

Meeting Country:
Deep Engagement with
Place and Indigenous Culture.



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Dedication

To my mother, Marian Eunice Brown,
who never had the opportunity for education
but supported me in every endeavour.

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Last but not least, I give thanks to Mount Gulaga for her ongoing teachings.

Statement of Authentication

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores place-based experiences of non-Indigenous persons in Australia. It examines the extent to which it is possible for non-Indigenous persons to enter deeply into Indigenous ways of seeing and/or knowing place and what the implications of this may be in terms of personal identity and belonging in Australia today.

The thesis draws upon the emerging cross-disciplinary field of place studies and is embedded in the discursive space of the encounter between Western and Indigenous knowledge systems. The Indigenous concept of *ganma*, meaning ‘meeting place’, the meeting of saltwater and freshwater bodies, is the organising principle by which the encounter is examined.

Because place-based experiences are the central focus of this study, phenomenology has been chosen as the methodological framework that can hold the complexity, multi-layered meaning and ambiguity characteristic of the human experience. What informs this research is a hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry.

The specific methods used to carry through such an approach involve three aspects: observations of and conversations with Aboriginal Yuin Elder Uncle Max Harrison in order to shed light on the cross cultural experience; open-ended phenomenological interviews with four participants who received land-based teachings with the Elder aimed at bringing forth the quality of their experiences; and first person phenomenological research through different forms of textual production that reflect the nature of deep engagement and dialogue with place.

The discussion chapters confirm the complexities of the encounter between two cultures yet demand a rethink of the intercultural space, the *ganma*. A new notion of *ganma* is proposed where a shared sense of place between Indigenous and non-Indigenous persons is occurring in ways hardly articulated to date.

Participants in the research had a powerful and profound embodied experience of Aboriginal culture, of Aboriginal place or country. These outcomes derive not through borrowing from or wholesale appropriation of another culture, but from direct experiencing and through direct dialogue. The nexus of the interchange is revealed to be an exceedingly complex structure. First, place is no blank space - it is inscribed and saturated with meaning. Country continues to exert its influence, inform, evolve and reveal itself. The potency of country is particularly strong when that site is a sacred site. Second, the influence of the Aboriginal Elder, as mediator of the teaching sites, has considerable impact. Third, the individual's own psychic contents are brought to bear in any relationship with place.

It is posited that an unhinging takes place that allows the shift from one mode of experiencing reality, a Western way of inhabiting the world, to another mode, an Indigenous way of being in the world. The venturer into the new *ganma* straddles both worlds, is able to adjust to the transfer of knowledge from one cultural context to another and adopts aspects of both cultures into their new conceptual framework. This new merging of the ancient and the modern incorporates place as inscribed with ancient meanings and place with new meanings and new inscriptions. Narratives of place embody the evolving notion of switching modes of reality to switching modes of being as new ongoing forms that challenge existing cultural explanations.

The integration of an Aboriginal worldview in non-Indigenous persons may be leading towards the development of a new sensitivity that connects us with place, more informed by Indigenous ways of being.

PROLOGUE

GULAGA

Some people get sick of places, get shifty feet, need to move on. I used to be like that, hanging out to explore the new, always ripe for the unknown. That was one story about myself. Now I know another.

It's my story about Mount Gulaga, a mountain on the far south coast of New South Wales I have been visiting twice every year for the last eight years. It is this female mountain that has given me the other story about myself, and a lot more.

Uncle Max says that the mountain always calls you back—mentally, physically, spiritually. This statement of fact slid right over me when I first heard it, like a lot of Uncle Max's teachings. I have come to realise that this is the way teachings work in Aboriginal culture. You don't really get it until you are ready to get it. Or you may get it in different ways at different times, in different places. Actually, it's almost as if it gets you, and holds on, rather the other way around.

I recall the very first time. We had stopped on the drive down south where Uncle Max began telling the stories: 'This is the spot that *koorakarai* wind spirit begins...'. I was taken into a world that was unknown to me, with words from a foreign language, stories that had never touched my ears. The land began to speak, to come alive. When I caught my first glimpse of the mountain, it was as if we had been prepared, bringing with us a conscious awareness of all the stories that connected us with her. She had inched into me already. I was drawing on my own Christian background, long since abandoned, and imagining myself as a pilgrim on a sacred journey to a sacred mountain, the ancient well-trodden path of neophytes paying homage to the Gods.

There had to be a bit of a let-down after such a big build-up. From below, there is no looming magnificent protuberance that takes your breath away when you see Mount Gulaga. Instead, there are three curvaceous humps that coalesce. Yes, very female, but not very 'mountainy'. Captain Cook, as he sailed up the coast, named her Mount

Dromedary after the humped camel. She has been known as that ever since, except for the locals, who have had intimate engagement with her over tens of thousands of years. They just refer to her as ‘Gulaga’ or ‘Creation Mountain’.

When you begin the climb, though, you realise she is one heck of a mountain after all. I puffed and panted and stopped, and stopped again to get my breath in what would have to be called a ‘strenuous’ climb. Sweaty, pooped, red-faced, wet-clothed arrival. Maybe that was my first teaching: never underestimate the mountain.

If you can ignore the body aches and groans every now and then, you start to feel her as you climb. You smell her pungent breath, hear her inhabitants, you sense her tugging you up, willing you to push yourself as some small sign of worthiness.

I’ve often seen a white-breasted sea eagle circling the mountain. Uncle Max says there are two that guard her rocky son, Belangubra, close by. I watch out for them now. There are the metallic-sounding bellbirds on the lower slopes that you soon leave behind for the odd dirt-scraping, tail-poised lyrebird or tiny, trembling leaf-burrowing marsupial mouse. Sometimes you need to bend down, be ever so still for a long time, for a really long time, if you really want to see things, take it all in. I always try to be in silence as I walk up, and encourage others to do the same. I believe this is the way to begin to deepen into this mountain. I think even on that initial visit, I sensed she was watching me.

The track snakes around the mountain, over and over again—very disorienting, so I never can tell exactly how far it is to go to the top; well, not actually the top, but the saddle, about three-quarters of the way up. The soils change in the snaking, from soggy, slippery orange clays on the moist, shaded southern side to hard, dry, brittle grey sandy ones on the west; likewise, the vegetation alters as you go higher and swing around: big yellow box beauties interspersed with groves of spotted gums. And the rocks, the big, unmistakable granite tors that leap out of the mist as if they expected you and hint at something for which you could never be prepared.

I have never been to the mountain on my own, even though I have been given permission to do so. I go always accompanied by an Elder, the Yuin Elder, Uncle Max Harrison. This just feels the right way to do it. It is Yuin country in which Gulaga holds sacred significance. She now holds sacred significance for me, too. When we go to the mountain, Uncle Max inducts us in the ways of thousands of years—through ceremony, through teachings, and through respect. I have white ochre daubed on my face, I place a red headband around my forehead, I am announced to the ‘Old Fellas’, the spirits of the mountain who guard the site. We tread warily.

There is not a lot I can tell you about what goes on for me on the mountain, I mean in the actual sacred sites themselves. I am wary, too, of speaking this. Most climbers pass them by, have no idea they are there. There are things that can be said and things that cannot be. How to know the difference? Well, spirit lets me know, right up front. Photos, for example, will sometimes not turn out. Tape recordings have come out blank, even when I made the checks to see that the equipment all was working fine. Journal articles about the mountain got lost in the Internet ‘black hole’. It took me a few times to register that these mishaps were no coincidence, were deliberate, and were not to be taken lightly. They were warnings to heed, advice about what was appropriate and what was not, and what could and could not be done with certain information. I think this is what is meant by the power of a mountain.

I have been learning this new language for some time now and staying alert to the world of meaning, of knowledge invested in the seemingly ordinary or the not-so-ordinary.

Another thing I have learnt about Aboriginal teachings is that silence in relation to knowledge is a good thing, unlike the Western intellectual ‘blurt’ tradition. To keep one’s silence maybe preserves the integrity of the site, the integrity of the knowledge lodged there, the integrity of my own experiences. Maybe I do not wish to dissipate anything of the strength of that site, dilute it with words. But there are some things I can say.

Gulaga has insinuated herself into my being. She lodges in my chest cavity, maybe even in the chambers of my heart. She calls to me from this place, speaks my name,

summons me through pulling on the white quartz umbilical cord that still connects her island and rock children to her. She is a Birthing Mountain, a Creation Mountain. She somehow birthed me from that very first time. Not that I have any idea what this means, but I have a few hints. At times, I dream of her. I often ask myself, does she ever dream of me?

The very final teaching site on the mountain enacts something that had a profound effect on me right from the beginning. We are instructed to place a small rock on a large rock mound that is referred to as 'The Rocks of the Future'. Uncle Max then states that we are now, having been taken through all of the teaching sites, custodians of the mountain—we belong to her, and are responsible for her. Now, I am not quite sure how this is to be lived out, especially for those of us 'whities', in relation to a sacred Aboriginal site, but it is the mountain herself that knows, and it is up to me to enact this, in whatever way feels right and respectful.

It is she—that 'possum-coated mist woman'—who chooses to visit me, just as I visit her. One day, I even saw myself in my mind, resting my hands on one of the sacred rocks on which we do a particular ceremony. I enacted the same ceremony, sent off a blessing with *koorakarai* wind spirit.

Time and time again, the same sites, the same teachings, the same Elder who imparts them. I never tire of this; in effect, the teachings are constantly refreshed, enlivened and expanded. And my reception of them is totally different each time. Some small aspect of a teaching may stand out with new meaning. Or a teaching that I had never noticed before reveals itself. Or there may be light shed on some other teaching, strengthening or reinforcing it. It is a process of continual unfolding.

I wonder about all this, and about my relationship with not just this mountain, but with all mountains, all places, all country. As white woman on this ancient land, I seek to find my respectful place. Perhaps the mountain is my guide. Perhaps this, too, is a process of constant unfolding.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1. The Nature of the Research

This is a thesis about deep engagement with place, and deep engagement with Indigenous wisdom.

I am interested in the relationship between humans and place. In particular, I seek to understand the nature of engagement with place and how we express such an engagement. To enter into relationship, any relationship, involves response, dialogue, reciprocity, perhaps even intimacy. I want to develop understanding of how we can create an intimacy of relationship with place.

The research is strongly informed by Indigenous ways of knowing, gained through research into Australian Aboriginal culture, history and spirituality, and also through knowledge gained experientially over the last eight years in my exposure to the teachings of an Aboriginal Elder and Senior Lawman, Uncle Max Harrison (Dulumunmum) from the Yuin country the far south coast of New South Wales. Thus, this research is also cross-cultural in that I wish to examine the response of non-Indigenous people to the teachings on the land of an Indigenous Elder. What implications may this type of cross-cultural experience have for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians?

In addition, I would like to ask what the implications are of a deeper connectedness with the natural world: are we able to develop an ecological consciousness, an ethic of living that moves towards Indigenous ways of respect, humility, and responsibility through relationship to the whole of creation?

Because I am primarily interested in depth engagement with place, it is people's actual place-based experiences that are the central focus of this study: both my own experience of deep engagement with place and the experience of others in place, as mediated through the teachings of an Aboriginal Elder.

Phenomenology is the research methodology that focuses directly on lived experience, which attunes to the experience itself and seeks its essence. Using my own deep engagement with place, in first-person phenomenological research, I produce a description of the qualities and characteristics of my own direct first-hand experiences. When I research with others, I look to their lived experience of receiving Indigenous teachings through a phenomenological approach using their descriptions gained through interviews after the event.

In order to understand the meaning and significance of the lived experience, I also look to hermeneutics. This is the task of interpreting and meaning-making. Due to my interest in personal and cultural meaning, I am involved in a hermeneutic practice of deep engagement with place. To derive understanding about my own and others' concrete lived experiences, I need to uncover the meaning structures contained within those experiences.

Hence, this research is a hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry.

The research questions I ask are:

1. How do we engage with place? What is the nature of this engagement and how is this expressed? What is the quality of the relationship developed?
2. What does this say about who we are, our place in this land, and in the world?
3. What are the consequences of a deep sense of connectedness with place? Is there a new sensibility that connects us with place, more informed by Indigenous ways of being?

More specifically, I want to know:

1. What is the nature of my own experience of engagement with place, and how is this expressed?
2. What is the experience of non-Indigenous persons receiving land-based teachings from an Indigenous Elder?

3. To what extent is it possible for non-Indigenous persons to enter deeply into Indigenous ways of seeing/knowing place, and what are its implications?

There are three types of participants in this body of research:

- a) Uncle Max in conversation with me about the nature of his place-based teachings;
- b) four research participants who have experienced Uncle Max's teachings in various places on the south coast of NSW; and
- c) myself engaged in first-person phenomenological research: this involves a very detailed examination of my first-hand experience of a deep engagement with place that occurs over several sites in Australia.

The benefits of such an inquiry seem particularly relevant in Australia at this time. In a post-colonial multicultural country, non-Indigenous Australians are grappling with issues of identity. Aboriginal Australians can teach us much about this land, about relationship with country, about spirituality, about the intelligence of nature.

Perhaps this research can model ways of developing our own individual relationship with this land and lead towards the development of an ecological consciousness, an ethic of living that moves towards Indigenous ways of respect, humility and responsibility through relationship. The value of such outcomes goes far beyond Australia, and has implications world-wide in this time of planetary ecological devastation.

This research project has both educational and cultural aims. In focusing on a deep engagement with place, I am inquiring into the learning process that occurs through the place itself, as well as through exposure to wisdom imparted through Indigenous teachings. How do Westerners learn about deep connectedness with place? How can the experience be expressed, integrated and applied?

Sense of place studies often fail to include an embodied response to place. I hope to contribute to this body of research through experientially-based research that places the experiencing body as central to the study.

Culturally, the research project is an in-depth exploration of inter-cultural exchange that has relevance to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Australia. It should also contribute to the body of cross-cultural studies in general, and open up ways of dealing with different cultural understandings.

2. Personal Context

I now provide a personal context for the thesis through narratives that locate the research in my personal experiences. These stories shed light on the source of my own sense of place and give the grounding to my research. The first scene (*Hot, fresh stolen bread*) is replete with sights, sounds and smells that identify the memories of my early life and hint at what was to become a lifelong urge to merge with the natural world, as described in the second scene (*My sense of place*). In the third scene (*Awareness of Indigenous place*), I explore my first exposure to Indigenous sense of place.

a. Hot, fresh stolen bread

I am ten years of age. My short legs straddle this chunky pony. It is early morning as I ride along the beach. I know the smells of the salty air. I breathe in seaweed, horse sweat, fresh morning air. I always take the short cut via the beach, hope it is low tide so Thunder can gallop hard on the glistening mineral sand. We have no time to waste. My legs feel sticky against this moving, breathing body. He gallops hard and I hold on hard with clenched mane. Everything blurs in this moment. There is no more horse, rider, sky, sea. It is all one.

This is all the world I have known. All the world I have ever wanted. Me and my pony on the beach. Gritty orange sand, deep-footed imprints, foam that clings to the shoreline and drips from Thunder's body.

It is my job to get the freshly baked bread from our local town, and deliver it home in time for cut school lunches. The Skillion rises up before me, big landmark of my home. The smells in the bakery are almost too much. I have been given just the right amount

of money for one loaf of bread, dig the change out of my pocket, and wish I had the money to devour the whole row of steaming out-of-this-world loaves.

Thunder waits patiently outside. He knows what is afoot. Can smell the loaves too. I jump on his slippery back and urge him home, mindful of the time. No way. He refuses to budge and keeps craning his head back to me. I know what his ploy is, say no, no, mum will kill me, push him forward a few steps with eager heels. Stops again. Looks back at me with eyes more eager than my heels. I yield, know I will blame him for my weakness, my lateness, the tainted bread. Know it will make no difference. I am in trouble. That's for sure.

We eat it from the inside out. Soft balls of steaming white dough scooped from hard outer crust. The smells could have deceived me, made me realise that the taste is a long way short of the smell. Nup. Even better! Maybe I think mum will not notice the hollowness, maybe she will be a little forgiving if I have left something of the original full-loaf perfection. My mind is a whirr of guilt and excuse and ecstasy. There is one soft doughy lump for Thunder, then one for me. And so it goes, all the way home. Very slowly, the obstinate dig in the heels, the moans of protest, the yielding, the savouring of each mouthful, both of us.

Absolutely delicious. Absolutely worth it. Absolutely terrifying to get home.

b. My sense of place

I return to my home on the Central Coast of NSW, and the smells of the bread, Thunder's sweat, the sea, are just as vivid and inviting as they were all those years ago. It is as if I am digging those fingers back into the soft hot dough, digging those fingers into Thunder's mane, digging those fingers back into that place.

I had no knowledge then of the many black fingers that had already dug into that very landscape. No idea that the distinctive landmark of the Skillion, in all its childhood pervasiveness, had an importance to those locals far beyond anything articulated by the white newcomer fingers. There were black shadows only, remnants of another time,

shell grits of middens that we dug up and had no idea about. To my pony and me, this was literally all there was—the two of us and the sea.

Those times when I felt totally merged with my horse, with this world, were few and far between. Perhaps it was my first experiencing of a unitive state, a spirituality that grew big enough to include me and the places I intensely lived in, rather than one enclosed in four walls with a cross.

Comment [RG1]: Query 'experience'?

A state of separateness from nature was more the everyday experience, normalised by a culture that took this as a given. Many years later, adult and having borne two children, the acute sensing of my separateness begat an intense longing for merging. I began exploring ways of crossing the interface, to find a way 'to merge and mate with the spirit of this world' (Prechtel 1998, p. 51). This intense longing had become a craving, gnawing through every cell in my body.

I recall when it first needed to find expression: I was on an isolated beach on the far north coast of New South Wales. The cusp of an incipient sand dune, created through high tide deposition the night before, drew me to it. And all I wanted to do was draw it into me. I'm not sure if it was related to the 'untouchedness' of the dune or its exquisite colour of soft flesh bordered by fringes of grey. I do know it was something to do with the shape itself. I kept circumambulating it as if magically it would invade my being. I then lay on it, crawled on it, around it. The frustration of my inability to imprint this form onto my being was actually physically painful.

The only similar feeling I could equate with this was a desire around food and a desire around sex. Imbibing food is certainly a means of taking something inside my body, but once chewed, broken down and swallowed, disappears with hardly a trace or the trace is so many hours down the track, that any association between the two goes unnoticed.

The sexual act, on the other hand, or a desire for sexual penetration, is a little more tangible and associative. The physical act of taking something into my body in this way is the closest I know of merging with that other being. And it is this actual merging that I was wanting to happen with the land.

How to ingest this other world, to blur our boundaries and so create a confluence?

Some years later, I pleaded and begged a friend to allow me to paint on her body. This was to be my first coming together of human body/earth body in such a concrete form. Her breasts were hills, rivers meandered across her waist and poured down her legs; her pubic hair became tufty tree roots; thicker roots bent over bony hips; the trunk powered up through the centre of her body; branches pushed out towards protruding scapula. The satisfaction that poured through me during and after this extraordinary experience was close to what I desired. Not it, but close.

Over many weeks and months, I drew human body after human body, all of them female, and all delineated by contour lines. I was mapping the human body through the normal Western tools of mapping landscapes: contour lines. This was not such an unusual way of doing it, considering I had a degree in Earth Sciences. My bodies exemplified that human body/earth body confluence and its expression in a creative form. It was this that provided some measure of relief from the gnawing of longing. Somehow, this process was satiating the longing, yet still feeding it. My relationship with the earth, both the living, non-living aspects of it, was changing. The change was coming, and was needing to come even more so, through my body. And this body was female.

My research explores the nature of this relationship with the earth. I want to develop an intimate relationship with the natural world that is expressed through a creative, embodied response. I want to know how others experience their own relationship with the natural world and what type of responses they have.

c. Awareness of Indigenous place

In my childhood account, I have mentioned the looming presence of the physical landmark known as the Skillion. Not a mountain, not a hill, more than a big cliff, it towered over the little town of Terrigal as a sentinel. We rolled down it at night, tourists loved to climb it (and not roll down it), and the locals accepted it as just a part of the scene of the local area. No one ever mentioned its Aboriginal associations, let alone any

Aboriginal associations in general. There were no Aboriginal people in that area still alive (none that we knew of, anyway), no traces of their thriving culture that European settlement had eclipsed, no Aboriginal history taught at school or mentioned outside school. I presumed they lived elsewhere in Australia, like the deserts in Central Australia that we so readily sketched with the aid of our Commonwealth Atlas. Australia was a white country, a Commonwealth country presided over by the Queen of England, and proudly so!

I would be typical in that I had no direct association with any Aboriginal person until well into my middle age. However, two things stand out in my high school years: one was the first Aboriginal strike in the Northern Territory—the Gurindji people and the birth of Aboriginal land rights. Somehow, this captured my imagination and opened a closed world of ignorance concerning the plight of Aboriginal people. The second instance was my mother's membership of an organisation to assist Aboriginal kids gain education in the cities by living with white families. Her zeal for this cause, as in every community task she applied herself, was not what I remember. I most recall the day she dropped out of the organisation, probably five years down the track. She announced that she had an overwhelming feeling that what she was doing, what the organisation was doing, was not right. 'Kids should stay with their families, with their culture', she said. And that was it. *Fini!* The Aboriginal Children's Welfare League must have got as much of a shock as I did. It was her realisation, out of who knows where, and the nature of that realisation, that jolted me and made me think more about what whites had done or were doing on this land to those people.

Thus, it was that my deep abiding with the natural world should at some stage bring me into direct contact with those whose deep abiding on this land, Australia, is timeless. If it were a longing to be taken in by the earth, then who better to induct me into this land than those who knew it intimately?

Enter Uncle Max, teacher and friend, who would open up this country for me and many others through land-based teachings. Indigenous understandings shucked open the oyster shell of country and revealed to me the pearl of insight into another world of being, a deeper engagement with country than that possible to date. If my experience was so

profound, then did others react similarly? The nexus of these two seemingly disparate worlds—the Indigenous world and the non-Indigenous world—fascinated me as a worthy phenomenon to investigate. Yet what was also to be entailed was the painful task of facing up to my white heritage, the white legacy inflicted on Aboriginal people on this land, still enacted today. Is this the journey all whites have to make in order to be accepted on this land, in order to not be eternal outsider, but becoming insider?

The streams I have chosen to follow in the pursuit of the questions outlined above provide the catchment area of my landscape of deep engagement with place and deep engagement with Indigenous culture.

3. Map of the Thesis

In the Literature Review (Chapter Two) I have chosen to organise the literature using an Aboriginal notion, that of *ganma*, meaning the meeting of the waters, freshwater and saltwater. *Ganma*, as a Yolgnu concept of eastern Arnhem Land, literally means the place of revitalised waters, the place of richness and diversity of the estuary where freshwater meets the sea (Watson 1989, p. 5). In adopting this notion, I am able to insinuate an alternative way of thinking about the world rather than just that of a Western template.

The relationship of humans with the natural world provides the backdrop for an overview of Western and non-Western traditions. The literature review demonstrates that traditional Indigenous intimacy of connection to land and the sacred nature of this relationship contrasts with the present state of Western civilization's removal from the natural world. The question arises as to whether it is possible for a non-Indigenous person to experience this way of being in the world. I then turn to the literature examining Australia and, briefly, the way white Australians have engaged with the land and notions of identity that have issued from this place. The Indigenous relationship with country, as described by mostly Indigenous voices, provides the blueprint of a deep engagement with place. When we look to models of Western depth engagement with place, the scholarship concerned with phenomenology and place has relevance, especially those aspects of phenomenology dealing with embodiment.

Given the complexities of engaging deeply with place and engaging deeply with another culture, Chapter Three, Research Methodology, shows how phenomenology and hermeneutics provide an adequate vehicle for a rich and multi-textured account of lived experience. Phenomenology aims to get to the heart of the experience, whereas the hermeneutic practice seeks to understand the meaning and significance of the experience. I apply this research approach by recording conversations with and observing Uncle Max. This builds a contextual foundation for interviewing four non-Indigenous people who have taken part in land-based teachings with Uncle Max (third-person phenomenology). I also explore my own depth experiences in place (first-person phenomenology).

Chapter Four, Conversations and Observations of an Aboriginal Elder, takes the reader into the life, teachings and nature of Uncle Max. Since a large part of this research concerns the receiving of teachings by non-Indigenous persons, it is fitting that I start with the Elder who imparts these teachings. I provide a profile of Uncle Max, much of it in his own words, then move on to providing some insight into the nature of my relationship with Uncle Max, which extends over eight years.

This leads into the section ‘Conversations with Uncle Max’, a casual and relaxed encounter that flows like a river meandering across a gentle floodplain, taking in various topics in this cross-cultural dialogue. However, its smooth nature should not disguise the import of the knowledge being discussed, the strength of the Indigenous teaching lineage and the insights of the Elder himself.

After having a better understanding of who the Elder is, what and how he teaches, the reader is taken into the first-hand experiences of participants who have been exposed to Uncle Max’s teachings on sacred sites in the chapter entitled Third-Person Phenomenological Research (Chapter Five). I have named each section after that person, such as Rowena’s Story, or Michael’s Story, as narrative holds strong sway in the recounting of these powerful experiences.

Indigenous teachings have profoundly influenced my own experiences in place. There are four pieces that comprise Chapter Six, First-Person Phenomenological Research.

My own embodied creative response to place is at the heart of the experience, and I present a multi-textured account of my own deep engagement with place through narrative, art, dance/movement, song, image, and Indigenous knowledge. The unification of all of the pieces is through the metaphor of the journey of exploration of white woman on this land, to find her place, her belonging.

The results of the research as articulated through Uncle Max, third person and first person phenomenology (Chapters Four, Five and Six), reveal an intimacy of relationship between people and the way they inhabit the world. The meaning that stems from these actual experiences, the hermeneutic aspect of the research, is discussed in Chapters Seven and Eight.

In Meaning-Making 1 (Chapter Seven), I present the discussion of the first-person phenomenological accounts before the third-person phenomenology, reversing the order in which they were initially introduced. Beginning with myself and my own accounts feels the appropriate place to commence the meaning-making process, like a rippling-out effect from the centre to incorporate Uncle Max and participants in my research, building on the meaning of the research.

I return to the notion of *ganma* in Meaning-Making 2 (Chapter Eight), drawing together pertinent streams of discussion that were opened up in the previous chapter with those of the Literature Review. With insight gained from the wider meaning-making process, I re-examine the *ganma* notion with 'revitalised' comprehension, and discuss an emerging identity and belonging in Australia. This nascent identity is hinted at through my final piece of writing in the Afterword, a personal journey of belonging strongly influenced by Uncle Max's insistence on *walkin' the land together and reconciling back with Mother Earth*.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Introduction

Let us set the scenes for the research. There are three enactments: the first scene is on a rock platform, South Coast, NSW. A woman alone is moving with white cloth, on the rocks, with the water. She is white woman in Australia, developing a deep engagement with place. She moves, she sings, she writes, she paints this place and her relationship with it. Second scene: the same white woman travels through country, sometimes on her own, sometimes in the presence of an Aboriginal Elder. She enters deeply into country, and country deeply into her. Scene three: An Aboriginal Elder sits on the ground surrounded by a group of non-Indigenous Australians, including the white woman. He is teaching them about the land, about his culture, on the land. This group of whites, men and women, are very interested to learn from an Elder how to engage deeply with this land and with his culture. The Elder has a willingness to share his teachings with those beyond his own mob, to impart Indigenous understanding to whitefellas. A simple coming together.

What is it that all scenes share? Place/country and deep engagement with it, and the Indigenous presence. Aboriginal people have storied this land, have sung this land, have painted this land, have danced this land since the beginning. Whites are newcomers to this land. Place/land/country is pivotal to the engagement. All scenes interpenetrate.

As a white Australian woman, I have a strong desire to connect deeply with the earth. Whites in Australia today want to know who they are, what it means to be Australian, to feel more at home on this land. Blacks too are struggling to articulate identity in the face of 200 years of settler colonisation.

Let us narrow the lens for a moment to focus on the scene between an Aboriginal Elder and white persons on Australian soil. We are witnessing a phenomenon that has been rarely studied and little understood, yet has persisted through ongoing cross-cultural

contact: the desire of certain white Australians to learn about this land and themselves through contact with Indigenous knowledge, and the desire of certain Aboriginal persons to share their knowledge with whites. What may come of this encounter? Is it possible for a non-Indigenous person to engage deeply with this place, especially through receiving Indigenous teachings? There is a tradition of sharing across cultures, the smaller voices to the larger narrative of white brutality and expropriation. So why examine this now? Is there any new light to be shed on the nature of the encounter? The seeming straightforwardness of the drama belies the complexity of the encounter. For here we enter contested space.

The following four quotes seem to mirror something of the nature of this contested space and hint at the problematic:

Sheridan:

White Australians' exclusion of Aboriginals has been ... cruel and our self constitution as 'Australian'—an identity, a unity, whose meaning derives from its discursive displacement of the 'other' race, just as its power as a nation state derives from the appropriation of Aboriginal land (Sheridan 1998, p. 78).

Carey:

[Oscar] drifted up the Bellingen River like a blind man up the central aisle of Notre Dame. He saw nothing. The country was filled with sacred stories more ancient than the ones he carried in his sweat-slipping leather Bible. He did not even imagine their presence (Carey 1998, p. 492).

Perkins:

My expectation of a good Australia is when white people would be proud to speak an Aboriginal language, when they realise that Aboriginal culture and all that goes with it, philosophy, art, language, morality and kinship, is all part of our heritage. And that's the most unbelievable thing of all, that it's all there

waiting for us all. White people can inherit 40 000 or 60 000 years of culture, and all they have to do is reach out and ask for it (Perkins 2000).

Read:

Leave the spirits to the people who made them or were made by them. Let the rest of us find the confidence in our own physical and spiritual belonging in this land, respectful of Aboriginality but not necessarily close to it. Let's intuit our own attachments to country independently of Aboriginals. We can belong on the landscape, in the landscape, or irrelevantly to the landscape. We don't all have to belong to each other. To understand that is a step to belonging (Read 2000, p. 204).

There is a whole history of black–white encounter shaping the contested space, giving it a multifaceted and intensely problematic morphology. This land is Australia, stolen from its black owners by the white intruders. The drama outlined above through these quotes is an intersection of two cultures replete with the complexity of such an engagement over 200 years. I would presume to narrow the focus by posing the question as to what extent this meeting place is cross-cultural? What is it that has been thought about, written about, such an encounter?

To tease out the nature of this contested space, the Literature Review needs to immerse itself right in the middle of the space, to become actor and audience simultaneously. It needs to ask some of the following questions: What does it mean to be white in Australia? What does it mean to be black in Australia? What happens then in the meeting place between black and white? What is it that each brings to the meeting? And what of the relevance of the land that each claims as his/her own? Can any white person in Australia today develop his or her own relationship with this country? Is a shared sense of place possible?

2. The *Ganma* Metaphor

For the purpose of this Literature Review, I have chosen a powerful metaphor for the meeting place, one that has been enunciated by Yolngu people of Arnhem Land in the context of Western encounter with Indigenous culture: *ganma* is the confluence of two very distinctive bodies of water, one saltwater (Western knowledge) and the other freshwater (Yolngu knowledge) (Watson and Chambers 1989, p. 5). In Arnhem Land, such a confluence creates a common and distinctive landscape. As Yolngu Elder Raymattja Marika has explained:

Ganma is firstly a place; it is an area within the mangrove where saltwater coming in from the sea meets the water coming down from the stream. Ganma is the still lagoon. The water circulates silently underneath... The swelling and retreating of the tides and the wet season floods can be seen in the two bodies of water. Water is often taken to represent knowledge in Yolngu philosophy. What we see happening in the school is a process of knowledge production where we have two different cultures, Balanda [whites] and Yolngu, working together. Both cultures need to be presented in a way where each one is preserved and respected. This theory is Yirrija (Marika 1999, p. 7).

The interface of two vastly different bodies of water, just like the interface between two vastly different cultures, often creates great turbulence and a clear line of demarcation. In the case of the waters, a line of foam often initially differentiates the two; with respect to cultures, we usually refer to that demarcation as a cultural divide. In either case, turbidity is characteristic of the meeting. Hence, we could easily refer to *ganma* as a contested place/space.

However, such a delineation may be too narrow, limiting the confluence to notions of dispute. Yolngu people know the richness of the interchange of the place in which the river meets the sea. It is here that fish and plant life abound. A search for the Western etymological roots may assist this clarification further: the Latin origin of contest/contested is '*contendere*', meaning 'to stretch oneself with all one's strength'; several derivatives are '*intendere*', meaning 'to stretch into or towards, to intend, a

reshaping'; '*intentus*', 'to be attentive, to be forcible and eager', and '*tener*', which is 'tender, both physically (especially young, growing things) and morally. Tendril and tendon derive here' (Partridge 2000, pp. 118).

So here we have an expanded and rich notion of the contested space. While not undermining the force, strength and energy of the conflicting bodies, as stated in the idea of stretching oneself with all one's strength, in the contest, there is immediately present 'intention', 'attention' and 'tenderness'. I intend to vigorously stretch taut this notion of *ganma*, like a tightly stretched tendon or ligament, and to take it as far as I can without it breaking or losing shape/credibility. Yet I also need to hold strongly to a sensitivity and tenderness towards the meeting place, one that yields its complexity rather than obscuring it through tightness/constriction.

Saltwater is sometimes classified as 'hard water'; likewise, freshwater named 'soft water'. The boundary between them should represent a reshaping of the two worlds, through the confluence. Brackish water is the result of that confluence, the mixing of the saltwater with the freshwater. Yolngu believe that in the joining of the two cultures, black (freshwater) and white (saltwater), into the one, 'the forces of the streams combine and lead to deeper understanding and truth' (Watson 1989, p. 5). In fact, *ganma* constitutes a 'collaborative conceptual space' that goes far beyond the notion of one being absorbed into the other—it is about 'conceptualising spaces of recognition and exchange' (Slater 2006, p. 31).

I take the words of Yolngu Elder Marika as instructive in informing this approach towards the meeting of the two cultures and the nature of the thesis:

I want you to know this and think back how the Aboriginal people and European, or, in other words, black and white of Australia came to know each other. Can we work together, hand by hand, side by side, more than what we are now? In work together, not only just like we are now, but know each other, hand to hand, side by side. We had enough learning about the English, about the schooling. How about the Balanda (Europeans or non Aboriginal) for a change, to come and

learn more about the Yolngu culture or Yolngu life? (Marika in Isaacs 1995, p. 17).

I am aware that my choice of using this guiding metaphor of *ganma* could be criticised as setting up a binary distinction between Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures in Australia. Considerable attention has been paid to the mode of dualistic thinking that has dominated Western thinking since its notable articulation by Descartes. Discourses of feminist scholarship (Butler 1990; Grosz 1994; Massey 1994; Probyn 1993), environmental ethics (Mathews 2005) and modernity/postcolonial projects (Rose 2004; Muecke 2005), to name just a few of those referred to in this text, all have an important focus on the necessity of the dismantling of dichotomous thinking. I am not denying the force of these arguments that tend to reveal the hegemonic stance of such ways of thinking, but my purpose in using this metaphor does not rest solely on a reductionist dialectic argument.

While I am mindful of the pitfalls raised in the intellectual debates, I am more interested in exploring other ways of working with this metaphor, such as that modelled by the Yolngu of Arnhem Land, as a conceptual space, as a 'process of knowledge production' (Marika 1999, pp. 3-9) and by the phenomenologist Bachelard who delights in the serious play of contradictions: 'Like the house of breath, the house of wind and voice is a value that hovers on the frontier between reality and unreality' (Bachelard 1964, p. 60). The *ganma* metaphor allows me to 'hover' between the space of the Indigenous world and that of the Western world, and to view it as a place of possibilities, a place of negotiation, a place of exchange, a place of complexity.

Geertz contributes something to the proposed examination of the contested place. In analysing the nature of culture itself, he draws out the notion of ideology or the system of meaning as being imaginatively installed and therefore crucial to human behaviour (Geertz 1973, p. 45). If culture is thus constituted, then it makes sense to use the imaginative capacity of the *ganma* metaphor to examine what each cultural group brings to the encounter as its system of meaning in the way of a tradition of knowledge that is swept towards the estuary. For one thing, there is a very strong tradition of Western

thought embodied in each white person present that is facing a huge and ancient body of Indigenous knowledge. How does each group relate to place?

3. Saltwater: Western Knowledge

Accepting the representation of saltwater, as Yolngu do, as Western knowledge, I start by examining the Western sense of place and ask what is required to engage deeply with place. It is not 'pure saltwater' that is being expounded here: the insertion of Indigenous knowledge, particularly as it pertains to place, tends to regard this water as brackish, since it is through the juxtaposition of Indigenous with Western that the qualities of each become more identified. The same can be said for the following section on Freshwater. So, what I portray here is predominantly the exposition of a Western sense of place, with insinuations of Indigenous sense of place: freshwater pools in the ocean of sea.

Perhaps more fundamental than the question of what constitutes the Western sense of place would be to ask is it possible to make generalisations about a Western sense of place. To generalise is to appear reductionist, and therefore potentially meaningless, yet there are widespread patterns that can be discerned. Bishop addresses these types of ideas:

It seems to be getting much harder for me to generalise, both because of my own complex and often contradictory array of subjectivities and ways of speaking/writing/listening, and because of being confronted by an often bewildering plurality of place based theories, notions and representations, experiences, sentiments and activities that come under the umbrella of being 'Western'. By the time historical era, personal gender, age, class, culture, ethnicity, religion, personality-type, biography, circumstance and so on are taken into account, as well as the complex questions of interpretation, re-representation and meaning-making, only the broadest of brush strokes are possible (Bishop 2003, p. 103).

The rubric of what constitutes being Western, and hence articulating a Western sense of place, is thus a vexed question. Yet in being Western, it behoves one to find threads that

resonate, demanding one tackle the complexity in order to place ‘self’ in relation to ‘other’. A similar problem confronts in the delineation of an Indigenous worldview. How can one be sufficiently meaningful in the analysis yet also cognisant of the specificities of individual/community disparities? There are multiple ‘Aboriginalities’ in Australia—a daunting task facing the researcher, who needs therefore immerse himself/herself in the distinctiveness of divergent communities while seeking to draw forth similarities. Hence, to speak of ‘traditional’ Aboriginal culture is equally fraught (in fact, perhaps more so due to the charged nature of a non-Indigenous person speaking this) as speaking in a general way of ‘Western’ culture. In both cases, understandably, I may be criticised for being culturally essentialist. In pursuing a Western and Indigenous sense of place, this prickling caveat underlines the discussion. And yet pursue it I must. The picture needs to be painted, if only with the ‘broadest of brush strokes’ as Bishop declares (Bishop 2003, p. 103).

I take my lead from the words of Berndt in relation to the awareness necessary when using such words as ‘tradition’ or ‘traditional’:

People always use the past selectively, whether it is their own past or someone else’s. Even well substantiated ‘facts’ can never be seen in their total context, and the ‘whole truth’ is an elusive and largely relative concept. Interpretations and re-interpretations are inevitable, in written as well as orally and graphically transmitted material. Continuities, dislocations, changing emphases, even definitions of such terms as ‘tradition, traditional’, belong within this dimension. So does the question of knowledge, or information about the past (Berndt 1989, p. 1).

It is impossible to chart here the entire corpus of Western thought on place; however, I can draw out some important ‘streams’ relevant to this particular study. I would like to mention in particular two significant contributors to the field, Casey (1997) and Schama (1995), who have managed, each in their own way, to provide an overview of place that is all-encompassing. Casey, in acknowledging the absolute fundamental nature of place, that ‘to be at all – to exist in any way – is to be somewhere, is to be in some kind of place’ (Casey 1997, p. ix), then proceeds to provide the history of Western thinking

about place in order to ‘thrust the very idea of place, so dormant in modern Western thinking, once more into the daylight of philosophical discourse’ (Casey 1997, p. xi). His is a theory of place articulated through the Western tradition of such philosophers as Kant, Whitehead, Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and Heidegger through to such contemporary exponents as Irigaray, Foucault and Derrida.

On the other hand, Schama is intent on a more practical orientation, a grand opus of landscape history and interpretation based on the inescapable link between culture and nature (Schama 1995, pp. 19). As a specific study of place/cultural relations realised through ‘the inherited landscape [of] myths and memories’ and his own experiences in some of these places, he reclaims the human ‘cultural habits [that have] always made room for the sacredness of nature ... their surprising endurance through the centuries and their power to shape institutions that we still live with’ (Schama 1995, pp. 15, 18). Hence, these two outstanding works with very different emphases valorise the Western human/place relationship and act as either bank of the river through which meander the streams discussed in this section on Western place writing.

a. Separation

There is a considerable body of writing attesting to the separation of individuals in Western society from their natural surroundings and the consequences of such disconnection. The Western philosophical lineage from Descartes on has dichotomised the world into ‘man’ split-off from nature. Dualism, where mind is equated with consciousness and body with nature, firmly enabled the split also between humans and their bodies and the natural world. Berry believes that this articulation of ‘mind and mechanism’ by Descartes has been a decisive act in the history of the human relationship with the planet: ‘In this single stroke he, in a sense, killed the planet and all its living creatures with the exception of the human’ (Berry 1996, p. 410). In terms of a Western sense of place, what has been described here is almost as if the ‘what is not’ preceded and forced the emergence of ‘what is’.

Bateson shared the belief that most of us have lost that sense of unity of the biosphere and humanity. His lifelong search was for the uniting factor, the meta-pattern, ‘the

pattern which connects the crab to the lobster and the orchid to the primrose and all four of them to me. And me to you. And all the six of us to the amoeba in the one direction and the back-ward schizophrenic in another' (Bateson 1979, p. 5).

Jung expressed our cosmic and social isolation as a result of the separation of the modern mind and nature:

Through scientific understanding, our world has become dehumanised. Man feels himself isolated in the cosmos. He is no longer involved in nature and has lost his emotional participation in natural events, which hitherto had a symbolic meaning for him. Thunder is no longer the voice of a god, nor is lightning his avenging missile. No river contains a spirit, no tree means a man's life, no snake is the embodiment of wisdom, and no mountain still harbours a wild animal. His immediate communication with nature is gone forever, and the emotional energy it generated has sunk into the unconscious (Jung 1927, par. 585).

Although I share the basic tenet expressed here regarding our isolation and cut-off state from the natural world, I question Jung's belief that 'our immediate communication with nature is gone forever'. In this thesis, I ask if connectedness can be reclaimed through an embodied response to place or through the facilitation of an Indigenous person's teachings. The history of Western philosophic thought reflects the enduring emphasis on the central problem of human nature as 'the subjectivity with which each individual is aware of the world' (Lawson-Tancred 1986, p. 12). Such a lineage is naturally characterised by anthropocentrism. Modern Western philosophy and psychology contribute to a cult of human obsession with the self, translated on a collective level as an obsession with the human species. If this self is disconnected from the natural world, is desensitised to it, sees it as objective reality, then what may ensue?

b. Ecological crisis of Planet Earth

A backdrop to the area studied has to be the state of the natural world vis-à-vis the impact made by the human species in its infinitesimally short time on this planet. I acknowledge the ecological crisis of planet earth as a 'crisis of our entire civilization',

which may be considered tantamount to ‘a slow collective suicide’ (Gottlieb 1996, p. 8). Over the last fifty years at least, there has arisen a plethora of writing that focuses on this crisis, elucidating such issues as the destruction of wilderness areas, environmental degradation, the extinction of species, global climatic changes, out-of-control human resource consumption, and the devastation of Indigenous communities.

All of these writings have formed an important niche in exhorting the voice of nature while simultaneously berating humans for the damage caused. A sense of despair reverberates like an overtone chant throughout the lands. Suzuki is one strong, constant voice pleading for acknowledgment and change:

In the past century, humanity has undergone a stunning shift in the way we live that has profoundly altered our relationship with the natural world ... As we enter the twenty first century, beset by tremendous disparities of wealth both within and between nations, terror and violence, and a single global notion of economics and progress, the natural world is disappearing at a frightening rate ... But in our infatuation with our technological and economic ‘progress’, we seem blinded to the implications (Suzuki 2002, p. 3).

Mathews states that the ecological crisis ‘is a symptom of a deeper, metaphysical crisis in human consciousness and an accompanying crisis of culture’ (Mathews 2005, p. 8). In the northern hemisphere, a dedication in a book entitled *This Sacred Earth* reads, ‘For all beings who have suffered needlessly because of human folly and injustice: may we remember their pain and change our ways’ (Gottlieb 1996, p. v).

So, as humans, we do need to change our ways. But how to do this? Schama’s project takes a novel tack:

I unequivocally share the dismay at the ongoing degradation of the planet and much of the foreboding about the possibilities of its restoration to good health. The point of *Landscape and Memory* is not to contest the reality of this crisis. It is, rather, by revealing the richness, antiquity and complexity of our landscape tradition, to show just how much we stand to lose. Instead of assuming the

mutually exclusive character of Western culture and nature, I want to suggest the strength of the links that have bound them together (Schama 1995, p. 14).

I, personally, have had to move away from saturation by the negative characterisation of much environmental writing, to a vision that uplifts my spirit and gives me a sense of hope in relation to life on this planet. Perhaps this hope springs from changing the ways we view and explore the natural world, through experiencing deep connectedness in place, in knowing the earth as sacred and the human–nature relationship as epiphany, as sacred communion. For such models, many have turned towards those survivors over aeons who appear to have lived in relatively harmonious relationship with their environment. Such a vision is as old as humanity itself. Such a vision dwells in the core of Indigenous teachings throughout the world, and sets humanity in its rightful place: a synthesis between human and nature.

Shepard looks beyond the history of ideas to develop a psycho-historical-cultural theory that analyses the development of progressive civilizations from hunter-gatherer onward. It is his belief that we humans as a species have progressively become severed, not only from ourselves, but also from the natural world. That loss caused the loss of maturity of the culture and the individual as well. ‘Stuck in adolescent immaturity’ denotes the current state of madness that characterises our world (Shepard 1982, p. 4).

Mathews agrees in acknowledging the significance of the usurping of the hunter-gatherer by civilization defined as a ‘settled way of life’. It ushered in a ‘refusal to live within the terms of the given, as earlier hunter-gatherer societies had by and large done’:

In order to conceive of these new kinds and classes of things, it was necessary to abstract quite radically from the world as it was, to look beneath the appearances to the underlying structures, and then to imagine ways those structures could be reassembled ... At the level of both world and self then, civilization tends to induce a preference for the abstractly imagined over the given, and seeks to substitute the possible for the actual (Mathews 2005, pp. 29–30).

If Mathews has pinpointed a radical abstraction from the world as beginning at that time, Shepard believes how crucial growing up in the natural world is for us both as an individual and as a species. He identifies this as having ‘no adequate earth matrix’ (Shepard 1982, p. 113). This notion has been termed ‘land’s deep imprint’ by Rawlins in the foreword to Shepard’s book, *Nature and Madness*, as the key to ‘biological maturity’ (Rawlins 1982, in Shepard 1982, p. xiii).

I like Shepard’s sharp disclosure of our biological/ecological identity, his declaration of the embodied soul connected to the earth, which fits with the overture of the research. But how exactly does one grow up in the natural world today, and is there no possible substitute for this? If he is right, then there is little hope from breaking out of this state of ‘arrested development’ as a species, since most of the world’s population lives in urban areas today. The sickness that Shepard (1982, p. 124) sees at the base of modern society seems to offer no alternative than to return to that idealised state of the relict tribal people where ‘everyday life (is) inextricable from spiritual significance and affiliation’ (Shepard 1982, p. 6). This is hardly probable or feasible. Perhaps Shepard has idealised this original state of civilization, a little akin to the ‘noble savage’ ideas that permeated literature and the arts when seventeenth and eighteenth century Western colonising nations made initial contact with native populations. This view romanticised and sentimentalised ‘primitives’ as a construct of the ‘other’, and of course removed reality far from them.

There is a real risk here in this work that I, too, may be idealising or romanticising the Aboriginal ‘other’, particularly when speaking of traditional Aboriginal cultures. ‘Traditional’ used in this research refers to those aspects of culture that are more or less implicated in a way of being that predates European invasion. I do not adhere to essentialist claims of one overriding type of traditional culture—there are multiple Aboriginalities that have always characterised Indigenous culture in Australia, yet there are also broad cultural sharings that recognise similarities. In addition, it must be recognised that today no Aboriginal culture remains untouched by settler culture.

c. Indigenous cultures and the natural world

Can Westerners retrieve something of ‘land’s deep imprint’ (Rawlins, in Shepard 1982, p. xiii) through understanding how it is that Indigenous cultures relate to the natural world?

San Roque offers a radical alternative to Shepard in terms of how humans can still access that natural world. He has lived and worked extensively with Aboriginal people in Central Australia, and takes their modelling of relationships with the natural world to posit a new way of understanding the nature of consciousness. He contends that access to the natural world is made through working via other levels of consciousness that are both literally within oneself and within the earth. He draws on the notion of the ‘lizard brain’ and Jung’s declaration of a place holding consciousness. In a conversation based on a Sense of Place Colloquium in Central Australia between Cameron and himself, he constantly alludes to an engagement with place that is not limited to our rational one-sided brain, but engages via the ‘lizard brain’ level:

I see the [Colloquium participants] men’s evening campfire story enactments based upon the behaviours of possum, frog, hawk and company as being engaged with the same project of allowing the participants to find some way of sliding consciousness down the neural pathways to the early or so called primitive brain which we share with lizard and his relatives (Cameron and San Roque 2003, p. 82).

I presume he is referring to the triune brain theory advanced by MacLean in the early 1950s (Kheper 2006). This controversial theory designates that three distinct brains have successively evolved—the reptilian, the limbic/mammalian, and the neocortex. MacLean stated that the three brains operate like ‘three interconnected biological computers, [each] with its own special intelligence, its own subjectivity, its own sense of time and space and its own memory’ (Kheper 2006). Thus MacLean’s model of the brain sees one of the three brains capable of taking over from the others; for instance, the limbic emotional brain can rule the mental realm of the modern neocortex.

Cameron, in his response to San Roque's introduction of this notion of lizard brain, teases out exactly how it may be activated:

So, it is not as if our European 'lizard brains' are completely inactive; they are just cordoned off from our normal waking consciousness and relegated to the unconscious. From that perspective, it is less a matter of introducing new material or new consciousness than it is finding a skilful way to break down the barriers that have been erected within the consciousness of the average Western person (Cameron and San Roque 2003, p. 87)

If this triune brain theory holds credibility, and San Roque's notion of 'sliding consciousness down the neural pathways to the early or so-called primitive brain' (Cameron and San Roque 2003, p. 82) is feasible, it certainly demands a rethink of how we engage deeply with place in a way that does not necessitate returning literally to a hunter-gatherer society, but also indicates that 'land's deep imprint'. This is still a reality that can be accessed, as Aboriginal people testify. Shepard's representation of the hunter-forager as 'this Me in a non Me world' as 'the most penetrating and powerful realisation in life' (Rawlins, in Shepard 1982, p. xiii) may help identify a congruency between Western and Indigenous notions of place:

The mature person in such a culture is not concerned with blunting that dreadful reality but with establishing lines of connectedness or relationship ... a lifelong task of formulating and internalising treaties of affiliation. The forms and terms of that relationship become part of a secondary level of my identity, the background or gestalt (Shepard 1982, p. 34).

It is interesting that Shepard looked at Australian Aboriginal culture as part of his research on relict tribal people:

Individual and tribal identity are built up in connection with widely separate places and the paths connecting them. Different places are assimilated or internalised. They become distinct though unconscious, elements of the self, enhanced by mythology and ceremony, generating a network of deep emotional

attachments that cements the personality. Throughout life, those places have a role in the evocation of self and group consciousness. They are mnemonic: integrated components of a sacred history and the remembered and unconsciously felt past. The whole of the home range becomes a hierophantic map, a repository of the first creation that parallels and overlies individual history (Shepard 1982, p. 24).

Although some of his notions are distinctively American ('the home range'), I take three elements that I believe may have deep relevance in investigating an Indigenous and Western sense of place. These are: the internalising or assimilation of places; the role those places have in the evocation of self and group identity through such assimilation; and the construction of a sacred history from these places.

Individual relationships with place, or what has been referred to as 'place responsiveness' (Cameron 2001), 'place attachment', or more broadly as 'a place-sensitive society' (Plumwood 2000), has been well researched and written about by nature writers, and dominates place-based literature. What is new here is this notion of ingesting a place. I have not heard it expressed in this way to date. It whispers of an identity that is place-based. I want to explore this slant through the research, as I sense its significance as a way of understanding both my own relationship with place and that of the intersection of Western and Indigenous sense of place. It seems more than a 'secondary level of identity' claimed by Shepard—should it not be defined as primary identity, rather than 'background gestalt'? Yet, in the deep soundings that are evoked in such a relationship with the land, it is very far removed from the Western experience of place declared thus far, let alone notions of identity. Granted, there is no tribal identity, no cultural container to express through myth and ceremony, this notion of place that Shepard speaks about. But is it possible for Westerners to move towards such a relationship with place, where place becomes 'internalised', hence leading towards a sense of identity or 'evocation of self' that binds one into a 'network of deep emotional attachments'? Could this not lead to 'land's deep imprint' (Rawlins, in Shepard 1982, p. xiii)?

There is a fine teasing out by Shepard of the nature of the different styles of consciousness of each successive evolutionary stage that is a fine and unique contribution to sense of place scholarship:

Quality of attention means cultural and habitual differences in the style of day to day hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting and touching the surroundings... What people notice, what they expect to encounter, the mix of senses used, even the quality of their inattention and disregard all reveal something about the kind of world it is for them (Shepard 1982, p. 21).

