this alluvial plain, so how did this one come to be in 'her' creek, and why did it look as though it had been ground for a long time against another hard surface? And slowly she came to understand that she was not the only girl to have held this stone in her hand in this much-loved place.

I found such a grindstone many years ago, and I still have it. Whenever I hold it, even think about it, I viscerally experience both what Paul Ricoeur would call a state of 'being-affected by the past'¹ and what might also be called a state of 'being-affected by the future'. I 'recall', as if I knew her personally, the last Wiradjuri woman who held the stone in *her* hand. I 'remember' her sitting beside our creek in the shade of an ancient eucalypt grinding the seeds of native grasses into flour perhaps, or collecting mussels, or fishing for yellow belly with the women of her clan. It's a seductive image. But I also wonder why she left her stone behind. Did she forget it? Did she dispose of it because she had no further use for it? Did she throw it into the creek in self defence or anger? Did she abandon it as she fled in fear, even terror? And, most importantly for me, did this event occur *before* or *after* the invasion and conquest of her country?

SHARING GUNNINGBLAND CREEK

This creek we both share, the imaginary Wiradjuri woman and me, rises on the northern rim of the catchment of the river she may have known as Galiyarr² and which I know as the Lachlan, within what is now the Shire of Parkes in the wheat-sheep belt of central New South Wales. For most of the year, our creek is either dry or a string of muddy waterholes, but sometimes after rain a trickle of water actually flows along its channel to fill the many farm dams that have been gouged into it over the last 150 years. Every five to ten years – and usually to signal the end of a long drought – far more rain falls than our little creek can accommodate and then our farm becomes a wide brown inland sea. Only in these wet seasons does water from our ephemeral creek ever reach its river.³

I can never know what this creek meant to the Wiradjuri woman who abandoned her grindstone in its channel. Sometimes, especially as I gaze at the sun sinking behind the Seven Sisters and watch the waterholes turn from muddy brown to rose, I try to imagine the landscape as she might have experienced it. For her, the creek probably traced a journey made by Baiamai, her people's creator,⁴ or Wawi, the rainbow snake,⁵ or another journey by another of her ancestral beings who shaped and gave life to these inland plains. And the rocky peaks of the Seven Sisters almost certainly embodied stories about seven young women who became the stars of the constellation I now know as the Pleiades.⁶ I try to imagine the Grindstone Woman in her possum-skin cloak telling stories about these seven sisters beside her campfire, or singing songs she learned from her grandmothers to ensure that the native bees continued to produce their honey, for example, or the magpie geese returned to the wetlands each year from their migration north. This young woman is dancing beside our creek in my imagination now as I hold her stone. Her body is painted in ochres and pipeclay mixed with fat and she is glowing in the firelight. But such visions don't fit easily in a landscape that has been so thoroughly cleared, drained, ploughed and poisoned by 'my mob' over the last 150 years. Indeed, the only features she would recognise are the timeless Seven Sisters and the other blue hills on the horizon.

A hint of what this country might have looked like before the conquest has been left to us by Surveyor-General John Oxley who, in 1817, described the general area of our farm as an impenetrable morass of wetlands which 'closed upon us, and rendered all farther progress impossible'.⁷ Twenty years later, Oxley's successor, Thomas Mitchell, reported that there were already cattle 'all along the Lachlan'.⁸ I fear, therefore, that it may have been in the decades between Oxley's and Mitchell's visits that the Wiradjuri

woman, as I imagine her now, abandoned her grindstone – although I hardly dare think about what might have happened to her next. Such stories are still very hard for whitefellas to remember.

SHARING DISPLACEMENT HISTORIES

Judith Wright, who shared my rural heritage, grappled with her own conflicted emotions about her relationship with the country she grew up in: ‘These two strands – the love of the land we have invaded, and the guilt of the invasion – have become part of me’, she wrote.⁹ But for me there is an added poignancy to my bond with the inland that both the Grindstone Woman and I are part of – because some of my forebears were indigenous people too. Like the Wiradjuri, they too were cleared from land they had occupied since time immemorial so that others could grow rich. At least two of my ancestors – great-great-great grandparents Margaret McGregor and Donald McInnes – were impoverished and probably illiterate Gaels who were ‘exported’ from the west coast of Scotland to the colony of New South Wales in 1839 as ‘redundant population’.¹⁰ Before they emigrated, the McInneses lived on Eilean Shona, a small rocky outcrop at the entrance to Loch Moidart in Argyll, on one of the feudal estates of the Macdonalds of Clanranald. They, or members of their extended families, may have been forcibly resettled on Eilean Shona after a ‘Clearance’ on a Clanranald estate at Rhu-Arisaig in 1794¹¹, but recent DNA analysis,¹² palaeobotanical evidence¹³ and biological morphometrics¹⁴ suggests that their ancestors, and through them my own, had probably been living on Scotland’s rugged west coast since the end of the last glaciation when hunter-gatherers first began experimenting with new ways of producing food and managing their environments. In this sense, the McInneses were aboriginal people, and every peak, strath, loch, burn and brae of Argyll, their Scottish homeland, must have been as deeply storied as their new antipodean home was for the indigenous peoples they displaced. For me, this is yet another of history’s tragic ironies that I am part of.

