

'... in time, nothing can be without becoming'

Ursula le Guin, *Tehanu* 1990

Chapter 6

A conclusion, a line in the sand

This thesis opened with a mud map showing a location – a pebble dot in the centre of Australia, representing contemporary places of the western Simpson Desert. The work that followed has expanded that isolated point, by finding ways of telling the histories that made it; ways that give sufficient space for the locale's diverse constitutive threads to be traced and shaken out. The story that accompanied the mud map began with a rhetorical question, 'what makes a place entangled'? This introduced my proposition that the places involved have qualities that are fruitfully understood in terms of 'entanglement'.

The concept of entanglement that I have explored in places of the western Simpson Desert encompasses the inextricably inter-woven temporal components of a place that arise from interactions between people, objects and the physical and historical characteristics of a place through time. It is this relationship between interaction and entanglement that my thesis has explored.

In the final phase of drafting this thesis, I had a much-needed hair cut. The lively and intelligent hairdresser asked me what I was writing about. I gave the pared-down 'dinner party' answer that I had developed over the years, that it looked at the relationships between Indigenous people in central Australia and the people who built the Overland Telegraph Line in the early 1870s, and the changes that followed after it was built, through to recent times. She immediately asked 'So what were their relationships?' I paused. After all this time spent listening to, researching and synthesising the diverse accounts that offered considered scrutiny, glancing observations, or incidental perspectives on this question, did I have a direct answer to this central question? A slideshow of vivid images flitted through my newly kempt head, with part of the answer in each: a man galloping towards a travelling group of Southern Arrernte people in desperate need of tobacco; children lining up sticks in the sand; families camped out of the line of sight of the station homestead organising ceremonies; stock workers mustering the station cattle through the Finke floodout country; Erlilikilyia watching and recording lives along the line; the late Bingey Lowe singing the songs that animate the country.

'It wasn't all massacres and violence' I murmured. 'But it did begin very suddenly, the history of interactions in this area, it began with dramatic change, and it never stopped, right through to now. That pulse of change shaped how things are now, and part of that shape is that many things did not change', I ventured, grasping at a way to explain what is contained in the important theme of continuity *with* transformation, in the people, in the country, in their relationships.

Seeing how they were maintained and how they changed was what I had aimed to see. But in answer to the question, had I actually seen what the relationships *were*? By looking at their actions and the context in which they were enacted, as described or implied in the various texts and spatial patterns and stories, could I see if they loved each other, were they wry, telling jokes, wary, or full of revenge? Occasionally this emerged, when the humanity of observed and observer was fully recognised, such as in Christopher Giles' account. But the gravitational pull of the dominant white story is strong. It is hard for the interactions that are present in the texts, the 'counter narratives' of water practices, working with the cattle, learning the country, not to get

overwhelmed in a single story, or to be drawn into a binary, Indigenous *versus* white understandings.

A distillation of the implications of what has emerged in this work is that that *no thing is only one thing, and no place is only one place*. I had this pointed this out to me early on in my research by Raylene Hudson, a member of the Irrwanyere Aboriginal Corporation, granddaughter of Mick McLean, the Wankanguru man who was such a repository of knowledge of the Simpson Desert. I was sitting with her under a shady tree on the fringes of the car park at Mt Dare Homestead in 1996. We had spent time together at Irrwanyere spring, now she was waiting for a tyre to be fixed for 'Mad Max', the blue Kingswood that went where most would think only 4WDs could.

Raylene was a 'native' of the country who had not lived in it, and whose memories of it come from songs her grandfather sang to her when she was a child on his knee.

'I realise now he was singing songs of his country. I was too young. But I'm going back there now, as near as I can get to where he was born in the desert.' ... 'I've been to Czechoslovakia, India, Europe, Canberra but I have to come back here because this is home, this is the place, nowhere else feels like this.' She announced: 'This is a historic moment. My grandfather and his people left the desert of their free will' – she draws a firm line in the sand from left to right – 'and now their grandchildren are returning there of their free will' – a line from right to left – 'There's just this missing generation ...'. She scrubs out the area in between the two lines. The history of assimilation and forced movements or removals is a present absence in everyone's lives. I ask if she is making a choice about where she lives, about which grandparent she follows. (I was thinking of Charlie Hodgeson's kids who have a Torres Strait Islander mother and an Arrernte/ Arabuna father). Raelene draws hard straight lines in the ground. 'Here's South Australia, Northern Territory, Queensland, New South Wales. White people, they think it has to be either one or the other, these lines, but its really like this' – she draws a series of intersecting circles in the middle of the map of Australia. 'Yes' I say. I can only agree with reminder that nothing is

singular, fixed. Categories that work to impose this *or* that are not helpful, those that take in part of this *and* part of that fit better.¹