His attention to such factors as 'quality of attention' and 'significance of place' have relevance to my work in that they tell of a deeper engagement with place than cursory statements often replicated in traditional examination of humans in their environment:

These early farming villages were probably much like their hunter forbears in their vigilant sensitivity to sound... All sound is a voice-dynamic, revealing and communicating... Attention to visual cues even more clearly differentiates the hunter from the villager... The hunter was mobile like his prey, the big game animals... The villager did not rove through these extensions of the self; he occupied them. The hunter seemed to inhabit the land body like a blood corpuscle, while the farmer was centred in it and could scan it as a whole (Shepard 1982, pp. 21–3).

d. Phenomenology and place

This notion is more redolent of the mode of sensual attentiveness called for by Abram:

I began to see and hear in a manner I never had before ... I became a student of subtle differences: the way a breeze may flutter a single leaf on a whole tree, leaving the other leaves silent and unmoved; or the way the intensity of the sun's heat expresses itself in the precise rhythm of the crickets... It was a power communicated to my senses by the way the shadows of the trees fell at that hour, and by smells that only then lingered in the tops of grasses without being wafted

away by the wind, and other elements I could only isolate after many days of stopping and listening (Abram 1997, p. 20).

Such acuity of attunement to the natural world announces a genre of writing that is not only strongly evocative of the place itself, but exemplifies the role that phenomenology has played in the contemporary enunciation of place. The lineage of phenomenology through such philosophers as Husserl (1960), Heidegger (1967) and Merleau-Ponty (1962) has created a focus on the 'indeterminate field' of 'spontaneously lived experience' (Abram 1997, p. 33). As Merleau-Ponty exhorts, 'we must begin by reawakening the basic experiences of the world ... to return to things themselves is to return to that world which precedes knowledge, of which knowledge always *speaks*' (Merleau-Ponty 1962, pp. viii–ix). It is our own lived experience that reflects the indisputable embeddedness, from a phenomenological viewpoint, in the world:

My life and the world's life are deeply intertwined ... the world and I reciprocate one another. The landscape as I directly experience it is hardly a determinate object; it is an ambiguous realm that responds to my emotions and calls forth feelings from me in turn (Abram 1997, p. 33).

Abram feels that it is natural to turn to phenomenology as a way of understanding the difference between Indigenous and Western cultures, 'for phenomenology is the Western philosophic tradition that has most forcefully called into question the modern assumption of a single, wholly determined, objective reality' (Abram 1997, p. 31). His groundbreaking work, which brings together ecology, Indigenous understanding and phenomenology, provides an important orientation for my work, particularly in examining the interaction between Aboriginal and a Western sense of place.

Yet it is Bachelard who has exposed me to an altogether otherworldly dimension of the depth of the actual phenomenological enterprise. Through his *Poetics of Space*, the world of imagination, meaning and perception are applied to examining how we experience houses as intimate spaces:

A geographer or an ethnographer can give us descriptions of very varied type of dwellings. In each variety, the phenomenologist makes the effort needed to seize upon the germ of the essential, sure, well-being it encloses. In every dwelling, even the richest, the first task of the phenomenologist is to find the original shell (Bachelard 1964, p. 4).

He provides a model of what intimacy can both reveal and hide in its inhabiting of space (Bachelard 1964, p. 47) and restores the poetic voice of the imaginal world to any phenomenological work. This is particularly instructive for my way of engaging with places through the notion of intimacy, and my working with images. Through Bachelard, I have learnt to follow ‘all the psychological elasticity of an image that moves us at an unimaginable depth’ (Bachelard 1964, p. 6) and acknowledge poetry as a ‘commitment of the soul’, wherein ‘a consciousness associated with the soul is more relaxed, less internalized than a consciousness associated with the phenomena of the mind’ (Bachelard 1964, p. xxi).

e. Place writing

The group of nature writers, represented by such writers as Abram (1997), Carson (1962), Dillard (1996), Emerson (1996), Lopez (1986), Muir (1996), and Snyder (1996), are those who are exploring deep connectedness in place. Place-based writing attests to the presence of a vibrant field of emotional energy flowing from relationships with place. This distinctive group, mostly representing a North American tradition, takes on a particular posture in relation to place in nature: that of deep immersion in the sensual immediacy of the lived experience. They also have the ability to transport the reader to that lived experience. The sensuality, integrity and intimacy of place pulsates through the reader as if he/she were there. It is this style that affirms not only my own experience of place, but also dictates how I would like my reader to receive my writing.

Tempest Williams, passionate exponent of wilderness conservation, gives one such utterance:

There is much to absorb and be absorbed by in this sky-biting country. At times, it is disorientating, the Earth split open, rocks standing on their heads, entire valleys appearing as gaping wounds. This is the power and pull of erosion, the detachment and movement of particles of land by wind, water and ice. A windstorm in the desert is as vicious as any force on Earth, creating sand smoke so thick when swirling it is easy to believe in vanishing worlds. The wind and fury subside. A calm is returned but not without a complete rearrangement of form. Sand travels. Rocks shift. The sculpting of sandstone reveals the character of windgate cliffs, sheered redrock walls polished to a sheen over time...In repetition, there is comfort and reassurance (Tempest Williams 2003, p. 260).

Thoreau (1996) is acknowledged as the founding father of this tradition of nature writing (which includes essays, short stories, poetry and novels). It oozes a new language of connection that is at once lyrical and poetic, yet still underlain by a strong ethic of ecological sensibility: 'Hope and the future for me are not in lawns and cultivated fields, not in towns and cities, but in the quaking and impervious swamps' (Thoreau 1996, p. 18). This genre stakes a claim as the voice of nature. It is a voice of wonder and awe and childlike delight; it is the extraordinary in the ordinary; it is placing humanity in its rightful place, as 'a small part of the one great unit of creation' (Muir 1996, p. 28); it is heartfelt in its plea for humans to change their ways. Such a posture is humble, respectful and anything but arrogantly human-centred.

There is another aspect to some of this writing that magnetises me: this is when the experience of nature evokes some spiritual awakening, some 'going beyond the normal' lived response. Emerson describes it as:

Standing on the bare ground—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God (Emerson 1996, p. 26).

Dillard speaks of 'the silence':

The silence is all there is. It is the alpha and the omega. It is God's brooding over the face of the waters; it is the blended note of the ten thousand things, the whine of wings. You take a step in the right direction to pray to this silence, and even to address the prayer to 'World'. Distinctions blur. Quit your tents. Pray without ceasing (Dillard 1996, p. 36).

Since this research involves the recognition of a spiritualised universe, the coming together of spirit and matter, those nature writers who incorporate a spiritual aspect into their experience are of most interest. It may be through an overt association, as in the above quoted, or it may be a more subtle acknowledgment, such as that by Lopez:

I took to bowing on these evening walks. I would bow slightly with my hands in my pockets, toward the birds and the evidence of life in their nests—because of their fecundity, unexpected in this remote region, and because of the serene arctic light that came down over the land like breath, like breathing (Lopez 1986, p. xx).

Lopez bespeaks a reverence to the earth and its creatures. In all of the above examples, the human drops away. Human-centredness ceases. Something else enters. This is the Western exposition that comes quite close to what has been referred to as 'a spirit of place', from the Latin, *genius loci*, meaning the spirit that inhabits a place. Rigby has used this notion in Australian place-based writing as a means to explore 'some of the cultural traditions that might be productively tapped into as we seek to find a new praxis of responsiveness to Australian places' (Rigby 2003, p. 108). Traditional cultures throughout the world seem to share the knowledge of *genius loci*. Suzuki states: 'Traditional cultures live in an animated world. Mountains, forests, lakes, winds and the sun may all have their presiding deities' (Suzuki 1997, p. 189).

This reverence is in much of the literature of place. Is this an ethic that Westerners could move more towards in their place-based relationships? How can it be acquired?

Snyder brings another quality of attention to his relationship with place—that of mindfulness or 'bare attention', as a Buddhist meditative practice that informs his

writing and signals his desire to reclaim a 'poetics of the earth' (Snyder 1996, p. 145). I have found that my own process of deep engagement with place contains a strong element of paying bare attention to self and surroundings in a similar fashion:

I was forging along the crest of a ridge, finding a way between stocky deep red mature manzanita trunks, picking the route and heading briskly on. Crawling.

Not hiking or sauntering or strolling, but crawling, steady and determined, through the woods... This crawl was in late December, and although the sky was clear and sunny, the temperature was around freezing. Patches of remnant snow were on the ground... No way to travel off the trail but to dive in: down on your hands and knees on the crunchy manzanita leaf cover and crawl around between the trunks... You go down, crawl swift along, spot an opening, stand and walk a few yards, and go down again. The trick is to have no attachment to standing; find your body at home on the ground, be a quadruped, or if necessary a snake (Snyder 1996, p. 194).

Such writing seems to evince a soft patina that immediately finds resonance in a soft flesh response in my body. I warm and glow within. I breathe deeply and feel myself sink into this place. I am earthed. I am crawling along the ground with him, smelling the damp compost, wiping the dew from my face. Goose bumps attest to the immediacy of the immersion. It is in this type of embodied response that my work is located. This writing is real, is personal, is visceral. It bleeds. It seems to me to harbour 'land's deep imprint' (Rawlins, in Shepard 1982, p. xiii).

In these writings that mostly speak of wilderness, of nature aware of itself, the teasing out of what it means to be human is fundamental. Although I know not the larches, firs, the Sierra forests, deer, mountain sheep and coyotes, I can still feel immersion in these places. Here, wildness or wilderness is the signature of a transcendent spiritual identity, unfettered by cultural or national affiliations.

f. Australian place writing

My body of writing in first-person phenomenology also locates itself unashamedly in ‘wild’ or wilderness places. While there has been an overemphasis on natural environments rather than the less loved built places in most of the nature writing and sense of place studies, some place-based writers such as Murphy (2003) are redressing the balance by focusing on urban places, particularly neglected, unobserved and seldom-loved places. However, this type of literature I steer away from, other than acknowledging its contribution to fleshing out a broader notion of place.

The nature of nature is something all writers grapple with, as I do, in engaging with a topic that claims to be delving into the heart of something variously referred to as the natural world, the non-human world, place, landscape, environment, earth. From these writers, I learn it is not so much the terminology that is important, but more the feeling that underlies the description.

Yet is there not a distinctive Australian sense of place? What is it that this most ancient continent with its most ancient lineage of culture yields? I am wanting to explore this idea experientially while still delving deeply into cross-cultural dialogue. Hay states that ‘nature writing is a tradition that is strangely absent in Australia’ (Hay 2003, p. 273). Academic historical literature on the environment in Australian history by such writers as Blainey (1970), Bolton (1997), Rolls (2000), and more recently, Flannery (2005), seems peripheral to my research. Although the human–land relationship, and to a certain extent, Australian identity, is explored, this type of functional, ethnocentric (and mostly white) writing is lacking the depth and perception of the American tradition, and especially lacking a strong type of spiritual connection to the land.

Of course, there is a very strong tradition played out in the large corpus of novels written by Australian authors based on or informed by the Australian landscape. Such notables as Carey (1998), Herbert (1989), Jolley (1999), Malouf (1986), White (1958) and Winton (1998) tell powerful stories that are vivid, meditative, and compelling in their teasing out of distinctive Australian characters with the ever-present influential presence

of the land as backdrop, the land as shaper of lives. Poets too, like Wright (1968), have powerfully sung this land.

The history of landscape art in Australia—its rite of passage—is one of being the grafting of European landscapes onto the Australian continent with a gradual ‘seeing’ of this land in its own right. This seems to parallel, as I suppose it should, the trajectory of white colonists on this land. Are we only just recently coming out of our blinkered approach to this land, based on a projection of European acculturation? Can we now see it, experience it as it is, rather than as a fantasy of what it is not? Or could it be possible that the land has been closed to we newcomers? It has been insightful for me to taste the moods of the Australian landscape, the unique qualities of light and atmosphere, the religiosity, the love, the intimacy and the search for identity, hungered after through all of these art works in an attempt to capture the essence of this land. Some early artists were even concerned to depict the ‘terms of the landscape itself’, rather than the human relationship to it (Bruce and Splatt 1978, p. 88).

Tredinnick has brought together a range of place-based essayists from North America and Australia in a rich compilation redressing the ‘lack of’ such tradition in this country. However, what interests me more is how he has pierced through the skin of this genre to expose its true belly in the privileging of the voice of the place itself:

At its best, this literature listens to the land and to those people intimate with its places. It puts words and their music, it puts imagination, to work in service of that larger order—the land, natural history—in which we humans live ... Perhaps the work of literature attuned to place is, finally, a listening. It tries to discern the soul of, the music of, a place on earth; and in the work, if we have listened well, we hear the place, or hear it as it manifests itself through the memory and nature and gift of the writer. The poem or the piece of prose, at its best, is a choreography in words of an act of careful listening; and through that listening we may hear that place express itself. We may catch the lyric of the country (Tredinnick 2003, p. 32).

The ground shifts, and instead of the notions we have explored to date in terms of what it takes for a Westerner to engage deeply with place (embodied response, deep emotional attachments, childlike delight, intimacy, listening, reverence, mindfulness, quality of attention, sensual awareness), we find ourselves on new territory. The place itself with its own voice and story endemic to that place emerges with the person in the role of conduit of the narrative. Story is place; place is story. Ecocentrism: humans ‘writ[ing] from the point of view of the land’ (Tredinnick 2003, p. 34).

Bonyhady and Griffiths in their collection of Australian writing, entitled *Words for Country*, dealing with the relationship between landscape and language, contend that ‘landscape does not just shape language; the land itself is transformed by words, phrases and ways of telling’ (Bonyhady and Griffiths 2002, p. 6). Although there is still a strong element of the human involved here, the tilt is away from human-centredness to place as central, a marked repositioning. And there is introduced a notion of reciprocity, of humans and land in a kind of dialogue.

I want this type of positioning as my frame of reference, but seek to go deeper into the notion. It is insufficient to shift the emphasis, as welcome as the perspective of Tredinnick and Bonyhady is. Surely, we are not so far removed from Descartes’s mind–body dualism in the construction of place relating to human or human to place: still separation, yet dialogue. Subjectivity and inter-subjectivity, with the other subjects broadening into beyond-the-human, may be viewed in this perspective as problematic if rigid subject–object notions are to be adhered to strictly.

g. Embodiment and place

If phenomenology deliberately positioned lived experience as central to the philosophical endeavour, as argued earlier in this chapter, it has also been instrumental in repositioning the body or bodily experience as crucial to an engagement with place. As Casey has proposed, ‘we are in place primarily by means of our own bodies’. ‘Embodied emplacement’ is how he refers to it (Casey 1993, p. xvi). Since the focus of my research is the experience of engagement with place, then bodily engagement must be part of that engagement.

Many scholars have railed against the ‘neglect and devaluation’ (Weiss and Haber 1999, p. xiii) of the body in Western philosophy, some even going as far as characterising modern theory on the body as ‘disembodied activity’ (Davis 1997, p. 14). It was Merleau-Ponty who sought to ‘overcome the practical and the theoretical limitations of a metaphysical mind/body dualism’ through understanding the body, the ‘living attentive body’ as ‘body subject’ (Abram 1997, p. 46):

... in so far as my hand knows hardness and softness, and my gaze knows the moon’s light, it is as a certain way of linking up with the phenomenon and communicating with it. Hardness and softness, roughness and smoothness, moonlight and sunlight, present themselves in our recollection not pre-eminently as sensory contents but as certain kinds of symbioses, certain ways the outside has of invading us and certain ways we have of meeting this invasion (Merleau-Ponty 1962, p. 317).

Such reciprocity with the world, a world of symbiotic reciprocity, informs the shift in emphasis that I have been seeking in this discussion, from solipsism to mutuality, and now from disembodied being to embodiment. I have found Casey’s serious examination of the ‘role of the body in the determination of place’, his ‘cultural specificity of bodies and places’ (Casey 1993, pp. 45, 65), important in providing a theoretical orientation for the reuniting of body in place. In particular, his determination of the body as ‘not an inert material thing but the animate, self-moving, self-aware body of a living organism’ (Casey 1993 p. 330), and the naming of the body itself as a place (Casey 1993 p. 52), have informed how I view my own and others’ relationships with place mediated by our bodies.

Taking this notion further, and in an Australian context, is the work of Davies (2000) and Somerville (1999) who write of body/landscape relations and the power of discourse to express such relations. Here, the body is defined by Davies as ‘coextensive’ with the landscape in her articulation of a theory of body/landscape relations ‘in which bodies are understood as taking up their material existence within landscapes and as landscape’ (Davies 2000, p. 11). It is through the languaging of embodied writing, and especially through collective biography, that ‘belonging with/in landscape is achieved in the double

sense of becoming appropriated and being appropriated with/in Australian landscapes' (Davies 2000, p. 11).

This notion is analogous to Aboriginal notions of one's body and landscape as one and the same, and echoes some of the understandings of Shepard, but it is through the power of the writing itself that a sense of embodiment manifests. Take the articulation of Davies' childhood:

The pores of our bodies were open to the air, we felt sweat on our skin and sought out cool breezes to catch the drops of sweat, to caress our body surfaces ... When our strong, muscular bodies, tanned by the sun, became cold, covered in goose bumps, we sought out the warmth of dry hot cement to lie on, like lizards, drawing the heat into our shivering bodies, readying them to leap again into the water, to experience the shock of coldness and the pleasure of strong movement leaping through the air and into the water (Davies 2000, p. 21).

It is this type of work that has demanded that I address the specificities of my own bodily engagement with place by bringing it into my consciousness, and has provided useful ways of thinking about meaning in relation to my first and third person phenomenological research. I may not share Somerville's denotation of her place writing as performance, but her view of narrative emerging from place certainly bears witness to my own work and experiences in place: 'In telling the story of place it comes into being as a particular landscape evoked by a particular body' (Somerville 1999, p. 4). Her work has major intersections with mine, in that she is writing a 'bodily presence' into both this Australian landscape and into the stories and lives of Aboriginal people – 'to make myself physically and materially present in the landscape of the Aboriginal stories' (Somerville 1999, pp. 11, 15) – and hence into some sort of belonging in Australia.

One other aspect that both of these feminist theorists offer is the perspective of gender in relation to body/landscape relations. Massey's pioneering work on the conceptualisation of space, place and gender designates why gender matters:

It is not ... just that geography matters, but that it is a gendered geography that matters. And what that means in turn is that taking gender seriously produces a different analysis ... it is arguing that gender is not somehow a 'local' concern but that, along with other axes of the constructed divisions in the societies we currently inhabit, it takes its place in principle alongside other divisions, such as class, whose relative significance in practice needs to be evaluated in each particular context (Massey 1994, pp. 181, 182).

The resultant broadening that demands the inclusion of gender into place analysis produces what Massey refers to as 'multiple, shifting, possibly unbounded ... identities of place' (Massey 1994, p. 7). A 'given' in Aboriginal culture, women's spaces in non-Indigenous Australia has been sadly neglected, even more so in relation to white women and their relationships with Aboriginal women and country. This is why the *Body/Landscape Journals* of Somerville is to be valued due to the 'Aboriginal thread' weaving throughout all her work, opening up the 'possibilities of new meanings' (Somerville 1999, p. 43) in crossing the cultural barrier through mutual dialogue of women's experience of place:

I rehearse the scene over and over again standing with Emily at the top of her mountain. I stand in shimmering heat rising above long soft grasses and follow the line of sheer granite walls reaching into blue ... I recall Emily's exact movements in that place, poking her stick through the grass to find the small round stones that mark each grave, the tone of voice and position of body as she speaks the words that surprise me so. *The graves have not been swept clean.* I am now sitting on top of the mountain; I become the mountain itself.

I visit that space over and over and know there is a profound connection between Emily's performance on top of the mountain and my ability to perform myself at this point; to make sense of my bodily experience in space, to story it for myself and at the same time for you, my reader (Somerville 1999, pp. 78, 79).

4. Freshwater: Indigenous Knowledge

a. Aboriginal voices

Let us hear from the original place-based writers on Australian soil:

George Musgrave, Taipan clan:

This land is Taipan Land, my home. Taipan is our totem, can't touch him, even the emu and the red kangaroo, can't eat them one too, that's our story. See, we pray for them, that's our story, same Taipan language, emu and red kangaroo. Taipans are on this land now, don't go near him. You can only see him from a long way, he can see you too. Taipan is our people, we are Taipan clan. Other mobs can't come onto my land unless you get permission from me. If I say no you can't get in, that's the law (Musgrave 2003, in McConichie 2003, p. 99).

The pre-eminence of country as defines self. Place is self.

And from Ungunmerr, who speaks of the term *dadirri*, or 'inner deep listening and quiet still awareness':

Dadirri recognises the deep spring that is inside us. We call on it and it calls to us ... When I experience dadirri, I am made whole again. I can sit on the river bank or walk through the trees; even if someone close to me has passed away, I can find my peace in this silent awareness. There is no need of words. A big part of dadirri is listening. Through the years we have listened to our stories. They are told and sung, over and over, as the seasons go by ... Our Aboriginal culture has taught us to be still and wait. We do not try to hurry things up. We let them follow their natural course—like the seasons. We watch the moon in each of its phases. We wait for the rain to fill our rivers and water the thirsty earth, like in my painting here. When twilight comes we prepare for the night. At dawn we rise with the sun.

We watch the bush foods and wait for them to ripen before we gather them. We wait for our young people as they grow, stage by stage, through their initiation ceremonies. When a relation dies, we wait a long time with the sorrow. We own our grief and allow it to heal slowly.

We don't like to hurry. There is nothing more important than what we are attending to. There is nothing more urgent that we must hurry away for.

... To be still brings peace—and it brings understanding. When we are really still in the bush, we concentrate. We are aware of the anthills and the turtles and the water lilies. Our culture is different. We are asking our fellow Australians to take time to know us; to be still and to listen to us (Ungunmerr in Stockton 1995, pp. 179–84).

Stillness in the bush. Stillness in life. Waiting for the right time, fitting in with the natural rhythms of nature. Own life as a rhythm of nature. In that place, all manner of things present themselves to us. This is the silence of Dillard, the bare attention of Snyder and the ecocentrism of Tredinnick. A Western sense of place may have all these hallmarks, but the Aboriginal worldview is far more than an evocation. It delineates a whole other way of being in the world and attunement to that world. The threshold has been raised. The West might only dip its toes into these waters. Deeply respectful of life's rhythms, the notion goes further, in that it embeds human as inseparable from those rhythms. There is order in the world. It is the acceptance of one's place in that order that bears no argument. There is also an invitation for us fellow Australians 'to be still and listen to us'.

I am reminded of the most enduring philosophic concept of the Chinese, the *Tao Te Ching*:

The wise person acts without effort
 And teaches by quiet example.
 He accepts things as they come,
 creates without possessing,

nourishes without demanding,
 accomplishes without taking credit (Walker 1995, pp. 2–3).

Some of what is being described here is part of the ontology of traditional Aboriginal Australians. Stanner refers to this as a ‘philosophy of assent to life’s terms’:

...the apparent evidence of design in the world; design in the sense of pattern, shape, form, structure; given design that seemed to them to point to intent ... Part of their religion seems to be like a return of equivalent or compensatory signs to the mysterious domain whence they came. There cannot have been many primitive rites which so strongly suggested a conscious attempt by men to bind themselves to the design in things they saw about them, and to the enduring plan of life as they experienced it (Stanner 1979, pp. 114, 117).

For Australian Aboriginal people, identity is established right from pre-birth on, predicated by a deeply embedded sense of identification with the natural world through kinship structures and the world of spirit. In the words of Neidjie, Gagudju Elder from east Arnhem Land:

Tree...
 He watching you.
 You look at tree, he listen to you.
 He got no finger,
 He can't speak.
 But that leaf...
 He pumping, growing,
 Growing in the night.
 While you sleeping
 You dream something.
 Tree and grass same thing.
 They grow with your body,
 With your feeling.

If you feel sore...
 Headache, sore body
 That mean somebody killing tree or grass.
 You feel because your body in that tree or earth.
 Nobody can tell you,
 You got to feel it yourself (Neidjie, Davis and Fox 1985, p. 52).

Tree as intelligent ('you look at tree, he listen to you'); the interconnectedness of this world for a self conterminous with nature ('If you feel sore.../Headache, sore body/That mean somebody killing tree or grass./You feel because your body in that tree or earth'). This sense of self is not one that has to be worked at as a 'lifelong task' (Shepard 1982, p. 34). It is a given, hence immutable in a preordained world, a world which Stanner refers to as 'ordained permanencies' (Stanner 1979, p. 29). It is total identification with the world of nature in a very specific individual/social/cultural construction: 'I *am* nature', not 'I am part of nature'.

This could mark a major departure point for Western and Indigenous senses of place. It seems as if the 'me in a not-me world' is a Western construct that does in fact require working at if one is to re-imagine the world through 'treaties of affiliation' (Shepard 1982, p. 34). Or could it be taught, especially by those who know, to those who are open and willing to learn? What might it mean if white Australians could listen, could learn to listen to the natural rhythms of the earth, to remain still long enough to hear what black Australians have to say? Those Australians who have taken time to know Aboriginal people, as Ungunmerr has suggested, such as those in my research, who are listening to the other voice, are taken into this other way of being in the world, by going out onto country to learn from an Elder. How do they deal with this 'foreign' orientation? What does it require for a white person to really *be* in this space?

It goes without saying that this view of the world, this orientation, binds the human, the non-human and place into a cohesive unity—a universe of intent. I suppose what Stanner is saying is similar to Shepard's notion of Aboriginal people 'formulating and internalising treaties of affiliation' (Shepard 1982, p. 34), but what I am questioning is if

this formulating constitutes a ‘lifelong task’. It may be argued that the original exposition of Aboriginal culture, once formulated, created a template from which there could be little divergence. Dreaming/Law is inviolate. Hence, each person born into that culture follows the template. And yet culture adjusts, accommodates change or perishes. So I am now wondering if Aboriginal people also have to deliberately, consciously create relationships with place, with the natural world.

b. Bound to the world

I would like to examine further this Aboriginal concept of people bound to their world. It may help explicate their sense of place. I look to three desert people, the first of whom is Randall (Anangu), Elder of Yankunytjatjara people, Central Australia, who describes the ‘sacred relationship to the land and all creation as *‘tjukurrpa’*’:

Tjukurrpa is the Yankunytjatjara name for what white people call the Dreaming, or the Dreamtime. It is hard to describe the idea of tjukurrpa in English. We do not separate the material world of objects we see around us, with our ordinary eyes, and the sacred world of creative energy that we can learn to see with our inner eye. For us, these are always working together and we learn how to ‘hear’ and ‘see’ with our inner eye. It took me a long time to understand that white people do not experience the world in this way. We work through ‘feeling’. But we are not using this word feeling to mean ordinary emotions like anger, desire or jealousy, or our sense of physical touch. When we use the English word ‘feeling’ this way we are talking more about what white people call intuitive awareness. We use this to feel our situations, to read people and to talk to country. Tjukurrpa is called Dreaming because it joins the worlds of ordinary reality and creative forces, and because it is not just of this time and place (Randall 2003, p. 3).

When Randall speaks of feeling as intuition, of hearing and seeing with our ‘inner eye’, what does this mean? How are Westerners utterly unfamiliar with such notions able to make sense of this? There is a reverberation here of the teachings of Uncle Max in his frequent reference to the inner eye as the third eye, lodged between the two eyebrows.

Do you have to be Indigenous to access this way of being in the world? Is it possible for non-Indigenous persons to go beyond the conceptual to an experience of this inner eye such that they too may be able to ‘feel our situation, to read people, to talk to country’ (Randall 2003, p. 3)? Or can an Elder facilitate the hearing and seeing with the inner eye?

The clear enunciation by Randall of the *tjukurrpa*, or Dreaming – what Stanner refers to as ‘a concept so impalpable and subtle’ (Stanner 1979, p. 23) – is something that Westerners struggle to comprehend. It has been discussed to a great extent in much of the literature, with many different interpretations on what constitutes this overarching concept informing all aspects of traditional Aboriginal life and worldview. Here it is simplified to be the world of integration between material reality and creative energy. If one culture is to understand another, does it necessitate a deep grasping of such notions?

The second voice is that of two women from the Great Sandy Desert, Napanangka and Nampitjin, both senior Aboriginal Law women:

We all got skin name different, different name. This from Dreamtime—skin, skin name. They bin all Dreamtime—we call Tjukurrpa ... still we follow Tjukurrpa—that one skin—my father he’s Tjapangarti ... Dreamtime skin—different, different place for different skin ... skin got different country. Napanangka—they go visit his country from Tjukurrpa ... that’s the way we living. His country from his father from his Tjukurrpa ... they all bin come together singing ... different skin for ceremony ... The crow he got skin. Every one bird—he got skin ... and whatever bush tucker—he got skin. Hmm, whatever little bird, they got different different skin ... in Tjukurrpa they bin sit down they bin havem skin ... You got skin ... you got country (Napanangka and Nampitjin 1997, in Peter and Lofts 1997, pp. 20–2).

The final voice is from a woman of the Tanami desert. Nungarrayi, a Walpiri woman, tells a story that reveals something of the complex relationship between land, spirit ancestors, the animal world and identity:

When this one Walyankarna our Snake Ancestor, was travelling north, the women from Mina Mina—those who possess the digging sticks—were travelling eastward. The women from Mina Mina had been dancing all the way along. Our Snake Ancestor was travelling north, and at a certain point they met, those Ancestral women who were going to the sky as the women went on dancing. The dust rose up above the women's heads and eventually this dust cloud just lifted the Snake, our Ancestor, it elevated that Ancestral Snake right up into the air. Walyankarna the Snake Ancestor ascended into the air on the cloud of dust that had been created by the women's dancing... When he landed that Ancestral Snake Walyankarna went down into the rock hole where he stays to this day (Nungarrayi 2002, in Museum of Contemporary Art 2002–03, pp. 6, 7).

All three Indigenous women writers give this sense of what it means to be 'bound' to the *tjukurrpa* through real ongoing vital links. It is interesting to know that one of the etymological roots of 'bound' is 'beholden', thus reflecting the notion of responsibility (Partridge 2000, p. 55). Skin refers to kinship categories that define self/species *as* relationship, not self/species *in* relationship. Through skin, I am articulated with other skins, with *tjukurrpa* and with country ('You got skin—you got country') in a unity saturated with responsibility and respect.

This is an ordered world, a world of direct lineage through the Ancestral Beings of the Dreaming ('our Snake Ancestor') where everything has its place and country is central. This type of binding has been expressed earlier by Shepard as 'inhabit[ing] the land body like a blood corpuscle' (Shepard 1982, pp. 21–3). Also narrative is introduced as the important glue in relationship and the declaration of places of significance is expressed through narrative. In the oral tradition, story is knowledge and sacred places are enstoried. There is, too, a hint of knowledge that is site-specific and gendered as we hear of women dancing through their country and meeting Snake. Such forms of knowledge will be addressed in the next section of this chapter.

Have we left far behind, through these writings, any analogy with a Western sense of place? I still hear the voice of passionate connection to loved places, story that is of place and the presence of the 'other' in place, that inhabits both senses of place.

Let us look to art and the way it expresses a culture, through the research of a non-Indigenous writer/artist, Watson, who lived and worked with the Aboriginal Balgo women artists of Central Australia:

At this deeper level of understanding I explore the concept ... that land is a conscious, sentient, embodied presence, which they compare to themselves and their own bodies. The surface of the land is seen as the skin of the body of the land ... Kutjunga people conceive of their image making processes as a system of marking or inscribing the skin. In this system, the skin of the body of the land is marked, as is the skin of the human body in body painting, as well as the skins or surfaces of sacred objects. This process of marking or inscribing the skins of the body of the land and of humans is not just a visual and conceptual one, however, but a multi-sensual one, where the making of visual marks is accompanied by the inscription of marks which, in the view of local people, are sonic, three dimensional and tactile. As such, Balgo image making is fundamentally a system of religious communication between and through the boundaries of differing conscious, sentient and active selves: those of the land, of human beings and of sacred objects; it is not just a system of surface decoration (Watson 2003, p. 24).

Here is expressed the deep embeddedness, the visceral notion of shared skin, skin stretched to include human body, earth body, sacred object body. Seamless? Perhaps not, but at least porous between the seams, allowing free flow and the unity of shared surface. Art as marking or inscribing the skin brings different surfaces, different skins into a unity, into a religious communication. Thus, skin is not inert, objective and unconscious; it is a living conscious sheath of transmission.

From this perspective, is it almost a contradiction in terms to speak of an Indigenous sense of place? Is it possible for myself and other non-Indigenous persons to know this depth of connection, to feel and know all the skins, to hear and sound the skins? I doubt this. Yet I do wish to hold it as a model of what is possible, and in knowing this, I come closer to a way of being in place that is firmly embodied.

Such intimacy is unknown in a Western sense of place. Western dictionary definitions of ‘intimacy’ refer to ‘closely acquainted, familiar, private and personal; involving very close connection, detailed knowledge’ (Pearsall 2002, p. 741). Yes, all of these things are present in the type of Indigenous connection with the land thus represented. But there is still a lack in the way these dictionary meanings do not go far enough to capture the essence of the intimacy of shared skin, as has been described above. Once again, etymological roots lend a hand to reveal something more of the meaning when first articulated: ‘intimacy’ comes from the Latin word *intimus*, meaning ‘inmost’ or ‘to make inmost to’. This word/expression is almost unused in contemporary English language. There is another linked word, though, that comes closer here to what I think needs to be expressed, and that is the word *intima*, used in anatomy and zoology, referring to ‘the innermost membrane of a vein or artery’ (Partridge 2000, p. 193). Perhaps this fits in terms of denoting an Indigenous way of inhabiting country: intimacy, when that intimacy is like an innermost membrane of a vein or artery.

c. The view from anthropology

I need to summon up those writers who seem to have a sense, know something of the inhabiting of country by Indigenous persons from this ‘innermost membrane’. Rose (2000) and Stanner (1979) not only bring a poetics of language and a sensitive rendering of Aboriginal ways of knowing, but also a depth of understanding and an ability to translate that understanding into Western comprehension. First, to Rose and her elegant articulation of relationship to country that she calls the ‘Aboriginal concept of country’, nominated as ‘nourishing terrains’:

So this is a human being: sharing flesh with country and with other species; killing and taking care; loving life and required to die; born of woman and of earth. To be located is to have a ground from which to know, to act, to invite and deny, to share and ask, to speak and to be heard (Rose 2000, p. 106).

People talk about country in the same way they would talk about a person: they speak to country, sing to country, visit country, worry about country, feel sorry for country, and long for country. People say that the country knows, hears,

smells, takes notice, takes care, is sorry or happy ... country is a living entity with a yesterday, today or tomorrow, with a consciousness and a will toward life. Because of this richness, country is home, and peace; nourishment for body mind and spirit; heart's ease (Rose 1996, p. 7).

Rose's Yarralin people are revealed, almost reverently, as part of an intricacy of interconnectedness that is firmly embedded in body, in culture, in country, in relationship. Country is privileged as 'the ongoing matrix of identity, knowledge and action' (Rose 2000, p. 28). Country cannot be easily defined nor succinctly expressed, but we hear again about it as flesh being shared like the shared skin of the Balgo women, and a ground of being from which and to which all is referential. To know and experience land as 'inmost' could be revealed in the personal rendition of country being spoken to, sung to and worried about. Yet, it could be easily dismissed by interpreting such notions through Western ideas known as personification or metaphor. Such a step is stopped short by Rose's strident declaration of the reciprocity of this process, that country too, takes notice and cares, and is, in fact, conscious. She takes this further through expounding intimacy as implicated here:

At the most intimate, the potential is for a completely reflexive relationship: the person takes care of the country and the country takes care of the person. Such a relationship is built up over time through knowledge and the assumption of responsibility. The relationship so developed is an individual achievement; a person is born with rights, but each must choose further to develop their own relationships with country (Rose 2000, p. 108).

It is a big ask for Westerners to adopt the notion of country as consciousness, with a life of its own and a 'will towards life' (Rose 2003, p. 34). The reciprocity she refers to here is the reflexivity of individuals in relationship. This is a long way removed from Tredinnick's ecocentrism, where writing is from the point of view of the land. This really is, literally, the land having its own voice and integrity of presence.

Western philosophy begat individualism. Hence, self, personhood, individual development and 'being' hold central sway in this tradition. Can this way of viewing the world be dropped, or need it be, in order to enter into the other's world?

I find it interesting that in the last quote by Rose, the emphasis is on the individual. Is she reflecting her Western embeddedness, or is the relationship with country really a matter of the individual's choice?

I get a different impression from Stanner, in his enunciation of a broader sense of the individual in Aboriginal culture through the notion of 'oneness' or a 'unitary system'. He gives several examples of perceiving self from this frame of reference:

In our modern understanding, we tend to see 'mind' and 'body', 'body' and 'spirit', spirit and personality, 'personality' and 'name' as in some sense separate, even opposed entities, though we manage to connect them up in some fashion into the unity or oneness of 'person' or 'individual'. The blackfellow does not seem to think this way. The distinctiveness we give to 'mind', 'spirit' and 'body' and our contrast of 'body' versus 'spirit' are not there, and the whole notion of 'the person' is enlarged. To a blackfellow, a man's name, spirit, and shadow are him ... a blackfellow may 'see' as a unity two persons, such as two siblings or a grandparent and grandchild; or a living man and something inanimate, as when he tells you that, say, the woollybutt tree, a totem, is his wife's brother ... there is also some kind of unity between waking life and dream-life.

The truth of it seems to be that man, society and nature, and past, present and future, are at one together within a unitary system of such a kind that its ontology cannot illumine minds too much under the influence of humanism, rationalism and science. One cannot easily, in the mobility of modern life and thought, grasp the vast intuitions of stability and permanence, and of life and man, at the heart of Aboriginal man (Stanner 1979, pp. 25–8).

Stanner has gone a long way to grasping many of these ‘vast intuitions’. Much of what he has made mention of here will have reference to the following examination of *ganma*, the meeting of the two cultures. However, in such a denoting of personhood, looking after self is looking after the other, where self is the other person/s, environment and all that inhabits it. This type of personhood may still contain a sense of separation, but ‘the separateness becomes an interdependent separateness’ (Stanner 1979, p. 58).

I am in awe at the depth of complexity, sophistication and consistency in the design and enactment of the living whole, as articulated thus far in an Indigenous sense of place. How can we newcomers to this land, we Westerners, even begin to understand such ‘embeddedness’, let alone emulate such notions of identity that are so culturally and place-specific? The sense of belonging that fits here will never be ours, nor should it be, since we are not of this culture. However, we may be able to take steps towards ‘being’ in place in a moment of profound connection. And there may be ways of belonging, of living in deep engagement on this continent, through the meeting of these cultures.

5. *Ganma*: Saltwater Meets Freshwater

We find ourselves at the mouth of the estuary, the place where freshwater river flows into the sea. What happens? Do the waters hold firmly to their own identity, yet join, masking separation, or is there a total transformation into a new substance?

Let us return to our original scene, the coming together of blacks and whites on this land with a shared intention. We have put forward something of the body of knowledge of each culture, particularly as it relates to land/country/place, the tradition that each brings to the meeting place. In beginning to examine the joining, the intersection of those two cultures, we have far more complexity than the simple nature of two bodies of water coming together.

a. Contested space

Let us also draw back into the picture the quotes given at the beginning of this chapter that suggested something of the nature of the contested space. We have several streams

here enunciating history, identity, belonging and the crossing of the cultural divide. The white voices are dominant: Sheridan speaks of white Australian identity forged at the expense of the displacement of the Aboriginal other (Sheridan 1998, p. 78); Read speaks to our 'physical and spiritual belonging' in this land and how this can be obtained through developing our own attachments to country and respectful distancing from Aboriginality (Read 2000, p. 204); Carey's character Oscar, in his novel *Oscar and Lucinda*, represents white man foreign to this land, oblivious and blind to the depth of culture sitting below (Carey 1998, p. 492). The charged nature implicit in these comments is in contrast to the quote by Perkins, which seems to be inviting whites in, eschewing the cultural divide in an open gesture of generosity of cultural sharing and acknowledgment of shared cultural heritage. Perkins says it is 'all there for the asking' (Perkins 2000). Is it? Oscar does not ask, and does not know; Read seems to know, but suggests 'do not ask, stay away from'. What to make of this?

It seems that history, knowledge, identity/belonging and land are all implicated as comprising the contested space. What does each culture know of the other?

Contemporary cultural theory pertains here. Said (1978), the critical theorist who gave early enunciation to what has been since termed postcolonial theory, asked the seminal question of how one really gets to know another culture in its own terms. His searching and confronting analysis of Western imperialism provides an important niche in informing this research. In order to get to the roots of this question, critical theorists have stated that what Said is arguing is for one to be cognisant of 'one's place within the social/political structure'... the 'Eurocentric discourse that constructs the other', and be aware of 'how knowledge is produced by the West as a site of power' (Ashcroft and Ahluwalia 2001, pp. 62–7).

I need to locate myself in the discourse as white privileged Western woman, part of a dominant academic culture, part of the ongoing ruling colonial system of governance that still defines the representation of Aboriginality in this nation. Said states that 'no production of knowledge in the human sciences can ever ignore or disclaim its author's involvement as a human subject in his own circumstances' (Said 1978a, p. 11) How, then, to really engage with my research material from this location? Critical awareness

itself is just the beginning. Everything I think and write about must be examined through this lens. Said provides some clues in insisting that one must not only be astute concerning that which is in the text itself, but also be alert to what is unrevealed through the text. This concerns the development of a 'critical consciousness' as a 'strategy of resistance' and one that 'detaches itself from the dominant culture' (Ashcroft and Ahluwalia 2001, p. 69). Such a consciousness must begin to 'account for and rationally to discover and know, the force of statements in texts' (Said 1978b, p. 713).

The starting point here must be the text itself: the construction of Aboriginality by white colonialists is the discourse producing the text. Here, too, is my location. Both in the creation of the phenomenological text and when I examine others as subjects, and when most particularly I write up the conversations with the Elder Uncle Max, I am part of the ongoing discourse producing Aboriginality.

Smith states:

Western knowledges, philosophies and definitions of human nature form what Foucault has referred to as a cultural archive...of histories, artefacts, ideas, texts and/or images which are classified, preserved, arranged and represented back to the West. This storehouse contains the fragments, the regions and levels of knowledge traditions, and the 'systems' which allow different and differentiated forms of knowledge to be retrieved, enunciated and represented in new contexts (Smith 1999, p. 44).

What is significant here is that this 'cultural archive' in which I have been steeped for my entire lifetime, much of it unconscious, must be plumbed to its depths. The images, the stories, the portrayal in public media, the textbooks I read in school, the attitudes of government and the changes in policy, have determined to a large extent how I see 'the other'. I was in high school when the 1967 Referendum said 'yes' to full citizenship for Aboriginal people, and the first land rights protest at Wattie Creek in the Northern Territory was something I wrote about in my General Studies exam for the Higher School Certificate. In early university days, I recall the setting up of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy on the lawns of Parliament House, and the furore surrounding it. I followed

closely with hope the High Court Mabo Decision (where native title was first recognised by the Australian High Court in 1992), and the Wik Decision (when the High Court of Australia found in 1996 that native title could coexist with pastoral rights on pastoral leases). I was shocked and ashamed in the 1990s by revelations of black deaths in custody (the 1991 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody), the report on the Stolen Generations (the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families 1997), the Hindmarsh Island dispute (the controversy arising from the proposal to build a bridge in a sacred women's area during the 1990s), and the firm positioning in Australian politics of the overtly racist One Nation Party led by Pauline Hanson. I felt pride when Cathy Freeman in the 2000 Olympics became the first Indigenous person to win an individual gold medal, and when I joined tens of thousands to march across the Sydney Harbour Bridge for reconciliation.

Australia, as a settler colonial state, has told its stories, its histories, from this Western way of knowing. In deconstructing the identity of Aboriginal Australia, my research demands a deconstruction of self as white coloniser, and a gatekeeper vigilance over how I portray Aboriginality in my text. I need to ask, what is it I retain and then retrieve from the 'storehouse', merely to 'represent in new contexts' (Smith 1999, p. 44)? Through this process, I question to what extent Said's detaching of consciousness from the dominant culture is a real possibility. There is more to this complexity than careful scrutinising of the text and what is behind the text, more to it I believe than what is represented as basically a cognitive function. Yet his analysis of the role of 'power over' in the construction of Western knowledge demands a careful examination of the 'cultural archive' of Aboriginality (Smith 1999, p. 44).

Muecke has identified a 'discursive space' wherein:

...non-Indigenous intellectuals have historically had relatively free rein in making their own critical interventions across a range of Indigenous Australian matters, without the obligation of engaging with the scholarship, arguments or analyses of Indigenous Australian intellectuals themselves (Muecke 1993, pp. 25–9).

What is this discursive space? Historians and social scientists have sanitised the text, choosing which elements would be included and which excluded in creating a whitewash of Australian history in the representations of the colonised. Mainstream history tells us Australia, the newly settled country, was unoccupied, hence ‘terra nullius’; that Aboriginal society, rigid, changeless and primitive, crumbled under the onslaught of European colonising, a process that is still continuing today. Blainey (1970) was at pains to play down the destructive and violent aspects of the frontier experience, in order to stress the heroic dimensions, including those qualities it drew forth that have contributed to the establishment of the (white) Australian identity. Aboriginal critical theorist, Birch, refers to it as ‘the victors’ histories [which] falsely parade as the history of Australia’ (Birch 2003, p. 152). Notions of ‘mateship’, ‘fair go’ and liberalism that characterise the legend are neatly espoused today in the political arena by a Prime Minister who refuses to apologise, to say sorry for what effects the building of nationhood have had at the expense of Indigenous lives.

It is only in the last thirty to forty years that analysis of the black–white encounter has been rendered in more realistic terms by such revisionist historians as Brock (1989), Manne (2003), Rowley (1972), Ryan (1981), and most particularly, Reynolds, in his radical enunciation of the Aboriginal response:

The black response to the invaders was more complex and more varied than anyone has hitherto suggested. Even sympathetic whites speak as though there was a single mode of black behaviour. Yet there was always diversity, contradiction, competing objectives ... The Aborigines were curious about white society and endeavoured to incorporate new experiences within the resilient bonds of traditional culture. They reacted creatively to European ideas, techniques, language and commodities. Nor were the blacks a particularly peaceful or passive people as conventional studies suggest. Frontier conflict was apparent in almost every part of Australia though it varied in intensity and duration. While suffering disproportionately Aboriginal clans levied a considerable toll on pioneer communities—not just in death and injury but in property loss and prolonged anxiety as well. The costs of colonization were

much higher than traditional historical accounts have suggested (Reynolds 1990, p. 2).

But even these less one-sided accounts of the history of race relations in this country have stirred up a contemporary furore, so termed the 'history wars'. It is not a debate between blacks and whites; it is whites creating the 'storehouse', the 'cultural archive', through the academy (Smith 1999, p. 44). However, this debate demands to be taken more seriously than historians quarrelling about fabrication and accuracy of sources concerning Aboriginal deaths on the frontier. As mentioned earlier by Said, what is invisible in the text is as important as what is visible (Ashcroft and Ahluwalia 2001, pp. 62-67).

The debate has had unprecedented coverage in the media and by politicians, thus entreating Manne to express his alarm at what it reveals about Australian culture today:

What is even more alarming in the reception of *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History* is the way so many prominent Australian conservatives have been so easily misled by so ignorant, so polemical and so pitiless a book. The generation after Stanner broke the great Australian silence concerning the dispossession. It might be the task of the next generation, if the enthusiasm for Windschuttle is any guide, to prevent the arrival in its place of a great Australian indifference' (Manne 2003, pp. 11, 12).

Windschuttle's attack on Aboriginal people, in that they are seeking to justify land rights on the basis of history, that there was no concept of land ownership in traditional Aboriginal culture, and that Australian historians had deliberately 'fabricated' evidence not only concerning Aboriginal deaths, but also the way the British behaved vis a vis the Indigenous population (Windschuttle 2002) is bold and political. It is fodder fuel for a conservative government resistant to granting Native Title. It is a recent contemporary example of Said's notion of how 'knowledge is produced by the West as a site of power' (Ashcroft and Ahluwalia 2001, pp. 62-67).

Who feeds/fed a cultural archive besides historians and social scientists? The field of anthropology, the white ethnographic tradition, which has had strong roots in Australia and is represented by such researchers as Berndt and Berndt (1965), Elkin (1954), Hiatt (1978), Maddock (1972), Meggitt (1962), Mountford (1976), Stanner (1979), Strehlow (1971) and Tindale (1974), and has much to answer here. These are the classifiers, objectifiers, analysers and mappers of Aboriginal Australia. Their localised fieldwork in various communities in Australia provides a huge accumulation of identity construction of Aboriginality. It was deemed imperative to record the remnants of those survivors of a lost and dying culture, hence the early ethnographic manufacture of Aboriginality seeded strong public images of a people who were superstitious, without religion and hence of dubious morals, hunted in tribes across widely dispersed country, yet showed no real ownership or management of same, and had an inordinately complex social organisation that held little meaning or interest beyond the field itself.

Acknowledgment of the breadth and depth of information gathered by these early anthropologists is without question. However, their work must also stand in relation to their science operating at that time, their own particular emphases and subjectivities, how their data was collected, and how this information was disseminated and used. The field of anthropology is/was never value-free. Ethics in the field, let alone the reproduction in academic journals and books, was rarely addressed. Consequently, much of this information could be considered, in the light of contemporary analysis, as cultural theft, or the sharing of information that is inappropriate in a public domain because it is culturally sensitive and therefore restricted in Aboriginal society.

To cite a recent example that illustrates this situation, the book *The Native Tribes of South East Australia*, by Howitt, was first published in 1904 and reissued in 1996. The book is said to contain ‘an enormous wealth of material of interest to anyone interested in Australian history, particularly people of Koorie descent’ (Howitt 1996, p. vi). And this is does, dealing with information collected in the 1870s and 1880s, particularly important since much of this knowledge has been lost due to the cultural dismemberment that happened early in South Eastern Australia. It issues a warning at the beginning: ‘Readers should also be aware that the book contains a great deal of

information (and some images) on such things as initiation, beliefs, magic and burial practices which would probably not have been included if the work were being published for the first time today' (Howitt 1996, p. vi). While this type of generic caveat is utilised frequently in the public arena today, does it go far enough? Should this information be available to any of the general public, white or black?

Such controversy still surrounds the work of Strehlow (1947) in Central Australia and his huge accumulation of cultural artefacts, including many sacred objects. It suggests some of the intricacy in the contestation over knowledge and the ongoing manufacture by non-Indigenous people of the Indigenous cultural storehouse. It is worth noting the response of Marika to the work of anthropologists:

There's many books that been written by the anthropologists, but it's been all muddle-up, doesn't make any sense. Sometimes it make me wild when I read their words. Their books make me very wild at it because they don't know much about nature, what's *in* the nature.

They don't know about the tree, *who* is the tree,

What the tree *is*.

They don't know *what* the grass *is*,

Who is the grass or *what* is in the earth

And what *in* the mountain,

What *in* the trees. Tree is tree, yes,

But we have individual names.

What is my tree and what is my mother's?

Which river is my grandmother or which mountain is also

My mother ... and my grandmother?

(Marika 1995, in Isaacs 1995, p. 14).

b. The woman's view

Australian anthropology concentrated on kinship and men's rituals, with consequent misinformation or no information about the role of women. Thus, women were rendered invisible or lacking power, ceremony and knowledge. One result of this gender bias of men has led Jacobs (1989, p. 90) to identify a 'male landscape'. Fortunately, this bias has been corrected by female anthropologists such as Bell (1983), Berndt (1974), Brock (1989), Gale (1970), Jacobs (1989), and Kaberry (1939) who have restructured the image of women in Aboriginal culture, vastly underrated by their male counterparts. So we have a male landscape delineated, a female landscape, and a landscape of men and women (Berndt 1989, p. 6). It is significant to my research, and is a huge departure point for Indigenous and Western sense of place to have such a delineation. Berndt referred to living in these zones of separation, yet overlap, as 'independent interdependence' (Berndt 1989, p. 6). How do Westerners adapt to such notions? Gendered knowledge has been brought in to mainstream Western philosophy and literature, but what we are speaking about here, in terms of the landscape, may have implications for all those living on this land. Is it possible for a white woman in Australia to have an experience of a gendered landscape? And what of women being taught by a male Elder? Is such a transgression of the lines of cultural transmission appropriate?

Let us hear the voice of one woman and her enunciation of the distinctiveness of Aboriginal female relationships to the land:

After the rain came the stillness, the silence except for our breathing mingling with the breath of the earth. Listening to the silence in the stillness brought seeds of awareness and then a Deep Knowing—Spirit to Spirit. We are women.

With that knowledge came new life and movement and we women joined together and we rose up and danced a women's dance of birth and re birth, of life healing, of re-generation, of re-creation (Atkinson 2002, p. 3).

In the introduction to the collection of short stories by Western Desert women, Mosquito shares her poetry:

We want people to learn about our culture
 We got a lot of stories ... secret ones too
 Too long people not listening to Aboriginal people
 We women got our own Law and Culture
Different from men
 We not stupid
 Giving you very important stories about our culture
 So you people understand
 We wanna spread our stories down to Perth...and other side
 Overseas too...right around
 Our children wanna be learning our stories
 Keep on hanging on to our culture
 Keep it strong
 Listen to what women saying
 It very important
 We getting old now
 We worrying for mining companies
 They think we stupid
 Treat us with no respect for Culture and Law
 Government mob too
 We know how to look after our country
 It very special to us
 You'll see.
 (Mosquito 1995, in Crugnale 1995, p. xv).

Since I am a woman, and women's knowledge is different from men's knowledge, I have needed to gain this perspective. I want to know how women experience the land, which may shed some light on my own gendered experience of the land. 'We know how

to look after our country... it very special to us...we women got our own Law and Culture... it different from men'. Such a distinctive relationship with the land demands further interrogation.