On their arrival in NSW in January 1840, my great-great-great grandparents and their family were employed as shepherds, labourers and servants by another Gaelic laird, the part-time squatter, soldier, police officer and ‘merino magistrate’, Captain Lachlan McAlister,¹⁵ and dispatched to his sheep-run in the headwaters of the Lachlan River near Goulburn.¹⁶ Within a decade or two, they acquired their own small blocks of land and began clearing the native vegetation. In the late 1870s, Peggy and Donald’s third son, Gregor, and his wife Anne Gibson, my great-great grandparents, migrated a few hundred kilometers downstream with their son Alan, and purchased a sheep station near Lake Cargelligo.¹⁷ Allan McInnes married Mary McFadzean at the Lake and

raised a dozen children. Their only surviving daughter, Agnes, married a lad whose parents had selected pastoral land near Condobolin. This couple had three daughters, the eldest of whom married a returned serviceman and settled with him on an irrigation block on the river at 'Condo'. I was the first-born of their three children. In the early 1960s, we migrated another 50 km upstream to our present farm on one of the Lachlan's many tributaries.

ROOTS AND CONSEQUENCES

This brief genealogy represents more than 160 years of personal experiences and intimately shared stories which bind me and my family to the inland plains in a relationship that is deeply emotional, even spiritual. But unlike the stories which defined the Grindstone Woman and her relationship with the same country, *our* stories about who we are all begin somewhere else. For settler-descendants, there is no escaping such discontinuities regardless of how deeply bonded we may feel to the land we now occupy. Our relationship with 'Country' can never be equivalent to that of indigenous Australians.

Donald and Margaret McInnes's many 'white' descendants succeeded because we were supported by the broader polity in ways most of us now take for granted. The same cannot be said for most of the descendants of the people whose clan estates my extended family still occupies. Their dispossession continues to affect every aspect of their lives, as do the discrimination, racial vilification and countless brutalities and injustices they have been subjected to since the invasion. Such incommensurabilities exploded into public consciousness in 2005 when a group of youngsters attacked a police officer and burned a police car on Gordon Estate on the outskirts of Dubbo in central NSW, a rural slum into which 4,000 people who identify as Wiradjuri, or as descendants of other indigenous groups, had been 'concentrated' without any of the amenities or services that are now taken for granted in other communities of this size in Australia.¹⁸ Is it too great a flight of fancy to imagine that some of the alienated youths who torched that police car on New Year's Eve in 2005 were the descendants of the Grindstone Woman and her sisters, or that I, as a beneficiary of their dispossession, bear some of the responsibility for the circumstances these young people now experience?

But we settler-descendants also bear the burden of responsibility for the damage we and our forebears have inflicted upon the natural ecosystems of inland Australia since the conquest of the Wiradjuri nation: loss of native biodiversity, poor surface water quality, rising watertables, dryland salinity, soil erosion, reduced fertility, increased

greenhouse gas emissions, and ongoing loss and destruction of indigenous heritage.¹⁹ And now even the Lachlan river system itself, including Gunningbland Creek, has been listed under the NSW *Fisheries Management Act 1994* as an endangered aquatic ecosystem 'likely to become extinct in nature'.²⁰

The circumstances and factors threatening the survival of the Lachlan's aquatic biodiversity include land clearance (especially of riparian vegetation); dams, levee banks and causeways; reduced seasonal inundation of wetlands; water extraction and regulation; nutrient pollution; deterioration of water quality; grazing; loss of aquatic plants; removal of snags and other woody debris; and introduced species.²¹ And my extended family has been complicit in all these processes!

AGENCY THROUGH NARRATIVE

Given these twin sets of pathologies – the injustices and discrimination so many Wiradjuri descendants still experience, and the ongoing threats to ecological communities – why do I spend so much time sitting comfortably behind a keyboard filling my computer screen with mere words? Why am I not getting my hands dirty trying to reverse the anthropogenic extinction event we are all now part of,²² or attempting to right my society's many other wrongs in more obviously practical ways?

As a writer, as a citizen, as a moral agent, I've struggled with this dilemma for decades, and in the process have pitched my creative energy at some of our most difficult challenges. I've also experimented with different media and different genres; I've published in both dead-tree mode and electronically, in the mainstream press and alternative media; and I've embraced the opportunities hypertext presents with my on-line publications as I seek to represent the complexity and nonlinearity of our biophysical reality. But what *real* difference have any of the stories I've authored made? The *Realpolitik* of social change and the intractability of the human condition often fills me with sorrow, despondency, even despair.