The various interactions examined through this thesis have demonstrated the idea that places emerge dynamically from the interactions that are enacted in and between them, in the same way that an object is not necessarily the same thing in shifting contexts.² No place, no thing is fixed in one form; its qualities are emergent from the interactions between its elements and people, and other living things. They are always emerging, becoming.

The question then becomes what *are* those interactions? I have traced the interactions that have contributed to the overlapping circles of people's lives in the region since the surveyor's first added their lines of sight to the mix. Three themes of interaction – intercultural interactions between people set in train by the Overland Telegraph Line; interactions with waterplaces; and connective interactions between places – emerged as important ongoing features in all places, in varying combinations. These three themes and the places that exemplify them have been considered separately for clarity in the chapters of the thesis. But they are interrelated.

In telling its distinctive histories I aimed to draw the western Simpson Desert area into the centre of maps, away from the margins where it has commonly been depicted. In doing so I have reanimated the richness and significance of the human encounters that have shaped this area. In re-telling its stories, the lived human history of the land has been reasserted over its popular image of as an empty wilderness.

These histories in place referenced and evoked pre-colonial, colonial and contemporary pasts simultaneously. Being in a place generated a simultaneous heterogeneous awareness of place-related stories of the Old People (that is, of previous generations of people); of the creator Ancestors; and of more recent histories of their own lives. Thus the changes that have shaped the place and its history are intermingled additions, not sequential replacements; 'the past and present moving on the same polyvalent site' as Michel de Certeau puts it.³

¹ All quotes Macfarlane field notebook Friday 8 November 1996.

² Strathern 1995; Thomas 1991.

³ In *Writing Histories* 1970: 317, cited Aherne 1995: 43.

Starting from the interactional, non-binary perspective of entanglement disallows a clear distinction between pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods. This accorded with the understanding that I cumulatively grasped as I worked with the members of Irrwanyere, that their relationship to the temporality of a place was not described in terms of a linear or sequential chronological series of events.

In the blurring of archaeological 'site type' forms and materials, this non-sequential chronology was also present physically in the landscape. For example, a stone reduction event is not purely 'prehistoric' when it is flaked in 1920; a demountable house is not purely 'modern' if it is sited due to its associations with historic actions and a powerful Ancestral place; a stockyard is not purely 'historic' if it is still used, and significant to both Aboriginal and white people. Rather than fitting them to a reductive fixed category of date or type, the actions which generated these structures require definition by process and associative context.

By focusing on the entangled nature of the histories, the missing histories of Indigenous labour and concern cannot be ignored. This focus makes impossible the sleight-of-mind that slips 'stockyard' under the category of 'white history' and stops there without further examination.

However, more than making missing histories visible, the approach I have worked through offers a way of enlarging the experience of what history can be. It is not history as any one of the contributors to the composite would, or could, tell it. It is an otherwise unavailable place-based form that emerges from the juxtapositioning of different constellations of attention, concern and experience.

Raymond Williams talks of 'experience' as 'a lived contact with the available articulations, including their comparisons'.⁴ Hence, if the articulation of particular pasts is not 'available' they will be missing from potential experience. Unless a history starts from the position that multiple inter-cultural threads are there, the work to find the counter contributing elements will not be done, and the narrative will slide along familiar lines, the already available articulations. It

⁴ In *Country and city* 1981: 165.

must do more than simply add and interweave the Aboriginal story into the pre-existing master narrative.⁵ Histories that are not restricted to texts but juxtapose them with oral accounts and material and spatial evidences can crack open limitations on the kinds of history that it is possible to tell, and the practices of history-making that it is possible to enter into.

A strong theme which emerged in the course of this work is that of teaching and learning, and the different modalities of relationship to country that were bound up with modes of transfer of knowledge. A tension between these modes ran through the work. Learning is implicit in maintenance of a place, a tradition, a practice. It involves intergenerational transfers of knowledge. The criteria for who are suitable recipients for the knowledge is one of the areas severely disrupted by the colonial process.