The gendered landscape has been of particular interest to female anthropologists. It has been asserted by several of them, in their research with Aboriginal women, that gender is crucial in terms of who is doing the research; in fact, it has been posited that 'only a woman will gain access to the deepest levels of meanings inherent in women's business' (Payne 1989, p. 53), and it may be essential for that woman researcher to also have had two children in order to access the knowledge. What I learn from female anthropologists is instructive, in that it is not merely focused on knowledge per se, but the intricacies and specificities of working with the whole sphere of Aboriginal female life.

The voluminous anthropological field data provides a useful background to my research, but I have tended either towards those writers who immersed themselves in the community under study, as participant observers, rather than those researchers who relied more on interviews as method. For it is these writers who seem to evince a body of work that depicts a deeper understanding, often a product of long-term relationships with specific individuals, and not just a collection of facts from a disinterested scientific observer. In addition, their work is based on knowledge directly from Aboriginal people, often using these voices, rather than the approach of many anthropologists who research 'Aboriginal' as curiosity or object of contemplation. Long-term relationships based on trust, friendship and mutuality have characterised many research-based relations that are not always gender-specific, such as that of Mowarlajai and Bell (Bell 1998).

I have already referred to the writing of Stanner (1979) and Rose (1996), used extensively in the last section. Elkin's (1945) book on Elders, *Aboriginal Men of High Degree*, provided a necessary conduit to a deeper understanding of the role of Elders in traditional culture, and hence clearer ideas around the role of eldership today. My conversations with an Elder, which constitute a considerable section of the research, demand such contextualisation.

c. The intrusive colonising gaze

Dodson points out: ‘Since their first intrusive gaze, colonising cultures have had a preoccupation with observing, analysing, studying, classifying and labelling Aborigines and Aboriginality’. He illustrates this by reiterating the imagery that has cauterised that identity:

To the early visitors we varied from the noble savage to the prehistoric beast ... in the law we were defined systematically, though variably, according to proportions of black blood ... Their men of religion were also concerned to define us (‘entirely lost to all moral and spiritual perception’) ... Similarly their educators assessed our capacity for learning (‘lacking in reflection, judgement and foresight’) ... We represented a potential for manipulation (‘some hopeful ground to cultivate ... as any untutored savages’) ... Their men of science believed they could locate the definitive answers in our brains and blood (‘showing anatomical characters very rare in the white races of mankind but at the same time normal in ape types’) ... And we have been an ever popular subject for portrayal in paintings and films. Initially, we appeared as the noble, well built native: heroic, bearded, loin clothed, one foot up vigilant, with boomerang at the ready. Later. After we had fallen from grace, we appeared bent, distorted, overweight, inebriated, with bottle in hand. And more recently we appear ochred, spiritual, and playing the didgeridu behind the heroic travels of a black Landcruiser (Dodson 2003, pp. 25–7).

So this is the consequence of the European gaze, a single lens that can invent the other culture according to cultural mores, historical period, the bias of individuals, trends in bodies of knowledge, research approaches, and political/economic/social considerations, especially power. And, of course, this lens then becomes the public face of Indigenous Australia.

Welcome to the ‘discursive terrain of the Aboriginal-as-subject’, the site where ‘the “received narratives” of colonially driven national history [that] have governed non-Indigenous understandings of and relationships with Aboriginal peoples since contact’

(Grossman 2003, pp. 3, 10). It goes without saying that we enter deeply into a contested site. This site also represents the 'unequal playing field'.

The dominance of the white voices is no mere coincidence. If there were a situation where a certain quantity of freshwater was met by an equivalent quantity of saltwater, then the mix would be even. When the river meets the sea, the quantitative difference, hence the qualitative difference of the mix, is enormous. Freshwater river is swallowed up by the sea.

In relation to this concept, Dodson remarks on the absence of the Indigenous in the construction of Aboriginality:

In all these representations, these supposed 'truths' about us, our voices and our visions have been notably absent. There may be an enlightened minority who have been willing to open their eyes and ears to allow the space for Aboriginal people to convey their Aboriginalities (Dodson 2003, p. 28).

It would certainly be very difficult to contest, even from a position of being embedded in the discourse of whiteness, the absence of the black voice in the manufacture of Aboriginality.

While recognising the role of the majority white, I would like to identify the space nominated here by Dodson, and reiterated by Langton when she states that 'the majority of Australians do not know and relate to Aboriginal people' (Langton 1993, p. 33). This nominated space is where my research hopefully resides. It may be a small space that this research niche fills, referred to by Dodson as the space of the 'enlightened minority', but this space does exist nonetheless. It is a space where certain non-Indigenous persons really listen to the self-representations of Aboriginality, and actively seek relationships of learning from and understanding of Aboriginal people.

In the history of race relations in this country there have always been the 'enlightened minority' who have a genuine need for relationship and are prepared to engage with the struggle to recognise Aboriginal people in their own terms. I place myself in this category. The participants in my research also defy the stereotypes to enter into a deep

engagement on the land with an Aboriginal Elder. It may be a completely accurate depiction by Langton that the majority of Australians continue to ‘relate to stories told by former colonists’ (Langton 1993, p. 33), but these exceptions to the dominant narrative always have provided another version of these stories. Who knows the long-term impact of such relationships based more on equality and respect? I certainly am attempting to track the short-term impact of these experiences through this research.

d. Indigenous critical scholarship

What are/have Indigenous people said about themselves, not mediated by the objective gaze of white dominant cultural probers?

It is only very recently that the voice of Indigenous Australians, as self-representation, has been heard, although resistance as a political act has a history as long as colonialism. There has been a proliferation of writing, especially autobiographies, regional histories, other personal writing, and poetry, by Indigenous writers since the late 1980s (Morgan 1987; Langford 1988; Ward 1992; Willmot 1987; Miller 1985; Wharton 1999) that has been referred to as the ‘Aboriginal Renaissance’ (Morrissey 2003, p. 59). Before this, Aboriginal writing was excluded or marginalised from mainstream Australian written publications. Although Langton is referring to the commodification of Aboriginal art, her statement contains something fundamental that valorises the importance of self-representation:

Without a body of self representation work there can be no self critical assessment made and no meaningful discourse on Aboriginal aesthetics by Aborigines themselves (Langton 2003, p. 12).

The recent collection of essays called *Blacklines* marks a watershed of the coming together in ‘critical mass’ (Grossman 2003, p. 14) of Indigenous Australian intellectuals, and also marks a watershed in the ‘free rein’ of non-Indigenous intellectuals not having to engage with this material (Muecke 1993, p. 26).

Such a collection, which addresses Indigenous subjectivities and knowledge is essential for my research. What does it direct me towards? What do these scholars raise that must be inculcated as part of this research? The body of Indigenous critical writing has as its focus authority in respect of representation. Given the disproportionate and inaccurate imposed definitions that have been used to date in the construction of Aboriginality, such emphasis is not unexpected. However, the analysis of the motives behind the construction unmasks the power of the state, which is able to use these representations as ‘weapons and symptoms of the oppressive relationship that exists between Indigenous peoples and colonising states’ (Dodson 2003, p. 32). Hence, to write/speak/paint/sing of self, of one’s culture, is political, is resistance work, is visibility, is undermining the hegemony of that state power, and is a critical intervention. It is also an act of courage:

In making our self representations public, we are aware that our different voices may be heard once again only in the language of the alien tongue. We are aware that we risk their appropriation and abuse, and the danger that a selection of our representations will be used once again to fix Aboriginality in absolute and inflexible terms ... However, without our own voices, Aboriginality will continue to be a creation for and about us (Dodson 2003, p. 39).

I am interested in the critical arguments about what constitutes identity, since identity and belonging in Australia today are addressed in the research. In this collection of critical writers are included the analysis of multiple modes of Aboriginality: notions of authenticity/unauthenticity (Bayet-Charlton 2003; Kurtzer 2003; Onus 2003); racism (Huggins 2003); the rejection of essentialist models, racial purity/impurity and its associations with assimilationist and other policies (Anderson 2003); cultural production and the critique of Indigenous visual and textual representation, both nationally and internationally (Langton 2003); language/history/cultural maintenance, survival, and revival (Bell 2003); and lastly, the politics of identification in the discourses of ‘black’ and ‘green’ (Bayet-Charlton 2003). Such multiple modes of representation with the raised complex of issues surrounding them alert me to the ways in which my research has been essentialist and homogenised in the depiction of what I have termed ‘traditional

Aboriginal culture' and in the seeking out of what constitutes an Indigenous sense of place. It seems obvious that such a depiction may indicate 'static', 'frozen' and 'invariant' cultural characteristics (Onus 2003, pp. 92-103). I am constrained to delete western-derived notions of 'authentic' Aboriginality.

Is Aboriginality any clearer when defined by Aboriginal people themselves? Dodson, who has been often referred to in this section of the Literature Review, expounds the complexity: 'I cannot stand here, even as an Aboriginal person, and say what Aboriginality is' (Dodson 2003, p. 39). Huggins says, 'To me and many of my colleagues, our Aboriginality is fixed rather than a diluted mystical vision to aspire to.' (Huggins 2003, p. 63). Anderson calls for the need to 'develop identities that are both coherent and sustaining':

In the transforming experiences through which Aboriginal people grow, those qualities which constitute our identities are constantly re-forming as we engage and re-engage our world. This is one experience which coheres us, despite all ambiguities and contradictions (Anderson 2003, p. 51).

Morrissey claims: 'What is central in Aboriginality is descent ... not genetics as inherited essential characteristics but the historical connection that leads back to land and which claims a particular history' (Morrissey 2003, p. 59). Morrissey, in fact, is the only writer in this collection to insinuate land as being crucial to identity. This notable omission is surprising to me, for two reasons: one is the public debate that sees land and land rights as central to any discussions of Aboriginality, and the other is that, from my own research perspective, land is central to Aboriginal identity. Langton prefers to concede a model of Aboriginality that has no fixed meaning yet is culturally and textually contrived through 'the everyday'. The everyday exists in the following three categories:

- the experience of Aborigines interacting with each other in social situations within traditional Aboriginal cultures;
- stereotypes and mythologies of Aborigines from whites who have had no substantial contact with Aborigines;

- constructions generated through dialogue between Aborigines and non Aborigines in which both subjects participate in their constructions as they try to find forms of mutual comprehension (Langton 1993, pp. 33–6).

I find this approach strategically of value. Her provocative and important work has immediate relevance to my research. The latter category of the everyday is at the heart of the research. Both individually, in my ongoing relationships with the Elders, and when groups of non-Indigenous persons seek teaching from an Elder, is there not dialogue and the potential to find ‘forms of mutual comprehension’? This, in Langton’s terms, is the only place where Aboriginality has meaning: ‘when understood in terms of intersubjectivity, when both the Aboriginal and the non Aboriginal are subjects, not objects’ (Langton 1993, p. 32).

The issue of Aboriginal identity still remains amorphous and impossible to label, just as Western identity and identity itself, let alone culture, resist definition. What does this mean in the context of Australia today? Anderson, in his critique of Western knowledge systems, points out that not all things can be known, that in fact, there are certain truths unattainable: ‘As for non Aboriginal people, this may mean that some things about Aboriginal people and life-ways will always remain unintelligible’ (Anderson 2003, p. 23).

Several debates between Indigenous and non-Indigenous academics have fuelled the dissension on use, ownership and control of knowledge, which has profound implications for all researchers in this area of cross-culturalism. Even if protocols are in place regarding permission granted to publish or use work for research by non-Indigenous persons, this position is contested by some Indigenous writers, who demand ownership and control of knowledge. One such debate is over the right of Bell (Moreton-Robinson 2003, pp. 66–77) to speak about rape in communities, with her stating that she has been granted permission by an Indigenous Elder to speak out on this contentious topic. In critically contesting that right, Moreton-Robinson casts doubt upon

any non-Aboriginal academic's ability to know Aboriginal people, let alone represent them (Moreton-Robinson 2003, pp. 66–77).

Such a stance has a direct corollary in terms of my work: I have been asking the question through the research, of how we 'know' Aboriginal people. It is now clear that I also must ask if I really have the right in terms of permission, to access that knowledge. It is my belief that we may acquire some of this 'knowing' through both Indigenous and non-Indigenous representation. In fact, both Langton and Dodson acknowledge this. Even if protocols are in place regarding ethical research, it is debatable that such a stance can be justified, as the Bell/Huggins/Moreton-Robinson debate exemplifies. It is understandable, in terms of the strategies and articulations necessary for Indigenous people to 'resist translation into the languages and categories of the dominant culture' (Dodson 2003, p. 39).

However, a posture such as this refuses acknowledgment of the right of one culture to make insights about another culture. I contend, from the viewpoint of a Westerner with a cultural emphasis on freedom of rights of the individual, that Bell has a right to speak out about rape in Indigenous culture, or in any culture; surely such a silencing could produce the narrow public narratives that have characterised the formulations of this settler state in its production and representation of Indigenous knowledge. Yet I, too, recognise that, from an Indigenous viewpoint, no one member of a ruling elite has any right to make suppositions about aspects of a cultural minority whose identity it has constructed as a means of hegemony.

The line of foam demarcating the two bodies of water, saltwater and freshwater, boils.

Although much of the critical writing by Indigenous intellectuals is confronting and searching, there is much to be gained by 'engagement with Indigenous subjectivities' (Dodson 2003, p. 10). Grossman goes further in her statement by suggesting that 'we disengage from such critique at our peril' (Grossman 2003, p. 14). What might this mean for my research in engaging with these subjectivities?

First, it forces me to examine and own the discourse of whiteness. My racial identity of whiteness is taken for granted. The invisibility of such a subject position, its assumed centrality, with its position of dominance and privilege, demands I interrogate myself, and confronts me in my role of active agency in the conceptualisation and analysis of Indigenous history and culture from a position of power. This means facing how I have been complicit in racial oppression. Moreton-Robinson demands an 'altering of subjectivity', rather than an 'extrinsic' or intellectual relationship with racism (Moreton-Robinson 2003, pp. 250–2). Subjectivity that is comfortable and unchallenged resists disruption. By placing oneself in different subject positions, one can see oneself through the eyes of the other, and hence change one's behaviour. This is reminiscent of Said's exhortation to detach consciousness from the dominant culture (Ashcroft and Ahluwalia 2001, p69). There is a need for detachment from self as subject position and there is a need for detachment from dominant culture.

But then, what happens to this detached consciousness? Could this not lead to fragmentation of the self and be quite dislocating? In my case, it tries to flee, escape the difficulty of the imperatives. Huggins confronts in her unequivocal alluding to the imperative: 'Foremost I detest the imposition that anyone who is non Aboriginal can define my Aboriginality for me and my race ... as it insults my intelligence, spirit and soul and negates my heritage' (Huggins 2003, p. 60).

This is no place to reside, even rest momentarily, in the persona of white woman academic. I am foreigner in this place. It is a place of paralysis, of gagging, of fleeing, of guilt, with no right to speak at all of the other. Here is the contested place from within the personal experience. Is this the place from which Read in 'Belonging' is informed, when he states whites should have 'respectful' distancing from Aboriginality (Read 2000, p. 204)? Is this really getting to know a culture on its own terms?

Yet I need take this argument further: if I feel interrogated and judged, is this not what Indigenous people have always felt? If I am gagged by my whiteness, is this not what has been the experience of Indigenous people? If I am outsider and dispossessed from enquiring in this cultural realm, is this not what has always been done to Indigenous people—disempowered, with no right of access? In all the classical terminology of a

Morenian psychodramatic role reversal, I have a taste, just a tiny taste, of what lies on the other side of the cultural divide:

A meeting of two: eye to eye, face to face
 And when you are near I will tear your eyes out
 and place them instead of mine
 and you will tear my eyes out
 and place them instead of yours
 then I will look at you with your eyes
 and you will look at me with mine (Moreno in Kellerman 1994, p. 264).

Now there is some sense of what an altering of subjectivity involves. It is obvious that the mass of accumulation of knowledge by whites in Australia must be set off against the small body of self-representation by Aboriginal people. Since this relatively new discourse faces two hundred years of construction of Aboriginality, any equalising of the cultural storehouse will perhaps require a very long period of time. Yet such a notion ignores the political realities that many critical writers have exposed. Power is still being exercised by a dominant culture that has great investment in continuing the narratives thus created. Hence 'postcolonial' discourse is a contradiction in terms in relation to Australia, and may be problematic as a mode of inquiry.

There is another problem that I would like to raise in the adoption of postcolonial theory by Indigenous intellectuals: is there not a danger in using a Western theoretical model, considering it is 'the language of the foreign tongue' (Dodson 2003, p. 39)? Is it possible to use a Western methodology 'to subvert the hegemony of our own representations' (Dodson 2003, p. 39) that derives from that same hegemony? Dodson, as quoted earlier, stated that it is necessary for Indigenous people to 'resist translation into the languages and categories of the dominant culture' (Dodson 2003, p. 39). Does such necessary distancing advocated here not seem at odds with the adoption of critical scholarship?

In addition, why is it that Indigenous critical scholarship seems to give great weight to addressing issues of identity, the analysis of colonial representations as a shared voice, using a similar rhetoric, rather than engagement with more pressing contemporary issues such as self-determination, social problems within Indigenous communities, land rights and reconciliation? Neill, in her book *White Out*, refers to Pearson's courageous speaking out about these areas through comments that 'endemic welfare dependence was poisoning indigenous people, resourcing a "parasitic drink-and-gamble coterie" and stripping communities of a sense of responsibility' (Neill 2002, p. 28).

e. Towards mutual understanding

Having explored in depth the problematic of the encounter between blacks and whites, let us turn to those who have walked together the path of mutual understanding. What does the literature say from these examples, about the nature of the black-white engagement, and the capacity of each to learn from the other, about the nature of the relationship itself, as well as the sharing of knowledge? This is related to Perkins' earlier cited statement about a hypothetical 'good Australia', 'when white people would be proud to speak an Aboriginal language, when they realise that Aboriginal culture and all that goes with it, philosophy, art, language, morality and kinship, is all part of our heritage ... all they have to do is reach out and ask for it' (Perkins 2000).

Stanner articulates this continuing tradition:

At all times in Australian history, go back as far as you will, there were always a few men who found intellectual and human interest in the Aborigines and their plan of life. The interest had its ups and downs; it reflected the ethnic knowledge and social preoccupations of the day, so much so that on occasions you have to dig for evidences of it beneath a thick overburden of indifference, dislike or contempt; but there is no period in which it cannot be found, somewhere (Stanner 1979, p. 357).

Likewise, there is a lineage of Indigenous persons who have sought to reach out beyond their own cultural contexts to a wider non-Indigenous audience. In the words of Marika:

All over Australia Aboriginal people are trying to be face to face, see each other, and walk together, share the knowledge, share the culture so *you* can know our culture that *you* don't know (Marika in Isaacs 1995, p. 17).

And Randall's offering:

I want to write my story so that you will understand what I have learned about the tjukurrpa and our spirituality, that informs these paintings and has shaped my life and given me the strength to recover my Aboriginal identity, despite being stolen from my family at such a young age. Especially I want to tell you about kanyini, unconditional love and responsibility to all things (Randall 2003, p. 4).

In some cases, the vision of the collaboration in cultural sharing between blacks and whites has been grand:

(Ngarinyin) recognise that Western culture has created many problems for lands, waters, and the atmosphere shared by all of Creation. They believe that, with only a little time left themselves, they should share their knowledge, wisdom and insight for the benefit of the earth and the survival of humankind. They believe that the future will only be sustainable if global consciousness shifts to awareness of what they call Two Way Thinking— the ways of ancient indigenous cultures in sacred relationship with and underpinning, the modern worldview (Bell 1998, p. 21).

Interestingly, despite the overtures of willingness to share culture with non-Indigenous persons, there is less interest in learning about Western culture that is not forced through political contingencies. One exception is the internationally renowned artist Kathleen Petyarre. Nicholls states that this aspect of Kathleen has had a major influence on how she 'reads' and negotiates the national and international art markets:

Her lifelong interest in the habits and cultural practices of non-Indigenous people has developed into an engrossment that has never waned. It has prompted in her a desire to work and otherwise interact closely with non-Indigenous people in a variety of settings. While Kathleen brings acute, almost forensically sharp

powers of observation to her interactions with white people, she remains, for the most part, non-judgemental (Nicholls 2006, p. 3).

In attempting to gain insight into mutual understanding, I look to those writers who have forged a collaboration—Indigenous and non-Indigenous—as instructive, since this most closely parallels my own process of ongoing conversations and teachings with an Elder: Bell and Mowarlajai (*Men's Business, Women's Business* 1998), Mowarlajai and Malnic (*Yorro Yorro* 1993), Isaacs and Marika (*Wandjuk Marika Life Story* 1995), Read and Foley (*Belonging* 2000), Randall and Lepani (*Songman* 2003), Benterrak, Muecke and Roe (*Reading the Country* 1996), and Lowe and Pike (*Hunters and Trackers* 2002). I also include Rose (2000) and Stanner (1979) in this category. Even though Stanner had many different 'informants' over his years of work in communities, he still maintained very long-term relationships with certain Indigenous people, like the one with Durmagam spanning 25 years.

So, from these deeply informed relationships, within explorations of mutual understanding, what are the learnings?

All seem to implicate long-term relationships of respect and experiential learning from the land – friendships, in fact, and learning that is two-sided. Travelling through the country, accompanied by an Indigenous guide, teacher, or mentor, seems to be an imperative; living or staying with the community of the Elder over long periods of time, often being adopted into the existing kinship structure, yields the richness of ongoing exploration of ideas. It is a cultural embeddedness, distinctively different from a Western objective gaze probing the other. It is often the power of the teacher, his/her ability to explain the complexity of the cultural contents, and also the receptiveness, intellect and understanding of the recipient. It seems that it often results in transformation of both. Bell, in her decades-long relationship with Mowarlajai, (who stands out for his numerous outstanding collaborations with whites, both male and female), refers to their 'mutually enriching discourse' that not only had a 'profound effect on my self concept as female' but also produced with David, a 'bridge of understanding between the two cultures' in the form of the enunciation of 'Two Way

Thinking'. Here we learn that the Ngarinyin method of storytelling can act as a conduit between the Ngarinyin and Western knowledge (Bell 1998, pp. 8, 9).

But although each collaboration has yielded a considerable body of knowledge, there are precious little clues to glean on the nature of the encounter itself. Here is a gap in the literature.

The dialogue between San Roque and Cameron, referred to earlier, does address some aspects of this vital area. In discussing the interaction between a Western sense of place and that of Aboriginal people, each acknowledges 'country that is alive with Aboriginal consciousness' as one that is problematic for non-Indigenous Australians:

CSR: ... In Australia, the country, or at least the Aboriginal country, is a seething mass of consciousness. Rocks, trees, watercourses, hills, ranges, are all impregnated with consciously held meanings, events, stories; all woven in intricate patterns of relationship and embodied in designs, song phrases and dance steps. This is a geographical literature which can be read once one has been taught the language and the perspective. Most of us who now live in Australia to some extent are the inheritors of this library, know of the existence of the inland sea of 'song lines' but are nevertheless profoundly unconscious of the subtle intimacy of the Creation Beings' life and role in keeping Aboriginal consciousness healthy and alert.

JC: So, the interaction between Aboriginal and Western senses of place must start from the recognition that Aboriginal people have a completely different conception of the relationship between consciousness and place than most Western people (Cameron and San Roque 2003, p. 77).

San Roque's statement finds resonance in the quotes at the beginning of this chapter. When he speaks about Australians being 'the inheritors of this library', there is the echo of Perkins saying 'White people can inherit 40 000 or 60 000 years of culture, and all they have to do is reach out and ask for it' (Perkins 2000); likewise, reference to our being 'profoundly unconscious of the subtle intimacy of the Creation Beings' reminds us

of Oscar in Carey's Australian novel: 'The country was filled with sacred stories more ancient than the ones he carried in his sweat-slipping leather Bible. He did not even imagine their presence' (Carey 1988, p. 492).

We find out that the asking of questions, such a Western way of acquiring knowledge, cannot often produce Indigenous knowledge, let alone understanding. Time and immersion in the culture seem to be critical ingredients, rather than rational mind asking and receiving immediate answers. Stanner gives us a more detailed exposé of the Westerner questioning, the Indigenous person struggling to elucidate, to grapple with the conceptual translation into English; the white man keeping on with questions to dig deeper and extract the meaning:

Scholars familiar with the Aborigines have usually had one impressive experience in common: to be taken by Aboriginal friends to places in the wilds and there shown something—tree, rocky outcrop, cranny, pool— with formality, pride and love. Conversations follow rather like this: 'There is my Dreaming [place]. My father showed me this place when I was a little boy. His father showed him'. What had his father said? 'He said, your Dreaming is there; you want to look after this place' ... What did the father do there? 'He used to come here every year with the old men, the wise men; they used to do something here [hit, rub, break off pieces, brush with green leaves, sing]; that way they made the [totem] come on, come back, jump up, spread out.' How did that happen? What is it that is in the place? 'We do not know. Something is there. Like my spirit [soul, shadow, invisible counterpart]; like my brother [father, father's father, mate, friend, helper]; like my Dreaming [naming the totem entity]'. Will he think more? What else did his father say? That there was something in the Dreaming place? The dark eyes turn and look intent, puzzled, searching. 'My father did not say. He said this: 'My boy, look! Your Dreaming is there; it is a big thing; you never let it go; all Dreamings come from there; your spirit is there'. Does the white man now understand? The blackfellow, earnest, friendly, makes a last effort. 'Old man, you listen! Something is there; we do not know

what; something ... like engine, like power, plenty of power; it does hard work; it pushes (Stanner 1979, p. 135).

Stanner, despite his profound depth of understanding of the intricacies of cross-cultural dialogue, still expounds, 'often one is not too sure even of the questions to ask, or the right ways to ask them' (Stanner 1979, p. 63). Examples like this mirror my experiences through the research with an Aboriginal Elder. I have had numerous conversations with Uncle Max concerning the Dreaming; I have read much on this topic; I still find it elusive. Learning or understanding for a non-Indigenous person may not come at all, or may come very slowly, in small doses of repetition, or a rush of recognition. Often silences are as instructive as words. Multiple meanings abound. Does this require another way of being in the world? Are both knowledge systems mutually intelligible? The translation of notions from one cultural conceptual basis to another's is never easy. Take then two vastly different cultures, and the translation is even more difficult. How then to 'grasp the vast intuitions of stability and permanence, and of life and man at the heart of Aboriginal ontology' (Stanner 1979, p. 28).

A serious look at the mediation between the two ways of knowing, using the Yolngu notion of *ganma*, has yielded interesting insights in the collaborative book *Singing the Land, Signing the Land*. It is stated here the usefulness of *ganma*: 'The social and intellectual undertaking of racial and cultural reconciliation and "confluence" presently engages many Australians, black and white... The process of *ganma* will not occur unless both sides approach the negotiations with a determination to understand something of the way the other knowledge system works' (Watson et al. 1989, pp. 8, 11). The focus is on conceptual systems and the interrelated role of language in articulating same. This work opened me up to the importance of understanding something as well of the linguistic structures of Australian Aboriginal languages in order to tease out concrete clues of each system of knowledge if one is to 'render each knowledge system in the terms of the other' (Watson et al. 1989, p. 7). So what is it we need to know, one about the other, that is brought out here?

I share only a few snippets of this rich exploration: In the Watson research, an example is used of a photo of canoes on a beach; we discover that, in the description of what the

photo depicts by Yolngu and English speakers are revealed significant differences not only in the worldviews, hence ways of perceiving reality, but also the problematic of using English to approach the other language. By naming the elements in the photo, Yolngu show the world as all things combined into a related unity; English see the world as objects separated in space (Watson et al. 1989, p. 15).

There is no possessive case in Australian Aboriginal languages; instead, words are placed alongside to indicate relationship. Yallop gives a clear example of the importance of this grammatical distinction for the central Australian language Alyawarra: 'If we were to say in English, 'hold the boy's hand', hand can be implied as not being part of the body; Alyawarra says 'hold the boy the hand', denoting a radically different notion of the hand as part of me and not an attachment or possession.' (Yallop 1993, p. 23).

Are these intricacies important? Yes, I believe they are, and it is only by delving into the intricacies that one is cognisant of the worldview from which it springs. Such intricacies elucidate further the Aboriginal relationship with land, with self in relation with all beings. It is fundamental to the language. 'My land', 'my country', 'my body' evoke a very dissimilar association in both worldviews. It leads to the discovery that in Aboriginal Australia, 'language is directly installed or planted in the landscape', or that language can be seen as a 'fundamental characteristic of landscape' (Rumsey 1993, pp. 199, 203). This discovery further feeds the notion explored earlier of Aboriginal embeddedness in place, and the wider concept of place as fundamental to identity.

As Westerners, we need to know about the role of silence (Eades 1993, p. 185), how information may be intuited rather than demanded through questioning (Yallop 1993, p. 25); 'shame' as one of the most powerful and all-pervasive Aboriginal concepts that has no equivalent in non-Aboriginal society (Eades 1993, p. 187); that mathematics underlies both systems of knowledge, yet the pattern of this enunciation varies around notions of value (Watson et al. 1989, pp. 31–41); that both have texts to encode knowledge, but the production of such texts is vastly different; that a formally articulated system of 'beholdenness' is part of Aboriginal being in the world (Watson et

al. 1989, p. 37). In that we do not know these things, and many more of the cultural mores of the other, the result is misunderstanding.

Trudgen (2000) sees that walking in the footprints of the other is not just essential for those of the dominant culture, but is also an issue of life and death, in the case of the Yolngu of Arnhem Land. Trudgen is one of those people who act as conduit between the two worlds, and hence has a perspective in seeing the situation from both sides. His conclusions may be familiar to those well versed in cross-cultural education, but it is the detailed examination of the Yolngu worldview and how this can be misinterpreted by Balanda [whites] through poor communication that is significant. The three elements he has isolated as being vital for good cross-cultural communication, are 'language', awareness of 'worldview', and 'understanding a people's cultural knowledge base' (Trudgen 2000, p. 113):

If the dominant culture trained its professionals in the Yolngu language, Yolngu world view and Yolngu cultural knowledge base—and it is possible to do so—then Yolngu would not have to do all the hard work to cross the cultural knowledge barrier. They could then receive the vital information to survive (Trudgen 2000, p. 120).

This is no idle threat, in terms of what he deems necessary for survival of these people. His book is entitled *When Warriors Lie Down and Die*. The 'diseases of development' still continue to kill, demoralise, under-educate and decimate this population (Trudgen 2000, p. 8). His findings are relevant to all Australia and far beyond.

Myers does not see that it is only Aboriginal people who have had to do all the hard work in crossing the cultural divide. He nominates an intercultural space that is more of a two-way flow between the two cultures, Pintupi, from Central Australia, and whites. This space is in response to the changed conditions necessitating 'understandings re-organised in relation to new identities and contexts established through intrusion of Euro-Australian settlement' (Myers 2002, p. 48) Acrylic paintings create the intercultural space through the medium of exchange on both national and international

art markets. The exchange context is giving knowledge and designs of significance to whites, expecting in return a relationship formed through that giving:

It is not just a story—however valuable—that Yarnangu paint when they paint Tjukurrpa or their country. These stories and places embody, through the processes of their exchange and transmission, identities already formulated ... what a father passes on, or transmits in this way is not personal property that he has created or accumulated himself but an identity that is already objectified in the land (Myers 2002, p. 48).

The shifting nature of this exchange not only puts pay to any stable or rigid notions of culture, but also deconstructs the image portrayed to date of vast chasms of difference between the two cultures:

In these movements, the once-conventional notions of ‘us’ and ‘them’—whitefella and blackfella, European and Aboriginal, Australian and Aboriginal, Western and Other—have been reshuffled, the absolute sense of difference destabilized (Myers 2002, p. 15).

Myers makes a further giant leap in the significance of this destabilising of the cultural barrier, in his positing that it is a ‘sign of an emerging national identity not yet brought into social being’ that is ‘critical to Australia’s self representation’ as a nation (Myers 2002, pp. 9, 10). This is a very grand hypothesis, and scarcely believable in the light of evidence to the contrary. Perhaps the field of art is showing the way to an opening between the cultures, a new dialogue emerging that has huge ramifications for both.

The sophistication, complexity and subtlety of Aboriginal culture, Stanner tells us, needs be approached by one of two methods: either by ‘thinking black’ or by ‘relating the knowledge to our own intellectual tradition’ (Stanner 1979, pp. 25, 28). How can one think black? From his point of view, this involves ‘not imposing Western categories of understanding’ but ‘seeking to conceive of things as the blackfellow himself does’ (Stanner 1979, p. 25). Once again, perhaps we are being directed, like Said has said, to detach ourselves from our dominant culture, to develop a ‘detached consciousness’

(Ashcroft and Ahluwalia 2001, p. 69). Howitt, in the late nineteenth century, had this to say concerning his similar notion:

It is necessary not only to free oneself from misconceptions, as to the universal rule of our own system, but also to have such an acquaintance with the nature of a savage as to be able to put oneself mentally into his place, think with his thoughts, and reason with his mind (Howitt 1996, p. 157).

One way of knowing if we had succeeded in thinking black, Stanner tells us, would be if we have been able to ‘enfold into some kind of oneness the notions of body, spirit, ghost, shadow, name, spirit site, and totem ... all present in the metaphysical heart of the idea of person’ (Stanner 1979, p. 25). And he emphasises that the enfolding should be ‘without intellectual struggle’. Not an easy task, considering the ‘force of our analytic abstractions’:

Aboriginal ontology cannot illumine minds too much under the influence of humanism, rationalism, science ... One cannot easily ... grasp the vast intuitions of stability and permanence, and of life and man (Stanner 1979, p. 27).

So, if we cannot grasp these ‘vast intuitions’, since our Western intellect is too strong, and not the ‘absolute standard to judge others’ (Stanner 1979, p. 28), then he suggests we resort to using the strength of our intellect in transferring the knowledge into our known system. Now, these two options may appear to be rather contradictory, but if we stay with Stanner’s unfolding articulation, we are demanded to stay on the razor’s edge. It is the force of Stanner’s analytic mind that takes us deeper and deeper into what is entailed in unveiling the complexity of Aboriginal culture to provide understanding and valorising to a Western readership. He says we have one of two options; I tend to think what he really demonstrates is the utilisation of both options, not an ‘either/or’. It is an intellectual stretch to ‘think black’; it is an intellectual stretch to make meaning through our own Western knowledge system; it is even a further stretch to accept both ways of understanding, work with them both simultaneously.

Is everyone capable of doing this? I doubt this. There are few that can match Stanner's piercing intellect. Add to this equation the length of time that Stanner had been exposed to the ontology, cosmology, cosmogony of Aboriginal Australia and his ongoing articulation of these complex notions. How many of us can plunge into the depths of the concept of the Dreaming, the great 'founding drama', that 'immense store of meanings' (Stanner 1979, p. 115)? Yet he believes that until we have a solid grasp of this doctrine, we will not understand the Aboriginal worldview.

How is it possible then for a non-Indigenous person with a single experience of an Elder's teachings, to grasp anything of the depth and complexity and subtlety of this Aboriginal culture? Does the land itself have a role to play?

f. The poetic sensibility

I proffer that Stanner, even though he stresses the role of the Western intellect, is more attuned, more comprehensible to the artist, the poet, the religious. Perhaps this is really the place of confluence of the two cultures. His refined poetics of expression find more of a place here in this world than that which he eschews and embraces, 'the withering effect on sensibility of our pervasive rationalism' (Stanner 1979, p. 30). I am deeply moved by his own poetics:

'He (Aborigine) moves not in a landscape, but in a humanised realm saturated with significations' (Stanner 1979, p. 131).

Is it through the lens of this poetic sensibility that access to that other world of Aboriginal culture may be gained? Are we to drop the idea of using the strength of Western knowledge system as Indigenous translator, drop the idea of trying to 'think black', and immerse self as poet/artist in the other culture? Or do we need all three modes of entry?

The idiom of the European mind would allow ... a poet, or an artist or a religious thinker to find a meaning to unify things so disparate. One of the timeless functions of poetry and art is to reveal, and of religion to sacralise, the gulfs

which a mundane life opens between things the ‘practical’ and ‘scientific’ minds treat as disparate ... But a waterhole, a camp, a breast and a womb really do have something in common: something to do with life or the sustenance of life. This ‘something’ can be expressed as a sign, and whenever the sign is used it can point beyond itself to the things unified by its meaning (Stanner 1979, p. 64).

Poetry and art reveal what may be concealed. Religion speaks of the sacred, sacralises the world. We deepen here into another way of being in the world, not restrained by the strictures of the Western rational mind. It is a world of signs that point beyond themselves. Such language requires another sensibility, knows not the artificial barriers of culture.

It is signs, signifiers, tracks and traces in country that interest Muecke, in his writing on the collaboration of travelling across country with an Elder (Paddy Roe) and a white artist (Krim Benterrak). I think this piece of writing captures the possibility of using the three modes of entry that Stanner embodies in his work. Here we have an artist, who produces his response to country through his artistic medium of painting; Muecke, who uses words to express the process and interprets meaning through a Western philosophical framework; Roe, just ‘is’ in country, telling the stories, singing the songs. I find this work interesting for several reasons: one is that the journey across country with an Elder mimics my experience, and my own deep engagement with place has artistic/creative response as central; another is that the non-Indigenous authors are asking similar probing questions to mine in this thesis, such as ‘How do we walk this path together?’ (Benterrak et al. 1996, p. 12).

These explorations are brought into a Western conceptual structure through the notion of nomadology:

A book has to be a set of traces, words going somewhere. The nomadic reader will then come along afterwards and track things up, deciphering the traces. There will be no general idea of what the whole thing is about, only specific lines to be followed. Singular authority and overarching general theory will be abandoned in favour of local and strategic movements, where one person’s story

ends, the other one takes off. Nomadic writing writes itself; its authority comes from the territory covered, not the person temporarily in charge of the pen (Benterrak et al. 1996, p. 22).

Nomadology seems to reproduce something of the essence of being in country, but it is also stated that this work is an attempt to construct a 'theory of place'.

The privileged position of country in nomadic writing – 'its authority comes from the territory covered, not the person' – is important. It mirrors closely an Indigenous privileged position of country, as does the stance itself of the nomad in country: flexible and open, with an eye to 'local and strategic movements'. It is not surprising that such a definitive statement that 'any sense of understanding the landscape can only come from the landscape itself' and 'such understanding can best be developed in consultation with Aboriginal people' (Benterrak et al. 1996, p. 222) emerged from the theory and practice of nomadology.

Is there a strategy to be followed? The intellectual baggage of whites needs be dropped since it is useless; country becomes text to be read and often to be collectively produced; to listen to an Elder requires recording the long silences 'which speak of the lack of common ground between white discourses and Aboriginal discourses' (Benterrak et al. 1996, pp. 21-23); 'survival depends not just on the right sort of physical treatment of the country, but also what one says about it, writes about it, and the images one makes of it' (Benterrak et al. 1996, p. 72).

I take this last strategy to explore a little further. What does it imply? I am reminded of Rose's Yarralin people: 'people say that the country knows, hears, smells, takes notice, takes care, is sorry or happy...' (Rose 1996, p. 7). Here is certainly country as sentient presence. Benterrak refers to a 'new sensitivity' that is demanded in response to the landscape:

Although everyone might have their own, private, mental response to a place, the reading only emerges as they attempt to 'express' this feeling: they must talk, sing, write, paint, take photographs and so on ... A new sensitivity is being

demanding of people's perception of the environment. This sensitivity is not to be achieved through mutual encouragement to be 'more human' or 'caring' with what we already have, but through seeing the 'already there' in a quite different way. Words like 'seeing' and 'reading' must continue to be theorized and worked upon with a method which makes these seemingly innocent words carry the responsibility they deserve (Benterrak et al. 1996, pp. 12–13).

Uncle Max often uses the expression *seeing, reading and feeling the sacred text of the land*. He also refers to how whites *go into country with whitefellas eyes and come out with blackfellas eyes*. Stanner often spoke about whites' cultural blindness by the 'veils of race, culture and interest' (Stanner 1979, p. 105). So, 'seeing the already there in a quite different way' that comes through nomadology, must be a result of the expression of various creative modes. Is this not an Indigenous response to country, where country is sung, danced, painted on the body, drawn in the earth? Can we whites produce our own reading of country, as a creative response in alignment with the new sensitivity demanded of Benterrak? Where this research ends, with a paucity of attention to the nature of the 'new sensitivity', is where my research begins.

There is a strong resonance in the work of *Reading the Country* to my thesis, but does it work as a theory of place? I think not. This is no cohesive reading of country. All three (the philosopher, the artist and the Aboriginal Elder) contributors on this journey remain separate parallel strands to the dialogue. And how could it be otherwise, using a model that speaks of 'no general idea of what the whole thing is about, only specific lines to be followed ... overarching general theory will be abandoned' (Benterrak et al. 1996, p. 22). However, it is a fascinating postmodern dialogue about the ongoing Aboriginal and European response to country, shedding new ways of thinking about the experience of bringing the two worlds together in place.

g. Belonging

In the search for other new ways of thinking about *ganma*, or the confluence of the two worlds, I turn finally to the literature of belonging in Australia. Here critical voices attend to identity and the nature of attachment to this land. Both Read and Brady

identify an 'identity in transition' (Brady 1996, p. 78), 'a painful intellectual and emotional impasse' (Read 2000, p. 3) that is endemic in a society whose very existence still subsists on dispossession. Recall the quote of Sheridan at the beginning of this chapter: 'our self constitution as "Australian" – an identity, a unity, whose meaning derives from its discursive displacement of the "other" race' (Sheridan 1998, p. 78), which also reflects something similar in the dilemma facing modern Australians. How do these contemporary writers deal with this issue? Land as contested space is the background; the possibility of shared belonging and how to construct an identity as Australian is to the foreground.

Brady looks to the origins of the contact situation to shed light on the present, both in terms of attitudes and changing relationships between the two cultures (Brady 1996, p. 78). Read, while recognising the problematic of 'disputed attachments to place' resulting for him in 'self denigration ... self doubt and potential paralysis' (Read 2000, pp. 1, 5), prefers to focus on the present relationships of specific persons (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous) with this country and their deep attachments to place. Both are seminal thinkers. Both have had considerable exposure to Aboriginal culture, both experientially and theoretically. They do not examine this subject lightly, but with penetrating intellect and profound compassion. Both look from a different lens at the process of justification of the occupation of this land and the pervasive guilt of this today.

Brady takes us deeply into the imaginal and psychological world of settler Australia to discover a template laid down at the meeting of the cultures that still reverberates today. It is a 'crucial disturbance' or a state of 'socio-psychological disequilibrium' (Brady 1996, p. 48) that was then enacted, psychologically projected or enscribed onto this landscape and its original inhabitants (Brady 1996, p. 60). Hence, we are here offered an explanation for the brutal, irrational racism, the land taken as 'an act of possessing and penetrating the land and rendering it fruitful' (Brady 1996, p. 50), the inability of our culture to deal with the Aboriginal other, hence the stalemate today. Brady puts it down to a problem of imagination, of ethics and spirituality that characterises the nature of the encounter:

Human behaviour is inherently fluid. It is influenced by the meanings we attribute to our physical and social experience. If we wish to change, then, we need to change our meanings, and our modes of perception (Brady 1996, p. 79).

Brady seems to want us to follow the lead of the novel *Oscar and Lucinda* (Carey 1998) by keeping:

...open the “poetic” quality of existence which the practical and pragmatic tends to disregard. This quality, of course, is morally the basis of a genuinely metaphysical and properly religious sense of reality. It is also the basis of Aboriginal culture (Brady 1996, p. 80).

Again, the investiture of the poetic sensibility is being raised as conjugal between worlds. In addition, we are exhorted to enter into the wound, the ‘sense of vulnerability and humility’, in order to come to terms with what we have enacted upon Aboriginal people and ourselves (Brady 1996, p. 144).

Read finds no relief in dwelling in the wound, nor does he see it as a strategic location from which to move forward. Having been immersed in the emotional pain of the white legacy, the ‘post colonial situation which seems to render our own place unfamiliar and strange, alien and inaccessible’, he asks, ‘how do we belong here, in the light of this struggle between love for the country and guilt for the invasion?’ (Read 2000, pp. 10, 14). He admits there is a need for all whites to ‘undertake some very hard thinking, talking and learning’ (Read 2000, p. 17) as part of the process of belonging, but rejects those writers like Tacey (1995), who valorise Aboriginality at the expense of the barrenness of the Europeans’ attachments to country, and Stockton, who urges non-Indigenous Australians to avail themselves of Aboriginal culture respectfully, so that the ‘sacred story of the first comer becomes the sacred story of the latecomer’ (Stockton 1995, p. 9). Read’s task is to ‘reassess the self-denigration that portrays us as morally and spiritually deficient’ (Read 2000, p. 3).

I am interested in such questioning that he raises as:

- Do the people respond to the forces in the country already or is it humankind which sacralizes the country? (Read 2000, p. 203);
- Do Aborigines belong in some deeper way than the rest of us? (Read 2000, p. 9); and
- In what sense are the Creation Ancestors actually relevant to Peter the non Aboriginal? In seeking them, do I seek to expropriate the Indigenous spirits? (Read 2000, p. 203).

Such questions are along very similar lines to many issues my thesis raises. His journey with an Aboriginal academic Foley, into the shared places of their childhood also evinces much in common with my own experiences with Elders on country and that of others. Does he come to any peace, any insights about how to belong, any soothing of his troubled soul seeking identity? ‘Mature belonging’, it seems, is possible, from a variety of sources, by not seeking to ‘all belong to each other’, but by developing our own attachments independent of Aboriginal people: ‘Leave the spirits to the people who made them or were made by them ... we can belong on the landscape, in the landscape or irrelevantly to the landscape’ (Read 2000, pp. 204-208).

This is certainly an unexpected conclusion, hotly contested by many scholars. I, too, contest whether it is at all possible to belong separately or ‘irrelevantly’ to the landscape. His core finding is that one can belong and feel strong emotional, intuitive attachments to this land without a spiritual identity. Is this so? There is a debate on identity and belonging in Australia today that was initiated by Read and taken up by Plumwood (2000). Cameron (2001) has also waded into the debate. The basic argument could be construed as one of whether non-Indigenous Australian identity and sense of belonging is in some way determined or influenced by Indigenous culture or needs to be completely separate from it. The debate certainly impacts on the nature of this research where I am examining the meeting of Indigenous and non-Indigenous persons in Australia today.

At the beginning of this chapter I asked whether it is possible for a non-Indigenous person, having received Indigenous teachings on the land, to engage deeply with this place. Having examined through the literature something of the complexity of *ganma*, the place of the joining of freshwater and saltwater and the place of the meeting of Indigenous and non-Indigenous culture, it now remains to expound a methodology that would do justice to such complexity.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

1. Research Approach: Phenomenology and Hermeneutics

In the previous chapter, I set out the multi-dimensional complexities of the dialogue of engaging deeply with place. Some of the issues raised include the nature of a sense of place for Western and Indigenous cultures, including the richness of the disparities and convergences of the two worlds; the difficulties of cross-cultural dialogue, teased out through the meaning structures that inform the dialogue; the explication of the contested space and hence the problematic of a shared sense of place; and the sense of identity and belonging in Australia today.

Given these complexities, how is one to proceed methodologically? How best to gather an account of the phenomenon that mirrors the richness and multi-textured nature of a deep engagement with place?

The research methodology that focuses directly on lived experience is phenomenology. Phenomenology seeks to arrive at the essence or the nature of the original experience. It has been described at its fundamental level by Seamon as ‘the interpretive study of human experience’ (Seamon 2000, p. 157), with its aim expressed by Von Eckartsberg as being to ‘examine and clarify human situations, events, meanings and experiences as they spontaneously occur in the course of daily life’ (Von Eckartsberg 1998a, p. 3).

Because I am primarily interested in the study of Western participants’ depth engagement with place, it is people’s actual place-based experiences that are the central focus of this study.

Such insights into the nature of phenomenology reveal a framework that can hold complexity, multi-layered meaning and ambiguity that all characterise the human experience. Therefore, it fits extremely well the requirements of my research. In the research, I am seeking to examine and understand the relationship of non-Indigenous persons in Australia with the land. It is the experience of deep engagement with place

that is the phenomenon under study. Seamon claims that the phenomenological endeavour 'offers an innovative way for looking at the person-environment relationship and for identifying and understanding its complex, multi-dimensioned structure' (Seamon 2000, p. 158).

Abram states that, 'it is natural that we turn to the tradition of phenomenology in order to understand the strange difference between the experienced world, or worlds, of indigenous vernacular cultures and the world of modern European and North American civilization' (Abram 1996, p. 31).

Like Abram, my contention is that phenomenological research, with its central core of lived experience, provides the conduit between cross-cultural dialogue. In that my research looks at the experience of non-Indigenous persons receiving teachings from an Indigenous Elder in Australia, it constitutes a cross-cultural study. In addition, I intend to shed light on what it means to be fully human through studying this phenomenon.

In order to understand the essence and significance of the lived experience, however, one must also interpret the experience, and bring meaning to it in order to clarify it. This is the field of hermeneutics. Due to my interest in personal and cultural meaning, I am involved in a hermeneutic practice that concerns deep engagement with place. To derive understanding about my own and others' concrete lived experiences, I need to uncover the meaning structures contained within those experiences.

Hence, this research is a hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry.

Von Eckartsberg outlines the hermeneutic process as:

One embeds oneself in the process of getting involved in the text, one begins to discern configurations of meaning, of parts and wholes and their interrelationships, one receives certain messages and glimpses of an unfolding development that beckons to be articulated and related to the total fabric of meaning. The hermeneutic approach seems to palpate its object and to make room for that object to reveal itself to our gaze and ears, to speak its own story into our understanding (Von Eckartsberg 1998b, p. 50).

I now return to my three initial research questions:

0. What is the nature of my own experience of engagement with place, and how is this expressed?
0. What is the experience of non-Indigenous persons receiving land-based teachings from an Indigenous Elder?
0. To what extent is it possible for non-Indigenous persons to enter deeply into Indigenous ways of seeing/knowing place?

Because I am seeking to extend specific questions from the phenomenon under study to broader questions about the way we as humans experience the world, I am immediately orienting myself to a phenomenological approach. This is expressed by Seamon as:

A phenomenological study might begin with a ... real world situation but would then use that specific instance as a foundation for identifying deeper, more generalizable patterns, structures and meanings (Seamon 2000, p. 160).

The three specific questions lead to several overarching questions that will hopefully reveal 'deeper... structures and meanings':

1. How do we engage with place? What is the nature of this engagement and how is this expressed? What is the quality of the relationship developed?
2. What does this say about who we are and our place in this land, in this world, and in the cosmos?
3. What are the consequences of a deep sense of connectedness with place? Is there a new sensibility that connects us with place, more informed by Indigenous ways of being?

There is an intentionality, and hence an orientation, through a phenomenological approach, that involves the adoption of the concept of an inseparable connection to the world in order to become more fully part of that world. It speaks of the intimacy of

relationship between people and the way they inhabit the world. Van Manen refers to this way of wanting to know the world as:

Profoundly to be in the world in a certain way ... the intentional act of attaching ourselves to the world, to become more fully part of it, or better, to become the world ... is the principle of intentionality (Van Manen 1990, p. 5).

Seamon asserts that this is one of the two assumptions that define phenomenological research. In adopting such intentionality, I recognise that human beings are fundamentally related to the world in which they live or, more philosophically, that all being is to be understood as immersion in a world that creates an 'undissolvable unity' with that world (Stewart and Mickunas 1990, p. 9). My research focus on a deep engagement with place, contextualised as part of sense of place scholarship, sees place as a key ontological notion that structures the whole of human experience (Casey 1993, pp. 15–16).

The second assumption designated by Seamon to illustrate the heart of phenomenological method is 'radical empiricism'. It is 'a way of study whereby the researcher seeks to be open to the phenomenon and to allow it to show itself in its fullness and complexity through her own direct involvement and understanding' (Seamon 2000, p. 165). My research operates on this assumption in two areas: in first-person phenomenological research, I am reaching understanding through my own experience of deep engagement with place. Seamon delineates this as where 'the researcher uses her own firsthand experience of the phenomenon as a basis for examining its specific characteristics and qualities' (Seamon 2000, p. 168). It involves my experiential involvement in various sites throughout Australia over a period of eight to ten years. There is no closure surrounding the length of time allowed to engage with these places. It remains an open-ended exploration of my ongoing engagement through creative expressions. Hence, this process produces 'an intimacy with the phenomenon through prolonged firsthand exposure' (Seamon 2000, p. 167).

In my research with others, I conduct in-depth interviews with persons who have partaken in a group experience of land-based teachings with an Aboriginal Elder. I also

conduct conversational interviews with the Aboriginal Elder and record some of his specific teachings. The experience of others lends further weight to a deeper exposure to and understanding of the phenomenon of a deep engagement with place. Von Eckartsberg (1998a, 1998b) refers to this type of phenomenological research as existential-phenomenological research. The interviews yield descriptive accounts of the experience of being in place. The descriptive accounts 'reveal their own thematic meaning-organization if we, as researchers, remain open to their guidance and speaking, their disclosure, when we attend to them' (Von Eckartsberg 1998b, p. 29).

In this second aspect of the research, my immersion as well, in the phenomenon under study, is very full, both as participant and observer. My own individual work in place, outlined above as first-person phenomenology, also feeds into this research with others through an openness or 'phenomenological intuiting', an 'allowing of the phenomenon to emerge as unfettered and unprejudiced as possible so as to reveal something of its own essence' (Spiegelberg 1982, pp. 118–23).

Thus, I have incorporated into my research the three methodological types (first-person phenomenological, existential phenomenological, hermeneutic phenomenological) advanced by researchers in this field. Through this deliberate methodological choice, I intend to produce a piece of research that is rich in meaning, multi-layered, and of sufficient complexity to deal with the subject in hand. However, I choose to refer to my research henceforth as essentially hermeneutic phenomenological research, since I believe this designation is adequate in definition to hold all the other phenomenological types.