And yet, what is social injustice and ecological degradation if not the enactment, reification or embodiment of the stories we've been raised on? As Foucault observed more than 30 years ago, our words, stories, narratives, discourses, texts – call them what you will – 'systematically form the objects of which they speak'.²³ Recent research in the fields of philosophy, narratology, cognitive science, psychiatry and psychology confirm the causal links between the narratives we're exposed to, the way we see and understand the world, and our behaviour in it, and offer powerful insights for those of us who want to effect positive change in the places we love. The general consensus

amongst scholars in these fields is that ‘individual and social actions are lived stories’;²⁴ or from another perspective, ‘We become who we are through telling stories about our lives and living the stories we tell’.²⁵

So stories work. No continent can be invaded, no massacre committed, no abuse perpetrated, no people subjugated, vilified or discriminated against, no land degraded, no wetlands drained, no climate changed, no species made extinct and no creeks or rivers despoiled by humans – unless stories make it so. The reverse is also true: people can be empowered, abuse ameliorated, wrongs righted, pain acknowledged, differences reconciled, land returned, ecosystems restored and endangered species allowed to flourish – but first we need the stories to unleash these possibilities. There is a caveat to this neat narrative formula, however: stories must be ‘believed or accepted’ if people are to live them.²⁶ And, as cultural practitioners, as storytellers, we have no way of ensuring belief or acceptance of the stories we tell!

STORIES AS PURPOSEFUL INTERVENTIONS

Cognitive scientists, psychoanalysts and narrative psychologists nevertheless claim that social change can be purposefully precipitated by introducing new narratives into individuals’ or communities’ repertoires, and/or by re-narrating already-familiar stories from alternative perspectives.²⁷ Writing can thus be considered every bit as ‘practical’ as lobbying for political change, or getting your hands dirty restoring wetlands and woodlands. As a writer, I now want to purposefully test these hypotheses along the creek I grew up on. I want to compose new, more inclusive stories about locals’ relationships with Country and with one another, and to re-narrate old familiar tales from the perspectives of the many ‘Others’ who have been ‘forgotten’ or purposely left out of mainstream narratives.

These omitted Others include not only the young people of Gordon Estate in Dubbo and such places, but also their Wiradjuri forebears who resisted the invasion and occupation of their clan estates in the early nineteenth century, and the hundreds of Wiradjuri men and women who were – and continue to be – indispensable to the survival and development of the pastoral and agricultural industries on the inland plains. They also include the many Chinese migrants who cleared the land around my family’s farm in the late nineteenth century and later grew the fresh vegetables which sustained so many rural communities; the Afghan cameleers who transported wool and other goods throughout the inland; the Indian hawkers who brought the outside world to my forebears’ stations and farms in their covered wagons; and the many Greek, Italian, Lebanese, Vietnamese and other more recent settlers, such as the Pashtuns, Hazaras

and Tajiks who fled the Talibanisation of Afghanistan in the 1990s; and the Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Iranis and Iraqis who continue to bring much-needed skills, services and amenities to rural communities.

Other 'Others' who have been blocked from mainstream narratives include, of course, the ecological communities we humans are part of, as well as the individual native species now listed as endangered, such the Australian bustard (*Ardeotis australis*) and Plains Wanderer (*Pedionomus torquatus*), the Southern Bell Frog (*Litoria reniformis*) and Stuttering Barred Frog (*Mixophyes balbus*), the Swift Parrot (*Lathamus discolor*), and the Golden Sun Moth (*Synemon plana*), all of which may have all been plentiful when the Grindstone Woman was gathering grass seeds and rhizomes along our creek, but which I have never seen. Until we have access to stories about these many occluded 'Others', none of us can know the richness of our shared inheritance, nor the full range of possibilities available to create our futures from. But *with* such stories, who knows what we could achieve and whom we could yet become? In this intoxicating state of 'being-affected by the future', I can see the Grindstone Woman more clearly now. She is dancing and singing beside Gunningbland Creek. And we are dancing, singing with her, bringing our creek back to life.

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² T Kass, *Thematic History of the Central West Comprising the NSW Historical Regions of Lachlan and Central Tablelands*, NSW Heritage Office, Sydney, 2003.

³ M Findlay, 'Romancing the grindstone on Gunningbland Creek', *Futures* vol. 37 no. 8, 2005.

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⁵ See PR Kabaila, *Wiradjuri Places: The Lachlan River Basin*, Canberra, Black Mountain Projects, 1996, p. 80; I Keen, *Aboriginal Economy and Society*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 2004; P Read, *A history of the Wiradjuri people of New South Wales 1883-1969*, Canberra, PhD thesis, Australian National University, 1983.

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