I went to the western Simpson Desert primarily to record the long term history immanent there, so it could be more widely known and valued. But it was what I was given the opportunity to learn, effectively in the periphery of this project, that altered the way I saw that history and its relation to the recent past and the present, and the course of the subsequent work.

This recording mode is deeply and rightly distrusted and politically suspect for Indigenous communities who have suffered from its bad history of appropriation, where knowledge and objects have been taken away and not returned. But records can travel too. They remain one part of the place that they record and that connection can be reopened. Something happens when they are returned to their place of origin. Cross fertilisation is possible. For example, Erlikilyika's work is reanimated when it comes out of its museum case and is returned to the stony ground and improvised humpies around Charlotte Waters where it was originally carved. Places such as the *mikiri* wells can be relocated using old map references, songs sung in Stevensons Creek 97 years ago can be heard and sung there again. Places known only archaeologically, or texts which record partial perspectives of the place can be reanimated by connecting them into the local history. Although originating in a recording mode, they can be reconnected with the mode of integrated learning that I have

⁵ Williamson 2004: 198.

termed 'knowing how to return'. I have set out to provide these kind of reconnections of knowledges locally, in particular, known places in the western Simpson region, such as Charlotte Waters, Dalhousie Springs, Anniversary Bore.

Scale has been important guiding principle in framing of this work. I wanted the focus to be on the small scale of a lived place, the grounded spatial and material history that archaeology enables, while retaining the tension between that and the large scale historical processes in which they were lived out, and to which they contributed to shaping.

But I think this still provides only an outline mud map of what it was like, what happened in particular places, an external history. An emotionally informed history remains inaccessible. I do not know what people felt as their carefully nurtured, intimately known waterholes were heedlessly sullied and breached by hard hoofed horses and cattle, as diversity in the land died. Even for white people the white histories are silent on the affect of their lives in these contexts. We have the one line reference by Captain White to a manager's wife going mad at Dalhousie Springs homestead; we do not have her diary that might reveal those things that so got under skin.

Cultural geographer Edward Casey points out that 'situs', the Latin for site, is closely related to 'thesis', which is Greek for position. This led me to consider how I would sum up my thesis in spatial terms: what kind of place is this thesis? It is the kind of place that is depicted in the photo collages that I have included in my thesis. I made the first of these inspired by frustration with my photographs of the landscape, which were unable to catch the range in scale and texture from vast to minute that was such a feature of being in those landscapes for me. Close-ups of the textures could work, but they were then cut off from their locale. The collages successfully evoke the multiplicity of textures, the diverse sources, temporal components and perspectives involved in any one place. They provide a visual metaphor for both the process and the outcome of the thesis, where rich, inherently partial stories have been brought together in a composite history that is different from any of the contributing parts, and that does not pretend to add up to a seamless unitary story.

At the end of a day of fieldwork we would sometimes sit on the verandah at Anniversary Bore and tell stories. I would throw in second hand stories 'from paper' that would trigger the recall of names of the people who worked at the places mentioned, where they came from, expansions and personalisations of the records.

I hope that this new text that I have brought together could also be read out in this way, be a trigger to other expansions, further recollections and layers of entanglement of understanding of what it is to live in the places of Australia. I would like to hope that it was sufficiently 'marbled', like the cake that Bingeby Lowe so generously gave me, that such expansions beyond would escape the grip of the dominant stories.

A promising prospect, a line in the sand, is that there are countless pebble dots of location in Australia. These can each be drawn out into their immanent skeins of entangled people, objects, routes, places. The capacity for expansion is a general property that applies as much to the original Parliament House in Canberra, or your own back yard as to the places of the western Simpson Desert.⁶

By taking the dominant, prominent histories as insufficient, it becomes possible for unrecognised histories to be brought into the realm of available experience.⁷ These go beyond merely adding to what is already known, but can transform the way a place is understood and its inhabitants understand themselves. Every recognised place in still-colonial Australia contains this expansive capacity for retelling the interactional histories that made them.

⁶ as John Mulvaney showed 20 years ago, and as Mark McKenna and Christine Hansen have demonstrated in the settled south-east of Australia (Mulvaney 1989; McKenna 2002; Hansen 2009).