Van Manen (1990, p. 30) delineates the six research activities characterising hermeneutic phenomenological research. I list each of these activities and show how my own research adheres to these fundamental tenets:

3. Turning to a phenomenon that seriously interests us and commits us to the world.

The phenomenon examined is a deep engagement with place. I have a profound interest in the nature of my own engagement with place exemplified through various creative

expressions, such as art, dance/movement, photography, poetry and writing. I have made my own study in this area over the last ten years as the subject of research. In addition, I am keen to know and understand what happens when non-Indigenous persons experience teachings in certain places by an Aboriginal Elder. Both areas of the research show a commitment to the world through looking at the relevant contemporary issues of cross-cultural dialogue, identity, belonging, and a connection with place.

Although sense of place research holds a firm though recent positioning in academic culture, cross-cultural studies in this field in Australia are lacking. I believe this research has value in terms of inter-cultural understanding and reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. To explore deep connectedness with place will hopefully shed light on the complexity of such a relationship, and perhaps model ways of developing an individual relationship with place. The research project also provides insight into what 'belonging' means in an Australian context and related issues of identity. In the light of the research, I question whether a new environmental ethic can emerge from a deeper engagement with place, especially that informed by Indigenous notions of place/country.

3. Investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualise it.

My own work (first person phenomenology) is experiential, and involves the creation of phenomenological texts based on direct experiences in several sites in Australia. My research with others, similarly, is based on how they experienced three to four days of teachings on the land with Uncle Max. In conversational interviews with the Elder, my main interest is on his experience of teaching. In all three aspects of the research, experience has primacy. Meaning is elicited from the experience itself.

3. Reflecting on the essential themes that characterise the phenomenon.

The reflection process is an essential part of a phenomenological study. It is through reflection that meaning is extracted. All strands of research will tease out themes and reflect on these as part of the interpretation and meaning-making essential to the hermeneutic study. Once elicited, themes need to be considered and reconsidered. It is

anticipated that first-person phenomenological themes may assist in the deepening reflection on the themes that emerge from others as subject in third person phenomenology.

4. Describing the phenomenon through writing and rewriting.

The process of creating a phenomenological text will demand writing and rewriting in all stages. Reflection is seen to be an integral part of a hermeneutic phenomenological study, and this aspect is what informs the rewriting. Both in third-person and first-person research subjects, reflection will be a crucial element to the project, especially since making sense of the experience itself cannot be determined by time constraints. Sometimes my own reflections of the experience in a particular site/place may take several days, weeks or even months/years, and writing and rewriting is a constant response. Similarly, with others as subject, I need to allow time for the experience to settle and begin to integrate in order for reflection initially, and then more time for further reflection. This then mandates further writing and rewriting. What is produced is a cycle fed by the experience itself, reflection on the experience, which may draw out meaning and themes, often in the form of writing, then further reflection based on the insights gained earlier, and so on. I recycle through each of the stages again and again in the building of the phenomenological text.

5. Maintaining a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon.

The process just described, of recycling through the experience via reflection, writing and rewriting, keeps alive and vibrant the relationship with the phenomenon under study: a deep engagement with place. The other essential way of deliberately maintaining a pedagogical relation to the phenomenon is through an ongoing appraisal of the literature. These current forms of knowledge have been examined for what they contribute to my research questions and the phenomenon itself. It continues to inform my research in all phases, and demands critical examination in the light of my research findings. I continue to read widely in order to keep a constant orientation to my research questions.

6. Balancing the research context by considering parts and whole.

It is important for me to experiment with the ways the individual experiences of myself and others produce parts that make up the whole phenomenological text. I find the focus will need to shift constantly from the particulars of an individual's experience to that of the wider, more generalised aspects that may embrace more universal qualities, such as those that describe what it means to be human. Also, taking the experience of third-person phenomenological research demands exposure to an Indigenous worldview which may necessitate contextualising within that culture or the bringing of awareness to the cultural difference, rather than focusing on the individual meaning-making. In short, the research context demands an examination of the extent to which the experiences described by self and others constitute personal/psychological factors, or cultural factors, or both, or transcend these factors in the teasing out of more fundamental issues.

2. Research Method

Having provided the rationale and justification of a phenomenological methodology, I turn now to the specific methods that carry through such an approach. Seamon states that 'since the researcher as human instrument is the heart of phenomenological method, the specific research methods she uses should readily portray human experience in human terms. The best phenomenological methods therefore, are those that allow human experience to arise in a rich unstructured, multidimensional way' (Seamon 2000, p. 167).

Overall, the research takes place in Australia, because it is an Australian sense of place that is being examined. The questions raised here also implicate identity and what it means to belong, in particular, what it means to be non-Indigenous and the possibility of a deep connectedness with this land.

There are three strands to the research: observations and conversations with an Elder, third-person phenomenological research, and first-person phenomenological research.

a. Observations and conversations with an Elder

The origin of this aspect of the research has its roots in Indigenous teachings. Having been the recipient of these teachings (twice a year at least over a period of eight years) on Yuin country, far south coast NSW, through Uncle Max, and on specific sacred sites in other areas, I became aware of the significance of the teachings, in terms of how I perceived the land, my relationship with it, and hence, in some cases, the nature of reality itself. This was my first direct contact with an Aboriginal person, and my first exposure to experiential Indigenous teachings. From this ground sprung the desire to know how others experienced these teachings, to examine whether a deep connectedness with place was possible for non-Indigenous people mediated through Indigenous teachings.

In advertising material, Uncle Max describes himself:

I am a senior initiated lore/Lawman of the Yuin teaching.

The Old People and the traditional Lawmen have put me through the stages of initiation in many parts of Mother Earth.

The Ancestors teach me and lead me in my work as teacher.

Meditation and spiritual practices are important methods used to contact these continuous teaching lines.

My aim is to bring these teachings into the hearts of all peoples and communicate their relevance to the times we live in (Harrison 1998).

I engaged in a series of in-depth conversations with Uncle Max in order to discover the extensive nature of his involvement in cross-cultural, place-based teaching.

Approximately once every two months, over a period of four years, I met with Uncle Max and tape-recorded our conversations. These interviews have been transcribed, then edited for inclusion in the research. The interviews were always very relaxed, in cafés, over a meal, or at his workplace. Mostly, they were unstructured interviews, allowing what arose at the time of our discussion. On occasions, I had specific questions that may

or may not have been adhered to in the interviews, due to the emergence of a broad variety of topics. These conversations were dialogues, a true exchange, yet always conceptualised as Uncle Max as teacher, and myself as student, with all of the respect and protocol that such a traditional relationship demands.

In choosing what to include from these conversations, I have selected those aspects that mostly relate to his experience of teaching others, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous.

b. Third-person phenomenology

I had been working with Uncle Max through the organisation Koori Connections, a business set up between Uncle Max and John Taylor (non-Indigenous) to bring Indigenous teachings more into the world, and particularly to non-Indigenous persons. I was co-organiser on some journeys and sole organiser on others. In this capacity, I was writing promotional materials, especially for educational institutions, both secondary and tertiary, in which I had a strong background. It also involved getting Uncle Max to present and run workshops at conferences and in consultancy to organisations, for example, curriculum design (Board of Studies, NSW Dept. of Education). I also organised groups of secondary and university students to participate in activities including both indoor and outdoor teachings in places like the Royal National Park and Ku-ring-gai National Park, where I tended to be the translator of programme requirements.

Participants in a journey of several days' duration in Yuin country, about six hours out of Sydney, with the purpose of receiving teachings on the land from Uncle Max, were asked to be part of this project in October 2000.

As participant/observer on the south coast journeys, I not only established rapport with participants through the shared experience, but I could also observe the group over several days. My subjective impressions of the group each day as well as my own experience were audio-taped each evening. I was not interested in taking notes during the days, due to privacy issues and intrusiveness. I was interested in observing what the

group process was, responses made by participants, and reflections on the whole interaction between non-Indigenous and Indigenous persons.

Participation on the actual journey to the south coast with Uncle Max was a choice voluntarily made by each person. Interviewees were self-selective, in that the group was told about the research before the weekend and those willing to be part of the research were recruited after the event. Because I participated on the journey, there was a shared experience that created a solid foundation for the interviews. I had an opportunity to observe the group participants before they had decided to be part of the research project.

The decision who to interview was made on the basis of willingness to participate (major factor), ease of access for interviewing (although this ended up not being a factor due to email access), gender (I preferred to have both genders represented), and residence in Australia (once again, not adhered to, as one interviewee was on a three-month visit to Australia). Each participant had to commit to several interviews, months and even years apart. Initially three participants agreed to in-depth interviews.

Due to the death of one of the participants, Michael, after several initial interviews via email (he lived in the United States), I needed to involve another interviewee. I chose to include a younger person who participated in a small group journey with Uncle Max that was organised two-and-a-half years after the original journey. This woman, Margarita, self-selected to become involved having some knowledge of and interest in the project already. I decided to still include Michael's contribution in the research, as I am sure he would have wanted this. Hence there were ultimately four interviewees.

Three of the interviewees were middle-aged: one American priest (Michael) who was here in Australia on sabbatical; one African-American woman, Rowena, who has lived in Australia for the last 30 years; and an Australian woman, Anne, who has had a strong background in teaching young children. The fourth was Margarita, who was a dance therapist in training.

The first interviews took place a few weeks after the journey. An interview of approximately three to four hours, with several guiding questions about the actual

experience of the journey and the teachings themselves, was required. This took place in the homes of participants, or in my home, in order to provide a relaxed, comfortable and safe environment, with the exception of Michael, where all interviews were done by email.

I then held a follow-up interview a month or two after this initial interview. In the intervening period, I asked participants to reflect on their experience. In most cases, interviewees read their initial interviews. The second interview, on the nature of the experience, was deemed necessary to allow a sufficient time for reflection after the weekend away. In some cases, a third interview was conducted, a year or two after the initial one. Interviews (on audiotape) provided the raw data to be transcribed and analysed for themes, in order to provide the meaning and interpretation that constituted the phenomenological text. All participants were given a copy of the final draft of their own particular narrative to make alterations if necessary.

Although the interviews were open-ended phenomenological interviews aimed at bringing forth the quality of their experiences, I decided to structure some specific questions around certain themes that I wished to explore. Even though I had particular questions, I wanted to leave the process open in order to allow trains of thought to emerge that were outside the parameters of the questions. I was hoping to hold an open dialogue that allowed for all possibilities of response to emerge with a certain mutuality and a 'staying in the moment' rather than any imposition of questions. As a consequence, not all questions were answered by all respondents.

The questions were designed to elicit responses to the following areas:

- Prior relationship with land/nature: What is the nature of your relationship with the land now? And as a child? How do you express this?
- Prior exposure to Aboriginal culture, Aboriginal persons, and Aboriginal teachings: Have you had any contact with or understanding of Aboriginal culture, knowledge or people before this journey?

- Personal experiences, in particular the teachings by Uncle Max: Can you explain what you experienced when you were on the land with Uncle Max?
- Notions of identity before and after journey: How do you see yourself in terms of individual identity? Is this linked with this land/Australia?
- Notions of reality before and after journey: How do you explain reality? How would you describe your ideas about reality?

The main focus in each interview was for the interviewee to describe their actual experience of the day/s as it was lived through. The questions themselves were secondary, and in the event that they were not answered, or not included in the final text, was due to the emphasis on the lived experience itself, as mandated through a phenomenological approach.

c. First person phenomenology

With first-person phenomenological research, I engage in a variety of creative modalities in response to specific sites/places. I call this a deep engagement with place. Methods employed include the step-by-step process of collecting material through engagement in several sites, and producing phenomenological texts that include or are informed by movement/dance, narrative, sculpture, installation art, image and poetry. These texts reflect the nature of deep engagement and dialogue with place.

Phenomenological method eschews definite procedures, and prefers to rely on openness, uncertainty, creativity and what has been termed a certain ‘fluidity’ in the research process. As Tesch states, ‘To conjure up an image of what this movement is like, it helps to see it more in terms of a flow, or of a cycling or spiralling motion that have no clearly distinguishable steps or phases’ (Tesch 1987, pp. 231–2).

Hence, what I outline here is more an attempt to bring coherence and order to the experience of first person phenomenology, rather than any fixed procedure that was devised, imposed and strictly adhered to. I engage with place both by revisiting the same site and by travelling through country. It is an embodied creative response to

place. Both forms generate the text. Some texts are purely narrative, others purely visual, or there is often a combination of both. Poetry has a strong expression as text, either standing on its own or enhancing image.

When I revisit the same place, I engage with it initially through movement or art installation, and I sometimes take photographs. This provides a template from which to continue engaging with this place over time, and expressing it through other creative means such as painting, poetry, clay sculpture and written text. All of these various creative expressions are the phenomenological text. Meaning is derived through the dialogue between these creative forms.

In one journey through country, I travelled for three weeks in Central Australia on my own; in the second, I travelled through the Kimberley of Western Australia accompanied by an Aboriginal Elder who wanted to show me his country. I have also spent much time over the last eight years with Aboriginal Elder Uncle Max, both on his country in far south coast NSW and on various other sites. From these journeys, I have produced phenomenological pieces of writing that reflect each of the experiences. In all situations, I kept a diary and/or tape-recorded my experiences.

In the journeys through country, creative responses in site-specific places are inserted into the narrative, but the narrative itself is the strongest element. It is after the event, ranging again from anything like several days to weeks, to months to years, that the narrative continues to unfold and eventually becomes the final phenomenological text.

The whole process is reflexive, in that by cycling back into the lived experience, in the various creative forms in which it has been expressed, and by reflection on it again and again, meaning starts to assume shape, even if the meaning has only managed to find final utterance in words. As I cycle backwards and forwards, working and reworking the text, informed by each new creative outburst, one cycle begets the new in what may seem like a constant emission, with no end point, but merely a piece of music with harmonies added indefinitely, so that the original tune may still be recognisable, but, with so much texturing, it has become almost a new piece.

d. Interrelationship of methods

Although the methods of research have been delineated into three separate strands, there is considerable overlap and cross-fertilisation, both intentional and unintentional.

Intentional overlap occurs through the construction of self in all sections of the research. The fact that my work with others is grounded in my own place-based experiences lends more credibility to the whole research project and enhances my capacity to delve more deeply into the phenomenon.

The research participants have received teachings on the land from Uncle Max, as have I. In first-person phenomenology, I examine the nature of my own deep engagement with place. With others, I take on the role of participant and observer of self, group participants and Uncle Max. Unintentional overlap is a product of myself receiving these Indigenous teachings and the unknown extent to which this may influence my own deep engagement with place. It is impossible to tease out the definitive impact, but acknowledgment must be made of my lifetime of experiences and the influence of various land-based teachers beyond the Indigenous teachings, and beyond the scope of the research.

Having established the methodology I am using as a vehicle for this research, I now turn to the actual results, beginning with the chapter on Uncle Max.

CHAPTER FOUR

OBSERVATIONS AND CONVERSATIONS WITH AN ELDER

1. Introduction

Since a large part of this research concerns the receiving of teachings by non-Indigenous persons, it is appropriate to commence with observations and conversations with the Elder who imparts these teachings. I'm interested in how he teaches, what he teaches, and why he teaches. These questions shed light on the cross-cultural dialogue that is at the heart of this research. In addition, the phenomenological enterprise itself demands exposing the nature of the experience in as many different ways as possible.

Section 2 of this chapter deals with Uncle Max's background and how he came to be teaching non-Indigenous persons on the land. I intersperse statements from Uncle Max about himself with my own observations based on eight years of regular contact.

Section 3 describes the nature of my relationship with Uncle Max. I believe this holds an important place in setting the scene for the last section of this chapter, Conversations with Uncle Max, and introduces the qualities of our particular dialogic process embedded within a broader cross-cultural dialogic process.

Section 4 is constituted from conversations between Uncle Max and myself over approximately four years. I have limited the content to the teaching process itself, whether that be teaching Kooris, or non-Indigenous persons, or both. I am keen to explore to what extent Uncle Max is conscious of cross-cultural differences and whether he adjusts his teachings accordingly; how much of his teaching methods are handed down, or whether they are more a product of his distinctive personality and teaching style; and what his own experience of teaching others, Kooris [NSW Aboriginals] or whitefella, is. Finally, I want to know what Uncle Max experiences on the sacred mountain, Mt. Gulaga, either on his own or when he is teaching others.

In all sections there is minimal, if any, editing of Uncle Max's actual words. There are two reasons for this. First is that I wish to retain the tone of the conversation so the

reader too becomes enmeshed in it. Secondly, Uncle Max's idiom is distinctive and part of the experience. He uses phrases such as 'you know' or 'see?' to enjoin the listener in the dialogue.

2. Profile of Uncle Max (Dulumunmum)

I choose to once more bring to the reader's attention, the self-description Uncle Max, (or Dulumunmum, his tribal name), has adopted, since by delving further into this description yields a richer portrayal of the Elder.

I am a senior initiated lore/Lawman of the Yuin teaching.

The Old People and the traditional Lawmen have put me through the stages of initiation in many parts of Mother Earth.

The Ancestors teach me and lead me in my work as teacher.

Meditation and spiritual practices are important methods used to contact these continuous teaching lines.

My aim is to bring these teachings into the hearts of all peoples and communicate their relevance to the times we live in (Harrison 1998).

In a very simple statement, what has been encapsulated here is the *modus operandi* of an Aboriginal Elder in twenty-first century Australia.

The two main things being expressed in this statement concern, first, Uncle Max's tradition of teaching practice—that which he has inherited—and, second, that which he has chosen individually to take upon himself, as part of his teaching practice. It is his own decision to attempt to bring about reconciliation with the Mother Earth for all of us, and bring forth the understanding that traditional Aboriginal teachings are relevant for today.

I intend to take several key statements of his and further expand upon them in order to shed light on their meaning and how they are enacted in the world. In order to do this, I

have also included direct comments of Uncle Max in italics taken from specific teachings or recorded conversations that may or not be included in this chapter as transcripts.

a. To bring these teachings into the hearts of all peoples...

Perhaps the departure point for this statement, being characteristic of any Elder throughout the history of Aboriginal Australia, would be contained within the last sentence: ‘My aim is to bring these teachings into the hearts of all peoples and communicate their relevance to the times we live in’ (Harrison 1998).

Uncle Max has always expressed the desire to bring about the reconciliation of all people, not just his own people, with Mother Earth. He firmly believes that we have all become disconnected from the Mother, from nature herself. This is his heartfelt notion of what reconciliation is all about, unlike what is defined as reconciliation in mainstream dialogue, as reconciliation between black and white on this land.

I don't like this word reconciliation. I don't approve this word. How can there be reconciliation between us mob and the other mob when there never was a partnership put there in the first place.

You can't reconcile a broken down relationship if there never was one in the first place.

What I'm trying to do is get both mobs to reconcile back with the Mother.

This is the very broad vision that has sustained Uncle Max's teaching over nearly forty years. It is a spiritual vision that, while embedded deeply in culture, is also transcending culture, and speaking to what he perceives as a universal human need. He is firmly convinced that Aboriginal culture has great relevance for people in Australia, for people throughout the world:

See, we've all got to walk the land together, as I always say, breathe the same air, use the same water, so the more that non-Indigenous people go into the

depths of spiritual connection to the land, they can look at Aboriginal sites through white eyes and walk out of some of those places with black minds. And that to me is a form of reconciliation, you know, of the full understanding. And the more into depth that they go...

Of course, first and foremost, Uncle Max is a passionate teacher who derives not only great pleasure from teaching people of all ages, but seems most content and most strongly in his powerful presence when teaching.

I've taken thirty, forty, sixty school kids, primary school kids through there, and that was incredible, the kids never spoke.

And when I put the ochre on them and said no speakin' through this very special place, eh, what happened is they took the whole area as very special, see, not just that little walk from the Energy Rock to the Three Fellas, they took it right through, no questions, nothing. Not a thing.

b. I am a senior initiated Lore/Lawman of the Yuin teaching...

In terms of identity, we understand that Dulumunmum is a Yuin Elder. The Yuin Nation extends from just south of Kiama to the far south coast of NSW, extending away from the coast into some parts of the Snowy Mountains region, often known as the Eden-Monaro. The focus of Uncle Max's people is Wallaga Lake, near Bermagui. He is a coastal man. It is also stated that Uncle Max is a senior Lawman. This is in addition to, yet different from, being a senior 'lore' man. Aboriginal lore is the body of knowledge dealing with stories/mythology/legends. He has knowledge of this lore pertaining to his own country, and has also acquired through his lifetime considerable knowledge of other people's country.

What I am trying to get people to learn and to understand is to look at the similarities, and not the differences. All the similarities are there in all the cultural stories—it is global, there are similarities globally.

A senior Lawman immediately defines his status as being cultural transmitter for Aboriginal Law. It is implicit in the role. What this implies is his right and obligation to hand on his teachings to the younger men of his tribal group, as has been done over millennia on this land.

c. The Old People and the traditional Lawmen have put me through the stages of initiation...

What is the tradition that Uncle Max inherited in terms of the transmission of knowledge? The status of Elder is not a given, not an automatic response to a person reaching a certain age, but a status that must be earned. And that earning is through the acquisition of knowledge. A senior Lawman title means he has acquired and 'holds' the knowledge of numerous Laws. To have acquired these Laws means Uncle Max has been put through many stages of initiation by those senior Lawmen who were his teachers, thus making him a senior Lawman also. The teachings are experiential and were always given on the land.

He draws out for me the distinction between *holding* on to the teachings and *keeping* the teachings:

Those holders of those stories had to become keepers 'cause they couldn't pass them on and so died with them, see.

So when you're the holder of legends and stories, and you don't give it out then you become the keeper, so when you go, the story goes.

So you only become the holder of all these Laws and that and you gotta pass 'em on, see. That's the difference between holder and keeper, you know.

I hear people saying they are the keeper of this and that, you know, so when are you going to give it to some young people?

This is the life Uncle Max has lived out—the holder, rather than the keeper. If one keeps the Law instead of giving it out through teachings, then it will die with the keeper. What is it that he perceives to be the essence of his teachings?

All of the teaching is about environment and respect for the mother. That's all our teachings, that's our schooling, what we go through when we go through Law. It's not about one plus one equals two, it's about lookin' at and understandin'. Being scientists in their own right were those Old People ...

d. The Ancestors teach me and lead me...

What is being articulated here is the living tradition that continues to inform Uncle Max in his teaching. His tradition acknowledges the ongoing access to the Ancestral spirits as source of teachings. Such 'continuous teaching lines' (Harrison 1998) implicate a dynamic system, a relationship or ability to communicate with other levels of reality that is part of a spiritual practice:

When that Old Fella appeared before me with the markings, then I knew the markings, cause they are my traditional markings...I had to go through all that for that old man without voice just pointing and showing me. Then I had to fully understand, to take the spiritual emails that were given to me, to understand....

Uncle Max, throughout his Elder life, has been remembering what he was taught by the Elders. Sometimes this is a real struggle; sometimes very many years later, the memory of a particular teaching experience comes to him revealing long-buried information. For example, recently he was shown a picture of an appendix in an anatomy book. This triggered a whole sequence of childhood memories of when his grandfather removed his appendix without cutting his body:

When Morelle [Uncle Max's partner] showed me that diagram, I was sort of shattered, 'cause I'll never forget that pain, I'll never forget it. And the Old Fella was knocking off, pushing, this diagram that he had drawn... That's what he

done, very interesting. It never dawned on me that I had that sort of operation without a scar.

Uncle Max has always been an inveterate learner for as long as I have known him, and I am sure, for his whole life. He avidly seeks the knowledge of his own culture, of other cultures, other knowledge systems, other religions, alternative ways of viewing the world. One way he utilises such knowledge is to incorporate it into his own teachings, or to interpret his teachings through it, making them easier to comprehend. This is one way that he is able to show the relevance of traditional Aboriginal teachings. He continues to learn through the spirit world and through his own personal development.

And some of what they showed me and taught me about, I had to go and look for—'if you go out there, out that way you'll see this there for yourself'. That was a couple of trips out to different areas, 'cause I could feel the presence of what they were telling me, but I couldn't see it until an awakening came, then something really big would happen. Then I would see what they were tellin' me, so crystal clear, no mistakin' that that area there was what they was talkin' about.

e. A unitive vision

Uncle Max believes that the lives of all Australians are bound together, as we are similarly bound with the natural world—the trees, the plants, the animals, the rivers, the wind, the rain, the sun. It is a vision of a unitive state—for the whole world, the cosmos. It also reveals an identity that is inseparable from the environment and is not restricted to a localised environment.

*See, they can't take us out of the environment, 'cause we **are** the environment. We are the environment.*

All I have to do is communicate with that part of the environment, then I know where I am. You know, that I'm home, that I'm among my relations.

I wonder at times how Uncle Max is able to sustain hope, what resilience he has in the face of what may seem like a pervasive sense of doom. In facing destruction and loss of culture, untimely death, illness and poverty, to name a few symptoms of Aboriginal life in NSW, he maintains an optimism, a commitment to life and teaching, a thrill about the sheer beauty and wonder of the world. And a willingness to teach whites.

f. Right relationship

Uncle Max holds the authority, knowledge and presence of a Yuin Elder. As such, he commands and demands respect, and he gives respect in return. I have observed that his authority does not require any proving by the group—it is a given. The model that has operated for millennia, which is a sequential passing on of knowledge—*I have to give it away in order to keep it*—is rooted in three key aspects of the teachings: respect, responsibility and relationship. Uncle Max continues to model his teaching on this template of ‘right relationship’, as spelt out in a brochure:

The Elders receive their knowledge through the teachings of the earth. They have respect for the earth.

The Elders carry the responsibilities for passing on the teachings. They are in right relationship.

We respect the Elders and their teachings. We respond—we act responsibly. We are taking a step towards right relationship.

The Elders show respect to us. They show us responsibility. We are in right relationship with each other.

The Elders open our eyes to see, feel and experience the connectedness with the earth. We are in relationship with all things. We are respectful of this relationship. We act responsibly to all things. We are in right relationship (Harrison 1998).

Although group participants in any teaching situation may not be aware of this template of right relationship, it is enacted with them and through them experientially. It is a lineage and a proven method of teaching, and along with Uncle Max's particular charisma, enable people to feel safe enough to relax more deeply into the teachings. He establishes 'right relationship' in his dealings with the group, with individuals and with the natural world.

3. Carol and Uncle Max Story

I first met Uncle Max through a friend who had organised a four-day-long weekend trip, called an Easter Pilgrimage, visiting sacred sites and receiving teachings from an Elder from the south coast of NSW. I had not wanted to go since I was so burnt-out and was just hanging on a few more months until I was to go on long service leave for twelve months.

But I did go. So Max took us to Gulaga and various other sites. It was my first direct contact with an Aboriginal person. I warmed to Uncle Max immediately. He was an excellent teacher and storyteller. He had the knack of using a personal story as an insight into cultural knowledge. I recall very deeply receiving these teachings, probably partly to do with my silence, that I was really in touch with my inner world. I could relate to a culture that was so female-inclusive, that so strongly valued the feminine. A lot of what he was saying was familiar to me, perhaps because I had gained some understanding through all my years of reading on spirituality, or perhaps intuitively I was open to receive such wisdom, hungry for it in fact. My age-old desire to know and understand this country on a deep and informed level was finally being satisfied. I recall how hard it was not to speak, especially in group sharings, when I had so much welling up inside me wanting to be spoken. Not to speak meant I could retain my energy, keep clear and focused.

The mountain was all: something in me had changed through this encounter and through the entering-into ceremony. I felt a bond between me and the mountain, between me and Uncle Max.

a. The Mountain will call you back

Several years later, when I had not returned to work, but had withdrawn entirely from the world into a world of healing, it just came to me that I needed to be able to bring the experience of the mountain and the teachings of Uncle Max to others, especially young people, who, if they really took on board the notion of guardianship, of custodianship of the mountain, of all mountains, of all country, perhaps could change not only their own relationship with Aboriginal Australia, but with the whole natural world. I began to work with Uncle Max to bring this vision to fruition, and of course to allow as many people as possible to be exposed to his teachings.

I have been to the mountain and other sites of which the Yuin are custodians, many times—at least twenty occasions. Each time, I receive the teachings differently, each time another aspect is stressed that for me is significant, and I am sure that the repetition has a very strong impact on me. The teachings on the mountain continue to inform me on many levels. I am privileged in that I am able to discuss these teachings with Uncle Max, in deep explorations where we both share, or sometimes when I share little but receive a lot. Each time, the experience of being on the mountain is profound. I feel a stronger bond to the mountain and the knowledge she holds, and I am hungry for more. The mountain seems to grow inside me.

My relationship with Uncle Max also grows inside me. I would call him a friend, but unlike most friendships, it is strongly defined as a teacher/student relationship, one based on learning. I have received very few teachings from any Aboriginal women. In being taught by Uncle Max, traditional cultural categories of males teaching males and females teaching females are transgressed. I am sure there are many things he would not teach me, due to the fact that I am white; I am equally sure there are many things he could not teach me, since I am a woman.

b. Uncle Max and the Law of Respect

The basic teachings I have been exposed to over the last seven years concern respect, relationship and responsibility. As my understanding has grown, then I reach new levels

of enactment and meaning of pivotal teachings. There is never an end, just an ongoing unfolding, much learning through mistake-making. Respect is for the earth, Mother Earth, the womb of creativity. It is also respect for each other, as humans, all living and non-living things, respect for the sacredness of places, the integrity of teachings and teachers, the spirit beings that imbue the landscape, the intelligence of the interconnectedness that binds as a glue, all the disparate elements of nature.

I would like to give an example of my ongoing teaching around respect, as an illustration of how deeply the teachings penetrate, which also reveals something of the nature of my relationship with Uncle Max. I take students to be taught by Uncle Max, American students who are studying at universities in Australia for one semester. This is an important part of their being in Australia, I believe, not only in terms of the cultural understandings that underpin this land, but also as a means of opening them to the land itself—a radical and unfamiliar notion to most.

Although many have a full exposure to black African American/white relations in the US and the history of social justice issues, I have often observed that there is little knowledge of the roots of that country: the American Indian underbelly. So I give them a big fat dose of the voice of this land, hoping that they may return home hungry for the voice of their own land. They respond quizzically, astounded at the story of blacks in Australia, both the historical stories and the cultural depth. Some students have resisted the teachings, closed down or been threatened by the entering-into ceremony conducted by Uncle Max. Some have even been utterly captivated, and with taste buds whetted, eager for more. All of them are affected in some way.

Alcohol or other intoxicants and spiritual teachings do not mix. I know this, yet forgot somehow when bringing the last group of students to the far south coast of NSW for a weekend of Uncle Max's teachings. As the food was being sorted, I threw in the odd cask of wine and several slabs of beer. A real Aussie experience. No drunkenness, but people just a bit tipsy and less serious in hearing the words. And, of course, the next day, a lot of dullness. It was only then that I registered what I had done. Uncle Max remarked on their fuzzy minds, not in a disparaging sense, but more as a statement of fact. A fact that I had failed to observe, let alone planned to prevent.

I was consumed by guilt, not only that day, but for the next few days, and the next, in fact for weeks on end. It was a nagging that would not let go. I had let him down as well as myself. The former was harder to bear, and I just kept hoping it would all subside with time. I did not phone Uncle Max for some time. Weeks. Then I needed to, on some other matter, and the guilt had settled, or so I thought. Within the first few moments of our jocular exchange, I felt the guilt rising like vomit, threatening to swallow me. I tried to swallow it, thinking that it had all gone away, that Uncle Max had forgotten, that it was my own issue anyway, and that he had probably not even given it another thought after that day ...

Deep breath of insistence. The words burst out, surprising me as I heard them: 'Uncle Max, I owe you an apology ... I have not been respectful'. A clean, clear, direct response followed: 'Apology accepted'. It was over in a second. The act, the action and the resolution. All that was missing was the agony of the time in between, which he could not possibly have known about. Or could he?

I have heard Uncle Max say on numerous occasions that the sorting out happens through Spirit. And by Spirit. My relief was enormous once the burden was lifted. But it was not that which was surprising. It was the thrust of the acceptance, that he had been awaiting and knowing that it was coming, and what it was about, so that my words that spewed out as a potential lengthy tome were cut short as superfluity. The resolution had to come ... eventually. It was all a matter of how long I could sit with it, in the discomfort.

I often fall flat on my face in my learning, am full of shame that reduces me to self-searching and apology. 'Apology accepted'. I had given it, he had received it. But it was not just a personal exchange, a lesson on respect between two individuals, one a teacher, one a student. I had offended beyond Uncle Max, desecrated the teachings of Spirit in that act of non-awareness. I had to come to terms with the consequences of that, far beyond the disrespect I had shown to Uncle Max himself, was the disrespect to Spirit. And Spirit was not going to let me get away with it ... thankfully.

4. Conversations with Uncle Max

a. Introduction

When I first began my conversations with Uncle Max, I was mute most of the time. I knew asking questions was a Western way of acquiring knowledge, frowned upon in an Indigenous context. So I sat and listened. More sitting, more listening. The conversations, therefore, were very undirected, and tended to flow in their own way. It was a very relaxed way of being, of being with what would arise in that moment. Sometimes we could be speaking about mundane things like the weather, football or John Howard [Australian Prime Minister]. Then, at some point, there would be a shift in Uncle Max, this shift only perceptible by my inner emotional state and concomitant response in my body. They were the signals that Uncle Max was operating on another level. Perhaps he had shifted into the realm of spirit, of serious business, of important knowledge. Whatever it was, my body recognised it, and I knew I had to pay attention closely.

During this altered level of communication, Uncle Max's persona also changed. It was as if he were infused with a shot of energy. He would become alive, animated and passionate, or softly spoken, barely audible, with an intensity that took my breath. In either case, the words would flow, with the deep resonance from another world. I was transfixed. It was a rather strange scenario: these pristine moments, that could last for hours and cease just as abruptly as they had begun, would be enacted in a busy, loud coffee shop in the middle of suburban Sutherland, in southern Sydney. There we would be, leaning over a tiny table, tape recorder buzzing away, oblivious to the cacophony surrounding us. Of course, I could not be so oblivious to it once I was at home listening to the tape. Quite often, I could more readily pick up each and every order for hamburger and chips, café latte and the mundane conversation over the counter, than the words of Uncle Max.

I gradually learnt to ask questions, as I grew to know Uncle Max better. It was always a matter of being respectful, and still mostly listening. Then it became more of my views that I could express, and real exchanges, dialogues about the intricacies of the teachings.

In the beginning, the subtle innuendos, the tiny slivers of knowledge dropped that connected learnings, would be lost on me. As time went on, I could connect these learnings, understand the significance of some of them, which in turn would lead to Uncle Max dropping me new slivers. An immediate feedback system was in operation.

I had to learn the new language, the layers of meaning, learn to read Uncle Max, always alert for multiple meanings. This became what Uncle Max refers to as *going in with whitefellas' eyes and coming out with black mind*. It was often confusing, obtuse and extremely frustrating for me. I wanted to be the perfect student who understood everything the first time I was taught. Often I had to trust that something I could not even begin to fathom may come to me more clearly at another time.

The following conversations include how Uncle Max teaches young Aboriginal men, how he takes them through traditional Law; his own teachers, including those of the spirit or unseen world; various specific aspects of culture, such as Dreaming, release of energy and respect; how and why he teaches whitefellas.

[Note: Uncle Max's speech is in italics, whereas my comments or questions are in normal font. I have done this to make it easier for the reader to differentiate the two.]

b. Start feelin' the land

What is your purpose in taking groups of people out onto country?

To get groups out, sittin' and talkin' with them.

We walk the land, start feeling it out; look at different areas, what to keep away from; where people can just go and sit and meditate, and sit and get in contact with all the Old Fellas; try and teach them how to get, to receive those spiritual emails; try to let people start to learn to look at the land talking to them, and listening to the land talking to them.

They got the library all around Sydney, the atlas there. All they gotta do is follow the path. You know, it's all there for people to tap into and understand ...

there is a great expanse of road maps or directories. All people need to do is latch onto people who know where they are. If they sit down and set up the map and have a look at that oral book of knowledge.

When you think about teaching, the adults I mean, that you take to the mountain, and they're not Kooris, do you have a sense of what they will get out of it, or what you hope they might get out of it? Why would you want to do that, why would you want to put any energy into doing that with whitefellas?

It's just to show them the Aboriginal connection, the spiritual connection to the land and the true meaning of land rights, not getting land for economic reasons or for ownership, but to be able to have that freedom, to be able to go and stay on different places, as they have been doing for thousands of years and not getting fined, but having access to a lot of these areas, so their spirit is not cut off.

This is some of the most important places that I want to do the teaching in because these younger people that are comin' up are gonna be the politicians in future years. So when they see an old blackfella standing up and sayin' 'land rights', 'sacred tree', 'sacred rock', they will fully understand by just bein' up there on the mountain and seein' the old stories there, you know, and all the ancient teachings, see.

So for whitefellas, I want to bring them into spirit, to make them understand about this.

And while I continue to do this and take Koori people up there with me, they have a better understanding also, of their culture, their cultural beliefs, not just a thing of having the Koori flag, and standing up closed fists and saying 'land rights'. 'I've got the full impact of the meaning of what a sacred site is, what it really means, not just the middens and all the artefacts that are scattered around'.

It's like that mountain, you can walk through there and the first thing you would notice there is the beauty, but you look at the beauty of it in a sort of scenic sort of way, through tourist eyes, you know, but then when you go through it with the teachings, then you can see the stories of Creation and Aboriginal Laws that were born, born through those Laws and those teachings, see.

c. Working with energy and release

When I was counselling, and there were kids who were suicidal, they spoke about cutting themselves, usually their wrists, and the enormous relief they got when they did this.

It released it see, that's the blood-letting see. So that's the same as in the days of the blood-letting ceremony, you know all the initiations and that, see. The young fellas are goin' out, see, and they don't know what's comin' up, see, 'cause they are goin' through some secret sacred ceremony, see. And before they go through that, see, their mind is focused on what's gonna happen, they don't know what's gonna happen, and they can't ask the fellas that have been through—those fellas become the aggressors and they say, 'come on, don't even look around, don't speak'. And because all that becomes discipline, right. So if they can just sit there, it's not 'what's happenin' next?', or 'could this happen?', and all that causes a lot of tension and a lot of worry and anxiety.

So if they can sit down, how I teach them before they go through that, how I can teach them to sit, and to just sit, and not do anything but just sit, and learn that art of tolerance. And then when it comes to the actual blood-letting, see, and they don't speak goin' through that and they don't speak coming out, and then we are all walking along, then you just got to say something to one of them, see, and there's just so much jubilation, see, so much joy and they say, 'yes' and start hugging each other and punching the air. Because it's released all that they have been building up and holding and then starting to get rid of by sitting there.

And if someone is walking around them and talking to them, saying, 'how are you feelin' now, do you think you can go through this now?', they'll just sit there.

Oh, it becomes so good for them, it strengthens them in every department of discipline!

So are you saying that you deliberately put them under tension?

Oh yeah, yeah.

To heighten it, heighten it, until you get to that point of the blood-letting when there is the release and a huge amount of emotion?

Yeah.

And that's the way energy works, of course.

That's exactly it, and because they are just a ball of energy sitting there, just wanting to get things out, out of their system, you know. Even if they are dancers, or fellas I've got out of the prison and done stuff, it releases all that for them and they know that what got them in trouble in the first place, that they can use that discipline to stop them from getting into trouble again.

So it's sometimes what I call the future warning bells, see. What they go through before their initiation is to all benefit them for that future thing. So all they gotta do, if they are going to do something silly, I tell them to remember this camp: 'so before you do something stupid again, I want you always to reflect back on to your past, and your past is right now and what you're goin' through now', and they start to see that.

It's like when we go up the mountain and they reflect on what their experience is like up the mountain, and the mountain calls them back, and what I tell them that you will return there, either mentally, spiritually or physically. You will always come back to the mountain, see. And that's the kind of thing they go through when I take them through their Laws. It's all about checking their 'nows' so it

keeps them out of trouble, keeps them on a spiritual level and a discipline level. And that's how it sort of works with them.

If they are going to do something stupid, they think back to when they were out on camp with uncle Max, and they would say, even thinking about it, 'he [Uncle Max] would pull that out of our minds and he wouldn't let us go to sleep 'cos he'd have us up all night talking about it, through the truth stick'.

Because what we leave in that stick is our energy, see. And that's what they do, see, someone is nodding off, and someone is not bringing their truth out, see, what was in their mind that day.

And it's not me, it's not anything magical what I'm doin', it's what they're leavin', the energy I'm grabbin' hold of and feelin' as it goes around, see.

So as it's coming around in the stick, you can feel the energy there and someone is still holding on to some stuff, and not letting go?

Yeah, there's a negative thing there.

Do you feel that through your body?

Yeah, I feel it both, physically and spiritually, because I can't enter the mental part, so that's the two parts I can feel it.

So that's why I'll put the stick around again, it might not be much, but its best if you can talk about it now, because otherwise you'll go to sleep with it and it will fester, see.

So you are talking about a couple of different ways of releasing energy aren't you—through the blood-letting, through talking it out and the truth stick, and I suppose, would dance and ceremony be another way of releasing it?

Yeah, another good way. So always the culture is kept healthy by working at release. 'Cause that's a cultural thing see, it's a living part of the culture, it's so important for them to be able to talk about some stuff that's sittin' in on them.

Well, yes, this is the Western equivalent of counselling, isn't it?

Yeah, if I have ten or twenty of them, I will say, well I'll let these fellas clear themselves. So then I talk to the other Elders, 'cause then I have to step away from them, so I say to the Elders, 'tell them fellas to keep away from me today 'cause there's something no good there, see. Until they talk about it, and sort it out, then they can come back into the camp'. So they can sit up there in the sun all day, I don't care where it is, see.

d. Doin' self-healing

And the other fellas say, 'gee we didn't know, we didn't feel anything, you know'. Well of course they didn't, see, cause what I'm doing then is just clearing the cobwebs, see, I'm getting them to learn to do their own counselling, see. And doin' their self-counselling, and doin' their self-healing.

[Right now, at this moment of bringing this information together back in my home, I hear black cockatoos. I feel a strong connection with these yellow-tailed lamenters of the sky, infrequent visitors to my local area. It is a big mob, so I begin to count—ten, twenty, thirty-five, fifty, seventy ... astounding! Not only does their call always make me attentive, but this size of a grouping I have never seen. I wonder what it is I need to notice now, look at what I have been writing in the words of Uncle Max, try and determine the significance of that visitation right then ...]

So away they go, see. And then they might all sit down and they might talk, or have a swim, and one of the senior fellas might say, 'ok, who's stuffin' up?', or something like that, you know. 'I don't know, but we just got sent up here'. And they don't know what they got sent up for, see.

One of the beauties of them then is to sit there and take their own inventory, see. And one fella might say, 'Well, geez, I wasn't too happy this morning'. They'll all look at him you know, 'It's probably you that the Elders' ... you know.

So someone else would say, 'Well, that was like this with me', and they all sit around and they talk, see, and when they come back, the message is there, 'don't come back to Uncle Max if you haven't sorted your stuff out'. But when they do come back, they could be up there for three or four hours, just sittin', talkin' and doin' stuff, and when they come back, they don't even come near me, they just tell the other Elders, see, 'We sorted things out'.

So the Elders come to me and tell me, and I say, 'Did they have a good talk?'. So they act as the go- betweens, see. So they ask them if they have got it sorted and are there any problems. 'Oh no, unc, no problems now, we have sorted it all out'. So the Elders say, 'Well, what did you talk about?' And they say, 'We left that up there', see.

Would that link with the Washing Through Law?

That's what they're doin', washing it through. It's the Washing Law and they don't even know they are doin' it, see.

The Western way of describing that would be to say you are leaving your baggage behind.

Yeah.

But sometimes I think in the Western way, you can get so caught up with talking about your stuff, that it keeps you energetically like a record, so rather than release it, you keep on in it, on in it, stuck in a groove. Did you ever find that too? The more it is talked about, the bigger it becomes, the more energy it gets, the more consuming it gets.

I'm always walking on eggshells with that one and how that works like that. So that in all my other talks or preps I'm doin' with them, I say, 'If you've got something there, leave it there'. That is some of the first things, some of the

things you put into their minds. 'Cause I don't want you to come with that shit, otherwise you contaminate the camp, right'.

And they look at that so seriously, you know, 'cause they know how good the camp is goin', so they might go up the river and start talking about things, and the first fella that comes up first with that stuff, he is the one they all hug, they say, 'Good on you, brother, you've got us all talkin', see, and once they all start talkin', they are all bringin' their stuff up, see, and what they say now is, 'Remember what the Old Fellas told us, leave it here.'

Sometimes they might jump in the river, sometimes they might dig a hole and bury it, you know leave all the energy there, and sometimes they might get permission, send one fella down to the Elders to ask could we get a fire and smoke ourselves, see.

Yes, see this is the difference, there are all these ways of releasing, not just the talking.

It's a bit like the pain [in the body] we were talking about earlier. If it's in this one spot, it can get bigger and bigger, and it stays there, but if you defuse it into other parts of the body...

Defusing it by inflicting a little bit of pain elsewhere, right, and by doin' your own inventory. See, there can be other little niggling things there too—'Gee, yeah, and I forgot about this, too', you know. So they forget about that one they started off with, see, and its so good getting them all prepared for that and teaching them all that kind of stuff.

When I first was in counselling, I could see the problems with just talking, and then I started to use art and clay and drawing, and that would also put it in different directions and give it a different shape, and it would be like, here is the language of it, but the language wouldn't be coming through words, so it defuses it again.

So even in that aspect of it, see, they'll do dance, and then someone will come back and say, 'Could we make something, do some artefacts, or could we do

this?’, see, and then they go into all those areas. So sometimes in the circle at night, I’ll say, ‘I hope everyone got everything they wanted today, I hope you got it all out, washed it through, just spoke your truth’. Each one has a little mark on the stick, and he says, ‘I am so and so and this is my mark; yeah, today I had a good day because I cleansed myself. I thought I had some problem that I’ve been carrying for a while, but it’s not there, you know’.

So that’s the way they go around things.

e. Whitefellas and blackfellas together

Now, sometimes I know there’s going to be problems when you get whitefellas on these camps; I know there was one in particular when one of the men went off the deep end. But let’s assume when you are teaching other Kooris, even if they have not been taught culture, here is, at least, an openness and something they have inherited, like an openness to this form of teaching, even if they might buck against it too. What happens then when you take whitefellas as well into this situation?

OK then, the first thing they have to learn is that they walk the same land, drink the same water and breathe the same air, right. ‘Now forget about the colour of the skin, and that fella is a gubba [whitefella] there, and then you’re a Koori or a Murri or whatever, so if you’re one of them, that is only a word, right.’ So one of the most important things I try and show them is that, ‘well, why do you think this fella is here?’ If it’s pretty Koori-dominant, I might say, ‘Why do you think he is here?’ ‘To learn about his culture’, see.

‘OK. So why do you think this gubba fella is here’?

See, I use the thing that is on their mind, but I bring it out, not them, see.

So then one fella is really pretty open then, see. It just opens them straight up. He says he’s here ‘cos he wants to learn our culture too. And then I’ll just say, ‘Are you gonna share that?’

'Well, we're gonna share it.'

'So you got no problem with this man here and yourself and your brother there and your brother there, and one here?'

'No'.

So I do that, 'cause that could come up tonight in truth time.

'Right, now while I'm askin' these questions, I want you to answer them honestly. Not just put yourself up there to be a big shot, you know, and that you've got the answers I want to hear', I say. 'You know, it's what your inner self has gotta hear'.

So I throw it back on them again, see. Right back to them again. So again, it's their inventory, not mine, see. So they'll think about that ... 'Yeah, well I was a bit sceptical about so and so'.

And I would say, 'Well, how do you feel about so and so now?' I said, 'You can all answer that for yourselves, so don't come up with anything, you answer that yourselves, 'cause otherwise we're singling out so and so, see. So just let's look and let's ask what's so and so's expectations of learning...'

One thing is he would say, is I am feelin' good about what I'm doin', see. So spiritually he is on the right path. Spiritually, he is on the right path. That's the course, that's the road to recovery I'm trying to put them all on, see. Hopefully, it can take away the prejudices and all that, see.

So it's good when you got a lot of mixed people there, so good, 'cause then you can start nudging out that bloody prejudice stuff that can easily come in at any time, it can easily be the 'them and us' again at any time.

So what you are saying is you want to try and bring it out right at the beginning, in a way to make sure you can leave it too, right at the beginning—'We are all here together to learn about Koori culture and we are all sharing that same path'.

Mm.

But then, what about the really deep experiences people have had when they have been out with you, like on the mountain? And I presume sometimes that can be very healing, and sometimes, depending on what your state of mind is ...?

Yeah, it could be intimidating ...

And it could send you a bit off the planet?

f. The world of spirit

Yeah, and that's what I think Stephen [whitefella] got there. It was probably the calling, the Old Fellas that were around, see, like when we was in camp. 'Cause I said, 'you know, just watch these Old Fellas that are around, 'cause they can pull you right away'.

And even these fellas here [those on the camp], see, this one is so bloody scared he won't look over across the river, see, it's only because he can see his spirit. Some Old Fellas see, and so I guess Stephen got carried away and thought he could handle this, and that was his mistake, you know, but he got called away all right.

So, there is the overzealous fellas that think they can get right into it. Even walking through the bush and that, even I back off, I'm not too sure what them fellas want there or what they're gonna allow me, you know.

Just the other day, I took the dogs for a walk, see the dingo alerted me—it's a great dog. that dingo. He can pick up anything, see, and what he was picking up, was ... I had this feeling, and I looked around real quick, but it was just this movement, so I went, 'Oh, that's what's goin' down, eh'. The fur went up a bit, then down--he seen something. And I knew that 'cause my fur went up and down too, the cold feeling went up my back, too, and I looked around real quick, you know.

So I know why this dingo was acting like he was, bounding here and bounding there, when hand hit the bush, just everywhere. So that kind of stuff when dealing with the unseen spirit, but it's a knowing that it's there, you know, just a quick flash. You are going through the motions of feeling all the stuff, see, and seeing it sorta, and that gives you a better understanding what you are dealing with, you know.

When I initially started to receive teachings and think about it myself, I would just use that word 'spirit' that covered a multitude, but then I started to realise there's a lot of different forms, because you have got the spirit of the deceased, the spirits of the earth, of the tree, of the rock ...

The plant kingdom, the animal kingdom, the wind, the rain, you got the spirit of all that ...

Then the earliest ancestors that walked in the Dreaming ... So then it seems to me that this is a very rich multi-layered, multi-textured world of spirit, and, of course, not all of it is good. There is good and bad there, so it is almost as if once you have negotiated your way through this human world, you have to negotiate your way through that spirit world, too.

And sometimes I think it doesn't matter if you are in the city, or where you are in this country, the country is saturated with culture, saturated with spirit, that everybody is going to be affected by it in some way. But they may not know that.

For instance when I went to Central Australia, I got sick for the whole time. I don't know if I may have walked on a site I should not have been on, I don't know if it could have been a place for women who should have been initiated; there could have been a whole lot of things that went wrong; it could have been a place that there was bad energy for some other reason. Whatever it was, I got sick, that's what I know, and I know it came through the land, in some way.

I think white Australians have hardly begun to address this yet, they have no idea. Over thousands and thousands of years, with all of those Dreaming tracks, with all those

songlines, it's like the whole land is covered with cobwebs of that, and you can't really get away from it. Even walking on it, it will come through you, but it might come through you in all sorts of different ways—sickness, health, good ways, not so good ways. I think we are going to be affected by it.

How about all the people who go to Gulaga and have no idea it's a sacred mountain, they go walking up there, stumble across in to the site, to those rocks, no protection, they are just there.

I wonder how many has walked out and got sick after. I wonder how many is total disrespect. It's like the people who built fires at the Stones of the Future [the final teachings on Mt. Gulaga], you know where I sat under, they built fires there and done little rituals there—right spirits, wrong intention, you know, it's not meant to be like that.

I wonder about on Mumbula Mountain [sacred mountain of the Yuin], the rocks that were blown up for the radio tower, what might be the effect on those people?

We think that a couple of the people who cut the spiritual umbilical cord have gone [died]. You know from Nuganudga to Gulaga, through the road, they never came and asked us when they were putting the road through, if there was anything of significance there. Just because farmers had the land, and they gave them permission to put the road through, you know, and a lot of things happened, a lot of things happened.

So, as I say, it's that web of life. If you look at that spider web and see all those lines, all those songlines and ley lines and all that sacredness, you know, that's the same as what's on the ground.

Even on Biamanga, on Mumbula, because it's like that snake lying down, see, right, he's coming up from the sea, he's coming up from the sacred waterhole right down near the sea, and he comes up and then he finishes there where they do the blood-letting, and it's salt water down in there and that Dreaming comes back around. But that Biamanga is like that snake, and the fellas that had their

ceremonies on the head of Biamanga, where there used to be all a lot of death adders.

Now, death adders are a pretty deadly snake, and for there to be death adders that far down south... does not seem right. Yet those men and women would go up there for that initiation. If they got bit by a death adder...I've been bit many times by a black snake, and I didn't have to do anything, because the more that you get bit, and if you hold yourself properly, you build up your immune system. And if you end up in hospital with a snakebite, what do they give you? Antivenene—see, poison kills poison.

g. The awesome silence of Gulaga

Do you actually remember the first time you went up Gulaga?

Yeah. I was probably about nine or ten.

So what do you remember?

The awesome silence, the silence that I had to go through. And my mind as we were walking up, it was head thumping by the time I got up there. And then, when we stopped near the saddle there—in all my years on Gulaga, I've never been up on the summit—never. And when they took me in through the sites then, the Old Fella, I think there were three old Fellas that took me in, and by the time I left the Energy Rock, what's happenin' here [points to head] is gone, because of the total silence, see.

I just kept silent all the way, you know, and they said to me, 'Anything you want to ask?' 'Nuh'. I didn't want to ask anything. I wanted to drink in what they was deliverin' to me, and that was magic, it was magic, to know that I can hold that right through to the end and then come back out without speaking.

