Entangled places: interactive histories in the western Simpson Desert, central Australia

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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This thesis contains no material that has been accepted for the award of any
other degree or diploma in any tertiary institution and, to the best of my
knowledge, the thesis contains no material previously published or written
by another person, except where due reference is made in the text.

Signed:

Ingereth Macfarlane
March 2010
For Pam Macfarlane who knew deserts, people, words and objects
Victor Macfarlane and who taught me
Bingey Lowe how to learn
Isabel Mc Bryde with love
Abstract

Entangled places: interactional history in the western Simpson Desert, central Australia

This work starts with a question: ‘what makes a place entangled’? Posing this question implies an understanding that places have qualities that are fruitfully understood in terms of the concept of ‘entanglement’. This thesis uses the term to express and explore the inextricably inter-woven temporal components of a place that emerge from stories of its history that were either direct accounts, traces in the patterned objects on the ground, or retrieved from archives. These qualities are interpreted as arising through interactions between people, objects and the physical and historical characteristics of a place through time. It is this relationship between interaction and entanglement that the thesis ‘has a good look around’; to use a key phrase used by Irrwanyere Aboriginal Corporation members.

The threads implicated in the historical entanglement of particular places are traced. These are: experiences as an archaeologist and a historian in contemporary places of the western Simpson Desert, mediated by Irrwanyere Aboriginal Corporation members who speak for that country; direct stories of the place; texts generated by white explorers, surveyors, scientists, managers and tourists; the enduring presence of the creator Ancestors; and spatial patterns of material objects.

Why is recognition of the processes that generate such entanglement important? It shifts attention. Focusing on their entangled character brings to the fore what are otherwise missing histories of Indigenous labour and concern. Importantly it also disallows unitary categories for places as being either ‘Aboriginal’ or ‘European’, ‘pre-historic’ or ‘colonial’; often assumed to be separate components of history. The challenge then is to track the interaction of these histories. The aim is to make the missing stories of western Simpson people in place available, in a way where the place of the story retains its specifics, but is simultaneously stretched into an expanded network of social and historical connections.
Three inter-related themes that emerged as consequential in understanding the dynamics of people and place in the western Simpson Desert are developed. These are, firstly, cross-cultural interactions during intense and rapid change associated with the construction of the Overland Telegraph Line. Remembered as a technological and political achievement, an agent of modernity from 1872, an unintended outcome of its installation was the incision of a continuous ‘contact zone’ through the country and lives of the local Indigenous people. The thesis looks at how these large-scale processes of change played out locally in a particular place – the repeater station at Charlotte Waters.

Secondly, the thesis looks at interactions of people and place through the lens of water. Water is vital, especially in the desert. What distinct expectations and understandings do different people bring to their relations with water, as revealed through their practices in relation to it?

Thirdly, the thesis considers what makes and maintains connections between places.

While the interactions explored in this work are specific to the particular places and region, the historical implications and the approach are applicable in any place.
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Ideally, this thesis should be read under a full moon, as it was the full moon that used to provide enough light for a ceremony, a dance or a race meeting, and this thesis is a gathering together of many people. Like a festival that could not happen if no one came, it only exists because of their many contributions.

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