I've taken thirty, forty, sixty school kids, primary school kids through there, and that was incredible, the kids never spoke. And when I put the ochre on them and

said 'No speakin' through this very special place, eh', what happened is they took the whole area as very special, see, not just that little walk from the Energy Rock to the Three Fellas; they took it right through, no questions, nothing. Not a thing.

So does that first time stay in your mind quite strongly?

Oh, yeah, yeah.

Was this like any other site you had been to?

No. There is another area on Nadganuga, but there's another area around Bega, where I was taken into this clearing, and that was a pretty powerful area. You can almost see this swirly thing, you know, you can feel it, it was so easy to feel it and then to start looking to see. And you can just see whatever leaves there was, or a bit of dust, just sort of see it moving, just going around, and that was it. And all this here and all this on the back of my neck was standing up [points to hair on arm and back of neck]. It was so scary that I couldn't move, but I just focused on what was there, and for me to get out of it, I had to look right into the centre, see.

h. Spiritual healing

I was down at that place of the big fire that I've spoken to you about, a few weeks ago, but I didn't get out of the car; I thought it might be a bit intrusive on the healing, so that sort of kept me in the car. I was looking and I had this overwhelming sense of stability, see. And that stability wasn't with me, it was out there. So I thought, it seems ok, but I still never got out, perhaps my presence could be jeopardising something, I don't know what it could be.

The spiritual stuff that was going on between me and the land!... I know that something was okay; I knew that when I took that lot onto the plateau, where the water was held back and then it came back eighteen months later, and it was released down the main watercourse, I think I was probing in too far.

There's my answer—I was probing too far into the mechanisms of the spiritual healing! See, that's why—ahh!

So there's a door there that says this far and no further. I can relate to that.

Yeah, look at that. All of a sudden it just showed me—'Here's the door, have a look—what can you do, you never created us', slam. 'Who do you think you are? God? Daramai [God or Great Spirit]?'

Isn't that wonderful! Isn't that a wonderful teaching there, eh?

I remember the last time I saw you receive a teaching like that, it was, 'wow, right!' We were sitting around and you were talking about the whales that beached themselves on the land here, and how they can't figure out why scientifically they beach themselves. You were talking about the Law and the Old Fellas, and I think you were talking about a Whale Dreaming all around Australia. Then, all of a sudden, you went, 'That's why they beach themselves!'

The regurgitation of the Law.

I remember that time, you got the teaching and you became alight, like a light globe.

Yeah, that was the whale and the sea, and now it's fire and water.

Our methods of healing the alcoholic and the drug addict was always on this culture. We don't have a Dreaming for alcohol. In the meantime, when these fellas [Aboriginal alcoholic/drug addict] are talking about themselves, and going into song and dance, they are looking at their journey and what went wrong, even right back, so it is a narrative journey. They call it a narrative therapy, like they invented it, but the narrative is the Dreaming, and they take the Dreaming as a bit of a joke: 'Oh, yeah, blackfellas with their Dreamtime, ha-ha-ha!, it's kids stories'. Yet they came and replaced that Dreaming with a thing they called the Bible.

Now every story in the Bible, I look on that as Dreaming. I'd like to see that 'walking on the water'. It's probably the same way they would say to me about Daramai Great Spirit, creating Nadi and Tunku out of the rock and taking them from the earth.

In their Dreaming, God took a hundred pound of clay and made man, then he made a man and the woman. It looks like the man is doing the birthing, whereas in our Dreaming the woman was created first from the Mother [Earth], and it is the woman that does all the birthing in the flesh form too, see.

If you go to court, you have to swear on the truth of what is in the Bible, and yet they will question us about the truth of what's in our rocks and our waterholes, and our trees, the sacredness, in what it represents. That tree in what it stands for, all the stories that go with it, that's when it becomes sacred.

When I say to the young men, 'You're not goin' to the pub, 'cause there's grog and drugs there, it's no good going there,' and they shake their heads. But the next minute, they're off and they go down to the pub and get into the beer and the plonk. So you tell them that, but there is no Dreaming against that grog.

If I say to them, 'Don't you go down to that waterhole, 'cause that water hole is sacred, because it holds the story there, it holds the Dreaming, the Law there.' And those fellas won't go near that waterhole, see.

So if these young men can look at the health part of it... For me for thirty years, I not only heard the voice of the spirit, but I also saw the spirit, when I cried for a small bottle of plonk I spilled. I asked 'what am I crying for? My Old People never had this'. In that instant, I was creating my own Dreaming, see.

When that Old Fella [spirit] appeared before me with the markings, then I knew the markings, 'cause they are my traditional markings, like the dots I put on people: mental, physical, spiritual. What happened then was that I said to that Old Fella, 'It's ok for you, Old Fella, you never had this grog and drugs', and he corrected me without voice, he pointed and he waved his hand in a wavy way.

And when I looked, I knew he was talking about the bush. I could see the bush and I thought, yes, there are a lot of deadly drugs out there. But they had a Law against it, see, and what those Old Fellas had, sometimes they would, only the trusted fellas, they would show them the deadly drugs, the deadly poisons, and they would say, 'Now don't you touch that, see, because you have to then figure out the antidote'.

See, poison cures poison, it's like the snake, when it bites you, you have to get the antivenene to fix you up or else you die, see. And Daramai Great Spirit gave the same healing methods for the deadly drugs. So I looked at that, and I said, 'That's my Dreaming, that's my Dreaming. I don't have to drink now since I created my own story, my own Dreaming'. But the events happened in reality.

What's another way of saying you created your own Dreaming?

It was a new creation, for me to look at, because I had nothing ancient to pull on, see. I had to look at that through arrogance, ignorance and ego, and I had to go through all that for that Old Man without voice just pointing and showing me, then I had to fully understand, to take the spiritual emails that were given to me, to understand, that those deadly drugs are still there. I know they are there, I was taught them.

It is a hard thing for us non-Indigenous people to understand the depth of your understanding of the Dreaming, but I started to get a stronger sense when you were speaking then. As soon as there is an awareness, a teaching that comes through...

The healing begins.

And that new awareness that comes forward is a new creation that then becomes a Dreaming?...

That becomes a Dreaming for you. It becomes your own personal one then, see.

Has that always been, that you always create your own Dreamings?

Yes, a lot of the healing in a lot of the paintings, only the artist knows what's there. We can come along and look at that, but they don't know the concept of it until it's explained, then you can sit and you can look at it, see. The most basic thing is women sitting around, and the waterholes, and the tracks, they are the most basic things, but there is a lot more there that you don't know. The artists have done that with their vision to create that narrative thing, in pictures, not in writing.

So is it that as soon as their story comes out, they have created their Dreaming?

Yes, so it's all there, but once they see that, that's the end result. The end result is them coming slap-bang, right up, face up to the reality of their life, of where they are—then they can start to do things, start standing up and talking about spirit, start standing up and talk to a tree—'I talk to the waters, I talk to a rock', you know—'and now I can see my spiritual connectedness to the land, I can see my spiritual connectedness to all my relations, the animals, the birds, the plants, the trees.'

We are given all these things and we don't ask for them—all we have to do is respect them, see, and all we've got to do is acknowledge them.

It's like when I take people out and do sunrise ceremony, thanking Grandfather Sun. One of the most beautiful things about that, is that Grandfather Sun raises the food we eat, Grandfather Sun gives us the heat and light, rain. We have that sight, and one of the most important things is that we can feel all that. And then when we thank Grandfather Sun for all these things, we thank Daramai Great Spirit, or our Creator, for creating the Grandfather, the Father [sky], the Grandmother [moon], right, to thank these creations for the work they do.

Besides an attitude of gratefulness, which is all part of the respect, for whatever is with us, whether it be the rain or the storm or the sun, this must make a difference in the world to have people walking around with an attitude of gratefulness, a big effect on the energy level in the world.

Exactly. And it also lets them look at the Mother, look at this whole ozone thing, then they have to look at what causes it. Then they can reconcile with the Mother, they can reconcile with the Mother just as our people have to reconcile with the Mother. They have to get out and use all the old things again, to reconcile back with Mother Earth. There can be conciliation, between people, but not reconciliation, because we never had a partnership in the first place, blacks and whites. But there was a partnership with the earth, everybody. Everybody had to use the tree and the rock to survive, everyone.

*And when you talk to the people and ask something like, 'When was you born?', they'll say 'I was born before the big flood, or when the last rain came through there.' See, it's related to the land, to the environment, and then they [whites] say, we can take you out of your environment. But you can't take us out of our environment: we **are** the environment. We **are** the environment.*

Our relationship with it is still there. All related to the land, and the time factor on the land, see. We walked, we had children, we walked, we had children. This fella was born when that tree was little.

That's really beautiful, Uncle Max.

i. Teachings by the Old People

They used to tell us [the Old People] where to get the mutton-fish: 'You can count the crevices, right', they would tell us, 'and you go into the second crevice on the right and you get the mutton-fish from there.' So we knew what to do, and that's how they used to select it and take it out, not just go and get it anywhere. And they'd say, 'Bring us back four'.

That's all they wanted, four.

When we would take those mutton-fish or abalone back to those Old Fellas, in the afternoon, 'Here it is, uncle, here is the mutton-fish you asked us to get'.

'Oh yeah, where did you get it from?'

'From that second crevice one, second from the right'.

'Yeah, that's the one, good, good.'

And that mutton fish was like a receipt of where we were, right. That's how clever and manipulative they used to be with us.

So we was curious, why they wanted us to go there, when there was lots of mutton-fish all around everywhere, but we went there to find out. And they were big ones there, bigger ones at that spot, and that's why they asked for four, 'cause four was plenty.

It took us years of figuring that out, we used to sit down and talk to each other, about how they used to direct us.

And some of what they showed me and taught me about, I had to go and look for—'If you go out there, out that way, you'll see this there for yourself'. That was a couple of trips out to different areas, 'cause I could feel the presence of what they were telling me, but I couldn't see it until an awakening came, then something really big would happen.

Then I would see what they were tellin' me, so crystal clear, no mistaking that that area there was what they was talkin' about. 'Cause then when I had to sit down and start drawing into the dirt, or the sand, looking at what all this area was, and which way the stories were running, which way the dulaga was moving or the malema was movin' or the nachis was movin', cause all these was the little spirits. That was all there for me to sit and look at, you know. Then I had to know what Dreaming track I was sitting on, if I was sitting on that women's Dreaming track, the malemas. There was always something there would show the woman's part of the Law. It was unmistakable.

These were my journeys of recovery, of discovery, of what the Old Fellas told me to look at, see.

'Cause when they sat me for hours and talked with me, all they done was painted a picture in my mind.

So, somehow, you would have to bring that into your body?

I have seen you draw once, a map of that area when we were near Biamanga, and I thought, 'Wow, I have never seen Uncle Max do this before'. You drew it all into the dirt, and I was astounded by the knowledge...

When they are teaching you, they talk about it, they take you out on it, and somehow the map becomes internalised, and you can draw it, 'I've got it, I've got it here [body]'. It's like the fellas I was watching in the Kimberley, doing the drawings. They are very clever there because they become the eagle's eye, and they are looking down.

No, they don't have to walk it, they can fly over it, and then they know it from the eagle point of view.

And what they done with me is, they got me to walk in and walk out, this is in the early 1980s. They told me to look at this, and I thought, what am I meant to be looking at? So I had a look at it, and I saw all these round rings and these marks, and one in particular was looking straight over my right, so I thought, this must be all them mountains. I knew which way to follow that, so what I done, I looked at all that, then I had to look in the mirror image, so when I came back out, see, and that brown mark I found out later was where all the water was under the sand. So I can dig for that soak water, then.

Being scientists in their own right were these Old People, and to be able to look at all those things and go and find water when they wanted it in the most unbelievable places.

That imagery, of what the Old Fellas were trying to tell me, about that oneness. So when they pointed to the rock, they'd say, 'Do you think you're different from that, or do you think you're different from that tree there, or the moss on the rocks, or the other plants?', and I knew by then that I wasn't different, and I

knew then that I had no cause to argue, to debate with those Old People, see, 'cause it's just common sense, just common sense to me.

Something I was just thinking then, oh yeah, about concentration. My concentration from the information that comes to me when I got to read something is zero, I got none.

I got none 'cause I'm looking at it in print, see, but it was different with them Old Fellas that was teaching me ancient wisdom, that was comin' through sound, eh, and I got that one.

To get a lot of that knowledge in those days, you had to hear it. 'Cause I look at the two factors of blindness and deafness, see. With the deafness comes a knowing, and sometimes it's the vibration of voices ... so my concentration with reading is zilch ... I used to read a helluva lot, and with the reading comes all the fantasy stuff, but with the hearing stuff, what it done was take out all the fantasy stuff, all the ego, see.

And that sound system thing was a very healing process for me, so healing for my spirit, that I wanted to hear these things coming from these Old Fellas.

Just hearing that Old Fella saying to me about my shoes, and he said, 'You know, what's up with your foot?' I slipped over the truth on that, see, and to lie, 'Got a sore foot, uncle', and carried on like that until he made me go and get my shoes. So I brought the good shoes in and he said, 'No, go and get the other shoes', and he cornered me, see. Something I always remember, those words, and how he put it to me, how he made me realise my truth; then I knew I would not get a whack from him, 'cause I was in enough pain as it was, you know, for what I was doing and saying, so I never got punished for it.

And when I had a look at that and I was almost crying, and he looked up at me and said, 'Look at me, what are you cryin' for? You never got hit ... yet'.

And that was one great lesson, one great lesson.

Well, I was thinking about those two things that are passed on: one is the oral tradition, for you to hear it, rather than through the writing. This is something that would come through generation after generation after generation, if you were open to it, 'cause this is how the knowledge was passed on always, through people speaking it. So you would have a very finely developed receptivity to any of that, the spoken word, like a genetic strength. Whereas, with a lot of us, that's gone...

And your sense of seeing, too, I reckon most Westerners, we've shut down a lot of those senses, we don't see with our eyes, or we mightn't see peripheral vision. And I believe that that would be passed on, and also the art of teaching.

Because of those people who taught you, and you said you picked it up as great teaching, and I really know that you are a great teacher, would some of them have been really good teachers and others not so good?

I would say they were all good, yeah, 'cause I admired them; but that's a different thing, for what they are.

But the stuff they put into me and reinforced what the other fella was talkin' about and reinforced where they got the stories from, reinforced, about that spiritual connection, reinforced that you can contact spirit, reinforced that you can bypass the living who might be distracting to you, see those were some of the things that they taught me.

If you can't get it from some of these humans, from the flesh people, go back where the source is. So, to go back where the source is, something that even some of those Old Fellas didn't know, see, it's that far back, see, that's where some of the stuff was comin' from, through that oral history.

5. Conclusion

This chapter has provided, by examining the Aboriginal Elder Uncle Max in a variety of situations, and in dialogue about a broad range of topics, a sense of not only who he is and the roles he enacts both in his own Indigenous culture as well as that of non-

Indigenous culture, but also gives something of the flavour of his teachings. If I have been able to impart something of the sense of this person, then it renders a useful context for the experiences of the research participants in the following chapter and enables the reader to have an intelligible grasp of some aspects of cross-cultural dialogue which has such a central role in the undertaking of the south coast journey.

CHAPTER FIVE

THIRD-PERSON PHENOMENOLOGICAL RESEARCH

1. Introduction

The following four narratives are phenomenological accounts of the experiences of participants who received land-based teachings from Uncle Max over several days' journey on the far south coast of NSW. Each participant paid to attend. The aim of this section is to bring forth the heart of their experiences of the teachings of Uncle Max, particularly on Mt. Gulaga, the centre of Yuin country and teachings. The stories have been produced from my own observations in sharing these same journeys, subsequent taped interviews, meetings and email conversations. Not all participants were on the same journey with Uncle Max (Rowena and Michael were). All journeys took place between the years 2000 and 2003. Because I was a participant and observer on all journeys, I become the translator and narrator of each story.

I have chosen to use narratives as the form of presentation of each person's experience since this is congruent with the narrative approach in first person phenomenological research (Chapter Six) and the preceding Chapter Four, Observations and Conversations with an Elder. Also, it enables me to insert my own observations and reflections in a more coherent fashion. As well as the direct experiences of the south coast and Mt. Gulaga in particular, I have selectively included and woven into each narrative, stories that each participant brought up in interviews after the weekend. These stories may connect with other places and other times but were triggered through associations of the experience with Uncle Max and the mountain, hence were deemed to be important in elucidating each actual phenomenological experience.

As mentioned in Chapter Three, Michael, one of the research participants, died two years after being on the south coast journey. I have woven the fact of his untimely death into the narrative of the brief and unfinished enunciation of his weekend experience.

The words of each person, in italics, are the actual voice of that person from interview (mostly) or email correspondence. I have placed Rowena's story at the beginning since she outlines the general shape, as a type of template, of the three-to-four-day south coast journey. The bold italics in Rowena's story have been taken from poetry she had been writing over several years and submitted to me independently of the interviews. This poetry serves the purpose of reflecting the voice of Rowena as a young ghetto child, although she wrote it as an adult. I have used capital letters to denote a certain teaching site on the mountain (e.g. the Man and Woman Rock and Tree) not only to accord due respect to that particular teaching site, but also to distinguish it from other places on the mountain without such significance).

2. Taking the Blindfold Off: Rowena's Story

a. A cave on the outskirts of Sydney

The cave is moist from the spray of the waterfall that spurts in front of it. The noise of the water is deafening. It has been raining for a few days, surprising in this long period of drought. We have to yell to each other to be heard. We sit mostly in silence, taking in the view of the world from this perspective. Rowena has already shown me her handprint on the cave wall. Splattered white ochre defines it. I know the story that goes with this imprint. It is a very important story for Rowena. I feel so privileged that she has chosen to bring me here, share this place with me.

It is no mean feat that we got here to this cave, but we did. Finally. We had struggled to find a non-existent bush track, bush-bashed for hours, and were on the point of giving up, when we both stopped and realised almost simultaneously that the cave did not wish to be found. Or was it that we had forgotten to ask permission? It took only a few minutes to rectify this situation. We finally got to the waterfall- tired, scratched, prickled, edgy from jumping over ants' nests. The hidden had suddenly made itself unhidden.

It is no mean feat that Rowena got to this place in her life, too. Finally. It is a place far from where or who she imagined she would be. Rowena is a black African American

woman, born and raised in a black ghetto in Los Angeles. Thirty years on from Los Angeles, Rowena is living in Australia. We move on to the Mt. Gulaga weekend. This story has as its echo the voice of the young ghetto child, for it is through those very eyes, of the child of fear, that her life has been lived.

b. The Gulaga weekend: Arrival

I meet Rowena on the first night of the three-day journey. She is tall and fit-looking, with a beautiful smile. I warm to her immediately. She oozes confidence and good laughs, and while we all prepare food, I hear she is a PE teacher at a North Shore school in Sydney. I do not know any African Americans, so am keen to find out about her American and Australian connection. She says little about the former, but lots more about her life in Australia: her Australian husband that she met in college, her children, her home on the northern beaches, her new-found passion for golf. Uncle Max and Rowena have met, through the school. They speak of Uncle Bill. I have not heard of him before. There is a really lovely light atmosphere around the kitchen...

Fear is the shape of me

It is the nameless monster in the dark.

I'm a child in the dark and I am afraid.

There are no monsters.

They told me.

They lied.

Fear is,

Fear is me

Is my life

Is what I am.

Fear is the monster

I have become the monster

I had no idea what could have been really going on inside Rowena, or anyone else for that matter. As it turned out, Rowena was in fear right from the word go: at the drive on her own out of Sydney to the far south coast, fear in being with a group of strangers, fear of not knowing what she is in for.

I think I would have to say that my very first feeling would have been fear. That's probably more to do with me and my upbringing. Fear of the unknown used to feel to me like cowardice, now I understand it for what it is, a conditioning from one's past. I don't worry so much when I'm beset by these vague feelings of my impending demise, I just accept that my mind and body have learnt to be inordinately forewarned about anything that could be dangerous to me in any way, shape or form.

Individuals had arrived at our accommodation at various times during the day, but the first coming together of the group happened on the Friday evening. This was directed by Uncle Max, an opportunity for him and the rest of us to get to know one another and a chance to lay out our expectations for the weekend. I first of all had welcomed everyone, introduced Uncle Max and explained a little about protocol with an Elder, particularly in terms of respect. For example, I explained about the appropriateness of referring to Uncle Max as 'Uncle', part of a widely used system that names all persons as relative and thereby integrates everyone into Aboriginal kinship networks; in relation to eating food, I spoke of the need for serving food first to the Elder, not beginning eating until he had begun, as a sign of respect for Elder status; I also brought up the Western way of learning or understanding concepts through the asking of questions, and the antithesis of this approach in Indigenous culture; mention was also made about the banning of intoxicants while receiving spiritual teachings. I have found in my workings with groups and Uncle Max that this setting out of some of the basic protocols seems to set the tone for the introduction of the central tenet of the teachings concerning respect.

There was open sharing, also a sense of safety in expressing inner doubts or concerns and the excitement of entering into the unknown. The group forms. Uncle Max is

tentative at first, gently coaxing people into feeling more comfortable. There is no imposition, a mere letting the dust settle as he engages with each in turn, requesting to know why they have come on these teachings and what they hope to get from them. In this way, trust is being built, not only between Uncle Max and each person in the group, but also between members of the group. In a very short time, Uncle Max has a very captive audience that is feeling safe and at ease. I suspect there must also be some sort of surrender into the hands of the leader going on, perhaps an unconscious process, when people are out of their depth or when the ground rules that dictate normal reality have shifted.

I feel a little calmer after dinner, when we all sit round together and introduce ourselves, chat and discuss our expectations of the weekend. Of course, others are more certain about what they want and expect, but there are a few like myself who admit to not knowing what to expect. That makes me smile and wonder if some of the people who sound so sure of themselves are in fact just as insecure as the rest of us. Maybe they've just learned the words to say in a situation like this.

c. First morning: Greeting to Grandfather Sun

The next day, there is a morning ceremony with Uncle Max, a greeting to Grandfather Sun at sunrise. So all the group have to be up at dawn, to be there waiting for the sun to first appear on the horizon. It is chilly and semi-light, and most of us stagger out of cosy sleeping bags with great difficulty.

The ceremony for greeting Grandfather Sun was wonderful and so simple. We tied a red string around our heads as a mark of respect and then walked the short walk to the beach. There Uncle Max arranged us in three semicircles, to simulate the rays of the sun. He instructed us to say whatever was in our hearts to acknowledge all that Grandfather Sun does for us by coming up each and every day. It was so moving, to be out there and almost with nature.

Once more, very early in the weekend journey, the placid scene that presents on the surface is far from congruent with what is really going on for Rowena. Her 'almost with nature' alerts to a very different inner state:

I still have my big jacket on in case I'm too cold, my shoes and socks are still on my feet, and showing no signs of coming off in the very near future. My heart is with this ceremony in this place and time, but my body is still protecting itself.

Be ready,

never let your guard down,

never relax

never sleep

never, ever, trust

d. The climb up the mountain

We leave our cars at the base of the mountain to walk up in silence, each at his/her own pace. It is a strenuous walk even for the very fit. I remain at the very back as safeguard. As it turns out, it is a very long, slow and arduous walk for me to the top of Gulaga. I notice Michael is struggling even at the start, with short steps and breathlessness forcing him to rest frequently. Rowena has disappeared ahead right from the start.

The walk up the mountain is slow and steady, and would have been a beautiful experience had I not been so stricken... As it happens, the experience took me by surprise... as soon as we got to the foot of the mountain, I knew I was in trouble. The panic feelings started to rise in me and I wasn't sure if I'd be able to control them. I spoke gently to myself and assured The Little One that she'd be ok...

I am far removed physically from the rest of the group. I cannot see or even hear anyone in front of us. I doubt we will even make it to the saddle wherein lie the sacred sites. Michael has all my attention. His breathing is laboured, but he continues on, stopping

and resting, stopping and resting. His chest heaves with each laboured breath. Rowena is labouring, too—not physically, but under considerable emotional duress. This, too, manifests in her body:

I try to focus on all the beauty that's around me and not on the actual physical pain in my body, and the choking sensations in my throat...

Despite the extreme panic and anxiety that has taken her over, Rowena manages to hold onto herself and endure the ordeal.

Rowena, Rowena,

Child of goodness and right.

Arise from the darkness,

Walk into the light

So I decide that whatever pace Uncle Max sets, I'll keep up with him. He doesn't know my story, so he has no idea of what I'm going through, but somehow I sense that he can keep me from slipping over the edge emotionally.

Walking up that mountain is like being marched back into a death camp for me. It felt to me that I was being led back into the woods by my stepfather, who was a wicked and evil man.

e. Preparation for entry into the Sacred Site

Once we reached the top, Uncle Max asks us all to wait in a group. One by one, he calls us over to where he's standing so that he can anoint us with the clay he's collected along the way. He prays a prayer that our eyes will be opened to see what he's going to show us; that our ears will be opened to hear what he intends to tell us, and that our hearts will be opened the better to feel the lessons he has in store for us. He places a piece of red yarn around our brow and instructs us that this is a mark of respect to show as we enter into the sacred place. Although

we haven't been told to be quiet, I notice that once each person has had their turn to be consecrated, they return to the table and sit quietly as though reflecting upon their new state of openness.

The group seems anxious, yet relieved to see the two of us, Michael and me, finally arrive. We are hours behind the others. The group is all ready to enter into the sacred sites. Red headbands are placed around Michael's and my foreheads, white ochre is daubed on our faces by Uncle Max, and the tension of entering into the sacred is palpable. Rowena is again overcome by fears—it is the 'woods', or the 'bush' as we would say, that unearth these fears again:

Finally all of the consecrations are done and we are about to set off. Once again, I'm worried that we're about to go into the woods, even deeper than before. What lies in wait for me out there is anybody's guess. I'm afraid but there is a huge part of me that can't wait to get there.

There is a particular protocol for entering into the sites. Uncle Max clearly informs us all about what he is doing and why, and his expectations when we are inside.

Uncle Max instructs us about clapping in. He says he'll clap the sticks once for each one of us to alert the Ancient People that we are coming and to seek their approval for entering the sacred place. I like this, somehow it makes me feel safe, as though I'm being watched by many pairs of eyes that are centuries old and they'll protect me. From what? The past is gone, and the present holds no monsters. My body does not agree.

The group enters into the sacred sites in single file, where teachings, ritual and silence absorb the next three to four hours. Time becomes irrelevant. I am so relieved to have made it up the mountain with Michael, that after all his effort, he is able to be here with the rest of the group.

f. Teachings in the sacred site

Rowena experiences a transformation in entering into the site—an extreme relief, after the terror that had beset her so frequently to date on this mountain:

Walking into the sacred place is like walking into wonderland. Everything seems different to me in here. Once those sticks have clapped me in, my fear begins to subside and I move towards a more peaceful place, somewhere safe. I think this is more to do with my expectations than anything, but I'm not willing to dismiss the possibility that this place is somehow blessed in such a way that it can quell all my fears... As we moved on, the thought crossed my mind that I was actually crawling 'round the woods without a care in the world. I knew I should be afraid, but it just wasn't happening... I felt no fear, only peace.

There are no questions from any of us. Unusually, there is no wind today, so the whole place feels hushed. Uncle Max's voice is gentle and melodious. He almost sings the words. This feels like an ancient practice that has been enacted and re-enacted over aeons: Elders passing on the knowledge; neophytes soaking up the rich juices offered. There is one major difference—we are whites that are receiving the teachings—well, not quite. Rowena is the exception, yet she too is an outsider. Being black for her holds a very different personal and cultural story to the one we are involved in.

The first place we stop, after scrambling over rocky, uneven patches of ground, is the Man and the Woman Rock and Tree. I wish I had paid more attention to the actual details of the story. I just know that as soon as Uncle Max got to the part of the story where the woman wanted something the man couldn't or was unwilling to give her, I knew the story was going to take that old familiar track where the woman causes the downfall of not only the man, but all of mankind in general.

I'm afraid I was busy contemplating this question while Uncle Max was talking, and so by the end of his first lesson, I did indeed feel guilty and naughty because I had failed to pay attention properly.

If Rowena's attention had wandered at this teaching, it certainly didn't at the next. It is this site that triggers a whole association in her life, around motherhood.

The next formation he showed us truly amazed me. It was the formation of a mother and child. Looking at this formation was very strange for me. You see, mothering for me was far more than just something natural that women do. No, it was more like a holy crusade for me.

For most of my life, I never remembered the actual facts of my abusive childhood. Psychologists tell me this is called repression. Whatever it's called, I do know that I always had a feeling that I was much less than everyone else around me, and more than that, I knew that I was a bad person, it's just that nobody else knew it. I always felt that I was a good actress and could cover up all of my 'badness'.

What a dirty little girl,

What a sad little girl.

What a lonely little girl...

A product of feeling a bad person, and the consequences one must bear for that, combined with a 'holy crusade' towards motherhood, led Rowena not only to be overly protective with her own children, but also put her under enormous pressure to perform.

When not one, but two, of our babies died soon after birth, it was for me, a confirmation that I was indeed being punished for something very bad that I had done.

It was also another nail in the coffin I was making for myself in trying so hard to be the best mother in the whole world, that I was actually killing myself in the attempt. No one could measure up to be what I had set myself to be.

I even continued to try to be the super mum after the babies died. Getting on with my own grief was not enough; I had to go about starting a nationwide group for grieving parents.

Yet, besides triggering so much painful emotional connection, the rocks also served as some sort of confirmation of her life as a mother.

Anyway, seeing the gigantic monument that nature had erected to my chosen vocation sent a wave of something through me. I'm not sure what the wave was, I just know I felt it go through me.

Here seemed to be a confirmation that all that I'd done in defense of my children was the right thing, and that my absent babies were somehow still with me. I thought that I would cry, but the thought gave way to a really peaceful feeling and one of wonder.

The group moves on to yet another teaching site, still silent, but concentrated focus is evident. We exchange looks, but nothing else. It is not tense, but is intense. Uncle Max draws us in like bees to a honey pot. He tells stories, personal and cultural, specific to the mountain, to his own life, or his own experiences on the mountain. We are captivated.

We came to a smaller rock that looked like a giant lump of pooh, fairly nondescript as sacred rocks go, I would have imagined. Uncle Max asked each of us to touch the rock. When I did, I could immediately feel a strong buzzing vibration travel up my right arm and out through the top of my head. Of course, it frightened me. I don't know what I imagined might happen to me if I continued to touch the rock, but I wasn't taking any chances, I took my hand immediately away.

Such a strong body response put Rowena out of the ease she had been feeling, into fear again, but this time fear from a different source, and one she was certainly not familiar with.

Uncle Max just continued to talk calmly to us, and I don't even remember exactly what it was that he was saying. Then after everyone seemed to calm down a bit (was it my imagination, or did everyone initially react with some kind of excitement upon the first touch?), he quietly asked us all to touch it again, and we did. This time, there was quiet. Uncle Max let us stand there for a few minutes just feeling.

I could feel the tears run down my face as some very strong emotion took hold of me, or did I feel it leaving me? I'm not sure which, but again, I know that I felt something strong. The tears flowed even harder and I just stood there and let this thing, whatever it was, use me for its own purpose, which after all seemed to me to be a good and holy one.

This specific teaching is at the site of the Energy or Healing Rock, and it holds a very significant place within all of the teachings on Mt. Gulaga. Uncle Max requests all of us to enact several things here.

After a time, Uncle Max asked us to picture in our minds someone who was in need of healing. I imagined my friend Wilma who lives in Florida and suffers badly from rheumatoid arthritis.

Uncle Max prayed a prayer of healing for all of our recipients and then asked in his prayer that a cool and gentle breeze come and carry the prayers to the appropriate places. I know now that it was not my imagination when I felt a sweet little breeze blow across my face. I remember it because it felt cold when it hit the tears. Several more times, he asked us to nominate in our hearts, a recipient for some special blessings, and then asked that a breeze carry the prayers to their owners. Each time, the wind came to answer him so softly that it was like we were all being kissed on the face, hands and neck.

A gentle, powerful experience like this is hard to relinquish, and Rowena holds onto it for as long as she can...

After having initially reacted with fear at the touch of this wonderful lump of pooh, I now had the feeling that I didn't want to let it go. If I could just stand there touching it long enough, then even my own little ills would be cured, but I felt that it would be wrong of me to pray for myself in this place.

How do I dress wounds that I can't find?

Where do I apply the salve?

What shall I stitch?

In this moment of healing for the sake of others, there is no overt giving to herself, yet there is a great outpouring of generosity of spirit towards others, and in that acknowledgment, a gifting of the self:

It seemed very much to me like I should be giving what blessings I found here, out to others. If I were ever going to receive anything from this experience, it would be from whatever blessings came back to me via the return route as a result of sending good will to others.

What a wonderful experience.

There was another time on the mountain, when Rowena's mind wandered away from the teachings:

At another point, we stood upon the edge of a precipice overlooking the valley far below. Uncle Max showed us formations in the land and water below that were important symbols to the Yuin people.

It's funny you know, I kind of lost interest in this part of the lesson, I have no idea why, but it just didn't mean much to me. It may be because my mind and heart needed to focus on other things. It may be because we were so high up and in the woods, but I don't think so, I didn't register any fear at the time. I have no idea what was going on in my head except, a kind of blank disinterest.

There is a site on the mountain that is very difficult to access. It is known as The Teaching Rock. We clamber up onto it, or rather are pulled up by Uncle Max, then sit on this enormous granite flat slab that falls drastically away on all sides. One slip could be fatal. Uncle Max says that, traditionally, it was always called the highest 'school' in the world. So we sit here in the same way, being instructed by an Elder in a tradition that goes back thousands of years. However, it is not the teaching aspect that captures Rowena's attention on this rock.

We were sitting between absolute death and Uncle Max. Max was on one side, and we were on the other, and the sheer drop to death was on the other side. We were between the two.

It was hard to pay attention to Uncle Max's teaching because it was like, 'if you don't listen and get this, you're going to die, you're going to die; I'm here teaching you this stuff and if you turn away from me and go that way, you die'. And his teaching was all about respecting the land, respecting the earth.

The final place that seemed to impact on her was the site known as The Rocks of the Future, where we are encouraged to take a small stone or piece of clay to place on a cairn. This ritual of adding to the cairn is not explained to us in advance, but shortly thereafter, we are informed by Uncle Max of its significance in terms of our relationship with the mountain. In having been taken through these teachings on the mountain, we are, in that act of adding to the cairn, making a type of pledge to the mountain. We have in fact become custodians of Gulaga. Rowena is aware through all of this, that the teachings issuing from Uncle Max are about caring for ourselves and all of our neighbours and family in nature. The final story that Uncle Max shares with us on the mountain concerns a huge rock overhang behind the cairn. He tells us that it was here that he came, lost track of time, and was given powerful spirit teachings about creating the opportunity of guiding more people (black and white) through the mountain's teachings, and teaching the young to carry on this vital work. Rowena's reaction to this rock overhang is quite specific:

The whole set up of the place looked just like a giant, please excuse me, vagina.

It occurred to me that he had gone back into the womb to ponder the things he needed answers to, and was so well cared for and answered, that he could stay there for three whole days without food or water.

g. The return: The walk down the mountain

Walking down the mountain was relatively easy. Even Michael managed it reasonably well. There was a sort of euphoria in the group, with everyone talking, laughing and sharing. Well, not everyone... Rowena's brief respite from fear is over. Her life, so accustomed to living with wariness and lack of trusting, rears its head again.

Walking back down the mountain, I again found that the fear beset me. I needed to find a safe way to get myself down from that mountain, so again, I set myself to walk with Uncle Max.

He spoke to me this time, and directly referred to my situation. I hadn't known that he knew anything about me. He actually said, 'Ah, I know about you...' That shocked the socks off me, but not really. Somehow I have the perception that the Elders know all sorts of things the rest of us don't.

He spoke to me about how to deal with the fear and sadness and the pain. He said, 'Just for today, tell yourself that you aren't going to go through that. Just for today, tell yourself that you are safe and whole and well cared for'.

Understand, many times in my life I have felt abandoned. Abandonment is a huge issue for me, and I'm working my way through that one at my own pace and in my own time.

When Uncle Max told me what he wanted me to hear and then left me to get on with it, it felt very much like abandonment. I had to fight my way clear to see it for what it was, his way of getting out of my way so that I could bring myself to a more peaceful place in a way that was right for me.

h. Evening sharing

That evening, there is sharing in the group after dinner. We are all very reflective. Rowena shares memories of bad things happening in dark forests and fear—nothing specific, but intimations strong enough to silence the whole group. Others spoke of how extraordinary the day had been. No one actually spoke about the teachings on the mountain itself.

I notice Michael tells a little of the stories he spoke about to me on our climb up the mountain, concerning his Vietcong ambush. Such painful memories seemed to exclude his being able to experience the mountain, and he expressed his desire to the group to push them away and reclaim the experience for himself.

My goodness, here was a man who'd been through something similar to my own experience and he was confessing it out loud to this group of strangers. Could I do such a thing? I don't think so ... they would never understand, and it's shameful, the things I have to say. I must never tell them ... I'm feeling the fear creep up into my throat and I don't know how to stop it.

Then while listening to others talk about their experience on the mountain, I know what to do. I go within myself and try to connect with that feeling I had once we were clapped into the sacred site. It works! I start to feel myself calm down again and that feeling that's rising in my throat subsides. When my turn to share comes around, I don't think about it, I just open my mouth and speak.

Everyone listened, and then when I'd finished, the next person began their turn. But inside me there was a shift. Another little shift. There have been many over the last six years, and I've learned to recognise them when they come.

It was a shift to something better, more whole, less tortured.

i. Visit to Biamanga sacred mountain

The next day saw early dawn ceremony of gratefulness, again to Grandfather Sun as he arises in our world:

Again it's a simple but beautiful ceremony and I can feel my body move inside while we all say our morning prayers. It's a nice feeling.

We have a leisurely relaxed morning over coffee, exploring shops in the local village, chatting, sharing thoughts, gifts and gradually wending our way to another sacred mountain. This day feels very relaxed compared to the day before—in fact, it is a bit like being on holidays. This mountain is called Biamanga, an initiation site for males and females, with a sacred waterhole and several plaques explaining the stories and significance of the mountain at the base, where we first gathered.

Uncle Max walks us around the grounds first, and we have a lesson about plants and food supply and medicine. Much of what he's saying I understand on a herbalist level, even though the words are different. Proof to me once again, that all knowledge is connected in some way or other.

Time and again, I see the same knowledge and principles expressed in different ways by different people all over the world, but the message is the same. Plants are there to heal; we all exist on a spiritual as well as a physical level; there is energy within and around us that can't really be explained, but it's there; all of our actions have consequences that affect our spiritual beings in some way for good or bad depending on what it is we are doing.

While we were actually standing at the pool, during a pause in the teaching, a loud, crashing, tearing sound rips out across the valley. I looked around and actually saw a huge tree falling—it must have been at least eighty to one hundred years old...huge! It just crashed and fell in a sort of slow motion. Most of the group had their backs to it. After the initial shock, some scrambled up the rocks to get closer to the felled tree. Many were paralysed and stayed put. I did not wish to go anywhere. I was quite shaken

by it and realised it was an event of significance. I could tell by the look on Uncle Max's face that it was significant for him, too.

I felt for a long time that there must be some significance to the tree falling at that particular moment. Try as I might, I couldn't come up with anything at the time, and still can't today, even though I still feel it must have meant something. Uncle Max just accepted the falling of the tree as a natural thing, something you might see every day. Of course one wouldn't see that everyday; it's the first time I've seen anything like it, and I don't think I'm likely to again.

If that incident wasn't startling enough, immediately following on its heels was another even more shocking one, that was to be experienced by Rowena alone and not shared with anyone in the group:

Sitting on a rock down around the pool and straining to hear Uncle Max's soft voice, my mind began to wander a little. I started to look around at the trees and plants on the banks and wonder if another tree might fall.

For a moment I thought that my mind was playing tricks on me when I saw a handsome Aboriginal man standing on the far bank, dressed in nothing but a loincloth. He was leaning back on the rock and had one foot propped up behind him on the rock. I didn't want to move because I thought that he would disappear.

Surely this was just my mind grasping onto the suggestion that Uncle Max had planted there that 'them Old Fellas' sometimes like to come and see what's going on in this place. Then another appeared on the top of that bank, and still another on our side further up in the scrub.

One would imagine, knowing Rowena's experience to date, that these apparitions would send her into a total panic.

Interesting, no fear from me. Here I am in the woods, there are strange men appearing all around me and trees raining down near me and as I check in with

myself, there's no fear, just a sense of wonder that I could be hallucinating these people. And I'm not even worried about losing my mind. It feels to me like the place itself, once again, has such a safe and calming affect, that the fear just can't mix, like trying to add water to a place that's oily. Just as they appeared, they stay there for a while, and then I don't see them anymore. They never moved, they just stood there looking at us.

It's an experience that I haven't shared with anyone when retelling the story of my trip. I don't think anyone would believe me.

j. The group unravels

The afternoon of the tree falling proves to be very unsettled, with people in the group getting lost and splitting up, plans going awry and tempers a little frayed. It is all very disconnected, people disperse and there are only a few of us who manage to make the drive to the top of Biamanga, as we had been instructed to do. We have no idea where the rest of the group are. Rowena is driving one of the cars that five of us are jammed into.

This time, the fear begins to grow inside me again like an organic thing of some sort, I don't know why.

No one knows that my whole ordeal began six years ago when a school bus that I was on nearly crashed over a cliff on a mountain road. We all thought that we would die that day and the experts told me that what I was suffering from afterwards was Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Whatever they call it, I can tell you, it sucks.

It seems that this bus trauma had initially triggered a return to Rowena's traumatic childhood, which had been suppressed for so long.

So here I am, driving myself up another bloody mountain road, I must be out of my mind! The road is rough and rocky, at one stage there is even a tree in the

road. I can't believe I'm driving on this road. Any minute now, I expect the car to pitch itself over the side for no reason at all and then we'll all die.

Where's my peaceful feeling? Gone. Abandoned again. I think I didn't breathe the whole way up there.

Uncle Max asks us to walk off the road down into the scrub, which is almost waist-high. Oh no. I can't go down there; I know what waits in bushes.

I'm making my way to the top of the hole. My fingertips are almost able to make the top—But not quite...

And like a robot, I go, because Uncle Max told me to go.

As we walk down into what feels to me like certain death, I grab onto the shirt of the woman in front of me and I hold her tight. I ask her not to let go of me and she doesn't, God bless her forever. She holds my hand and squeezes me tightly and she tells me that I'm really safe.

I keep telling myself what Uncle Bill told me, I'm a part of and connected with all these plants out here. They won't hurt me and they won't let anything hurt me. But the peaceful feeling won't return.

Those of us that did go to the top of the mountain received additional teachings. However, it was a strange feeling that the group was all broken up, no doubt many lost. The trek home felt rather flat.

k. Evening sharing

Pre-dinner discussion had quite a bit of tension concerning what had gone wrong and who was to blame. There were some harsh words spoken, many excuses made, a lot of stirred-up emotions. Rowena and Michael were not to be seen.

All the way back to the cabin, I feel sick. Like the badness of my stepfather somehow came back to infect me. It's not like it was on Gulaga. This time, the bad guys won and I don't know why.

I don't know quite where to put myself. Michael comes to me and offers his ears and his shoulder; I refuse. I don't want to talk about it, look at it, or even think about it. I just want the whole thing to go away.

I wander around the house feeling displaced and agitated. I try to lie down, ugly images jump on my brain and I can't shut my eyes. I try to walk outside, the dark frightens me and I run back inside. Maybe I will have to talk with Michael. No, I'll just forget about it.

Finally the feelings get too much for me and I know that I have to talk to someone or I'll explode.

I go in search of Michael and he doesn't seem surprised to see me. He offers me a seat out on his front porch and brings a box of tissues with him. Boy, what a good priest! He even knows when to bring the tissues!

At some point in the heated atmosphere that evening, Uncle Max spoke up and announced that he took on the responsibility for the misshapen day, citing that it was a result of his not keeping a tight spiritual focus, and hence the group dismemberment had resulted. This was quite a turning point for the group. All of the tension seemed to melt away. Discussion then opened up about the whole day's teachings.

l. The final day

Rowena had to leave the group soon after breakfast, for a commitment in Sydney. She was disappointed to leave prematurely, when the rest of us were to visit a few more places on the way home:

On the one hand, I was really glad to be getting out of there and to be going back home. On the other, I was sorry that I had to miss the last part of the trip... But I was taking some good things with me anyway, and that would have to be enough.

I had shared with Uncle Max that I would be going home soon [America], and that I couldn't locate my sister and I was worried about her. He said he would be able to help me with that by doing what he called, 'singing her up'.

We all gathered out on the bluff for the Sun Ceremony and Uncle Max gave special thanks for Grandfather warming and shining on my sister Vicki. He had instructed me to do the same and I did. He also told me to stay after everyone left to pray further for my sister. I did.

After all the goodbyes were said, and the prayers of thanks were prayed, and the last car drove out of the driveway, I had a very strong feeling that my sister had been reached and that I needn't worry about her anymore. We are, after all, connected with every living thing on this earth.

m. Back to the cave on the outskirts of Sydney

It is more than a year since I have been with Rowena following the Gulaga weekend. We are sitting on her back veranda overlooking her beloved garden. I had not known the story of her strong connection with the Aboriginal Elder called Uncle Bill, through a school camp. She begins to tell it. As preparation for this camp, the school staff had been taken to Redfern, to the notorious Aboriginal ghetto known as 'The Block'. For Rowena, the shock of this exposure may have been more intense than for others:

I was plunged out of my shakily constructed world and back into the ghetto with all the horrible nightmares I thought I'd left back there.

It was Uncle Bill, as her first Aboriginal teacher, who had plunged her into a new world of belonging and feelings that she had a place and relatives in nature who cared. It was him who had subsequently challenged her to go into the bush barefooted, to place her

hand on the cave wall that I referred to at the beginning of Rowena's story and call it home. We are sitting in this same cave as Rowena speaks.

He just put my hand up and said, 'this is now your place,' and we sat there. He spat the ochre on my hand.

I sit and look at the white hand outline, still clearly identifiable, as Rowena's sign of belonging to this place. It seems as if Uncle Bill and the Redfern experience had hugely impacted on her life and formed a connecting thread with the Gulaga teachings of Uncle Max. I ask her if any of the specific sites on the mountain still resonate with her today.

The Three Rocks, one on top of the other. Yeah, I've got pictures of those ones: where you've been and where you are now and where you're going. Pay attention to where you are. They resonated for me because at that time I was so heavily into looking back to where I'd come from—still processing all those memories; in order to process it, I had to go back there. Much of my days I was actually spending living in the past—the only way I could process. So I was very much into lots of fear and pain, real physical gut-wrenching pain and anxiety, really bad stuff.

This had been unearthed after the bus accident?

Yeah. So coming to this place, this huge thing saying, 'Hey, pay attention to where you are!!!' Every session I ever spent in therapy was always 'I want this to be over, I want to move on. It's not where you've been or where you're going, just pay attention to where you are'.

So when I went with Uncle Max, it was like going away to college. For me, it was like finally coming out of kindergarten and getting to eat with the big people. I let him take me there and I closed my eyes and tried to 'feel' what he was teaching. Sometimes I succeeded, other times I lapsed into my own fear.

It felt like I saw a little bit more of what Uncle Bill began to show me two years ago. I began to experience a little of my relationship with my 'new family'. I

now get up every morning and say 'good morning' to Grandfather Sun. I try everyday at some point now to put my bare feet on the earth in the belief that connecting with the mother [earth] in this way is like medicine for me.

I draw strength from putting my feet on the earth, even though it's still hard for me to do, 'cause we were never allowed to walk around barefoot; you'd get beaten up for that. I consciously do it because that's where I find my strength, that's where I find my healing.

When I get really anxious, I do from time to time, it puts my feet down. And that reference point of coming back to the Mother and going 'ok, Grandmother Moon, Grandfather Sun, I am here—those are my feet and they're on the Mother'—then I can start to think, or just come back. I can find almost instant calm just by looking. It is a specific look: it's a look out, see how big everything is, look at that tree—to look out and expand yourself. It helps you go 'Oh...Oh! That really, really helps'.

The impact of those teachings and the way Rowena has been able to incorporate them into her daily life, have repercussions as well, on a much broader level.

The teachings actually provided a context for me, kind of like an ending for me, a full stop. If I did not take them on board, it is like doing all those destructive things like pulling out all the trees, digging up the grass, shooting birds, pulling off bee's wings.

And if you accept these teachings that we are all part of the one spirit, all part of the one organism, then you cannot treat those things badly, you can't do that. I spend hours and hours looking after my little patch of garden, then go inside and beat myself up—it is not congruous.

This is what I took out of it.

We lapse into silence again, then finally Rowena speaks:

This place symbolises everything: all the rocks, the water over the rocks. I chose on the side of the cliff these ferns that grow out of the rock—live, beautiful growing things that come out of sheer rock—I chose that as my totem—they still survive. All the stuff washes over them, but they still survive—so delicate, yet they flourish in that harsh environment.

Much has changed since that time away with Uncle Max. Rowena had been to America, had, in fact, managed to reconnect with her sister Vicki, the one Uncle Max on the last day of the Gulaga journey said he would ‘sing up’ so she could be found. Vicki was still living in the ghetto of Los Angeles; Rowena had brought Vicki’s daughter back to live with her family in Australia.

We are now back in her home garden. She points out a place in the garden where she meditates.

My relationship to my land [America] before I left home was not good at best, non-existent at its worst. Now that I have eyes to see it, I feel great compassion and sadness to see what has become of it and its inhabitants.

Do I feel that I belong more to this place than to the other? No. I’m inextricably bound to both places now.

I wish that I could leave the other place behind and forget about it, but I can’t. It spawned me. How does one forget about one’s own mother?

At the end of the day, Rowena gives me a copy of the words she had sent to Uncle Max a few days after the Gulaga journey:

*Just for today,
I will wait and not worry over what the next moment in my life will bring.
Just for today,
I will trust to the lessons you taught me,
That I am part of something far greater
Than the microscopic world my eyes can see.*

*Returning to the mountain
 In my mind and in my heart
 You assured me Uncle Max
 Would bring me back to the Laws of respect
 And love for all Creation
 It would bring me to my Biamanga
 Back to the sacred pool
 Where anger and hurt could be washed away from my heart
 In the cool bath of the Dreaming
 Leaving only the whisper of a breath of the Mother
 And a nurturing love for all beings.*

*This day, Uncle Max,
 I will go back to the mountain
 And I know that as I go
 There are many that travel with me.
 The ancient people will be watching
 And I know, Uncle Max,
 That you will be too.*

3. A Slow Awakening: Anne's Story

a. The bush grew me up

Anne paints me a picture of her childhood, which is far from bereft despite the loss of her mother at a very young age. Her mothering, instead, came from the bush:

I really do believe that the bush grew me up. It held me in a very difficult time of my childhood, and that was my sanctuary, that was my place to go... The bush was my mother, my bigger mother, and even though I couldn't comprehend that in my mind, all I knew was that I loved to be down there.

Before this time, however, she remembers living in the inner city, right on a main road, with visits to the park being the only respite from harsh city life. Yet this, too, had its limitations in terms of:

...a sense there of movement and swings, rather than environment.

I see her then living in a house on the rim of the bush, in a Sydney suburb on the North Shore, disappearing for hours on end, being lost in this natural world.

My real awakening to the world of nature, which has become so important to my soul, was when we built a house in Beecroft, largely bushland—that's when I discovered all kinds of things I didn't know existed.

Perhaps 'lost' is a misnomer, and 'found' might better describe life at that time for Anne. A deep immersion in this world that also holds her, mothers her, is an awakening to wonder.

One day I arrived and there had been rain in the foundations, and there were tadpoles—how could I not know these existed? Finding my first cicada and thinking I had discovered an insect from outer space... a huge lizard on this log, almost prehistoric to me in my smallness... there were lyrebirds down the back. The awe of this world I lived in!

Here is a young girl, spending much time alone, sitting on rock ledges and being still and quiet, being part of the place. This is not a fear of isolation, a fear of harm, of creatures that hurt or kill:

I'd find a place where no one would go, next to the creek, on the mossy rocks under the tree ferns, and there would just be enough sunlight coming through to warm me. I'd just lie there for hours in the stillness, listening to the water. I could do that for a long time, and lose all sense of time. This is how I knew I must have been meditating because I'd lose all sense of time or struggle or thinking; I'd just go into this place. I felt that was my nourishment as a child. I can't think of anything that nourished me more.

So I came to love all the many life forms around me, even the ones I was scared of. I didn't mind feeling afraid of seeing a snake, it was kind of like a fear I looked forward to. There was in me an acceptance of all these things that I did not have in my human existence. So for me, this is more my natural home.

Of course, Anne the adult, looking back on her early childhood, could enunciate the vitality of the bush for a child in her situation.

Because while things were far from connective in the rest of my life, when I was in the bush, even though I was alone and many people would think that would be lonely, this was my oasis, my home.

The significance of the natural world, in terms of the pleasure, comfort and joy it gave, stood alongside a notion of identity and belonging, broader than the self, which Anne imbibed.

I was part of something much bigger...

This is quite a sophisticated notion for a young child to grasp, but Anne the child is developing a bedrock of deep connectedness with the natural world—it is her home, her sustenance, her life source of vitality. I do not doubt her choice of the word 'oasis'—the bush was vital to her life, to her survival.

What could tear the fabric of the chrysalis? Adolescence, for one, when notions of not being safe in the bush emerge. Not through danger from the bush itself, but danger in the form of humans. A young woman learns she is no longer safe and must take care. The other form of consciousness that also began to emerge was Anne's awareness that the bush was changing, that those places she loved were being destroyed through the impact of humans and development that continued to make incursions on the bush environment.

I am sitting with Anne in the bush of her childhood. She points out the rock ledge she lay on, under the ferns. We sit in stillness and listen to the sound of the water gurgling into the deep pool. The smells of the bush are strong—eucalyptus and damp earth. I feel

its potency now and am aware of how much love is in Anne still for this place. She also points out the numerous houses that push in on the bush, squeezing it out. It is a nature reserve now and lots of dog walkers, BMX bikers, laughing families, pass us by. There is a huge tree close to the creek that holds special relationship for Anne. We both wonder at the Aboriginal presence here.

Did Anne have any contact with Aboriginal people? She recalls a unforgettable photo next to her bed:

As for Aboriginal culture, I was very ignorant, yet there was some inexplicable connection that I felt. I still don't understand why my mother chose to put a painting next to my bed from my earliest memory, a little painting of a naked Aboriginal girl with my own name—she was called Annie. I always felt she was my twin in some inexplicable way. I don't really understand it, but I know that consciousness did come to me when I did connect with some Aboriginal Elders much later. I then got to meet another part of me that had not lived the life I'd lived, that had lived another life. Even if this painting was of a mythological person, something in my soul connected to a sense of another soul and another life.

Anne will never know why that picture was there. She does know her mother put it there, and it stayed, right through Ann's growing into adulthood.

b. A vital connection to the land

Real contact with Aboriginal people was to come through her partner and his associations, which seemed to link Anne into another world:

Hearing a whole lot of different stories—Daniel's [an Aboriginal friend] grandfather had been kidnapped and used as slave labour—it was such a shock to me... the shame of the culture I've come from.

Anne was able to learn vicariously through her partner's direct experiences, raising her consciousness in all sorts of ways about Aboriginal culture, history, present

circumstances. The ‘unconsciousness’ that had characterised her early adult life was being excised in quite strong and forceful ways:

That was when he [her partner John] started having dreams. It was as if the Old Fellas were teaching him a thing or two in his dreams, and at times he certainly had a lot of fear. There are things I should not tell, as they are his stories, but he certainly knew, he certainly discovered, it was no sentimental journey, the meeting of the two cultures. And when he returned he was a changed man... because I'm close to him, I really learnt a lot of things through his telling me.

Anne’s partner John worked with and had Uncle Max as a teacher for some years. The whole family was to feel the impact of these teachings. Her own journey thus begun, Anne now becomes exposed to different Aboriginal individuals, and realises what it was that she so earnestly shared with Aboriginal people in general:

I feel we have a connection, Aboriginal people and me. I feel that the thing that links me with Aboriginal people is because that connection to the land is so vital to me and that I appreciate what has been created over aeons between humans and the land—on this land that people tend to call Australia. I feel I know nothing compared to the history of Aboriginal people and their connectedness over time, but because I live on this land, my connection with the land takes me into that connectedness. There is so little I know, and yet I feel deeply, deeply appreciative, just for the conscious relationship that has been forged over time.

Thus, there is a recognition in Anne of a people, of any person, who has a vital connection with the land. And what flows from this recognition is a sense of gratefulness for the depth, length and breadth of a lineage that has ‘forged’ a ‘conscious relationship’ with this land. Anne has a background of forging her own relationship with the land. She is now beginning to forge a relationship with this ancient Indigenous culture.

A Koori client was referred to me—we connected over many months. At the end, we were very comfortable with each other, and both learnt something about the

meeting at the edge of both cultures. We may not have had the relationship we had, if I had not learnt some basic things around protocol and respect. So I learnt to listen, and not follow what I had been taught. She gave me a beautiful compliment: 'Dig into your ancestry, you might have some Koori blood'. I also heard the pain within her culture, too, that I won't speak of. It's not just between cultures, the pain, there's plenty of pain. Afterwards, I felt the grief of the boundaries of our culture, the grief that I could not offer to mind her child... I wanted to be an aunty to her child...

When one enters into another cultural realm, the road is seldom smooth. Anne's teachings at this stage were around respect and protocols that act out that respect. She would also learn more to shame her of her own cultural heritage, and go through the pain and grief of the cross-cultural encounter that can occur between two sensitive and caring individuals.

This is the setting for a very powerful meeting with Uncle Max's teachings and Mt. Gulaga.

c. Old wine into new skins

Anne is reluctant to speak of the experience on Mt Gulaga at all. There are long silences when she appears to try to summon up some words, then nothing. A lot of deep sighs issue from her. I wait patiently, aware that I, too, have difficulty finding any words to express my experience on the mountain but, more than that, that there are many things that I will not speak about.

It is so hard. What I can say is that some experiences are beyond words, and what I can say is that I was very honoured to be invited, the first time I went, simply because I was a relative, and my partner was connected up with these Elders.

There are words, however, for the climb up the mountain:

The mountain walked me up – I had a sense of the mountain walking me up - I don't know how to describe that, really. I would say that the mountain was tolerant of me, tolerant of my ignorance, and walked me up anyway. I felt like I had permission to be there.

Anne knows something of the power of entering in to the sacred, of the necessary preparation to move from the profane world into that of the sacred realm, yet she was perhaps shocked by what she faced in that moment before entering in to the sacred sites on Mt Gulaga:

What I do know is that, before going in, the preparation for going in, I was suddenly aware of the enormity of being there. I actually had an experience, and it was actually a quick experience internally, of a whole lot of archetypal experiences coming together in one moment.

I'd had a very strong fundamentalist Christian upbringing which certainly came up for me when I was to enter a sacred place. Being aware of the Koori relationship with the Mother [Earth], my major grief in my life of growing up without my mother, and entering a sacred realm of the Mother... there were a number of really big forces meeting within me.

This is obviously a highly potent moment for Anne, the enormity of which translated as facing the real possibility of not surviving it.

I thought, I may not even survive this – quite seriously. I was very aware of my unworthiness, partly connected with the history of the culture I'd come through: the domination, the desecration of the continuity of the culture, the rape of the land. What I was conscious of was [that] I may not survive.

I knew before going in, of a strong spiritual presence that had been forged between humans and the land. Yes, I had a really strong sense of a well. 'And I better go in with the right attitude', you know. However, I was not sure that I could go in with the right attitude, because of my spiritual weakness, my lack of focus in my mind, my lack of development in spirit and soul. So I wasn't sure I

was prepared to go in to such a place where I already had a sense of spiritual matters I do not understand, that are bigger than me. I had an extreme feeling of my own smallness as a human being.

The 'well', as representing the forging of the relationship between humans and the land, by Aboriginal people on this earth over millennia, exerts its presence into Anne's psyche. Its daunting nature may easily have prevented her entering into the site, despite the fact that she was to be guided in by an Elder, prepared through the daubing of white ochre on her face, and taken into ceremony through proper preparation and the demonstration of respect through the wearing of red headbands.

I crossed a kind of bridge within myself when I decided to go in. I also knew there was no way I was not going in. There was something in me that compelled me to go in. I suppose it was a surrender, a surrender of my will, a willingness to go in, knowing it could be my death. You know, all of a sudden, that seemed to be superfluous.

I think it was a shock for me to meet my own smallness, my spiritual smallness. I am just thinking of the story in the Bible about pouring old wine into new wine skins—if I was not prepared enough, it could kill me. I also had a sense that if I was totally oblivious, it wouldn't hurt me. It was a funny thing...

Hearing this, I am quite shocked myself at the strength of this 'facing up' that Anne had to do, right there at the threshold of the sacred sites. I take it to mean that the site exerts such great power, that she may not have what it takes to actually be with that.

It was something that was going on, and it wasn't just me, and I don't pretend to understand, but I don't feel I can actually speak of anything inside there.

Whether that's me being over-precious, I don't know; all I know is that I wouldn't be listening if I didn't follow that.

Besides a strong inner intuition banning her from speaking of the experience within the sacred sites and the teachings of Uncle Max, Anne does share other thoughts on why this silence is necessary to her:

In my limited understanding, I think it is about respect in part. I actually feel there has been a strong relationship between Koori people and that area over time, and there is much that I would not understand that has been placed there in terms of protection. So it's not simply about respect. It's also about, I do not want to fall into the typical way tourists visit—the sanctity of that place can dissipate over time. It's partly protecting me from crossing the line of being a tourist, rather than a guest invited here by Koori people.

There is also a strong sense in Anne that she would not go to the mountain unaccompanied:

I would not feel right to go there because of the significance of the place for Koori people, even though I hear some people say it's okay. I wouldn't feel right to go there without invitation from Koori people.

d. The tallness of spirit

Without knowing any of the details, we can still measure the extent of this profound experience for Anne. What is not said is often as powerful as what is said.

I think that was the strongest experience I've ever had in my life. If I were to describe it in one word: deep awe, deep awe. Even the fear seemed irrelevant somehow. The fear of death seemed minor.

What I can say is that afterwards I could not stop shaking. It was extraordinary, all I could do was sit down and weep and shake. In a funny kind of way, it reminds me of the weeping and shaking after childbirth. With my second birth, my whole body was really shaking and I was weeping and crying, you couldn't describe it as happy or sad, it was a mix of feeling.

A time of withdrawal, a closing off from the outer world, a time of turning in to one's inner process, is often necessary after a shock, after a most intense, overwhelming experience.

I needed to do that—just sit on a log and not connect with people for a little while. Then one of the Elders came and sat on this log beside me. I won't speak of what we said between us, but I'll always feel love for that man, even though most of the communication was not through words. There was an acknowledgment between us. That moment will live for the rest of my life. I will say that I felt the tallness of his spirit in that moment. That tallness was connected with his lineage and I felt the awe of that.

There was more to this interaction that arose some time later, when Anne was able to reflect on that specific moment.

Afterwards I felt sadness, and a kind of acceptance, of the severing of my lineage. I felt the bigness of his and that I was not connected in that way.

I wonder about the wider impact of being on the mountain, if it informs Anne's life in an ongoing way...

I feel a protectiveness for that area. I don't go around saying, 'Oh, I've been to Mt Gulaga'. I feel quite protective... it goes beyond feelings. There's a felt sense of having met in a place where that connection is there always—at some level I can never forget.

I've felt fear in relation to the mountain too—that's been around my ignorance: 'Oh, what moved me to do that? Was that okay to do that? Can I trust that?' In going through that process, I feel like I've gone through teachings, even though I'm not there.

I am a witness to Anne's own commitment to and complex relationship with the mountain and how she struggles to make sense of that.

It certainly is an experience of something larger than my everyday ordinary existence, but it also reminds me of the spark in my ordinary everyday existence. I can't be totally removed from it, having experienced it.

Anne is at pains to stress the limitations of language to convey what she means, the inadequacy of the Western experience to describe such a compelling worldview. She comes from a place of deep respect to the Indigenous teachings.

I use the word awakening, a slow awakening. The awakening to the interrelationship between all things, that spiritual connection.

I've really taken on board opening my senses, to be aware of the teachings all around me, and that the teachings are there, if only I pay attention. And with that comes respect, as well as paying attention. I know that various words have been used by Koori/Yuin Elders with me in teachings, at different times; however, these are the main things that have really infiltrated my life, and for me that is a gradual awakening.

I know that what was being taught, was to lift my head up and out. I'm not in that place yet...

e. Kookaburra speaks

I would like to insert a story that illustrates what Anne really means by paying attention to her senses, and respecting what it is she senses. It is a story about kookaburra and the spiritual connection between all things.

We are in the middle of one of our conversations, sitting outdoors on the grass. I am engrossed in listening intently to Anne. She interrupts the dialogue: '*I am hearing kookaburra now*'. Of course, my ears prick up too. I ponder what sense Anne makes of kookaburra in that moment. It could easily have been ignored, but Anne deliberately takes notice.

I have felt the strong connection with kookaburra throughout my life. So for the kookaburra to be calling as I am speaking about my appreciation for the bush, I actually feel heard. I feel really heard, whether that sounds bizarre to someone else or not. I am reminded of the larger connection and connect there with Indigenous understanding.

When Anne says she has been heard by kookaburra, I presume she is referring to the world of intelligence that is so much a natural part of traditional Indigenous ways of being in the world, that informs on so many levels. But I am intrigued by how she discerns what to take notice of and what to ignore. Is everything of significance? How is one to differentiate between one bird call that remains in the background and one bird call to take notice of?

Just the timing felt too synchronistic. I know there are many ways I could interpret that—it is how I choose to interpret it at this moment. I don't for one minute think it's speaking only to me, but kookaburra is reminding me of its presence.

It's important for me to understand where I'm coming from with this. I think once I used to think it was hubris to imagine that kookaburra is speaking to me, but to me, that's just normal now. The whole world is speaking. Speaking is not probably the right word—we connect and we don't connect.

I realise that in order to be in the world in this way, must take skills, an alertness, a perceptiveness, a discernment... I push Anne to expound on this further.

Yes, like dragonfly, I can have a larger vision, a larger hearing, a larger sense of feeling.

If something pricks in, like kookaburra, I suppose that is learned significance: I have learned to listen to kookaburra. There may be other things that I don't pay attention to, that I don't listen to.

I have made contact in a place of real knowing, so there's a history between me and kookaburra.

There is a vision being expressed here of a world of meaningful signification. This is the world Anne inhabits.

I tell you how I took that experience then, when kookaburra called: my heart felt the joy of, 'Oh, the bush loves to be recognised and appreciated'. To me,

hearing the kookaburra right then was knowing that the bush was heard, that it heard my genuine appreciation.

I don't care what people make of that, but for me, it's a joy in my existence. I don't for one minute think that the rest of the world thinks through human brains, and human ways of thinking, I don't think that, but I think we are connected in mysterious ways, that very rarely do we get a glimpse and understanding. But for me, it was like a glimpse of knowing.

We connect and we do not connect ... it stays with me, like the scent of newly mowed grass...

4. Reclaiming Sacred Connection with the Land: Michael's Story

a. Background to Michael's story

Michael was thin, very thin, stooped, and not healthy-looking. He coughed a lot, probably asthmatic, I thought. A heavy smoker. And he had a lovely Irish sense of humour and a grin a mile wide. I was shocked when the idea came to me that he might die walking up the mountain. No, seriously, right from the beginning, I thought he might not make it. It was obvious he was struggling, stopping every five or so steps and wheezing to catch his breath. I walked some distance behind him, concerned. I am used to walking at the rear of a group, as an issue of safety, but this was a hard ask. I did not want him to feel patronised, or that I was worried about him and hanging about in case something should happen, and I did not want him to feel bad that he was holding me up, which he was. So how to do this? I stayed a fair way back, hovering with him just in my sight, but far enough back that there was plenty of space between us. Sometimes I caught up with him to chat casually about anything I could summon up, none in close enough to see where he was at, how he was handling the climb. It felt like a sort of compromise for both of us, probably unsatisfactory as well, for both of us.

So it was a long, hard, tedious walk up the mountain that day. I always find the walk tough, as I am mostly unfit, and the sprightly young ones who bounce up as though it is a Sunday stroll fill me with envy and memories of when I, too, was as fit as a fiddle and knew no bounds through my body. But today was tougher, with my mind on Michael, always. It was his body's painstaking messages that kept me alert. I am sure he knew the game, and went along with it too: the game of me not really walking slowly because of him. And we talked a bit, about our lives. At some point, he told me that the last time he was in a forest was in Vietnam, where he was ambushed. I asked no questions: his sharp, shallow breaths said it all; but I did wonder about his fear, in that very moment, and in that moment thirty years ago, when most of his mates were killed. I told him about my time in the desert of Central Australia a few months earlier, and he told me to read Thomas Merton, especially his book on the Desert Fathers. I promptly forgot that, not Thomas Merton, but the name of the book.

Michael was an American Catholic priest, from an Irish background, and a large family. He was on sabbatical in Australia and was obviously drawn to learn about this land through Indigenous teachings. I liked him immediately, and I liked the way Uncle Max included him and the other priest, Glenn, and embraced their spiritual traditions within his own, by asking them to offer prayers at certain special moments, like the massacre site, or often using analogies of Christian teachings. Michael shared himself strongly with the group, especially about his struggle up the mountain, and it was obvious to everyone that it was quite an amazing feat that he had actually made it to the top. I found out much later that he had been really taken by the whale rock. Perhaps that is what links us...still.

The other link is that he chose to be my research subject. We emailed each other once he had returned to the States, and I realised the difficulties of doing research by email as against interview. But it was still worthwhile. What he had to say about the land, this land, his own land, his sense of belonging in all of God's creation, in fact his healing journey with the earth, through the teachings of Uncle Max, were worth reading. The sheer beauty of the language he used is a reflection of the depth of this new-found, once lost relationship.

Michael is dead now. He died exactly two years to the day that he was on the mountain. We had hardly begun our interviews. I decided to include his words, his short story, as an honouring of his life. The other priest, Glenn, was about to email him that night, as he was reading over his journal of the sabbatical two years earlier, to remind him of the anniversary, as they had obviously done the year before. This is Glenn's story once he heard of Michael's death:

The news has come late for me. Though, the day he died, I was thinking and praying for him before I retired for the night, and was ready to email him, to say if he remembered where he was two years ago on that precise date—it is my custom each year to reread my diary that I kept from Sabbatical.

October 2, 2000 was one of those days of tremendous transformation for me personally, making the arduous trek up Gulaga, in Tilba Tilba.

I remember Mike and Rowena being on this adventure along with all the others.

I remember the large rock formations, and how Uncle Max spoke of the sacred sites.

I remember how happy Mike was to see the Whale Rock. I sent him a picture of that precise site recently.

I remember so vividly the Healing Rock, and how alive it seemed, how prayerful it all was.

I remember how the gentle breeze came up as Max invoked it.

I remember the prayers on the beach as the sun arose to grandfather sun.

I remember how truly good it all was, including the smoking ceremony, and how cleansing it all was. How my heart felt on fire.

I remember Mike having to put up with me in that small basement room, hovering over me, going crazy because of my snoring.

I have such an intense feeling of wanting to return again... and pray for him on that same sacred spot, so important to us all.

Uncle Max and I had spoken of Michael a few weeks after that weekend journey that Michael and Glenn were on. Since Uncle Max drives up the mountain in a 4WD so is often oblivious of what goes on in the walk, and since we had no chance to speak in private until then, I told him of Michael's physical struggle up the mountain and how I was really concerned that it was at the time too much for him, may have killed him, in fact. He too expressed his great concern around his health. I suggested he had emphysema, rather than asthma. Uncle Max agreed.

Two years later when I tell Uncle Max of his death, and the date, Uncle Max nods, and is hardly surprised. He states that he knew when Michael was here his spirit had received healing on the mountain, a sort of reconciliation.

We both felt his presence on the mountain the next time we were down there. Strongly. I turned around when I thought I heard someone coming up the track behind us. It was like I saw him again, struggling up the mountain, almost at the top. And when I saw the Whale Rock, and it shocked me as if I was seeing it for the first time, I thought of Michael...

And so to Michael's childhood and his own developing relationship with the land, with nature, with God...

b. Childhood relationship with the land and God

It was not until I was in high school after my family had moved from New York to the state of New Mexico in the US southwest, that I first discovered what I would now call a relationship with the land. Growing up in suburbia, growth and development were facts of life. I didn't connect to the sense of loss as fields and woods disappeared to make room for housing and shopping centres. Favorite 'special, hidden' places with their 'secret' forts and tree houses would suddenly be gone, then there would be new neighbours moving into new houses.

In New Mexico, the vastness of the landscape was almost staggering after the closed-in horizons of community development. I suddenly became aware that God had used an entirely different palette in the desert southwest than He had on the eastern seaboard—sand but no ocean; mountains instead of hills; brown and gold, orange and lavender instead of the pale pastels of the evening sky.

The family started getting into camping in the vast tracts of national forests, and I started rock climbing. Though I was brought up in a religious household, I now began experiencing the Divine in nature as well in religious ritual, and a sense of being able to come to a peace in this ‘new communion’.

c. The tainting of place

Such responsiveness to the sheer beauty of the Divine in nature, carefully nurtured, cradled by a place-sensitive religious family, was to be obliterated in Michael through his service in the military, specifically in war zones.

This same awareness of a character to the land was also present during my tours of duty in Vietnam and in Germany. Triple canopy rainforests, lush delta land and again the mountains—all held a quality that somehow remained separate from the horror of combat. Yet, in all honesty, they were, in a sense, robbed from me, because the reality of war was played out in those landscapes. And though rationally, I knew better, the peace had been nudged out by disquiet and distrust. They no longer were really ‘safe’ places. Later, even the Black Forest and the alpine regions were, somehow, tainted.

A ‘tainted’ relationship with place—this expression speaks volumes in terms of the loss, of the distortion, that Michael experienced in those combat areas, which was also transferred to other places.

The family’s move to Florida helped restore some of the contact with nature. The ocean remained a safe place and one in which the unstoppable hand of God was visible, raw and untarnished by other memories.

d. Seeking Australia

Michael, in this cut-off psychological state from places, from the natural world as God's creation, determined to visit Australia. Why Australia?

My exposure to issues involving the Native American peoples at home stimulated a casual interest in the situations of indigenous peoples in general, so on my first trip to Australia five years ago, I was piqued to learn what I could of the Aboriginal people.

I had made a mental icon of Uluru, and made the trip intent upon climbing to the top and having a picture taken. It was only after meeting some of the local people and learning of their desire that the rock NOT be climbed because of its sacred nature, that I began to see their own sacred relationship to the land. I didn't climb. I left only footprints and took only memories.

Thus began a developing relationship with Aboriginal teachings about the land, with Michael holding respect and a willingness to learn about these ancient traditions.

Since then I had done only casual reading on Aboriginal beliefs, but had grown increasingly interested in trying to develop an understanding.

My work as a priest, trying to deal in real and effective ways with spiritual issues, made me want to open my mind to the possibilities for the truths in belief systems outside my own—not as a substitute, but as a way of staying alert to the one Truth of God finding expression in diverse ways beyond my own experience.

In that regard, the chance to participate in the journey with Uncle Max seemed like a fabulous opportunity...

The 'tainting' that Michael referred to earlier, pervaded his being when he first entered Mt. Gulaga.

e. Mount Gulaga

I return to the mountain itself and the extreme difficulty Michael was having. Not only was he physically struggling every step of the way, with breathlessness dominating, but emotionally, too, he was challenged. The strong emotional recollection of the ambush he suffered while serving in Vietnam, produced intense fear in him, making the climb an ordeal on many levels. And despite all this, he kept going. Phones are always dead on this side of the mountain, and I worried how I would get help to him, how to leave him alone, if something drastic should happen, when all I could do was climb to the saddle of the mountain where the rest of the group and the 4WD was waiting.

On reflecting on the experience of the journey, a few months later and back in the States, Michael down-played his physical and emotional challenges. He tended to focus more on what he had gained and learnt from the time on the mountain. He was keen to acknowledge that he had reclaimed, had been given back through Uncle Max, a ‘forgotten language’, which enabled him to know and ‘articulate again his own sacred connection to the land’. We both knew, I am sure, that what he was not saying was as important as what he said.

The sharing of Uncle Max was not only an intellectual exercise in ‘objective learning’, but an emotional and spiritual exercise as well (and the physical dimension of the journey was not lost to my consciousness either, as you well know). In many ways, I could not even be writing this now, in these words, without the experience. For me, it was like Uncle Max was providing the grammar, syntax, and vocabulary of a forgotten language: he gave me something which made it possible to reclaim, AND articulate my own sacred connection to the land.

Michael refers to a particular belonging for him that is linked to Australia:

It has made it possible for me to experience Australia not just as an exciting, foreign place ‘down under’, but to experience it as sharing in the sacred meaning of another, and a discovery of it that makes it sacred—not foreign—to

me. The first concrete result of this is that I shall always be able to consider Australia as 'home': far from family, the familiar and old friends, but filled with new and wonderful people, places and things which can never again be entirely foreign.

Yet this belonging goes beyond Australia to a 'universal sacredness' of all places and people 'foreign', a oneness in God's plan and a oneness of humanity...which I see as PART of God's plan.

At the same time, Michael points out his restored sense of love and appreciation for his own places in America and their 'unique sacredness':

I am already nurturing the longing to look again upon my Atlantic from my beaches. And I use 'my', not in the sense of private possession, but in the sense of unique personal identification with what has shaped me as a 'Floridian'.

Such a Divine communion was in fact also a Divine gift:

Spiritually, I really have come to believe that God blessed me in a special way in directing me to this experience and allowing my path to cross with those of other seekers.

f. Postscript

Recently I was in America. A work colleague, after visiting a university for the day, suggested we call in to a Trappist monastery close to this town in upstate New York. It was serene and nestled in to a hill, hidden by snow—snug and soft and quiet. I could hear myself breathe again for perhaps the first time in four weeks since being in this busy, exciting, stimulating country. I breathed in the sharp, clean air of the snow-bathed land, and I breathed in the sharp clean depths of this ancient tradition of monks. I heard their chants, and I came back into myself, a soft resonance with the Zen garden even more classical in its snow-bound bonsai, and overseen by a stunning white marble statue of Madonna and child. Pure simplicity. The heart of being. This Madonna drew me to her, somehow connected me with Michael. Why did he come up in my mind at that

time? I kept staring at her, taking photos of her, as if mesmerised by her sheer beauty, or was it the compassion that she embodied. It was freezing cold outside but I was reluctant to move. I said prayers for Michael since he was so strongly in my thoughts, and vowed to send his parents the photos from here and the story of our connection in Australia. Inside, I was surprised to discover that Thomas Merton was a Trappist monk whose books adorned plentiful bookshelves. He had obviously spent much time in this very monastery. And the book that jumped out at me? The Desert Fathers. Michael! The interconnectedness. Something about the full circle and closure. I had his gift firmly clenched in my hand.

5. Birth, Death and Healing: Margarita's Story

Margarita's story is a journey, inner and outer. Her experiences of the weekend with Uncle Max link in with a broader story of birth, death and healing. It is a story of dislocation and finding place, one's own place. Let us begin with Margarita's personal experience of Mount Gulaga, and then weave back to connect with other narratives that link time, place and people. Margarita was feeling in grief and dislocated, from self, from others, from place. She had only just returned from living in America for the past two years.

a. Barred out from the land

It was stuff I did that day, that came out later that day, that had an impact. I don't know if ritual is the right word, where we had to tie the wool bands around our heads and put the ochre markings on.... my recollection is that I was just watching and empty—I just felt empty.

Part of the emptiness she refers to feeling here on the mountain, has its source in the way she was feeling about being back in Australia, separated from close-knit friends and partner, an intense learning and teaching environment, with an unusually high level of group support. She could have expected those consequences concerning human

relationships, but was quite shocked by another reaction: the way the land itself felt to her.

When I was in America, I felt like I couldn't connect, like I was connected in Australia, and then when I came back here, I was frustrated because I couldn't feel the same connection. I was 'barred out' from the land; I was like a cat clawing at the glass. I couldn't get through—it was a ten-inch glass, and I was looking at the land, and I couldn't feel anything.

I was trapped in this glass and suddenly I could feel how much my heart, my body, my cells, had opened in America and how much I'd taken in without even knowing it. And suddenly coming back here, I felt like a foreigner in my own land...

A foreigner in her own land of birth, and a sense of emptiness; these were the feelings Margarita carried with her up Mt Gulaga that first day.

I seemed to walk very slowly—there is a pace when I am out in the environment, I cannot walk fast and I tend to deliberately step out of the line and fall back to the end of the group. I think I was aware geographically that we were up. It was not a ridge, but I really felt like we were up.

Perhaps these feelings were exacerbated, too, by not being able to feel really part of the group.

I was aware that I was with an Indigenous Elder. At times there was a part of me that felt challenged about how I should have been around that.

I'd just come out of months of training and living in America where people are much more in your face. At times in my training I had to take on a level of assertion that was difficult for me; I'd been in other retreats, of different styles of community; I was on his land; I was the youngest in the group, so I wondered what I had to do or not do.

So on all those levels, it was, 'How do I be with this group, and how do I be with this Elder?'

b. I enter the land

Margarita has a background in dance, and over the last ten years or so has been training in an outdoors movement practice. This practice has developed in her an acute sensitivity to the natural world. So, even though she is feeling closed off, within the *ten-inch glass*, separated from the world, she manages to have an awareness of her surroundings, in entering into the sacred sites. That sensitivity, albeit muted, is still present.

I think I go in, I enter the land, through nothing tricky, just through looking. I just look at the trees and the forms, and the colours and the textures and the shapes and the leaves and the ground that I'm walking on, and the textures of the rock.

I just look, I just sit and look, and sometimes I might have to look for three hours before it lets me in.

When I went to Central Australia, I had to walk, sit and sleep for a week before it let me in—looking and listening and smelling. It is such a basic thing, but I think we're not good at that—the world we live in, the culture we live in, we have no time to do that.

It's like the first portal, if I dare use that word. You just sit on a rock and look at it, don't do anything—don't pound it or impose all your crap on it, just go and be there. Lie on it or something, and then something happens.

c. Stepping over the threshold

Margarita then goes on to briefly describe some of her specific responses to the sacred sites that were then entered into on Mt Gulaga.

The Energy Rock felt like a gateway in; it was like stepping over a threshold, when we crossed that rock.

Uncle Max invited us to place a hand or both hands on the Energy Rock. I had a very strong and specific experience there. There was a split second of, I couldn't connect, then I dropped that story and just let my hands be there.

When I did that, there was this light, a white light, but it's not an earthly light, came, and it was so, so bright, and it was in my eyes. And the rock was warm and soft in a way. Bizarre. And I was just totally in this light and having this feeling, so clear.

Then there was a moment of doubt in me, and it was such a quick thing: 'How can this rock I'm touching—it was freezing up there this day—how can it be warm and soft? It's rock.'

And as soon as I had that thought, the white light went and there was blackness in my eyes. In my hands it was cold and hard and had a feeling of contraction.

I didn't pull away, I stayed with that, but I couldn't get the other one back.

Each particular formation on the mountain, within the sacred site, has its own specific teachings elucidated by Uncle Max...

I liked sitting on the Teaching Rocks. I felt like a kid. It had a really good energy.

I remember walking past The Pregnant Rock—that was interesting—old ghosts revisited. You could put your hands on it. My mind was scattered there, it travelled over a lot of different thoughts and scenarios. Like my desire or yearning for that pregnancy—something I want, and having just become single...

And my thought went to a friend's ex-wife, particular circumstances around them having a child, sending good wishes to her for wellbeing and healing.

And I think my grandmother was with me. That was very strong, too.

d. Wind dragging cobwebs through the soles of my feet

The presence of Margarita's grandmother here on the mountain links with the story of her death while Margarita was in America. This extremely close relationship had an extremely poignant and meaningful ending. On this particular day, she was teaching a group in the outdoors, on the beach in California.

I just went up to a couple of rocks on the beach. I lay down in the hot sand and lay with my legs around the rock, the soles of my feet in the wind. I had my eyes closed, I could feel the wind blowing in off the ocean—the Pacific Ocean.

I did so many dances over there of throwing this line across the ocean, casting a fishing line from San Francisco to Sydney.

I could feel the wind going between my toes, wrapping around, spiralling around.

All of a sudden this cold, cold chill, unearthly cold, passed right through the core of the sole of my foot, up my legs, then it came up through my body, up there round my solar plexus, and then it pulled out.

I was lying on the beach and kind of convulsing a bit, and the image I had was that it was pulling out all these old bits of me, all these old parts that did not serve me any more, old cobwebs.

They were pulled up and across the ocean and were scattered.

That evening she was to discover that her grandmother had died that very day, at the very time Margarita was experiencing the old bits of cobweb passing through her body.

I did the calculation; it was just in that window of forty five minutes that I was with the rock. And suddenly I thought it had a dual meaning—the cobwebs were also her.

She was so old, she was ninety six, she blew through me, passed through me, then went off into the wind.

Margarita describes this time as one of the most profound experiences of her life, and is rather amazed that the link between her and her grandmother, in that moment of her death, came through the land, in fact through the joining of the two lands of Australia and America.

I was connecting with the land there in America, but she travelled across the ocean, and passed through me, so the connection is there.

What extraordinary images—the casting of the fishing line between two foreign shores, the wind dragging cobwebs through the soles of the feet, the old unwanted parts being scattered across the ocean, the grandmother passing through the body!

e. Three Rocks on Gulaga

We return to the mountain in Australia, to Margarita's experience at the site of The Three Rocks.

And of course The Three Rocks: the before life, this life, the afterlife rocks. The interesting thing about them was that there in the moment, there was not necessarily any really strong experiences.

I was just open, and sat there listening and absorbing it.

My process is slow. I'm very much in the moment; I move on; I am in the next thing. It was enough. I really didn't want to have any pressure on myself; I'd had so much pressure; I was glad to be led.

Yet it was these three rocks, underrated in their significance at the time, that were to hold key insights, ongoing teachings and a reference point for Margarita in times of distress. This was something not spelt out through the teachings on the mountain that day, and came as a complete surprise to her, some weeks later.

I did not get the connection of those Three Rocks with Uncle Max until afterwards; it only came afterwards. It is not like I had a lightning bolt moment when I was sitting there in front of those rocks—it grew over the weeks when I left. It just happened one day, and since it happened then I have chosen to use it since.

At the final teaching site on Gulaga, Uncle Max usually points out to the group that the taking of photos is now permissible. Margarita had quite a strong reaction to this invitation, despite the fact that she is a prolific photographer:

Travelling all over the world, I have to have my wallet, my passport, my journal and my camera. Everything else can get lost, but I have to have those four things.

There was no way my camera was coming out of my bag—the thought didn't even go through my mind.

It was not even about appropriation, I just said, 'No, I can't take that away'.

f. The teachings happen in all kinds of ways

Although Margarita had some contact with Aboriginal people before this journey, particularly in Central Australia, this was her first time with an Elder, specifically being instructed on the land by an Elder. It is interesting that she is aware of how one may receive teachings in a variety of forms, and it is interesting that for much of the time Margarita seems to be in another world, drifting through the teaching sites, with very little intensity of connection.

I think my general state over the days with Uncle Max was one of wandering along and listening.

There was something in me, that Western thing, of when am I going to have to do something, when is the 'big Kahuna' going to happen?

Just noticing that little voice was up there, not engaging with it and still bringing myself back to being with Uncle Max, reminding myself that the teachings happen in all kinds of ways, in just him being who he is, in just him sitting and talking over the dinner table.

It was that last example, *of sitting and talking over the dinner table*, that was put into practice that evening, after dinner when the rest of the group had gone to bed.

We talked that night and later after everyone left the room, Uncle Max and I had an exchange. It would have been just as easy for that exchange never to have happened, and I could have gone home none the wiser.

What happened in that conversation was not known to me at that time, or anyone else in the group. As is often the way with Uncle Max, teachings are given in overt and covert ways, to the group as a whole and to individuals separately, as need arises.

There was something in our exchange where I saw a whole other level of his training—training is not the right word—of who he is, of the Indigenous things he knows, the abilities, the capabilities he has, and that as a white person, I don't know a hell of a lot about.

There have been very strong resonances from that conversation along with The Three Rocks, that I also carry along...

g. The mountain working on me

So what were the resonances from The Three Rocks on the mountain that Margarita carried with her?

I always felt external until I went to the mountain with Uncle Max. And even then on the mountain, I could not say that I necessarily felt connected at a conscious level.

I always felt then that something turned in my experience, something shifted. I knew the mountain was working on me when I came away from it, but I did not know how, because I couldn't feel it.

So when did she know it? When did she become consciously aware that the mountain was *working* on her?

It just happened out of the blue. I did not think, 'Oh, I'm going to do this'. It just happened, and then in the process of it just happening that first time, I was quite conscious—conscious of the comfort it gave me because it made everything seem more tangible and it gave me too the mantra of 'This too will pass'.

I guess it is like a visualisation, I feel like I have a photograph in my memory. I remember sitting there, sitting there very still, looking at the three forms of those rocks.

An image spontaneously arises in Margarita's mind, which then manages to immediately connect her back to that place on the mountain. It is as if she literally revisits The Three Rocks.

I did it one day when I was feeling very challenged by some stuff. There is a lot of energy around that association. It's like going back, that image hooks me in even at an unconscious level, to my emotions.

I was quite strongly seeing the form of the Middle Rock, which was so clearly contained by The Rock-on-the-Earth, the 'before life'. It had a clear outline, obviously the energy of it could expand and contract, but the actual substance outline of it was very clear. The Now-This-Life Rock was shaped and contained by the 'afterlife', pointing up to the sky. Even the shape of the rock is reaching upwards.

Hence, the visualisation that appears, seems to serve a very important purpose:

So when I have felt challenged, the containment of the 'here and now', 'this life' in that form tells me that I'm not trapped in what's happening now.

It's something about its position in relation to the other two. One reminds me of where I've come from, and the 'afterlife one' kind of gives me hope of moving on to something else.

The visualisation creates a locating of the self in relation to the rest of Margarita's life's journey, and a concomitant feeling of tranquillity in the siting of self right in that very moment when her bearings are lost.

It was very soothing, very calming, because I felt those things so quickly when I visualised it the very first time.

I then have chosen to use it often, because the effect was so clear to me then. And every time I have used it, it's had a very calming effect.

You reminded me what Uncle Max said, that 'the mountain will call you back, in all sorts of ways'. But I didn't register it. I think I literally thought, yeah, I'll go back to the mountain.

I suddenly registered, Oh, I don't have to go there—I am going there. I'm not physically, literally, going there, but it's already calling me back.

So how does Margarita make sense of this 'revisiting' of the mountain?

The essence of it, particularly in relation to Uncle Max, is very humbling. There is a knowledge, a wisdom, a teaching, that has been there for so long, that goes so far back, that on the one hand it can make me feel very small and humble, and nothing in this life. I think inseparable in that, there is some kind of teaching that is coming through it—that is there, it's kind of its essence, it is what it is.

And I think, too, there is that thing of inner/outer, like the environment is my mirror, that it's reflecting back who I am or what I need.

So how much of me is projecting on to the rocks, and how much is the pure teaching?

h. Sandblow womb

To the surprise of both of us, a definite link was made several months later by Margarita with earlier teachings in another Australian landscape: Fraser Island, a favourite haunt of Margarita, held similar teachings for her as The Three Rocks on Mt Gulaga. There was a strong intuition by her that the two sites were somehow related as she describes this particular place on Fraser Island called the ‘sandblow’:

The form, the shape of the place, was very much like entering into a womb. Even the way you had to hike in, you came up over this ridge and then down into this sandblow.

I camped down in the lull of it.

There was a time when I was right up the top dancing with the relict forest—the old dead trees in the sandblow that have probably been dead for hundreds of years. And there are these amazing grey sculptures in the yellow sand; they are basically stumps of the main trunk. Some have primary branches, but most are whittled back to their core, I guess. They are grey and cracked and vastly contrasting forms—all sorts of different positions: some upright, some fallen over.

So they get buried and uncovered, buried and uncovered, as the winds blow the sands.

And I danced a pathway with five trees, through them, in and out, kind of dancing and weaving. Four of these trees were in the directions, the fifth tree emerged as the great grandfather tree.

The messages that came through were that in the north tree was the direction it was headed—my life, the journey, what is to come, the unknown, travelling forwards; my dance and I rested together, whole, united. It is not about the individual any more—it is about the greater thing.

Western tree: the old day setting, bedding down, going to rest.

Southern tree—where it's been, where my life has been up to that point, what has gone. I felt the broken fragments of my life there, the disjointed parts, the parts broken off.

Eastern tree—strong energy, the rising of the new day, a fresh start, the dawning.

The great grandfather tree—a great mass of a tree—the presence of the wise old sage guide, a constant presence, overseeing my journey.

When she consulted her journal, the connections between the two places, Gulaga and the sandblow on Fraser, and the similarity of the teachings, became obvious to her. I ponder the means of acquiring these teachings, quite different from teachings that are directly mediated through an Aboriginal Elder. I cannot resist questioning Margarita as to what is the source of the teachings—who or what is giving the lessons?

I have a sense that in this particular situation, it was sort of the spirit of the tree. And I have a sense that the message of the spirit of that particular tree might not be the message that it gives to you or someone else. The spirit of the tree might manifest in a completely different form. There might be a particular essence of the tree...

Several months later, having followed the visualisation of The Three Rocks whenever there were periods of major stress, a strong new image of The Three Rocks came to Margarita:

I was walking along the beach. I thought of The Three Rocks, but they would not come. I continued walking. Within seconds, the middle rock came to me, an outline, not solid this time, not the solid mass of rock I usually see. I was sitting in the rock, sitting cross-legged, Buddha pose, with my arms on my knees. I started to draw today. I drew first the images I had about sitting in the rock. These drawings are all black and white, no colour, unusual for me. The first one is the Middle Rock, me in it. The dark border is the outside edge of the rock. It's the 'now' rock, the rock I constantly returned to.

As I was drawing it today, I was thinking ‘God that rock is so big—she is taking up all the space, like edge to edge in the rock’. I felt so much smaller.

When I drew that, this other feeling came up, of wanting to rest in that rock, be in that rock, and wanting to be in a foetal position... I have not done the drawing yet...

i. The spirit of the place where I was born

In reflecting on her experience down the south coast with Uncle Max, and her feeling of being ‘barred out’ by the land, Margarita gained an important insight into her personal journey:

Perhaps leaving America and coming back here was the final last movement or exit from the birth passage. The wrenching away, the disconnection, just floating in space here. It must be what it’s like when you go from being in your mother’s womb, to being out in the world—it would be very dislocating.

However, the source of that dislocation she had been through, also became transparent:

It made me feel how important the spirit of the place is, the spirit of the land, and something about the spirit of Australia, where I was born.

I’m born in the residence of this land. This is my place of birth. That’s what I felt like at the time in America. I could not quite get it. I always connected, but there was something that was missing... and I always felt it was partly the amazing energy of this land and very much because this is where I am born.

I was carried in my mother’s womb here and born into this energy. It’s what you know—you’ve been sleeping it, breathing it, eating it, drinking it, from dot. Here. Even before you are born, your mother is sending it to you, through her cells. I believe it is vibration that is here and you just receive it on an unconscious level.

That's what I couldn't feel in America, the vibration. There's an essence of vibration, a core essence, that was not me, because I wasn't born there. That was the piece that was missing.

j. Exchange with Uncle Max

And what of the conversation that Margarita had with Uncle Max that night that was mentioned earlier? How significant was it?

He asked a question, it was a little bit strange, there was something behind the question... He asked me something about here (my solar plexus area) and I think I said why are you asking me that for. He said 'well, I had a bit of a sense there was something there... mmm'.

I felt he knew something that he wasn't telling me.

He said that he saw a light here, in this area—he wasn't sure what it was, but he was very sure that he had seen the light.

This morning I had my hand on my solar plexus. I told him this.

He then said, 'Oh, right, that's what it was, since the light was like a hand print.'

The sharing that took place in that brief moment, between Margarita and Uncle Max altered the relationship between the two:

It was sort of as if something softened between he and I, more of a rapport established. He opened a little bit and I opened a little bit, and I had the sense he knew something I did not know, in terms of his learning and tradition, and I also had the sense that there was something he didn't know, that he hadn't figured out. He said something about touch, and using touch and learning about touch. It was enough, the conversation was enough.

That exchange between Uncle Max and Margarita, also had ongoing residual effects:

Since that time I have thought on a number of occasions, I wonder if I should go and see Uncle Max and ask him what it is about touch, what it is I need to learn.

I had a sense it was something I needed to use with others. I have been using it a lot over the last few months, I use it more and more with myself. I wondered if there was something in his teachings...

Through my hand, over recent weeks, I have been able to feel the condition of my heart. Sometimes I put my hand here and my heart is very far away, it is very distant... and sometimes it is right there and I can really work with it, or sometimes I cannot even raise my hands to my own body.

Something about touch: the hand on the rock, the touch with the person who is dying; there is something about touch, some piece of the puzzle.

k. Birthing

I return finally in Margarita's story to the place she was living in tropical Queensland before heading off to the United States. When she reflects on living in that moist fecundity of the rainforest, she has a sense of her overall journey that took her far further than that from one continent and back:

The forest was full of leeches, muddy and a thousand mosquitoes. There was a repulsion in me from going out and dancing in the forest. Yet the house I lived in was half way up the trees, in the trees, my environment of fecundity.

I cannot underestimate my ordinary everyday life, living in that environment. And living in that fecundity, there is a level of something from the land that took me in, right in, on a psychological journey.

It's like it started there in a way—it took me back to a womb. I went out from that in America, through the turmoil. Maybe that was the passageway of birth over in America, life and death all in one—and maybe I am only now in a different part of the cycle now.

CHAPTER SIX

FIRST-PERSON PHENOMENOLOGICAL RESEARCH

1. Introduction

I have chosen to write up first-person phenomenological research through different forms of textual production. There are four pieces of phenomenological text that make up this chapter. The link between all is place and Indigenous knowledge/ways of being and my own way of being in place. I wish to show the multi-textured nature of my own deep engagement with place. Such an engagement is strongly influenced by Indigenous teachings, is body-centred, and does not privilege the written word. In fact, it demands expression through a variety of creative modalities, and could be seen to be narrating the land through dance, song, and art.

Although each phenomenological piece here stands alone, each is also nestled within the breast of the other. In this way, the multi-textured nature of the text mirrors the multi-textured nature of my own deep engagement with place. The unification of all of the pieces of text submitted here is through the metaphor of the journey of exploration by white woman on this land, to find her place, her belonging in this land. Perhaps she represents symbolically all white Australians seeking to find their place.

Dialogue with place is the other unifying concept that in two of the pieces of writing (A Deepening Relationship with Place and Desire for Centering) has been designed to reflect the broader dialogue with that place/s. In these pieces of writing, the relationship or dialogue between text (phenomenological experience) and image holds a central focus.

The first piece of writing is called A Deepening Relationship with Place. It is the grounding work from which all other experiences of engagement with places are informed. It outlines a procedure for a fundamental and ongoing practice of deep engagement with place, or what may be termed an intimacy of place. This practice, although step-like and linear, is really fluid and open. I have thus interspersed the

description of the procedures with my raw direct experiences, in italics, and photographs. The images serve a dual purpose: they illustrate the text and thereby assist in clarifying the step-by-step practice, but even more, they enable the reader to begin using other imaginal worlds in order to enter into my world. The place is the east coast of Australia, by the sea. This is where I live, is also my ground of being, the place that I call home.

It is from the safety of this watery, salty base that I move out, to explore the other more 'foreign' places in Australia—from the known into the unknown. What happens when my own being in place, strongly informed by the practice articulated in *A Deepening Relationship with Place*, intersects with Indigenous teachings, in being on strong Aboriginal country?

Desire for Centring brings us to a place, the desert of Central Australia, a place far removed from the coastal fringe of Australia, yet a place that has great significance for many Australians. I journey there on my own, with no Aboriginal guides... or are there? Tacey states that Australians can 'huddle in enormous coastal cities and pretend that the vast landscape is not there' (Tacey 1995, p. 7). Yet the desert of Central Australia has a hypnotic presence for white Australians, is both alluring and repellent, and holds a focal point in Australian identity (Haynes 1998).

In meeting this powerful archetypal landscape, I sink deeply into country: country that has strong mental and emotional urgency meets woman with strong mental and emotional urgency. Narrative holds central sway and poetry demands a voice. I include images of art installations enacted in the desert to tease out the experience even more. I struggle to make meaning out of the experience of being in the desert and through this I begin to know the power of this land, and the power of Indigenous teachings I have received.

Digging Beneath The Kimberley Skin enjoins us with a narrative firmly planted in place—the remote Kimberley region of north-west Western Australia—and connects us with the symbolic thread of my slow movement towards a new sense of belonging. This is a vastly different landscape from that of Central Australia, yet there are similarities.

This time, I am invited onto country the correct way, through respect and the guidance of an Elder who can introduce me to his country. There is a resonance in this respect with the journeys of Uncle Max on his country. The Kimberley is both desert and saltwater country, side by side, a place of powerful extremes. I live out these powerful extremes in the stories that are told through me, in the experiences I inhabit.

There is a rekindling of a new belonging surfacing here, one that crosses cultural boundaries while at the same time transcending culture, and is still firmly linked to place. This writing was initially generated as an oral text. I have done this to honour that oral tradition of storytelling enacted on this continent over aeons and because the country itself demanded it. I invite the reader to have someone read it out loud or have self do this, so as to really allow the cadence of Kimberley country to speak.

The last piece of text submitted, a photographic essay, is a purely visual text of me moving with white fabric over rocks beside the ocean on the south coast of NSW. I return home here, to the ocean. Full circle. Here you see me as moving body, in response to other non-human moving body/bodies, the heart of an embodied dialogue with place. The intention here is to move the reader/viewer to immerse him/herself back into the visual, visceral world of the body. It is a moving meditation, yet story is immanent.

All photographs throughout this chapter are taken by the author, apart from those noted in the Acknowledgements.

2. A Deepening Relationship with Place

To speak about a ‘relationship with place’ may be such a cliché that it lacks real meaning. I believe that if such an expression as describing a way of being in an area/place is to be used, then the notions already associated with ‘relationship’ need to be brought into awareness. In entering into a relationship with another, we are first drawn either towards them or pulled away. It is a simple equation that lives its life across time, across many cultures, in terms of humans interacting with each other.

In the same way, we are either drawn to a place or we are not.

Sometimes a person/place grows on us. If we do decide to take this relationship further, we need to tread warily at first, sensing how to be with that person/place. Like a dog sniffing its way to establish itself in relationship, we gradually get to know the other, bit by bit, inch by inch. We start to read the other by spending long periods of time with them; we learn to respond and start to develop reciprocity, even intimacy. It is an ongoing adjustment, a work in progress, a commitment over time. Some relationships, though, are not like that. Some people/places sometimes pass through our lives leaving little imprint. In any case, relationships do not just ‘happen’—they must be created.

How can a relationship with place be created?

I offer here a series of steps or a sequence of experiences that facilitate a way of being with place in an attempt to articulate my process of engagement with place. What began as instruction from various movement-based teachers (Prpto Suryodamo, Indonesian movement teacher; Helen Poynor, English-based movement practitioner), developed into my ten-year individual practice and exploration of embodied creativity that is primarily movement-in-nature-based, and also incorporates art installation, sculpture, painting, poetry, photography and writing. All this has taken place in a variety of places throughout Australia. In this piece of writing, my own reflective experiences intersperse various aspects of the discourse on place. I use images from many of these places all coastal south-east Australia, to illustrate the type of process I have been involved in to develop the practice.

a. Step one: Choosing site/place

There are various ways of choosing a site that I may choose to intentionally engage with: it may be that I am spontaneously drawn to work in a certain place that I happen to walk into; it may be that I see a place and it tends to stay with me, impressing itself on my psyche until I finally return (and this may be weeks, months or even years); it may be that there are certain sites I return to year after year or day after day, so that they become my familiars, in contrast to those sites that may constitute a one-off experience.

Regardless of how the place is chosen, I am attracted to the place, and there is an intention to engage with it. There have been occasions when I have taken photographs of the site antecedent to any other ways of being with the site. Such photos start to anchor me in that site, beginning the relationship.



These white-bleached poles attracted me for many years.

I discovered them while walking far north on Byron Bay beach, far north coast NSW. Human-created, yet more a presence of ancient beings, weathered sentinels standing guard over who knows what.

I fell in love with them, photographed them, walked among their line, touched those deep-lined grooves, noticed how the tides caressed and pulverised them.



Each year on my annual holiday, I could not wait to go to the poles, see how they had changed.

It was as if the presence of that place insinuated itself into my being, drifting in and out of my awareness, acting as a magnet.

Maybe four years on, I began to move with them.

Although the site may be chosen in advance, the specific area within the site to work in may be very localised. For instance, the choice of a particular rock outcrop, or a part of a rock platform, or a section of a dry desert riverbed, is very much a product of the moment. I know that if an area attracts me, if I want to spend more time in it, then this is the right place to work. This involves a strong trusting of intuition and spontaneity. Mostly I think I am choosing a place but it interests me to reflect on the idea of the place choosing me...



I see the rocky beach from the corner of my eye, beyond the furthest reach of the rock platform. At high tide, I cannot reach it. That is part of the appeal, but mostly I am drawn to the thousands of stones huddled closely in banks or layers of seeming solidity. When I approach this place, the singing of the stones as the waves sweep them back & forth opens something in me, perhaps my heart. I breathe into the sounds...

Whatever the reason, something draws me unconsciously towards the area in which I am to work. I am already entering into relationship.



For me, the places I am drawn to are beautiful wild places, where noticeable human impact is minimal.

I was brought up by the ocean. As soon as I am by the sea, the sounds, smells, sights, evoke childhood pictures and I feel I am home. Peace. Belonging. I ease into the familiarity of place. Are these the veins of memory, the personal associations that have embedded themselves in me over my lifetime of experiences, or is there something else that draws me to a certain place?

b. Step two: Entering into a particular mind space as preparation for the engagement

Once the site has been chosen through a mental marking of the space, I attempt to leave behind expectations and the chattering, distracted, busy mind, and be fully present. This requires an attitude of receptivity and openness, in some cases facilitated by meditation, to bring the focus to what is often described in Buddhism as the ‘here and now’. It would be good to imagine that as humans we bring just ourselves to any relationship. In fact, as humans, what we bring as ourselves is a complex amalgam of a lifetime of experiences that will affect the nature of the relationship we develop. I find it is thus important to empty my mind, to let go of any mental/emotional ‘baggage’ I carry, to enter the site with a clear intention around this.

It could be that I sit for only a few minutes or up to an hour, depending on the degree of mental distraction that I hold. However, the pure intention that is brought into consciousness at this moment may play a role in facilitating the posture of being fully present. An acuity of attention may also be a by-product of this type of preparation, which I then take into the site. In any case, there is a stilling in me.

If we bring our own individual psychological contents to all relationships, then likewise any relationship we develop with a place is no *tabula rasa*. Could places also contain their own psychological contents? What of the non-human or more-than-human presence? These ‘unknowns’ could be nonetheless potent in their presence, and perhaps come into play through a reciprocity of place relations.

c. Step three: Entering the site through respect paying

I enter the site and pay homage to the traditional owners. I witness who came before me, the spirits of the Old People, the spirits of the land. This is a silent observance, a gesture of respect, a humble acknowledgment. I am asking permission to be in this place.

My response to the land in the last few years has been greatly influenced by the teachings of an Aboriginal Elder, Uncle Max Harrison, known by his tribal name as Dulumunmum, from the Yuin nation, far south coast NSW. It is an automatic reaction for me now to show my respect to the land/spirits, to the traditional owners in this way. It is akin to knocking on the door before entering someone's home, or removing one's shoes at the doorstep. It feels very fundamental, a basic orientation in time and place.

In this respectful entering, I am beginning to 'arrive' in this place.

d. Step four: Orienting self in place

I then perform a simple ritual acknowledging the Four Directions, the earth below, the sky above. I kneel to each direction and touch my forehead, my lips to the earth.



I circle around myself.

If I am doing this in sand, my movement makes a four-petalled flower, with my body as stamen.

When I perform this simple yet meaningful act, I am lowering myself to the earth.

Traditionally, this is a religious act, an act of humility, of obeisance to a higher power. I

am in a position of feeling humble, in awe of my smallness in the largeness of all that is. I feel it in my body, through this posture. The form of this ritual brings my body into direct contact with the earth body, in a humble supplication.

To kiss the earth is a profound act of devotion that changes something in me at that moment in terms of my relationship to that place. It is like I am entering communion.

In the Christian act of Communion, I symbolically eat the flesh and blood of the man/God.

How to taste the blood and flesh of the earth in such a holy way?

In aligning myself with the Four Directions, I am acting as a compass.

As I align east, I am aware of the rising of the sun, beginnings, of sunrise over water, of moments too few when I have witnessed the rare pinks of dawn. At north, I am aware of the passage of the sun through the day, the welcome warmth of north-facing windows on a cold winter's day. At west, I see sinking red/orange ball in rich indigo sky, endings, closure. In south, I feel shade, shadow—my own shadow, the world shadow, cool breath on hot summer's heat.

In just a few precious moments, I have brought myself into a deep strong engagement with place and created some sort of identity within that place. My coordinates fix me in time and place. My body is my personal point of reference in this time, in this place.

On the few occasions when I have been photographed during the enactment, the dynamic of human audience, of being watched, adds a distinctly different dimension. The level of self-consciousness, of performer on stage, demands addressing, until that time when the immersion takes over and I become oblivious of the camera.

A Yuin practice that Uncle Max has taught me is to greet Grandfather Sun at dawn. To offer thanks and appreciation through this sacred ceremony is to also honour and respect our place in the universe. Something changes in me as I take up this practice. To begin

the day in this manner is a constant reference point for the rest of the day. To place myself in a state of gratitude is a new orientation in the world for me.

e. Step five: Entering the site in noble silence

A Buddhist precept on retreat is that of Noble Silence. Buddhism knows that such silence enables one to become more fully aware, to bring a presence, a consciousness to one's surroundings, to one's inner and outer worlds. Because I mostly work alone, silence is automatically present, yet it is not something I take for granted. Silence enables me to have a heightened sensitivity to the sounds or silences of my surrounds. This is a posture too, a gesture of openness, of receptivity to the world around. It is not a place of imposition, of insinuation, of expectation. It is just 'being' in place, allowing the rush of thoughts that immediately surface to be recognised, but not held, not engaged with, just noticed... Finally, the thoughts slow down and the surroundings start to seep in.

A trail of ants... where are they from? Where are they going? What are they doing?

When the thoughts drop, it is just 'being' with ants, no questions.

f. Step six: Entering into my own body



It is not easy to wake my body up on this chilly dawn morn.

I move slowly at first, push and coerce my body into aliveness.

But then I sense the invitation from the ancient ones and I have moved scarcely before I know.



I move to wake up my body, to energise it and bring my awareness into moving body, often quite rapidly and energetically.

This generally involves ways of focusing that bring awareness and aliveness into the body as a precursor to relationship with the other (place). I may feel various parts of my body, or slap and squeeze certain areas while moving across, up, over and around the site.

It feels like a preliminary way of not only activating myself into a stronger sense of embodiment, but also begins to make me aware of this body of mine moving in this place. Hence, it is grounding and providing a grounding for the enactment that has no shape or form at this embryonic stage, but may hint of some possibilities.

g. Step seven: Immersion in place: response, dialogue



Now is the transition period, a shift from sole focus on place and then on body, into a focus on body *in* place. At this point, I am in a position to be more open to the emergent in a state of heightened receptivity.

Spontaneity takes full stage, and I am alive and alert to the myriad of possible opportunities with which to engage: something will catch my eye, I will feel the wind, or I will be drawn to wetness or sound of waves gurgling under rocks, or cracks, or bark on trees. It is an invitation to play. Whatever the stimulus, my response is through movement.



*I step firmly on this earth in this body; I
am sensing being, sensing the space,
called to respond; I am moved and move.
One impetus flows into the next in a
timeless world of the mover and the
moved—distinctions that at first were
obvious now merge.*

*I feel the soft glow of morning light on
slightly chilled flesh.*



I move in, around the poles, responding to each one in turn or a grouping of beings.



*At first, it is just me and them,
as I touch, caress and let my
body decide how it wants to
respond, but then the sea is
upon us, the tide encroaching
and I too become the poles,
touch the sea, weave in and
out, stretch my body around,
between, above, below,
become the sea, sink into my
waveness, my high-tideness.
There is no separation. I/we
are life, aliveness.*

There is always a sense of being met by the other and drawn more deeply into the drama, the drama of being human embedded in landscape. There is no contrivance here, but awareness and willingness to be curious and follow that curiosity to wherever it may lead me.



*I am taken back into
another time on
another beach...*

*I take some time to
sit on the rocks, to
feel the initial
bumpiness and
discomfort dissolve
into a comfort
between body and
rock.*



*The need to
stretch out, to
feel my whole
body on the
surface of the
earth takes
over.*

I shuffle and shift until I find ease. Shortly, my whole body is suffused by the heat of the rocks. I roll on my belly and try to drag myself across the rocks towards the sea. Immediately I feel myself as giant turtle, struggling back to the sea, having heaved herself up the beach the night before, dug against time and tide, finally formed a deep nest; grunted and groaned in the struggle to birth ten eggs; then, weeping tears in the abandonment of same, to struggle exhausted, back to the cold sea.



I lay exhausted after this enactment and am shocked to discover real tears on my face. What is the fate of my offspring? It is all out of my hands. I must surrender.

Often my response to a place may be one of stillness and soundless, or very active with sound and song, or a combination of both.

I leave the white, aged poles that by now are almost covered in water. I want to watch them at some distance rather than being immersed in the drama. I move to the top of the sand dune at the back of the beach. I am struck by the deafening noise of cicadas in song. There seems to be a few different sources of the sounds, and after a while I can discern what section of the back-forest begins the song and how the other sections join in, like a choir in different parts. I take up my place and join in too, breathing at the required breaks before gradually allowing my voice to swell to the crescendo. The rhythm is hypnotic, the heat

and the forceful breaths dizzying. But most of all, once again, I feel the joining, the real meeting, the pulse of life.

To allow the emergence of what needs to emerge from self is all that is required of being in place in this deeper way. It is a willingness to enter deeply into the drama of life, of that place, in that moment. I may become ant, become turtle, become cicada. Or I may merely feel the wind, really feel it in all its qualities of touching skin, neck, hair, nostril. And wind feels me, and responds. A dialogue.

Perhaps we have deeply embedded in our psyche our sense of oneness with the universe. Or perhaps we have ‘forgotten’ and cannot access this bedrock easily. Perhaps Indigenous peoples have always maintained this link.

My body moves in remembrance that all life is movement. I lose sense of my body and become the movement, part of earth body. Essence.

So ‘being’ in place allows me to begin the ‘remembering’. Buddhist teachings on impermanence inform how to notice the ephemeral nature of life—that emotions, sensations, thoughts, arise and then fall away. My movement practice takes on a similar rhythm. Each response has its own lifetime, then falls away. A new response emerges, something else catches my eye, or I am still, mesmerised by the tiny shudder of a fallen leaf.

That movement swells in my body and I find myself swaying in the same rhythm, backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards. I want to be back in the water, allowing my body to be pulled in the same way as the seaweed. It feels like an ancient urge towards merging.



I am carefully attending to the ancient poles again, the shifting tide that now retreats as innocuously as it rose to engulf the poles and me not so long ago.

As the wave surges in, a long brackish seaweed is pulled strongly in the direction of the in-heave , then pulled back just as strongly with the out-heave.

I notice its strong anchoring yet its total surrender to flowing with the surge.

This notion I am exploring here through movement and response in relationship with place is a ‘given’, a ‘modus operandi’, that requires little effort other than awareness and responsiveness. Our senses are automatically in relationship. We cannot but be in relationship in the natural world, in that we exist.

h. From movement to installation art

At times, the response to the place shifts to art installation, or may begin as such, with or without movement. Usually, I do know if the art installation impulse is stronger and therefore will be the dominant response.

I am staying at Culburra, a beach on the south coast of NSW that I have been visiting for twenty five years. I am here for a week this time.



On the beach, I am inspired to create an installation using a dumping ground of long-exposed white sticks at the base of a near-vertical cliff.

At these times, I use photography to record various stages of the process. I step back from immersion in the work, to witness of the work. This pausing does not appear to distract me from the task, nor detract from the intensity of the experience. I take in the creation from all angles, allowing my mind to peruse its content, but more focused on the qualities of the piece and the surroundings, which are a crucial factor to its *in situ* location.

I have no idea what I am making; I just begin to create, pausing every now and then to photograph the organic growth of sticks. Once I begin, I know I will continue to work on this piece. It is slow and painstaking, with lots of collapsing. It seems I am building a structure and carefully choosing each stick in turn for its right shape or length.



I confound myself and the laws of building by not selecting the heaviest sticks first, going to lighter and lighter sticks as I build upward and outwards. Instead, I thread each stick through and in between what goes before so that the creation becomes a lightly woven structure of light and shadow. It is strong, but the wrong stick in the wrong place can topple the whole structure. I am playing with strength and fragility at the same time.



I am ever aware of my surroundings— the rock platform and the ocean with its daily tidal incursions, the vertical cliff behind the stick installation, the sky, the birds, the shifting sun, the pungent stench of seaweed, my exposed skin, salt on dry lips.

I often pause, take it all in, see and know my work in this context of wider relationship.

Each day I return to continue the work for three or four hours, stop when it is too hot or I am exhausted.

I am unsure if the high tide of the previous night will have washed it away completely.

The unpredictable is ever present: it may be dogs, young children or careless adults who may destroy the work in progress.



I live with this uncertainty, yet find that the installation, now a formidable white dome structure, survives. It continues to grow and grow, to transform itself. I am totally absorbed in this process. When I awake, I cannot wait to rush to the beach. It captures many waking moments. I even find myself dreaming about building huge stick structures that go on and on into the sky.



What is it I am learning here? Is it all about light and pattern and weaving? About the relationship between rock and wood, wood and beach, wood and wood? Human creating order from chaos?

These thoughts flood into me at times, but lie gently, then retire. All that seems to be relevant is to keep on building. And when a section or the whole thing falls to pieces, to begin again and again and again.

i. Step eight: Leaving the site: closure/opening

I give thanks for being in, for having access to, for being accepted in this place—a quiet acknowledgment of gratitude. Once again, for me, the gesture is all-important.

Although the phase of working in the site itself is finished, closure may be a misnomer, since the completion of the piece of work in that place is more the beginning of the next stage of engagement with the place. Hence, I more truthfully refer to this phase as closure/opening. What determines how long I work in a place? Suffice it to say the impetus to create seems to fall away or a work feels complete for then. In a way, its own life span in that moment has been reached and there is usually a strong sense of completion. When I worked with the stick dome, each day I wondered if that was the end, if the final stick had finally been added. Of course, it had to be completed, in that I had to leave after a certain time; however, I have no idea how long I would have continued to build. This reflects my practice of avoiding human imposition in the site. I move, create for as long as it takes. The dialogue seems to come to a natural end.

Ritual thanksgiving, similar to the beginning protocol of asking permission, is accompanied by a cleaning up of rubbish in the site. This simple gesture goes some small way towards respect, gratefulness and my own way of adopting something of the Aboriginal notion of ‘caring for country’.

I usually do not remove any installation I have produced, since I know this work will be done by the elements in their own time. The ephemeral nature of this work is quite appealing, and I have been influenced by installation artist Goldsworthy (1994) in his attitude of doing no harm to the areas in which he works. In addition, I like to explore the notion that this piece will be seen by others, and what may they make of it captures my imagination.



I move to the other end of the beach away from my dome in order to observe people perhaps engaging with the piece. Unseen but watching, I am able to devise yet another way of engaging with this piece. Artist and voyeur, a thrill to witness the new life that my creation evokes in others.

A man and his lively brown dog come upon it suddenly.

The dog sniffs around it. The man looks intrigued, then calls the dog away. He glances back once.

A woman and her young daughter stare at it for some moments, then the girl makes a movement to seize a stick.

I can imagine the whole thing collapsing right there now, having just finished it, and I am ready to leap up and save my precious work.

Fortunately something holds me back and I surrender its fate. The girl is given another stick lying close by and she gingerly places it on the dome. It stays.

j. Step nine: Reflection—ongoing engagement with place through image and theme

On returning to my home in Sydney, I spread out the photographs of my work that were taken in the site, on my large kitchen table.

I leave them there for weeks. Always in passing, I am noticing, watching, keeping alive the experience.

It feels like the place itself becomes imprinted on my being.

And what of the place too? Am I imprinted on its being?

At this stage, my mind is beginning to engage with the work, but with an attitude of curiosity and openness rather than an attempt to analyse. Analysing would be like tying a noose on the wild creature and wrestling it to the ground instead of letting it remain wild and carefree. Such an attitude relies on the knowing that to force meaning or expression in words could end in suppression of the impulse.

There is no time limit to this ongoing response, but some general pointers have been observed: usually, a few days elapse after the deep engagement, in order for the dust to settle on the experience. This may be a time of allowing what needs to emerge in response to the actual experience itself. The experience needs to breathe, with no coercion. Then the dialogue continues.

The site-specific experience desires to come forth through various differing art forms from that of the original expression, such as art (drawing, painting), photography, sculpture (clay), poetry. There is no pressure on me to express anything, but if the urge to use some particular artistic modality comes through strongly, once again spontaneously or intuitively, it usually generates new responses than those of the initial experience.



Several weeks later, I may write some poetry based on the photos and the memory of the experience in situ.

Poetry seems a softer, more tender way of being with the experience initially than through words. It caresses it, coaxes it in to this other world.

These are the words that sprang up after the making of the Culburra dome:

Weaving of bone

Whale bone

In
out



between
through



Pulling in tight

Letting go loose

Close fitted torso

Bones

White

Sticks

Bleached



Thread in, out, between, through



Shade light pattern

Thread

Loose order

Strong fragility

Open closure

A poke at the heart of the universe

Also, through poetry, a narrative often emerges, merely by the sequencing and suggestiveness of the photos. As soon as writing begins, the narrative and meaning may become more overt, or maybe not. It is not as if I am searching for meaning, but more, that I am seeking a myriad of ways to express the experience. The articulation through words now sits more easily. In order to stay open to the informing through many ways of knowing, an attitude of being poised or alert to the innumerable possibilities of the ways that information may flow is necessary.

Working with clay, for example, speaks in another language to poetry, and reveals something else, some aspect of my relationship with that place until now unuttered, undisclosed.

Clay is of the earth. I work with one type of red-brown earth only, mostly because of its feel, its smooth texture and its responsiveness, its extreme sensitivity to touch, its plasticity, its elasticity, its willingness to allow what will be, yet at the same time not yielding up all sense of self. I find myself sinking into this tactile intimacy.

I am surprised to find often a crossing of forms emerges through my clay sculptures, such as a rock/human interface where human forms are hinted at merging into rock or shapes where stingray becomes human becomes rock. I watch the forms emerge and am intrigued, wondering the origin.



Could this be the unitive state where boundaries between species are blurred, where there is no distinction between the animate and the inanimate world?

Am I experiencing evolution in process?

Or is this the world of the shamanic shape shifter, who is unfettered by embodied existence hence moves to join once disparate worlds, spirit free?

There is no strong resemblance necessarily to the place I have worked in. The clay seems to draw out its own life form.

My own experience in certain places of becoming turtle, seaweed, cicada, poles, very much an embodied memory, seems to feed into this different understanding of species crossover that is now being expressed through the clay.



Unbaked clay is like that: free and fluid and responsive, water- like qualities before heat drives out the porosity, hence the permeability. I do not bake my earth. I like how it draws from the atmosphere, accommodating itself to the prevailing conditions and how it dissolves away back into the earth from whence it came, continuing to inform me of the nature of impermanence and much else besides.

My sculptures are organic, flowing.

I wish to emulate clay.

Become free, fluid and porous to my world.



k. Conclusion

Sometimes the response to a place will reverberate for weeks, months, years, or a particular theme may express itself through other means of communication or even through other places, thus further deepening the connection and shedding light on meaning. In this way, through this ongoing dialogue that is informed through various modes of artistic expression, the place is visited and revisited. A relationship with place, begun tentatively, continues to unfold. It may now hold the qualities of an intimacy with place. I call it a deep engagement with place.



3. Desire for Centring

a. The pull to the centre

Quite strange that I found myself outside the Flight Centre in Surry Hills on a cold June windy afternoon. Noticed the fares to Alice and within two minutes was clutching a ticket in a clammy hand. It was a whim, yet the whim is embedded in another story of cyclical urgings.

This urging is a pull towards the Centre, the Red Centre, Heart of Australia, the Dead Centre. And like some enormous magnet that plucks me as a tiny piece of iron filing, I find that I am there, without knowing why. This cycle recurs every two to three years, and all I know is that I begin to yearn to be out there. I feel the desert in my being, taste the dust, hear the colour, and see the smells. It begins as an imagining and develops into an ache that cannot be ignored.

So this was to be my fifth visitation to the desert, but first on my very own, responsible for me only, not a group of 40 privileged private school girls on safari, a three-week sortie from the stifling of North Shore suburbia. On these tours, I introduced the notion of pilgrimage, of the sacred aspect of the journey, with daily insertions of snippets of Aboriginal culture. I wanted the students to feel the land on a cellular level, and the people who sprang from the earth, to awaken their dead centres. Lofty ideals, I knew, that were probably rarely achieved, but perhaps approached at times. On these journeys, I had very little time on my own: the odd pre-sunset run on dark red dunes or snatched meditations here and there. Always I craved the experience of solitude on this land. I wished to let the dust settle on my feet.

Closer to leaving, there was another agenda that unearthed itself. I was with my Chinese healer Lu, who remarked, as her tiny padded feet walked up and down my spine, 'Ah, Red Centre. That red soil. That Chinese for blood. You going to blood place.' This ricocheted through my body like lightning. I am menopausal. My blood-letting days are ending. I have been grieving this for some time, but what registered in those few moments was the deep knowing that through my menstrual cycle was an archaic rhythm

that anchored me in the cosmos. The connection, informed by the pull between the earth, sun and moon, intimately connected me through my body to the cosmos. This umbilical cord was so fundamental to my being as a woman, so fundamental to my sense of belonging, to being part of this universe, that to not have it was incomprehensible. To what extent this was conscious over the years was irrelevant: the knowing was embodied. And now to know that the umbilical cord was to be severed sent me into an existential panic that knew no bounds. What rhythm would fix me in the cosmos? My pull to the Centre felt significant.

b. Rustlings of spirit

There are several stories that overlap on this journey. I allow these narratives to snake in and out and around each other. For this is snake country we enter.

I am disturbed... I am disturbed...

Disturbed by who-knows-what, but disturbed at being here.

I feel alien, yet familiar. I am known here, yet stranger.

Seeking, asking permission to be here from the spirits of this land makes little difference.

I am still disturbed.

I take myself to the dry old riverbed through snaky, shivery grasses to old grandmother tree.

Old grandmother gum

Beckons me.

From bed of ancient sands

I peek at her

through

sensuous leaves.



Her bulbous trunk

Rounded and strong

Speaks of age

wisdom

and solidity.



Branch snakes out

Root snakes out

Life snakes out

Snake country.

I play with her shadows

Give her depth on ground

As well as air.



*I dig her roots
As she too digs strongly for wet
For ancient slipping friends
Of silver scale.*

*Sand bed resistant to such unearthing
Collapses back in on self
Refuses to bare those dark spaces.*

*Grit holds tight
Yet I keep digging.*

*Branch meets root
In shadows echoing self.*

*Too bare!
Too bare!*

Pain of exposed hurts.



Red fibre cloth

Touches fibrous root

...gentle meeting

In place of moistness.



Cloth binds root

*Snakes in,
around*

Poultice to the wounds of time



Twigs of bending piety

Close over gap

Brush lightly on trench burial pit

Tender

Fragile

Vaulted ceiling

That eases pain.



Branch weeps gently

Closes eyes

In profound gesture of remembering.



Rib cage of twigs

adds strength

Reflects mirror spine of

mica fish



And vision of hope.



Afterwards, I lie in the riverbed for hours and hours, sliding rough grains through my fingers and listening. There is some connection, albeit tentative.

I am sick the next day—body aching, head clogged, lethargic.

I must see the traditional owners of this land and ask permission to be here. Perhaps this will cure my disturbance. I recall the teachings of Uncle Max Harrison, my teacher from the far south coast of New South Wales, concerning respect to the owners when in new country. Maybe these teachings go a lot deeper than I thought.

I surrender to the sickness, but still force myself to walk this land, like others have for thousands of years. I walk beside the riverbed. I watch, notice, listen. What I take in

makes me sick to the core of my being. Broken, shattered glass everywhere I look. Broken shattered lives haunt me. Grey shadows moving through land.

Grasses whisper, 'sick country, sick country'.

At home in the city, I often attack rubbish with a missionary-like zeal, receiving a halo of stroked ego pride and purity as my reward. At other times, I know I am coming from a humbler place of gratefulness wherein my action is one of response and responsibility towards mother earth. In this place at the Centre, I am paralysed into doing nothing. I cannot act, so overwhelmed am I by the extent of the ravage to the Mother, to the people of her land, by the people of the land. My soul wails at the damage and I have an inkling of the sickness.

I go to the Central Land Council office and whisper in embarrassed tone to the girl at the desk. It is not just my shyness at what may seem like a ridiculous request, considering how long tourists have been coming here, but also I discover a well of emotion that springs up. Tears thankfully hidden by sunglasses. She laughs out loud and says, 'This is Crown Land. You don't need no permission to be here in Alice. Don't worry about it.' I crawl off, feeling humiliated by the rebuff and wondering at the feelings.

I am camping about a forty minute walk from town. I go to bed early since it is cold but I dread each night. Nights of torment, restless awakenings, nightmares... long, long nights. Disturbed spirit on disturbed land. Mornings are a relief, but I am exhausted from lack of sleep.

One night, in a dream, I see the face of an old Aboriginal woman. She says nothing, but just stares at me. I wake up and remember her face.

c. Snake sheds skin

I hire a 4WD and take off, thinking maybe that it is Alice that is making me sick. Perhaps the land will heal me, in those areas where the tainting is less strong. For it is the MacDonnell Ranges that have particularly sung to me, this sinuous spine country that has never left my being since I first saw her.

Like some prehistoric saddleback creature or Rhodesian Ridgeback dog, she insinuates herself through all this country and into me.



Before I leave, I go to an Aboriginal Co-Operative art shop and ask about who to see for permission to be here. The man seems sympathetic, a little inquisitive, but helpful. He describes the appearance of an Elder to me that I may see around the streets, and suggests I approach him. I feel this is going nowhere, but to my amazement I see someone matching the description just after I leave the shop. I follow him and two women and a few kids at a safe distance. I am very nervous and wish this would all go away. But it won't. I am uncertain about protocol, and it seems ridiculous to even contemplate just going up to him on the street. Instead, I approach one of the women lagging a fair way behind. I blurt out something, she grunts, has a scared look on her face and turns away. I wish I had not done this. I feel stupid and quite humiliated. Again!

As I drive out of town, the sense of freedom, of taking off, the adventure of it all, hardly has time to take hold when I am suddenly suffused by fear. In a moment, the relishing of the expansiveness is supplanted by terror, the enormity of this land, the size of it, the never-endingness of it all.

I am swallowed in one huge gulp. Logic finds no routes here as I shrink, become small, vulnerable and prey-like. Thoughts dash from one fear to the next, like how long it is since I have changed any tyre, let alone this big bulky. I have never driven a 4WD, have no idea how to handle the skid, the soft sand lurch, the overfull creek bed.



I find myself walking in an isolated gorge and realise if I had an accident, no one may find me for days.

I berate myself for my irresponsibility, recognise the real threats, and cringe in their face. I am walled in by cliffs, that in another light I may experience as stunning. I crawl into my tent for respite.

That night I cannot breathe. I wake up choking on mucus. If I sleep, I will die. I stay awake to stave off the dying. An almighty dust storm whips up, and as I have left the fly off my tent as a gesture of opening to the big sky, I am soon covered in dust—eyes, ears, nose, hair, eyebrows, all clogged. A death mask. I lie there, allowing myself to be buried alive.

I am camping next to the Ross River, and in that moment I recall that name and its well-known association... Ross River Fever! Visions of aching joints, fever, are quickly transformed into my own knuckles, knees and toes. The sweating inside my tightly trussed sleeping bag is profuse, but I dare not move for fear of dust invasion. I try relaxation exercises to calm the panic, but there is no release. I sweat and ache, and ache and sweat in my death mask. The fear hurtles ever onward, spurred by the close howling of the dingoes. This is wild dog country, where babies and people can be dragged from tents by starving dingoes. I see it all: my aching dust-ridden, trachea-clogged body will be discovered half-eaten. ‘Cause of death?’ ‘Multiple causes’.

Fear is at a frenzy now; I want to scream, but I am prevented.

But then dawn breaks and I am still alive.

Shaken, I return to the soft grass of the camping area in town. What seemed bare and inhospitable now is like an oasis, and I am reluctant to set off again.

A woman in an art shop tells me to try another Land Council down the road. Her look makes me feel like some white whacko, but this permission stuff has its hold and I dutifully trudge off. Her 'just down the road' is a walk of at least three kilometers in the middle of a hot wind that refuses to let up. I wait some time before a woman at the desk finally acknowledges my presence. I am starting to speak the words as a rehearsed script, so often have I churned them out in my mind, but I still have a strong emotional investment in the content behind the words. On to the next man in an office. I am praying that he will be the one and I will be put out of my misery. On this recital, my words stumble out, tears again scarcely held back, but he has a kind face and I feel not so stupid. Of course, he is not the one, but says that Uncle Max at the Central Land council is the Elder who gave the Olympic torch permission to run through Alice, so he is the obvious person to approach.

Uncle Max. Feels a rather uncanny resemblance to my own Uncle Max. I grin at the irony. At least I have a name...

My voices tell me to stop now, that I have done all I can to sort this respect thing out.

My lack of ease still remains, as does the sickness...

d. Spinal tapping

I head out towards the Western MacDonnells. I have been reading a book on shamanism that refers to how an initiated shaman in Australia has many of his bones replaced by quartz crystal.



The spine follows me everywhere.

This country is skeleton country.

I saw a leather bag in town with the landforms on the front made of emu skin. The scaly, spiny protuberance captured the land exactly, and I couldn't stop looking at it.

I go towards spine, feel it in my being, seeping into my bones.



I had visited my very aged mother the day before leaving. Ninety-five years on this earth. She has not wanted to be here for about the last ten years. And still is, in spite of the desire to quit this earth, quit this body.



Flesh hanging on bone frame... Belly stretched beyond stretching in the bearing of ten pregnancies, eight of whom birthed. The beauty of this, although she does not see it. I see her body reflected in this ancient landscape—skin hanging off bones, the wearing down almost complete.

Am also reminded of my friend's horse, the day of its death. My friend had owned this loyal animal for thirty five years. Maybe that makes it about the same age as my mum. I went to be with her on the day of the putting down. Saw its flesh so thin that the entire skeleton is transparent.



Huge cavities.
Gaping pelvis, as if
it could birth right
then. Backbone
knobbly and
protruding. I saw
the beauty here,
too.

Taking photos of the two of them, nuzzling each other, saying their goodbyes.



I lay under his belly
and captured gentle
hand on scrawny
neck, eyes filled with
tears, forgiving
breath. One foot in
the other world, just
like my mother.

Opaque, really.
Frail but with
strong spirit in
the eyes.



He had no teeth left, all worn down. We gauge a horse by its teeth. First thing, grip jaw and pull soft fleshy lips apart to determine the state of the animal. Defined by dentition. My mum prides herself on still having her own teeth. And her mind. Others seem to gauge her as well on the state of her teeth, remark incredulously that she still has her teeth. She, too, defined by dentition. No sharing of commonality in the last days of life, however—how easy to euthanase an old horse. My mother cannot choose to have help in slipping from this body, is forced to endure the humiliation of failing body, frail dependent body. She shows me a baby bird in its nest. Bellbird. As we watch, it takes its first wobbly steps to the edge of the nest. No feathers on the grey, goosy flesh.

I face old age, death, through facing this land. The fleshy soft lips have been pulled apart here, too, to reveal bleached bones, antiquity. Spine, the first to form and the last to go—the hard, ancient residual remnant, the core of the body of the earth, the core of our body.

This is what the land teaches me, not through my mind but through every pore of knowing in the whole of my being.

I faced death the night before and now I know the next stage. I am no longer in such drastic fear, for I have gone beyond death.



I walk on Mother's back,
meet her bone-to-bone, spine
touching spine.

My sickness eases slightly. I coat my body with white ochre, like a thick protective unguent that stems the porosity, clogs the pores with a gentle membrane, a white sheath that affords me a respite from the onslaught.



Bones appear in the form of
dead small animals. White
contrast against red rocks.
Fragility against strength,
mortality against eternity.
Dingo lair? Tasty morsels
for hungry offspring
sheltering from perishing
heat of day?

I spend many hours arranging and rearranging the skeletal remains, moves me further into bone country.



e. The steely eye of God

The respite is too brief, the land is too strong.

This psyche of mine in persisting in knowing, meets the psyche of land that knows no pity.

I am battered, bruised and aching from the encounter. My flesh has been pared back. I am invaded, exposed, stripped naked, and oh so vulnerable.



I try to meet the awesome gaze of God, but turn away from the potency, the might, the indifference, the harshness. This is a face of God I know not.

I am used to a land that welcomes my overtures, coaxes me gently into relationship, embraces me with gentleness. I long for the ocean, the softness of water, the shelter of cool, moist sand, the singing of rocks.

I yield to this power, fall to my knees as humble supplicant, shield my eyes from the steely eye/ear, since this is how it presents itself to me.

Like a desert rat fleeing the noonday sun, I run to retreat, go to ground at a friend's place a few hundred kilometres north of Alice. I stay in this cool, dark abode for four days, venturing forth only once at dusk to create serpent.

The world passes by me and I peer, voyeur-like at it from tightly drawn blinds.

I have wandered outdoors to be yet again confronted by smashed glass wine/beer bottles. I stoop to pick them up. I no longer feel the paralysis that had prevented same in Alice. However, instead of throwing the shards into a plastic bag, I start to form them into a shape on the ground.



I know this shape is to become a serpent, and it ends up being very large and winding lasciviously over and around red sandhills. It has two large eyes and eight eggs tucked in one curve. I am utterly absorbed in this serpent-making process, lose all track of time until darkness descends.

That night I awaken filled with an enormous sense of peace. I weep at the relief... to know this feeling after so long an absence is almost too much to bear. Something has shifted, that I know.

Is it that I am in some way being accepted by this land?



In making the snake from broken shards of glass, have I healed something in me, in this land, of these people? Is this my rebirth?

No answers, but I give profound thanks even in this unknowing.

That night, I sleep well for the first time.

f. Snake leaves its mark

I am leaving soon. I return to the Central Land Council three days in a row. Uncle Max is either not there or busy or called out. His secretary seems genuinely taken by my plight, but it is all out of her control. However, when on the last day she hears I am flying out tomorrow, she is delighted and exclaims that Max too is flying out at that time, but for a different destination. She gives me a clear description of his big, black cowboy hat, large paunch and incessant smoking.

Before leaving, I take myself into a shop that sells crystals. There are not many found in the Centre, most are imported. But I manage to find a small white quartz crystal, still covered with bits of red dust.

I spot him easily at the airport. I cannot believe it has come to this penultimate moment, and feel a little reluctant to take it to its logical conclusion. The strong urging that refused to leave me alone seems to have dissipated. But I see the humour of the situation, love the climactic ending that the drama has metered out to me, and play my role in the final act.

Uncle Max shakes my hand, his dark eyes penetrate mine, and once again I am seized up by emotions. I force the words out, asking him for permission to be on this land and somehow squeeze something in about respect. He nods and says, 'Yeah, that's fine... and next time you're up this way, why don't you call in and see me...'

g. Blood-letting

I am fortunate enough to have a seat right at the back of the plane with adjoining seats vacant. I sit glued to the land from above, a view I have always relished.



The river systems, although dried mostly, speak to me, and I follow their parched bloodlines for more.

The arteries, the veins, the blood vessels all equate with my body.

This knowing I am feeling in my body.



My salty tears wish to
 join this red, salty
 blood on this red, salty
 land. How to enjoin?
 Yet we are enjoined,
 this I know, otherwise i
 would not be having
 such a response. But
 the ache continues, the
 ache for merging.

Once home, I am cut off from the world, feel quite split off, dissociated, and find no anchoring at all, save the times I spend with my daughters, my flesh and blood.

I take to my burrow again and hide.

On the third day, I am plagued by a desire to paint—on canvas with thick, juicy earth colours. This is unusual, and I resist the urge, hoping it will pass. But it does not pass until I feel I am driven to get this colour out.



Six canvasses later, I start to feel at ease.

I place them all around me, look at them incessantly and keep on working on them.

They have invaded my being.



I can see an imposing eye/ear of God; I have smashed a beer bottle to make a serpent on canvas; and the colours that have poured onto the canvas are vivid reds, oranges. They bleed into one another.



Weeks later, I make a trail of red dust across my lounge room carpet. It has a serpentine shape that snakes across the floor. There are eight eggs lodged near its belly. It remains for three months.

4. Digging Beneath the Kimberley Skin

There is a story here to be told. No, in fact, there are several stories to be told. They are here, right now, bubbling away each in their own dialect, wanting to rush onto the page. I hold them back, forbidding them utterance. It is as if they will vanish once they enter into the world of literacy, like a dream so strong that vanishes in a puff of awakening. Yet the force of their demand continues to build, and I know I cannot hold on to them much longer, these stories. Like the onset of the Wet, impossible to hold back.

It is in this landscape of the Wet, the seasonal fracture of the year into two distinct seasons, Wet and Dry, that the stories reside. Of course, it is a simplistic division that serves the possession of this country by whites; Aboriginal people know that the complexity of the land does not lend itself to binary distinctions alone.

The Kimberley... big powerful country. Place of extremes. Wild, inaccessible country, registered on many sections of maps as ‘unsurveyed’, and known like the palm of your hand by traditional owners. This is the source of these stories, but perhaps not their beginning. I am not even sure if there is a beginning, and even less sure if there is an ending. I break the rules already: stories have beginnings, middles and endings. Perhaps these stories offer themselves more as chunks of middle, open-ended middles.

I do know that that there is a story here about bones—baby’s bones. I see them now, wrapped in paperbark: a small bundle packed with significance.

And there is a story about *Namarali*, *Wandjina* man. This is a strong story, the central vein that draws me to it like the red veins of this country, dried river veins, red haematite, blood of this land, that I fly over on my way to Broome, capital of the Kimberley.

There is another sense of narrative present, central to every story and peripheral at the same time. It is the story of the tides, the omnipresent tides. This daily saturation of the land followed by withdrawal, sets every scene, underscores every living moment. The tidal imperative: tide is time, splintering the day into four six-hour intervals that bleed

into one another, yet still hold firmly to their classification as either high or low. The ubiquitous tides, which manage to saturate your psyche, bending and shaping all wills; tidal charts consulted time after time in any one day, until finally you start to realise you have your own tidal reckoner clicking away inside, sensing the turns. And if you are really lucky, you will even experience the pause between the turn: that moment of exquisite stillness, like the pause between in-breath and out-breath, held once by me through meditation. It felt like infinity.

One night camped on the beach, I awoke in the night and saw Donny walking down towards the water, the tide moving out, a fullish, very bright moon stillness. I wondered if he could not sleep, was restless, hot, or maybe checking on the boat. Next morning, I asked him if the boat was OK during the night. He looked blank. I told him how I had seen him walking down to the water in the middle of the night. 'Might be my spirit', he replied, matter-of-factly.

I am still beset by beginnings. I can pinpoint an invitation a year ago. I had received an email notification about an art show at Macquarie University by painters from the Kimberley, The Art of the *Wandjinas*. I went and I bought my first painting in about 30 years, and definitely my first piece of Aboriginal art work. I knew the moment I saw him, the *Wandjina*, that I later knew to be called *Namarali*, that I had to have him in my home. He sits here now, looking out to the northern skies. I think he invited me to go to the Kimberley, not that I knew that then. But there was another invitation at that time, from the artist Donny Woolagoodja, who painted this artwork, to visit his country. I took up the invitation a year later.

I finally have unpacked my large, bulging backpack today—tent sticking out on one side, sleeping bag on the other. I could not do it for a week. I just left it sitting in the middle of my bedroom, stark reminder of another lifetime. I slowly put things back, washed and sorted. I wonder how long it will take to put myself back.

I sniff to smell the sea, sniff to smell crocodiles, sniff the strong pungent odour of mangroves at low tide, sniff my body odour of sweat unleashed, sniff dry, stiff salty, clothing, sniff the big moon in black sky, sniff fear.

Yet, while my sense of smell becomes more refined, other senses close down. Like my ears: I remain deaf in one ear for almost the whole trip; sounds blur and I am forced to remain outsider from the conversations of others, unless I sit really close and strain and ask to constantly repeat; I shortly give up on this and surrender to my inner world and the country that enters me in other ways.

Wandjinas have no ears and no mouth.

When I think about invitations, I recall a much earlier invitation to visit this part of the world, given by a similar man from similar country. It was David Mowaljarlai, Ngarinyin Elder who unexpectedly turned up at a conference I was attending at Macquarie University, a Transpersonal Conference, at least twelve years ago. One evening in a large lecture theatre, he spoke to the group in a simple, heartfelt way, and told us of his dream. This was a dream to do with the coming together of whites and blacks in this land. He knew from this dream that he was to invite whites to come to his country, the Kimberley, to teach them and to learn from them. He was now travelling the country, having consulted and been granted permission from his community, issuing the invitation. I knew in me at that very moment, that I accepted the invitation. I had no idea why I was in tears and so moved by this beautiful man and his dream. His eyes shone and his spirit spoke. I think I kept that invitation in my heart.

Several years later, when I was taking one of many student trips to the Australian outback, we passed through the Kimberley and I saw a book that David had written, *Yorro Yorro: Everything Standing up Alive*. I did not buy the book but the images of the *Wandjina* cave paintings, those ancestral spirits that walked the earth and created it, that I was seeing for the first time, haunted me. It was their eyes, I think, eyes that bore right through you, to your soul, and held you, suspended in another world, another time.

Invitation offered; acceptance given. Entering into the unknown. No information except we would be out on a boat for about two weeks. A whiff of fear. A whiff of excitement.

Before I brought my *Wandjina* painting home, I experienced the power of the *Wandjina* presence. Donny had carved pearl shell into a *Wandjina* to be worn around the neck. The one I chose had gold as well as cream glow—that iridescence that pearl alone evinces. I was enamoured of it, and of course wore it to bed that same night. Sometime in the night, I awoke with a shock, riveted to the mattress. I could feel what seemed to me to be a movement through and around my body. Somehow, I knew it to be lightning, and with that recognition, came my awareness that this is what electricity must feel like. Yes, I computed that this was lightning moving in a circular fashion throughout my body. There was no fear, no panic about the implications of such knowledge, just a knowing. Of course, I also realised in that moment the source of the lightning, and removed the *Wandjina* from my neck and placed it on my bedside table. Although the feeling in my body dissipated, it did not desist completely. I knew the *Wandjina* energy was still too powerful to be that close. On to the floor, away from my bed. And still the feeling persisted. Finally, I got out of bed and took it into the lounge room. Relief.

The *Wandjina* as Creation spirit is the bringer of the Wet, water as the source of life. Around his head is a halo of lightning rods and thunderclouds. Donny says that *Namarali* is ‘the big boss’ of all the *Wandjinas*, ‘the most powerful spiritual warrior to have walked the earth’. I believe it.

The next morning, I think I really registered what had occurred in the night. I reeled. There was no doubt I was awake; there was no doubt about the sensation in my body; there was no doubt that I was calm and accepting, and knew exactly what was going on. Hey, if a small *Wandjina* worn around the neck could have this much potency, what could a painting of considerable proportion do in my house?

I want these stories to drift into you like the tides, to waft over you and take you with them; to creep up on you unawares and jolt you by their sudden arrival; to speak to you in lapping sounds from the bottom of a tin hull; to drag you into whirlpools that threaten to engulf you; to scrape you against low tide reefs; to embrace you in deep aqua pools of reminiscence. For this is what they do to me.

Imagine this: five people on one small pearling boat, named *Badmarra*; one true saltwater person—four to shortly become saltwater persons; treacherous waters that demand explicit knowledge and finely-honed intuition; perishing heat that radiates off ancient, crumbling cliffs, offset only by cool ocean onboard drafts; aqua water; crocodile country; sea eagle (*'badmarra'*) country; sandflies, mosquitoes and mangroves that ooze them forth onto white, unaccustomed flesh; night skies where the spaces between the stars become as important as the stars themselves; deep silences. This is Worrora country we enter. Country that has known white hands relatively recently, yet makes up for shorter time with a brutality and aggressive seizing of land that still reverberates today as shock waves... waves of shocking exploitation and dismemberment that go on and on. This is certainly a story that knows no ending.

Worrora country. Country that is now firmly etched into my being. And the invitation of a black Elder to a white woman, this too is etched into my being. In the face of such outrage, how is it possible for a black man to continue to offer such generosity of spirit?

It is new for me to explore country by boat. Sea as country. As varied in detail and story as any landscape. I begin to see the dimensions of this world, both in the pattern of its ever-changing surface and what is deeply below. Porous skin.

I am not sure when mention was first made of the baby's bones. I had already moved into that timeless realm where days were indistinguishable from tidal fluctuations. Early on, I think, and when we were close to the cave that housed the bones. Donny spoke of how tourists would trek up to the cave to see the bones. He wanted to put an end to this, this lack of respect. There was a need to put these bones to rest, put this spirit to rest. There is a deep silence from the rest of us. I ask no questions even though I am intrigued: Who is this baby? Where did she come from? How did she get to be in this cave? Why did she die?

Western ways of being in the world, of acquiring knowledge, fall away like flesh off bones. What is essential back home is superfluity here. Essence country. At first a story, then an intention, then a plan. It was spoken of each day like a punctuation, in the same way the tides punctuated our days and made themselves pivotal to our lives. The

bones would be moved. Threads would be dropped: there was an issue of logistics and when, according to the tides (of course), of how to get access, and to which cave they should go (the bones that is), and who should go. But even though there was this presence invoked each day, I wondered if the actual shifting of the bones would really take place, or that this narrative would ebb and flow in its own way, with no clear resolution. It did not seem to matter, whatever the outcome.

I sleep little by night. Days are full with sensory overload and nights equally energising, what with stories of stars, phosphorescence, and red fire eyes of crocodiles. I have grown sea legs in a relatively short space of time. From a trepidatious beginning, clutching white knuckles on handrails and squirmish stomach, I begin to feel exhilarated by the sea. I brown and lose worry lines; salt encrusts my whole body like a second skin; I ride comfortably on the boat as she rides comfortably across the waves; even my chronic constipation, no doubt caused by onboard exposure, eases off, as I ease into becoming saltwater woman.

One morning on the beach, in a little protected cove close by to where we are camping, I am urged to do an art installation. White wood against red cliff face. I have no idea of the meaning of this piece, as is often the way during the construction. What a word to use, 'construction'! I would prefer to call it an enactment or something else not so formal and unfeeling but there is no apt word that seems right, I go on in the blazing early morning heat, carefully choosing white bleached pieces of wood and either laying them across ledges or jutting them out of holes in the rock face, or leaning them against the wall. I am often drawn to working with white sticks, exploring, for one thing, the relationship between rock and wood and water. But this feels different. I leave not knowing what it is about, or whether it is complete.

Kimberley pearl shells have been a highly sought-after trade item throughout most of Australia for tens of thousands of years. Some pearl shells were carved and worn around the neck or used to cover private areas. But it was not just the decorative value and sheer beauty of the glowing shell, but the inherent power that created their magnetism: magical or supernatural power including the power to induce rain.

I wear my pearl shell *Wandjina* each day and night. It may be keeping me awake, but so is everything else, and it feels important to keep it close to me in this country. It hangs right over my heart.

Wandjinas have no ears, nor do they have mouths. They are sometimes shown with hearts right in the middle of their chests.

I am hot and restless at night. Throw my covers off completely, for a few moments of bliss in cool skin until chill forces the dragging on of over-stuffed feathers. On and off all night. Instead of this rhythm being distressing, I accept the interruptions as yet another discontinuity, another fracturing of the sequence we call time. Everything merges, slips and slides together. Day is night, night is day.

We catch and eat our own fish, either as sushi or cooked over the hot coals of the open fire on the beach. I am taught how to gather oyster shells, to prise them off the rocks, then to prise them open to discover the quivering palm-sized delight inside. No oysters have ever tasted so good coming from these pristine waters. Ground pepper and a squeeze of lemon. Ecstasy! There are always plenty available, but we each state how many we can eat, and no more is taken. I have always been taken with the word 'shucked', as in 'freshly shucked oysters'. It has felt a strong powerful word, and now I live out its associations: such force to unlock the tightly held flesh!

I wonder if I, too, have been shucked by this country? No force here, though, more a willing gentle unfolding, the opening gradual and reciprocal. The crack widening little by little, like if you put oysters in a fire. My soft, pulpy flesh exposed, and the country slowly showing its soft, pulpy flesh. The taste of each other!

It is as if suddenly I begin to notice, become acutely aware of the minute and the grand: seeing the world through *badmarra*, sea eagle eyes and eyes of sand gecko at the same time. There are tracks everywhere on the beach, but I manage to make out dog, large dog, paws moving right by our tents just above the high-tide mark. I guess maybe the fishing people keep dogs. I tell Donny and he informs me it is dingo, a lone male whose female pack waits until he calls. Crocodiles seemingly love dingos and often confuse

pale-skinned, fair-haired humans with them. I am a very fair-skinned, blond woman. I ‘will’ my skin to start turning darker by the minute! We see a very large croc crossing the bay right then, but I am unable to pick up his scent as I could the other day when we were in the mangroves and Donny picked him up. Strong, saline smell. Unmistakable.

I also notice, after about three or four days, the land showing itself to me in a new way—spirit presence in rocks. They, too, unmistakable. It is like a switch turned on. I speak not these things, but nod in silent acknowledgment.

There is a protocol to follow if one is to pay respect in visiting *Namarali*. This is to wait three days before attempting to get to the cave wherein he resides. We have visited other caves in the last few days and seen many *Wandjinas* painted on cave walls, but this one is the most sacred. Some of the caves are burial caves with bones on ledges or piled into dark corners. I can’t wait to exit from these ones. The last time Donny went to the *Namarali* cave and did not follow the protocol, he and the group wandered the bush completely lost for at least eight hours. The cave refused to be found.

Donny asks if we have had any dreams the night before. I recall a really weird one of me dreaming through the experiences of others who have lived in this country. I flowed rapidly through their entire lifetimes. A whole range of people like pearlers and cattlemen. I am not sure if they were Aboriginal people, too, but they all had a passionate connection with this country, and I was experiencing it as if their lives were concertinaed and passed into me, a type of shorthand that gave me the depth and breadth of their experience of country. And now that was all in me.

There is an unusual track by our camp again. Donny identifies it as snake. It goes right under one of the tents; in fact, right under a sleeping head. It has either come from the water or is going in to the water. Someone asks if this is a water snake, coming on to land. ‘Maybe spirit’, Donny replies.

The three days have felt just right. There has been a build-up, and always in my mind has been this intention. Patience and respectful waiting. It is as if he senses our presence and we his. ‘*Namarali, Namarali.*’ Perhaps he sniffs us. We are all preparing

in our own way to enter into the domain of this powerful healer and warrior. But no-one speaks about it. The build-up is a nervous excitement for me. I wonder what has really brought me here. Few of Donny's own people, let alone whites, have been to this cave, and I feel the privilege of the offering, and the sadness of a people dislocated, unable to access home country and sacred sites.

We are accompanied by a few people who are staying in a fishing camp close by. Two are children, one very young, who will have to be carried most of the way. One child has been left behind with an adult. There appears to be some problem with her.

Somehow these people have materialised to join us. And again I surrender to whatever arises, disallowing feelings of intrusion.

There is early talk of paperbark collection, for the baby's bones. So this is here, too, become part of the bigger narrative. As a kid, I used to play in a paperbark forest near my house. I was always intrigued with the layers of the bark and used them to make soft bedding and coverings for my dolls. I know them to be water trees, always growing in swamps, and now they are to wrap the bones of a human baby.

The beach on which we land is guarded by hundreds of rock *Wandjinas*, many covered at high tide. They are beautiful in their shapely forms that speak of presence, almost akin to the shaping of the first humans from clay, as some Aboriginal myths speak. They, too, inhabit our small beach where we have set up camp. Unapproachable for days. These *Wandjinas* have been in a huge battle, attacked and fatally wounded *Namarali*, who demanded to be laid out in the cave far from the beach. The story sets the scene and provides a surreal backdrop to the land-based journey we are on. We are smoked. Black, eerie *Wandjinas* check our credentials and allow us through; *Badmarra* sits breathing deeply on an aqua ocean; red, black and gold flag flapping...waiting.

It is not an easy walk: heat that makes you sweat from the minute you begin to walk, thousands of flies that have been waiting to leap upon sweaty bodies from the moment you step one foot away from the sea; hard, unforgiving red rocks that pulsate more heat into an already intolerable atmosphere; stinging green ants dropping from a great height onto unknowing backs; spiky *Spinifex* shrubs that announce themselves with a sharp

stab, managing to ignore all manner of clothing. All this and a pervading stillness. A pervading stillness.

I find it hard to make superficial conversation, and avoid it. I wonder if we will find the cave, or if we too may wander lost for hours. Within half an hour, I have drunk one bottle of water already. I worry that I only have one bottle left. Donny strides ahead, a lizard-like ease over rocks. I do not see him brushing off green ants as the frequent shouts indicate the rest of us are doing. It is not just the kids who find it tough-going. By the time I have almost had enough, we are there, in the welcome coolness of a well-lit cave.

I breathe very slowly as *Namarali* spies me, and I him. His eyes follow me around the cave. There is no escaping them. I lie on the floor, looking up at him, eyes ablaze. And I immediately know why I am here. The others chat, eat, drink and take photos. I practise hard at allowing and not sinking into resentment about how I would want the cave experience to be in this moment—utter silence—and it works. I can be fully with *Namarali* and not caught up in the chattering, judging mind. I notice dragonfly present.

When I finally reluctantly come out of this prostrate position, the children are painted in red ochre. I want this, too, as it seems right and appropriate. A mark of respect, as I am used to doing with Uncle Max in any sacred place. There is a qualitative shift once Donny has applied the ochre to my face. It was some deepening, of being more fully present, of almost pride and standing tall, of sinking into country even more, and country into me. He invited me as well to rub the blood-red rock myself, and put some on my arms and hands, while laughing about the fact that this ochre would take about three days to wash off. I secretly delighted. Donny applied the colour to his grey hair, and there he was, transformed, as we all were.

I recalled the time in the Centre when I had been so unhinged myself, and once I found white ochre by the road and rubbed it over my whole body, then everything seemed to shift. It was as if the country accepted me or could recognise me. Then, I was out on country on my own, not introduced and welcomed by an Elder, traditional custodian of this site, the one responsible for painting up the paintings so the Wet will continue.

I find out later that the custodianship, the responsibility for this ancient lineage of paint-up, was handed to Donny by his uncle David Mowaljarlai, freshwater man.

It is a wrench to leave the cave, a physical pain in my body. We split into two groups: the fish camp people are to go a different way and get the paperbark. I have a foreboding and am glad I am with the Donny group. I am elated now, after the visitation, and we make it back to the beach quicker than the way in. Hot and tired, and glad to plunge in the water just briefly, knowing there is a big croc in this bay. I rub not the ochre, wanting it to soak right into me, through my skin, into my muscles, my tissues, my bones, my marrow.

The other group is not back. We stay cool and wait. There is a little concern. And we wait. *Badmarra* is still flapping, a lot closer now, or so it seems, in high tide, and waiting.

Finally they arrive, hot and flustered; obvious they have been through an ordeal. One child is really distressed, probably heat exhaustion. One man, the leader of the group, has a huge pile of paperbark under one arm. All are overheated and stare at the water. They stare even more strongly at us, paddling in it to keep cool. We take the paperbark back with us on *Badmarra*. It sits right at the front of the boat with pieces flying off as we pick up speed. I keep staring at it, imagining the wrapping of the bones. The distressed girl lies on the floor of the boat, fussed over. So we are one step closer to this enactment, yet I still have no idea if it will stop here or continue on to its supposed climax.

That night, I bring out my tape recorder to speak, as I dutifully have most days, of the experiences of the day. I cannot record. The 'play' button works normally, but no 'record'. We had been told stories of photos taken that never develop; cameras dropped and broken, after *Namarali* cave. I accept the provocation: no speaking. My deafness aids the no speaking: propels me further away from conversations and people, into watching and noticing and reflecting. Into just being.

Wandjinas have no ears or mouth.

The other child story wafts in like a piece of driftwood on the next high tide, the one who was left behind. It appears she has a few problems related to her lack of normal development, and they ask Donny if there is anything he can do.

The bones have to be retrieved first, at high tide. Who is to go, and who is not to go, is the topic of conversation. It appears that no women and children are allowed. Then all that changes, and the men will collect the bones in the morning, on the high tide, and then we will all take them to the new cave. I know this may change too and let it all wash over me, with no attachment to outcomes again. This, too, is how the sea takes me over: I am waves washing over the reef, knowing that the certainty of this firm base will evaporate with the new incoming depths.

Donny tries to reach the child that night, in his dreaming or what some refer to as doing a journey in spirit. He says the child is blocked to him by the mother.

I sleep and sleep in the days and weeks following my return to Sydney. There seems to be no accounting for the degree of tiredness I feel. I still have my backpack on the floor in the bedroom, unpacked now, so empty and sagging in on itself. I cannot take that last step of removing it to the garage for storage... not yet.

The day of the bones. Or is it? Plans made abruptly change and we are washing at the fishing camp. Women washing while the men go off to retrieve the bones. The young boy cries, as he really wants to accompany them. We sit and wait their return, still unsure what may unfold that day. When they do return around lunchtime, I see the paperbark jutting out of the front of the small dinghy. I cannot take my eyes off it, like trying to avert your gaze when you pass a road accident, and know it is serious, and you still stare all the more. There is talk of the smoking that will be needed: us and the little dinghy and *Badmarra*. I gather this is to clear that spirit's energy from us all. It makes sense to also cleanse the boats, but it still takes me by surprise.

The readiness to leave seems to jump up rapidly, as if the tide has changed and we all have to go... now! And we are off, walking in single file after Donny, across the jagged rocks, sweat pouring off in the first few minutes of shady tree departure, flies gathering

by the score. The child with the problems does not accompany us. The man closest to the front has a huge bundle over his shoulder. I am shocked by the size and the weight, obvious by his straining muscles. Then I see the second bundle, much smaller and tied up and around with red string. So this is the baby, but what is the other? It is only then that I hear they found another set of bones in the cave, underneath the baby's bones, a man's bones.

I am reminded in that jolting moment of another story of bones being moved. It was Uncle Max, the Elder from south coast NSW with whom I have had close contact for many years now, telling me this story, about how he was carrying a man's bones, moving them from a place they should not be, to a place they could be. He described the feeling of the weight of the bones just getting heavier and heavier, until he was almost staggering under the weight. The bones were now the body. Uncle Max was carrying the full weight of an adult man's body on his shoulders. I see the same picture in front of me, now, as I focus on the front man's extreme exertion in holding the bones on his shoulder.

As we walk in single file, funereal like, there is no speaking. We all drop into the silence of deep intentionality: we are respectfully taking the bones home, laying the spirits to rest. In such a hushed atmosphere, we could easily hear *Badmarra's* flag flapping, but the wind, too, has dropped, and there is no flap; the cloth falls limp and still.

All sorts of stories begin to take form in my mind, connecting these two sets of bones. The strongest one, which will not go away, is that they were murdered by whites.

I do not get bitten by green ants on this day. Quite remarkable, really. They are still prolific, but for some reason I am not attacked.

The bones are laid on ledges in the cave, new burial place that has not been known before as repository of the dead. However, this cave has cave paintings on its walls, on the ceiling: *Wandjina* spirits that seem welcoming to their new charges, and other

depictions that show visits, if not actual habitation in this vicinity. I go up close and see that the baby is wrapped in a cloth, so small and vulnerable.

There is a void once the bones are deposited—a void of how to express what is within me.

If I were at a Muslim mosque, I would kneel facing Mecca on my prayer rug; if in a Buddhist monastery, I would prostrate myself and touch my head on the ground as an act of humility and obeisance; if I were in a Hindu temple, I could chant, repeat my prayers over and over, full of the grief of this moment, full of the contrition of this moment, full of the joy of this moment. I have no response that seems apt, and the lack is immense.

The loneliness in that emptiness merges with my still palpable anger and grief about the deaths, the disrespect of voyeuristic whites, all too eager for any photo opportunity, eager to rob the dead of dignity. My throat aches to scream. Yes, this is the response I really need now: to scream and scream for all the injustices, all the injustices.

We are smoked good and proper on returning to camp; the small boat, too; *Badmarra* will have to wait until the next morning, the food removed, the decks scrubbed down. Big fire, big smoke, big story.

The sun setting is spectacular. We are all hushed again, sucking in the smoke deeply, sucking in the experience deeply. This is a good thing that has been done, a big thing. I keep on moving after the smoke, determined to cleanse myself, and cleanse myself, and cleanse myself.

Donny takes the child with the problems on his lap, fully facing the smoke, and repeats a ceremony I had seen his father do in a video the night before we took off: ‘I *woodu* you, I *woodu* you, I *woodu* you’, as he holds smoking leaves firmly to legs, knees, arms, head. She is absolute trust.

On our way back from the cave, I find a cache of white sticks dumped no doubt by one of the king tides many moons ago. A protuberance I nearly trip overturns out to be a

chunk of bone. I tuck this, too, into my sticks. My mind goes straight to my installation. Incomplete. I realise also that it is a parallel process to the bone story. In fact, the installation *is* the bone story. I walk back laden with white, bleached bones that know their place, too. They will be placed on/in/against the cliff in the morning at sunrise, at low tide. Now it all makes sense and comes together in a rush of recognition: that piece of work holds all the feelings that could find no expression in the cave itself.

The white sticks are carefully placed, joining the rest. I even place a paperbark root on a ledge; it looks just like the baby. There is much grief here, in the laying of the spirits to rest. I think of my own losses, those dear ones who I still grieve. This is an acknowledgment on a personal level, and yet the grief goes further, far beyond the personal. In laying these bones to rest, I am also representing all whites, for all the grief, all the damage we have wrought. I kneel before the ancient old rock face and ask forgiveness, over and over again. And finally, I allow my aching throat its freedom.

'I am Gadja, grandmother to Donny. Skin group Wodoi. Worrora woman. Saltwater woman!' I am standing on top of a rock in the Royal National Park near Sydney, yelling it out. Not once, but many times. As I drive away, *badmarra* flies above. I yell it out to him, too, knowing he already knows.

There was another invitation issued. An acceptance. An honouring.

My skin is peeling since I got home. Not just flaky little pieces, but big chunks of thick skin that I help remove. I have never seen my skin come away like this. New skin emerges, old skin sheds.

I am now related to Donny, related to David Mowaljarlai, related to that country, through skin. Wodoi. My skin receives this with goose bumps. My bone marrow still holds onto the red ochre.

Snake itches to rid itself of outworn scales. Scratches hard on tent peg and sloughs off part of dead skin. Slides back towards water.

I meet with Uncle Max to share some of the stories. It turns out he has been up to some of that country, seen a *Wandjina*, taken to a cave by David Mowaljarlai, 'big Lawman'. I ask him what he thought when he saw the *Wandjina* for the first time. 'Sort of eerie', he replies, 'but then I noticed he had no mouth...!' At that moment, a man drops a card on to our table in the café with a key-ring dolphin on it. I glance at it quickly, feeling interrupted and eager to hear the rest of this story. On the card is written: 'I am deaf and mute... please help me by buying one of these key rings'. We are both stunned. 'That's a powerful message from spirit', says Uncle Max.

The next day, I cannot find my tape recorder that I had sitting on the table in the café, recording our conversation. Lost!

Wandjinas have no ears and no mouth. Sometimes their hearts are shown right in the middle of their chests.

In Broome, on our way home, we run into the fishing family. The mother of the young girl with the problems speaks of how she really wants to get a pearl *Wandjina* from Donny for her daughter to wear, and tells that she was able to help her daughter draw a picture of *Namarali*. She shows me how, by tracing with her fingernail, the outline on the skin of her daughter's back, over and over again. Her daughter giggles at the touch. She shows me the drawing and I remark on the likeness. I tell her I like it a lot. The young girl grins.

The tides are big and strong, heading towards the next full moon, when I am back in Sydney. Well, not so big and not so strong as I have known. I take off my pearl *Wandjina* and place it on my bedside table. *Namarali* stands ever vigilant, eyes out to the big northern skies. *Badmarra* flaps in the wind, waiting.

I have another dream, about Aboriginal people up north. I am with them, sitting in a circle, talking. I awake, knowing I have been dreaming about my relatives.

It was their eyes, I think, eyes that bore right through you, to your soul, and held you, suspended in another world, another time.

5: Photographic Essay: White Skin Interface



















CHAPTER SEVEN

MEANING-MAKING 1: DEEPENING INTO THE EXPERIENCES

1. Introduction

In Chapter Three, I made the case for phenomenology being the best methodology for researching the experiences of a deep engagement with place and deep engagement with Indigenous culture. Through examining the lived experience of self and others and through observations and conversations with Uncle Max, the phenomenological accounts of these experiences were produced.

In this chapter, in keeping with the phenomenological project, I now re-immense myself in the content from each of these three sources, to discuss the results of a deep engagement with place and a deep engagement with Indigenous culture. I take the 'hermeneutic turn' and ask about the meaning of those lived experiences. Meaning-making is elicited from the actual experiences themselves, with issues raised in the Literature Review constituting an integral part of this discussion.

I have deliberately chosen to discuss the results in a different order to which they were presented to date, namely to begin with my own experiences of place as First-Person Phenomenology, and then move out from this centre of my own being to that of the meaning-making of others (Third-Person Phenomenology), concluding with a focus on the impact of Uncle Max and his teachings in a section entitled *The Process of Facilitating Others into a Deep Engagement with Place*. This ordering, in keeping with my emphasis on waters, both freshwater and saltwater, as a guiding metaphor for my research, feels like the meaning-making moves outward in ever-increasing ripples or circles from the centre of my own experiences. In moving out in this way, it also expands and gathers up earlier discussion to create a folding and enfolding of layered complexity.

2. First-Person Phenomenology

I am a white woman in Australia. I have had very strong and important teachings on the land by Aboriginal Elders. I have received very strong and important teachings from the land itself, from very specific sites.

In Chapter Six I presented four pieces of phenomenological text representing my experiences of being in various places, and referred to as a deep engagement with place. My places are storied, but not necessarily through words. In attempting to discuss my experiences in those places, I need to stress the extreme difficulty in giving linguistic expression to a deeply intimate experience of land and self. This very reason determined the inclusion of poetry, images, oral story and photographic essay as part of the phenomenological text, and provided a means of alternative expression more fitted to the task.

The thread holding the different forms of texts together is an ache to be close to or merge with the intimacy of nature, to enter deeply into the heart of the natural world, into the heart of the world of spirit, and express this in creative form. It is to find home. From a place of disembeddedness and disembodiment, my journey has moved into embodiment and embeddedness in place. My Indigenous teachings have profoundly influenced this embeddedness.

I now have a better idea of who I am and my place in Australia as white woman.

My own embodied response in place is located within a storied universe. As I move/create installations, then continue to engage with the images that have emerged through that initial encounter via poetry, photos, painting, and writing, the narratives that emerged in that place continue to unfold and inform me. It is these stories that link me to that place, to myself and to the larger cosmos through the engagement of my own rhythms with those rhythms of the larger whole.

Abram states that, 'human events take on meaning only to the extent that they can be located within a storied universe that continually retells itself' (Abram 1997, p. 187). I accept this provocation that the land is not empty, that it is full of stories, energy and

power. Although these are not my stories, and do not derive from my cultural background, they still exist nonetheless, and belong in that place. What happens then when a white woman treads on Aboriginal country? Does she feel the imprint of the old stories? Do new stories emerge? How do the new and the old stories meet?

I intend to examine each of the pieces of writing submitted under First-Person Phenomenological Research individually, as a way of particularising meaning-making before drawing broader similarities across all works. Such an approach not only valorises the distinctiveness of place, but also the distinctiveness of each piece of writing. It is also in keeping with a phenomenological approach, already expressed by Seamon in the Methodology Chapter, as: ‘A phenomenological study might begin with a ...real world situation but would then use that specific instance as a foundation for identifying deeper, more generalizable patterns, structures and meanings’ (Seamon, 2000, p. 160).

I have inserted three ‘Reflection’ sections as a means of creating a breathing space, a space of reflection on the themes discussed to date, and a way of linking all of the pieces of writing.

a. A deepening relationship with place

This essay outlines the fundamental practice of a deep engagement with place. It is an intentional practice that makes explicit the nature of my engagement process itself. It is about the developing of relationship with a place, through embodiment and through creative response. Any practice only becomes a practice through immersion and repetition of that practice. Any practice only becomes instructive when followed over a long period of time, when reflected upon and written about in an attempt to articulate what is occurring.

Over a period of ten years or so, I have been musing on what goes on when I deliberately do movement or create an art installation in a place, then continue to engage with that place over a longer period of time through ongoing dialogue, expressed either by writing, poetry, art, photography, sound, song, or sculpture. The outcome of these

deliberations is this piece of writing, which attempts to lay out a series of steps that have managed to facilitate for me a deeper way of being with place. More importantly, I believe this practice has opened up for me a deeper way of being in the world in general, not just through this primary practice. Thus, the practice itself is the bedrock from which I continue to engage in a deeper way with places, and with the world in general.

i. The nature of relationship

I am aware of the developing of relationship as the core of this work. There is no imposition of the self onto the place involved here, but more an opening to, an acquiescence, an act of surrender. I move in place, and I am moved by the place; it moves towards me. We both then move, move towards a reciprocal relationship of shaping each other, of revealing more and more to the other. Just as the waves carry sand onto the shore and are in turn influenced by that very deposition, so a reciprocity develops between me and the place in which I work, where it is difficult to determine who is shaping whom. The dance is all that counts.

What is it about developing a relationship with place that may be similar to or different from developing any type of relationship? All relationships depend on dialogue, communication, and reciprocity. With a person, a relationship, unlike a brief encounter, takes time. The model provided in *A Deepening Relationship with Place* takes the reader step by step into a process of easing into place. What begins as a brief encounter, the first rudimentary beginnings of a relationship, then proceeds to develop into a deeper relationship, characterised by increased levels of intimacy. My relationship with that place/site is never the same after I have spent some time in it. It is somehow etched into my being; it abides with me and takes very little encouragement to be brought to the surface of my conscious awareness. However, I do consciously continue to develop this relationship, to keep it alive and active and vibrant by continuing the dialogue begun in place. I feel I know that place and feel known by it.

Thus, this piece is concerned with a model of depth engagement, raising important issues that seem to provide pointers to a way of being in place. What are these pointers?

ii. Initial encounter with the site

Where I choose to work, or the choice of the site itself, instead of being a straightforward process of conscious choice, seems to implicate a more complex phenomenon.

Human centredness would indicate that it is we humans who make a deliberate choice as to where the engagement takes place. In a reorientation that subverts our Western notions of what occurs when human and place meet, Plumwood provides a model of nature as ‘active collaborative presence’:

Such a nature would be no mere resource or periphery to our centre, but another and prior centre of power and need, whose satisfactions can and must impose limits on our own conception of ourselves, and on our own actions and needs. The nature we would recognise in a non reductive model is no mere human absence or conceptually dependent Other... but is an active collaborative presence capable of agency and other mind like qualities (Plumwood 2002, p. 16).

This is the model that is being suggested here in the essay, so that engagement is active collaboration, perhaps more akin to Indigenous notions of country as sentient, or what Rose in *Nourishing Terrains* calls ‘a living entity with a yesterday, today and tomorrow, with a consciousness and a will toward life’ (Rose 1996, p. 7).

The adoption of such a worldview demands a new way of being with place, one that recognises self and other not as counterpoised dualities, but as dual subjectivities, or more as multiple subjectivities. It is ‘encountering the land in the active rather than the passive voice’ (Plumwood 2002, p. 18).

If I am drawn to engage with a particular place, then from this discussed perspective, I may assume that the place is also drawn to work, to engage, with me. This opens up a whole new way of being with place, mostly unrecognised in the Western literature of Place-based studies, although perhaps more recently insinuated in the writing of such people as Bonyhady and Griffiths. In the context of language and landscape, they

contend that the landscape itself does not just shape language, but is in fact also shaped by language (Bonyhady and Griffiths 2002, p. 6). Such reciprocity with place has also been enunciated by Rose, whose teacher Jessie Wirrpa acknowledges ‘animals, many plants, Dreamings, the ancestors, and other things like hills and stones take notice’ (Rose 1999, pp. 97–104). So it is not just about speaking to country, but listening to country and responding to country that matters in an Indigenous relationship with places practised on this continent over thousands of years. One could say that country is accustomed to communicating with humans.

iii. The attraction/repulsion of places

Why is it that I will immediately be able to work with some places, while others may merely be visited and have photos taken; why some refuse having photos taken; why certain places may inhabit my mind/imaginal world for weeks, months, years, with no consummation through a creative act in that place; or why I can do work at a later stage with some, when it feels right? In all cases, whether I have worked in the place or not, the place is somehow working on me, somehow locked into my psyche. Therefore, from the adopted perspective of mutual collaboration, then surely I, too, am also working on the place, that somehow I am locked into its psyche.

Moreno has identified the psychological concept of *tele*, the attraction towards, the indifference to, or repulsion away, from another person:

Tele (from the Greek: far, influence into distance) is feeling of individuals into one another, the cement which holds groups together... Like a telephone, it has two ends and facilitates two way communication. Tele is primary (Moreno 1977, p. xi).

A proponent of Moreno’s approach to *tele* adds:

These relationships include a co-conscious as well as a co-unconscious recognition of the link, this aspect being much more extended than the conscious one. It includes the unrecognised body reactions, unknown social experiences, the religious and ideological activities and the long history of our ancestors,

elements that link human beings through common experiences, many of them unconscious even to the individual but still forming part of the hidden co-unconscious of the relationships established as part of the life of one individual, one family, one race, one planetary inhabitant (Zuretti 1994, p. 220).

Could this not also be occurring in our relationships with place? It feels to me as I experience it, a very simple push or pull reaction to places. But what may be occurring here is surely not so simple, as the concept of *tele* indicates. Conscious elements may be only a small part of the reason for the engagement. If there is the unconscious mind as well, we would still have to also take into account the 'co-conscious' and the 'co-unconscious', made up of body responses, often unknown or unrecognised, and social and cultural factors that are indelibly printed on the human life, as Zuretti points out. Often it takes a lifetime to try to figure out a portion of one's own psychological makeup, let alone try and get hold of much of our unconscious world, let alone establish our inheritances of family, race, gender, our human or more-than-human identity.

If place and I are to be seen as active collaborators, then a new interpretation as to what is occurring in the engagement itself is called for. Western explication would tend to account for such humanising of the landscape as a form of anthropomorphism. I reject this notion in favour of the integrity of the place itself and its own ability to develop relationships. We are speaking about a consensual relationship here. But how can this be negotiated? In my experience, to cite one example, it may be an intuitive acceptance or rejection by the site, perhaps facilitated by the respectful, humble attitude I bring to the place, in the willingness to learn in this place, from this place.

iv. A ritual of orientation in time, place and body

I return to the initial encounter as I describe it in this piece of writing, to unravel any hints of what I have found needs to be enacted as a preparation for preliminary engagement with the site. First, there is an orientation in time and space, in one's own body, and in the site chosen, that seems to act as an essential way of preparing for deeper engagement. I acknowledge the four directions, and locate myself in time and space, in my own body, in my humanness, and being human in this very place.

Such an orientation, where the body itself is the site of orientation, has a very ancient lineage, in both Western, Asian and Indigenous traditions. For example, geomancy, the ancient art of earth divining, sees the body as crucial to determining relationship with the place:

The way we view the world is determined by the structure of our bodies, our physical existence in space and time. Our bodies have a four-fold form; in front, behind, left and right. Wherever we are, we perceive the world in terms of our body's position and our bodily directions... our bodily structure defines the four directions here and here, but also we have orientation that is a front and a back. It is this orientation that gives us our perspective on the world and our perception of time and space (Pennick in Devereux 1992, p. 192).

When I have a particular practice of working in a specific site, the protocol I follow initially and very importantly is an acknowledgment of the integrity of that place, prior to my arrival, prior to the arrival of Indigenous people, prior to any human arrival. I am asking permission to be in this place, from the spirits of this place, the guardians of this site, which may have been here since time immemorial.

When I acknowledge the spirits of this place, I locate myself in a more-than-human universe. In bowing to the earth and touching it with my forehead and lips, I am already entering into earth as not mere 'brute matter', but as conscious sentient being, and entering into 'human implicated in a wider subjectivity', the prior existence of which has been acknowledged. Such a worldview insists on a new way of viewing self, of defining identity, or what Mathews asserts is self-realising self only through world; not through self-realisation per se, but as 'human... [part of] some greater whole—which must be realised before individuals themselves can be realised':

If mind is restored to matter, then modern assumptions about the scope and limits of knowledge, technology, politics, economics, even psychology, are turned on their heads... The question How shall we live? is then no longer a question that can be negotiated by us among ourselves, but must be negotiated within a much wider field of mentality than was ever envisaged by the modern imagination.

The world can no longer be discounted as brute matter or unknowable background, but must be included and accommodated as active presence in all our deliberations (Mathews 2005, pp. 13, 14).

I am negotiating my presence through that 'wider field of mentality' even more so when I move on to ask permission from the spirits of the Old People (Aboriginal) who used to inhabit this place in the flesh, and who may still be present, and then permission from the traditional owners (Aboriginal) today. A request to be in that place from this perspective feels an essential part of respect-paying, a major part of the teachings I have been exposed to over the last eight years through Uncle Max Harrison. As visitor to any new place, so the teachings say, I need to ask if I am allowed to be in that place. This is part of The Respect Law. How would I know if permission is refused? Is this mere gesture of courtesy or genuine seeking of permission?

Muecke, in referring to the way that Aboriginal teacher Coral Oomera Edwards has enunciated a means of making a sense of connectedness with places, states that 'in establishing a relationship they [children] acknowledge the prior existence of a context they now seek to become part of, and perhaps this performed ethic opens into sensations such as 'seeing' the place for the first time, which is another way of seeing it differently (Muecke 2004, p. 69).

In this way, in the absence of a cultural container, I have devised my own ritual of protocol, which enables me to enter into this engagement with respect, and also, as Muecke states, with 'a performed ethic'. I am acknowledging, in my work, such 'prior existence' of the place, which also orients me to the place and its contents in a new and different way. I have inculcated, as part of my practice, the Indigenous notion of the importance of how one enters country, and the acknowledgments necessary if country is to accept one.

There are some places where I have experienced, after asking permission to be in this place, refusal of permission. I have no idea of the reason for the refusal, but accepted it as a given, and moved away. I wonder at which type of sensitivity has to be developed in order to detect such refusal, and the reason behind such refusal?

The ritualised protocol thus described in *A Deepening Relationship with Place* allows me to bring a heightened awareness, of attentiveness, as well as a posture of respect to the encounter. It serves to still the mind, create a strong focus and intentionality. I come with the intention of being respectfully with that place and how it chooses to be with me. Because it has become a practice, the repetition tends to immediately alert myself to entering into that other state. In stilling and clearing the mind, there is a gesture of openness and receptivity that accompanies it. In this state, I believe I am more amenable to what the place itself will reveal to me.

This state of awareness bears strong resemblance to the reverent attitude of such American nature writers as Snyder (1996) and Lopez: ‘I would bow slightly with my hands in my pockets, towards the birds and the evidence of life in their nests’ (Lopez 1996, p. 21).

v. Embodiment

This appears to be a crucial element in the deep engagement: to feel my humanness, in my human body, alive, alert and active in the opening to the possibilities of what may emerge in and through this place. All response to the place is predicated on my body as active player, as conduit of teachings, as site of reciprocity with place, as sensate tool of mediation between place and self.

Embodiment provides the grounding of the self. Casey, in his theorising of place, asserts the ‘unique role of the body in the constitution of place’:

Where better to look for a renewed appreciation of place than in our own bodily enactments. Where else can we look for it, given that all human experience emerges from the facticity of being a body-in-the-world? (Casey 1997, p. 46).

The primacy of the body in relation to place, and what he terms ‘embodied implacement’ is what my movement in places reveals. As such, body becomes place (Casey 1997, pp. 49, 52). Embodiment is realised in my practice through spontaneity, play, curiosity and the sense of freedom engendered via these behaviours and the responsiveness of the place. This potent mix constitutes the initial enactment. With

heightened alertness, a stilled mind, an openness, an attitude of respect, and an intention to engage with whatever arises in that place, I am moved to move, or to create an art installation.

Some stimulus, the wind for example, can be felt on my face; I respond to it by moving my head, the right side of my body, or my whole body. I am moving then with the wind, playing with its ebbs and flows and allowing my response to be free and uncensored. There is a childlike quality to this type of response that knows no bounds, is inquisitive about this world, and is learning about the place through much sensual exploration. It is akin to what Shepard denotes as the ‘quality of attention’ so necessary if we are to inhabit the ‘world our bodies knew’, (Shepard 1982, pp. 7, 21) or Abram’s ‘sensual attentiveness’ of the preliterate world where the songs of birds no longer are just songs, but ‘meaningful speech in its own right, responding to and commenting on events in the surrounding earth’ (Abram 1997, p. 20).

A particular rock may now arrest my attention. I move towards it, crawling over it, sensing its ‘rockness’ through touch, taste, smell—all the senses are active and involved. Then the sea, or a bird, may grab at me, inviting engagement and response. Or I may begin to work with the stones, making sounds by hitting one against another; making my own sounds too; or I may make an installation, where fabric becomes the second skin of seaweed, sticks become dome of light and shade. I am at all times in the state of what Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr calls *dadirri*: ‘inner deep listening and quiet still awareness... there is nothing more important than what we are attending to’ (Ungunmerr 1995, in Stockton 1995, pp. 179–84).

Mathews refers to ‘communicative cues on which engagement with the world depends’:

Recognition that a wild creature is responding to our signals, for instance, will not occur until its behaviour ceases to conform to instinctual patterns—patterns that are universal for its kind—but assumes an unpredictable and singular character instead. For us communicatively to engage such a creature then, we must be acquainted with it under both its universal and its particular aspects. Similarly with the world at large. To initiate communication with it we must

address it at the level of particulars. This requires awareness of intricate patterns of unfolding, attunement to the minutest details in the order and sequence of things; we must be prepared to pay attention to things in their infinite variability (Mathews 2005, p16).

This is what I am doing through my ongoing practice—attuning to the ‘minutest details’ in each place, seeking the clues that invite me to dialogue further. The engagement is playful and spontaneously responsive; it is about constantly staying curious to the world.

One day, I was in a very slow mood. I placed my foot delicately on a wet rock platform. Stopped. Looked, listened, observed the space around my foot intently. After some time in this stillness, the whole rock platform showed itself to be moving—a mass of small round black shells all intentionally going somewhere. My foot became obstacle to be slid around, clambered over, pushed under. Scarcely felt by this human body, this other world took me in as resident, adapted to my presence as if I had always been there, no questions asked. The normal world I envisage as that which I engage with daily, altered in that brief, radical experience. Who I am, an altered subjectivity, part of a greater whole, is no longer an intellectual concept, but a strong embodied knowing.

Recall the words of Neidje:

Tree

He watching you

You look at tree, he listen to you

He got no finger,

He can't speak

But that leaf... (Neidjie et al. 1985, p. 52)

Here we have enunciated the intelligence of the non-human, the more-than-human world. This type of engagement including the nature of the relationships being formed, is very individual, and requires a new orientation in the world if one is to accept the presence of unseen forces and unseen intelligences. It is not only I, the human presence, that is doing the responding to the place, but the place too is being place-responsive. I assume that I could be developing what Shepard calls ‘treaties of affiliation’, where the

process is ‘individual, demanding our own development work in the natural world’ (Shepard 1982, p. 24).

What I have described here is not so different to that articulated by Mowaljarlai in his experience of sunrise:

You go out now, see animals moving, see trees, a river. You are looking at nature and giving it your full attention, seeing all its beauty. Your vision has opened and you start learning now.

When you touch them, all things talk to you, give you their story. It makes you really surprised.

You feel you want to get deeper, so you start moving around and stamp your feet—to come closer and to recognise what you are seeing. You understand that your mind has been opened to all those things because you are seeing them; because your presence and their presence meet together and you recognise each other. They give their wisdom and understanding to you when you come close to them (Mowaljarlai and Malnic 1993, p. 54).

vi. Altered subjectivity

There have been some instances when I seem to have moved more into the consciousness of the place, leaving the consciousness of the human, to inhabit other life forms.

*I roll on my belly and try to drag myself across the rocks towards the sea.
Immediately I feel myself as giant turtle, struggling back to the sea, having
heaved herself up the beach the night before, dug against time and tide, finally
formed a deep nest.*

The usurping of our usual human/Western/modernity notions of identity, intrudes on this piece of writing when I become seaweed, become turtle, become chorus of cicadas, become lizard. What goes on here? As turtle, I struggle to lay eggs:

Grunted and groaned in the struggle to birth ten eggs; then, weeping tears in the abandonment of same, to struggle exhausted, back to the cold sea.

Is this mere poetic licence? I think not. I move into assuming the body of that being, enjoining its world.

After such an experience, I not only have an expanded notion of what it is like to be lizard, to be turtle, to be seaweed, because I have embodied their way of being in the world, but also inhabit a wider sense of self in that I have that knowledge embedded within me. I know the lizard within me; my qualities of rock such as hardness, softness, resistance, compliance; the grief of the turtle leaving forever her offspring.

The literature surveyed through the Western tradition gives very little indication of what goes on here. Abram refers more generally to ‘an echo in the very depths of our flesh, a kind of memory in the bones’ that attests to our knowing of our sea within our bodies and our ocean born origins (Abram 2004, p. 91). Research on altered states of consciousness (Tart 1972) at least acknowledges the possibility of inhabiting other realms of reality, but it is something that has been more the domain of poets and artists to express. We can readily hear the words of Oliver:

Stroke by
 Stroke my
 Body remembers that life and cries for
 The lost parts of itself
 Fins, gills
 Opening like flowers into
 The flesh (Oliver 1972, p. 92).

In addition, it is Indigenous sources that attest to the power and knowledge of this type of ‘shape shifting’ of forms through a mythological base forming an integral part of culture. In the collaborative book *Yorro Yorro*, by Mowaljarlai and Malnic, based on teachings in the Kimberley, one of the Elders, Hector, tells the story of the discoloured stone:

Neggamorro struck the cloud boulder with lightning. As he struck the rock split. The lightning spear made a deep hole in the sheared surface. From there Yamben, a water goanna spirit-man, jumped out (Mowaljarlai and Malnic 1993, p. 63).

There is also a strong body of knowledge in the field of shamanism that attests to different realms of consciousness:

The shaman's trance state, or its variations, is unqualifiedly recognized as a transformation of consciousness or an altered state of consciousness—sometimes spontaneous, sometimes deliberately induced—in which the shaman personally encounters an ontologically prior reality, a realm of essence, the formal power within the outer sheath of what we see as reality (Ryan 1999, p. 3).

Perhaps I am doing, through my practice, what Tacey exhorts us to do:

We need to become less human and more like nature... the only way to develop a spiritually powerful culture in Australia is to enter more into the psychic field of nature; to shamanise ourselves in the image of nature (Tacey 1995, p. 7).

vii. The psychological baggage of self and place

I make here a bold supposition concerning people and places. Every human, and I suspect every place, carries a multitude of lifetime experiences that form who that person or place is at any particular time. Perhaps the transition time, of entering into a mental space of stillness through the ritual of entry, also facilitates a letting go, a clearing of the emotional contents, my specific psychological contents (most commonly referred to as 'emotional baggage') that I bring with me to the place.

Can I become, then, the empty vessel when I choose to engage with a place?

What it is that each party psychologically brings to the encounter must now be asked, in the same way that a similar question was posed in the Literature Review, through the notion of *ganma*, the meeting of Western and Indigenous knowledge. There, the two

parties were Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Here, we are referring to the place and the human, in their encounter. There is no *tabula rasa* here, on either side of the engagement.

It is obviously not easy to identify the psychological ‘baggage’ that a human carries, an amalgam of lifetime experiences, known and unknown, conscious and unconscious, that have shaped who that person is and how she/he perceives the world, let alone how that particular amalgam will react with a place. Hence, it has been instructive to examine my own as well as other persons’ distinctive experiences in place to shed light on this aspect.

For example, the white sticks I have frequently worked with on many beaches and rivers over long periods of time (shown in photographs in this essay) may relate to something in my psychological makeup, such as an unconscious link with my childhood, for example a drastic beating by a parent with a white stick. All pure speculation and hidden from my conscious mind... yet it needs be acknowledged, that such conscious and unconscious contents of the psyche must impinge on the place, as on any relationship.

How do we know how much from that person’s own psychological makeup will be projected on to the place itself? Freud (1915) and Jung (1927) both, as early seminal scientists of the mind, enunciated the notion of projecting the psychological contents of the mind onto another, known in psychological parlance as projection, but known and used today in common vernacular. Projection occurs when my psychic contents are assumed to be owned by the other I am in relationship with. That is, when I believe that what is occurring between us is really about you, when it is actually about me. Hence it is a process of denial, a falsification of the real relationship and a lack of ownership of my responsibility. All of this goes on in the unconscious mind. In Jungian analysis, once there is recognition in the consciousness, that the issues are really mine, then a withdrawal of those psychic projections is made, which leads to a healthier, more reality-based relationship (Stein 1994, pp. 114, 285).

From this perspective, I may be projecting onto the places where I have worked with white sticks, all types of psychological contents, none of which is owned by the particular place, but is more about me and my own psychological contents.

Thus far, we also have no guidelines to reveal how one can possibly tap into the integrity of the place itself. Even more challenging than identifying personal psychology applied to place is the identification of the lifetime experiences of what the place itself holds. Is it possible for places to store memories, experiences, and various cultural layers?

Schama claims that a place has a 'social memory', that it is 'culture, convention and cognition that makes that design' (Schama 1996, p. 12). This viewpoint is very acceptable and conservative, but Devereux (1992), in his study of ancient megalithic sites in England, has devised the notion of sites as systems of knowledge. Stepping further into a radical notion is Pogacnik, who, through the ancient art of geomancy, or lines of earth energy, speaks of the subtle tissue of the landscape, of the meridians of earth energy that work in exactly the same way as a human energy field, and may be felt, interpreted and worked with in healing (Pogacnik 1997, pp. 22–5). These Western notions alert us to alternative ways of understanding the integrity of place.

Thinking along these lines, if I am drawn to working with white sticks, then I surmise that this particular place in which I am working has provided that opportunity for a certain purpose. I know that each time I work with these sticks, in a myriad of ways, in a myriad of places, I am being taught something about wood—whether it is to do with the relationship between wood and water, wood and air, wood and sea, wood and rock, wood and sea, wood and river, wood and wood, wood and time. Hence, I can now perceive the site as instructive, and even if I may not be able to articulate in words what it is that I have now understood about these relationships, there is some knowing that I have embodied, that seems to alter my relationship with wood and its other relationships I have explored. It also alters my relationship with that place. In other words, a conjecture is being made that teachings come through the site itself.

Such an intelligence at work in place is hardly recognised in the Western tradition. One exception is Tacey, who firmly acknowledges the sacred dimension of the Australian landscape:

The landscape obtrudes, and often insinuates itself against our very will... the landscape in Australia is a mysteriously charged and magnificently alive archetypal presence... the land is, or seems to be, the sacred which bursts in upon our lives, which demands to be recognised and valued (Tacey 1995, pp. 6, 7).

A further issue to be interrogated, in considering the integrity of place, is whether the place itself may choose to reveal itself, and to whom and when, and how. And whether it, too, may project itself onto the human psyche in the same mode of transference as that which occurs between humans.

viii. The ongoing engagement with place: The creative dialogue

We have so far looked at the engagement itself as encountering the land in the active rather than in the passive voice. The initial encounter provides the template for the nature of the relationship.

So, once the site of engagement has been chosen, through some process of intuitive, consensual agreement between myself and the place, a protocol of entering conducted, and the initial engagement has been enacted over a period of usually several hours, or several days, what then occurs to continue that relationship already in place? How does the dialogue with place continue?

I referred earlier to Shepard's 'treaties of affiliation', as a way of making sense of the engagement process (Shepard 1982, p. 34). Using the terminology of 'treaty' to describe the relationship between myself and a place gives status to the more collaborative notion of an engagement with place that I have been exploring to date. It suggests more equality in the relationship, an idea of an ongoing negotiation, a respect for the other as the basis of the treaty. However, in other ways, treaty is totally inappropriate for this context, where obviously no formal recognition can be given by the place, but merely an intuitive sensing on my part of the complicity of the place in our joint engagement—a complicity, which may of course be withdrawn at any time. This in itself negates the notion of treaty as binding on both parties.

Yet I do wish to capture something of the tone of what Shepard was describing here: that these treaties of affiliation require our very own individual work, in an ongoing way. He gives due seriousness to these 'lines of connectedness' (Shepard 1982, p. 34) as lifetime work in the natural world. Although I have stressed earlier the role of play, spontaneity and creative expression through an engagement with place, Shepard's ideas bring it to another level of meaning and importance. He is speaking about the assimilation or internalisation of places (Shepard 1982, p. 24).

I would now like to outline my ongoing work of developing relationship with places, delineated as inescapably linked with the initial engagement, but further enhanced from this initial stage of engagement by the ongoing relationship, kept alive and nurtured through dialogue via various forms of creative expression. At this stage, we venture beyond those notions of sensual attentiveness that were so ripe in the earlier engagement in place. As I have shown in this piece of writing, I allow time for the place to again pick up its conversation with me, and I with it. I may leave photos in an obvious viewing place, to be seen and re-seen. I am constantly aware of the place and reflecting on the experience of being there if it is visually available to me; I may paint something from the place a few weeks or a few months later, or right on the heels of being with that place; poetry may be the response invoked, or clay sculpture. If I had already embodied some of that place, through the primary engagement, then it appears to be further embodied through this next part of the process. It is an intuitive response, an allowing of the emergent, just as was the initial enactment, and it may take several forms of expression, like clay and poetry, or painting and writing together.

Continuing to engage with the place in each modality of creative expression seems to evince the generation of new responses: some subtle new quality of the place relationship may be revealed—a shift in perception, a revealing of new information about that place that did not emerge in another modality, a narrative that springs forth which may be unique to that place or connect with another. Each new iteration draws forth a new response from both the place and me. The resisting of words until final expression, seems to allow that place to be known in many other ways before an

articulation through the written word. Such a way of working with place may take its modelling from the therapeutic context of expressive arts therapy:

The expressive arts therapist... must be prepared to work with sound, image, movement, enactment and text as they are required in the encounter with the lived situation of the client.

...This multidimensional approach... [has] its rootedness, on the one hand, in the possibilities of sensory expression originating in lived bodily experience and, on the other, in the unity of the imagination as a creative source of meaning.

...Expressive arts therapists... [are] specialists in intermodality; that is, to be capable of grasping the junctures at which one mode of artistic expression needs to give way to, or be supplemented by, another (Levine and Levine 1999, p. 11).

This constitutes the ongoing dialogue that forms the relationship itself, that sees its growth and development as more is revealed by each side of the relationship, deepening into an intimacy of the 'known' other. Once again, there is a sense that the place continues to work on me, and I on it. It is the ongoing drama of human embedded in landscape that can reverberate over weeks, months, years. I think it is through this means that the places become internalised and assimilated, leading to what Shepard refers to as an identity that is place-based (Shepard 1982, p. 34). The place has become part of me. Have I become part of it?

ix. The developing of deep emotional attachments to place

The process of depth engagement that I presented in A Deepening Relationship with Place has as its outcome a deep emotional involvement with the places I have worked. Each experience of place is individual, each expression of it is distinctive, and, as I have tried to articulate, in some way each place insinuates itself into my being. My being is now linked with each of these places, whether the experience was one of intensity or mere playfulness. It is a direct communication with the natural world that can be summoned up at will, and links me back immediately to that place. I do not hesitate to describe these place relationships as loving, as reverential, as devotional. I am deeply

attached to all those places that I have developed relationships with, in the processes described. Hence, I reject Jung's grieving over the forever loss of our 'immediate communication with nature, and the emotional energy it has generated... [which] has sunk into the unconscious' It *is* possible to reclaim a direct communication with nature, to know the river contains a spirit, that thunder is the voice of a god, and that the mountain still harbours a wild animal (Jung 1927, par. 585).

Much of the place-based literature attests to deep emotional attachments to loved places. Clues as to how to develop such attachment remain unclear and undelineated. We do get a sense that time and immersion in the place are important factors. Goldsworthy (1994) has a continuing relationship with his home area in Scotland, which continues to inform and inspire him over a period of twenty years. He too, through his art installations, receives understanding about the deeper processes of nature, about the nature of wood, rock, ice, water, snow, and about their interrelationships. Such immersion in a known yet still unfolding expressive place would surely constitute a deep emotional attachment to this place he calls home.

b. Reflection

Let us recap what the discussion has covered thus far: what are the main issues that have emerged as a result of the practice of a deep engagement with place? I have delineated the notion of 'relationship' as central to the engagement with place; that the choice of site of the engagement, the ideas around the reciprocity of self and place, and the ritual of orientation in time and place, are all important to the understanding of the nature of relationship as it pertains to self and place. In exploring altered states of subjectivity as they may occur in any engagement with place, the possibility of a world of wider subjectivity, hence broader notions of identity, is introduced. There is, then, a slight shift in emphasis to considering other aspects of relationship that involve more deepening into an intimacy with place, such as the embodied experience of spontaneity, play, curiosity, and the freedom to explore.

The psychological 'baggage' of self and place adds yet another layer of complexity to our understanding of what is brought by each party to an engagement with place, leading

on to examining the role of creative dialogue, as an ongoing communication with place over a longer period of time. Such dialogue results in deep emotional attachments with those places.

Hence, a relationship with place calls forth the elements of communication through direct dialogue, reciprocity, respect, and continual exposure in some form, as a way of deepening into an intimate knowing of one by the other.

This way of being with place, as outlined here as a practice, has other repercussions, the major one being a deeper way of being in the world in general and of being alert in the everyday to the myriad of intelligences that open themselves in the recognition that one is a being of an interconnected whole.

One of the fundamental research questions asked in the Introduction Chapter was, ‘How do we engage with place? What is the nature of this engagement and what is the quality of the relationship developed?’ Having introduced these above concepts of self and place, it is obvious that we are already developing strong ideas that have emerged from the research material pertaining to these questions. They also feed into the broader question of who we are, and our place in this land/world/cosmos, which is emphasised more in this next piece of discussion.

c. Desire for centring

I travel to Central Australia, a vastly different landscape from that of my home, the south-east coast of Australia. I want the reader to be able to inhabit this country from the inside, somewhat akin to the inner relationship to the land described by Shepard as ‘inhabit[ing] the land body like a blood corpuscle’ (Shepard 1982, pp. 21–3). I also want the reader to inhabit my psyche from the inside, to feel the intensity of my experience as their own. How to do this?

Phenomenology relies on the direct experiencing itself as holding the power to move the reader. Direct, simple authentic languaging and the subverting of normative linear

narratives, I believe, assist this process. Red snake country sinuous narratives overlap in the informing of the reader.

In this approach, I have been influenced by the notion of nomadology, as a model of writing the land, articulated by Benterrak et al. (1996), based on the work of Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987). It articulates a way of looking at the world, and thus representing it, in discontinuities, as fragments, as movement from one place to another: ‘an aesthetic... constantly in flight from ideas or practices associated with the singular, the original, the uniform, the central author... an intellectual space made through the essentially nomadic practice of moving from one set of ideas or images towards another set progressively picked up on the way’ (Benterrak 1996, pp. 11, 52). In that I move forward and backward in time and narrative, and between places, I am adopting the ‘discontinuities’ of nomadic writing.

i. The psychology of self/identity

I enter the story as dislocated and disturbed woman, seeking some answers to existential questions, such as,

Who am I?

How do I now belong on this earth?

If I am to be barren woman, what does this mean to my identity/embodiment as woman?

What does this mean to my identity/embodiment/belonging as anchored to date by the cosmic rhythms of life?

I entered the desert of the Centre unaware I was carrying these deeply unconscious yet relevant issues. It was not until much later, months in fact, after the almost powerfully overwhelming experience itself had settled, after I had expressed what I needed to through art, photography and poetry, that I could approach the experience through reflection and attempting to make meaning from it through words.

Could not my powerful experiences in the desert be one of projecting these issues onto the land, the possibility of which I raised earlier in the discussion on *A Deepening Relationship with Place*? Or could it not be deemed to be a deeply personal journal, a therapeutic exposition?

What meaning do I make of this experience in the desert?

Of course, relationship is privileged once again, as the signifier of self and place. But this time, unlike *A Deepening Relationship with Place*, relationship is fraught, conflicted, overwhelming. The desert is powerful, with powerful energies and forces, and my own personal journey is very powerful. No longer is place benevolent, welcoming and nurturing, as my usual experience on the placid coast had lulled me into believing. I am shown another aspect of relationship, just like all human relationships, that is one of power, strength and awe. I am stripped bare emotionally in this stripped-bare place—is it only in this form that I can meet it face to face? The power of this land pushes the human into her rightful place, as mere human, speck particle of some far greater force.

It is certainly possible that psychological projection of my inner world onto the outer landscape may well be what was taking place. So, for example, I may have unconsciously related only to those aspects of the land that were somehow relevant to my issues, such as the barrenness of the desert responding to my own impending barrenness: the blood red of the desert soils could reflect my soon-to-be bloodless state of being; the Centre may also be seen to be blood country in terms of the blood of the Indigenous owners that has been spilled all over this land. It could be posited that I only took notice of the crumbling spine of the ancient land because this was where my interest was fixated, in relation to my stage in life. I may have been searching for external clues that reflected my inner process, such as the sensed restlessness of the land that was in fact my own restlessness. Psychological projection would be me projecting barrenness, blood soils, restlessness, separation, alienation, as if they existed outside of me only and belonging to the psyche of the land. It does not seem to fit the model of projection in that I was not in denial of those aspects of myself, hence projecting them

externally. Throughout my time in the desert, I was all too painfully aware of my issues and how they were being raised as well in my external environment.

However, there are a few other possibilities of the meaning I could make from this experience, which I raise here for consideration. I lean towards a more reciprocal notion as that raised earlier, between self and place, where a consensual relationship may yield psychic exchange of materials, both known and unknown. I was not disowning my barrenness, my restlessness, my age, my facing up to mortality. I was feeling these states even more strongly, magnified greatly, intensified, because the land too was expressing these states.

ii. The land reflects our psychic process

Is it possible to think of the sentient land as a mirror that reflects back to me, in external form, what is going on in my inner life?

What was the land mirroring to me?

I was facing sickness in the land, disturbance in the physical and the spiritual levels. I was certainly unwell and very ill at ease on this land from the very beginning. The country around Alice Springs is neglected, dirty, unkempt; so too the local Aborigines, whose own lives are in disarray, reflected in high rates of physical/sexual abuse, alcoholism/drug abuse, poor health, imprisonment, high morbidity and mortality, low education levels, low employment levels, poverty... It is impossible to avoid seeing and feeling such psychic and physical dislocation.

Having all of this in your face in Alice Springs on a daily level is sickening enough, yet I was not just sensing the sickness on that ground level. It was as if the sickness pervaded the earth, the earth's tissue, and that woundedness oozed forth to those open or porous enough to receive it. Perhaps I was open, having received teachings in the last few years from an Indigenous Elder. Perhaps the teachings of Gulaga mountain and other sacred sites had sunk in very deeply and were manifesting in all sorts of unexpected ways. This article is that of a woman out on land on her own, a stranger to country, not accompanied by an Elder, but perhaps accompanied by strong Indigenous teachings that

apply in all country. Without formal permission, with no cultural container, is it possible to pick up, to adhere to the teachings embedded in the earth over thousands of years?

Of course certain country, from an Indigenous viewpoint, can be sickness country:

An old Aborigine warns us about going to Mandjilwa, a Sickness Dreaming place near Mount Bomford. The last people to go there became quite ill. Diarrhoea-with-blood is the specific illness manifested at this Dreaming. The Dreaming of Mandjilwa is so strong that it transfers on to everything in the vicinity. 'So strong', says Mowaljarlai, 'that if you bring a small branch with leaves, or some paperbark, from there and out into the town water supply, everybody in Derby will get tummy-with-blood. Just from going to this one special place, you may die' (Mowaljarlai and Malnic 1993, *p.* 43).

Is it possible, and more to the point, probable, that such Sickness Dreaming country affects all of us, black and white?

Facing sickness of the traditional people, in body mind and spirit, and the sickness of their land, is mirrored back to me through my own sickness of body, mind and spirit. So it is about facing up, facing death in all its magnitude, facing life too, in the ways we whites have dispossessed and decimated the Aboriginal population of this land.

I was also facing the nature of the ageing process in the land. The place provided me with exposure to the crumbling flesh of the body of the earth, to the last remnant of the body, in the form of protruding spine that snakes powerfully through this landscape in the guise of the Western MacDonnell Ranges. The spine of the earth was all around me, protruding from the landscape, protruding into my psyche, like my old friend's horse's bones, like my mother's bony sinewy hands—undeniable in its potency and relevance. I am the landscape—no separation. My inner and outer worlds are one.

I faced up to death itself in the form of a near-death personal experience, and insight into the broader nature of death when flesh is stripped back, broken down, to reveal the bare bones of the body as remnant. I needed to be able to tune in to these cues, to work with

what was being offered by the land itself as teachings, as reflections of my inner world, to deepen into my own process of death and dismemberment, unsure if I could literally survive this. The spine of this ancient earth is my teacher, as is the body of my ageing mother, as is the old bony horse. I am attuned to the flesh as impermanent, to white ochre as peace (Mowaljarlai and Malnic 1993, p. 52), to bones as death. I sink into the knowing of this on all levels of my being. Finally, I faced my own dislocation: as woman, as mortal human, with no culture of this land, with no belonging on this land.

So when I found and worked with a sculpture of white, bleached bones, probably the remnants of a dingo lair, I arranged and rearranged the bones, along the red rocks, along the wizened black old tree trunk. I was attuning more to death and dismemberment. When I was ill and choking on mucus in my tent, and further choking on a night-whipped dust storm, it felt like I was dying, that I may not get to see the morning light of day. Finally, when I was making an art installation out of broken beer bottles, such a symbol of the degradation and decay of this once strong healthy land and people, the circular snake with its eight eggs that emerged as a symbol of hope and healing, could also lead to my own hope and healing, and the embodied knowledge that rebirth is the necessary corollary of birth and death. Death, dissolution, decay, essence, rebirth: were these teachings that were offered to me at this time by the earth?

iii. A gendered experience of place

There is another important aspect to this piece of writing that I would like to raise. That is the notion of a distinctly woman's experience of the land: the gendered experience of land, such a 'given' in Indigenous Aboriginal culture.

That there is an intensely female orientation in this piece, is obvious, yet it also goes beyond the particular to explore universal issues that each of us must address as we age and face up to our mortality and our humanness. There is a supposition that I put forward now, that the land responds differently to a woman than a man, irrespective of cultural background; that Indigenous notions of a male place and ceremony that goes with it, of a woman's place and ceremony that goes with it, and a place of overlap where both male and female interact (Berndt 1989, p. 6) may have relevance beyond these

cultural confines. I conjecture that my femaleness, my inhabiting a distinctly female body, will create a more definitive type of relationship with land than a definitive relationship that a male body would. Who is to say that any lack of cultural relationship with the land, forged over thousands of years, may not exclude me from that depicted pre-existing relationship?

iv. The Law of Respect

I relate, in *Desire for Centring*, how the teachings I had received around respect, from Uncle Max on the east coast of Australia, and particularly those of asking permission to be in someone else's country, permeated my being deeply. In fact, the unrelentingness of how the Respect Law dogged me by insisting on getting permission from traditional owners to be in this Central Desert country forms a central vein of narrative.

Could it be that the land blocks out the uninitiated, blocks those it does not know, does not recognise, those that have not been introduced formally by a ceremony that the land knows and recognises? I propose that these teachings, usually followed only by Indigenous persons over thousands of years, with a particular known protocol for induction of strangers into new country, may impact on all strangers to country, whether they know it or not, whether it is conscious or not. It certainly seems that my restless spirit could not rest on this country until formal acknowledgment was granted. Much of this writing in this piece attests to that proposition.

Or, I repeat an earlier asked question, as to whether one has to be opened up psychically in order to detect the nature of the impact?

In either case, I believe I was I being tested by the land, being proved of my right to be present, by being confronted with death and dying: of self, of the land, of local Aboriginal people. As well, to go deeply into a process concerning the finitude of one's bodily existence, then to receive healing through the land (the old white-haired Aboriginal woman in my dream; the white ochre on my body; the sculpture of the bleached bones; the glass snake with its eight eggs), changed my perception about who I was and what reality was. It was a knowing that was embodied, that came through the

land, not through mental process. I was also being tested as to whether I could enter respectfully into country, follow the formal protocols and persist with following respect until the goal was achieved, no matter what it took.

d. Digging beneath the Kimberley skin

I like the way Murphy speaks about stories:

I see stories as seeds, possibly encased in a burr: psychologically chaste and compact: pointed to burrow deep into the earth and lodge there, able to unfurl their meaning and give rise to shoots, saplings, great trees to shelter a whole community; able to lie inert for vast times and still hold their nourishment, their viability; and yet hooked, carried with us whether we like it or not, whether we understand them or not, until they sprout, in their own good time, our own good time. The burr is the story form itself, a mnemonic, hard to shake from memory, able to contain a mystery in portable form, even when the mystery has not yet opened to us (Murphy 2003, p. 226).

There is a mystery that unfolds. And the mystery is the story. And I, as the author of that story, know not the mystery of that story. It alone knows.

The story demands the reader to enter deeply into country, to lose all track of time as we know it in a linear sense, and surrender to the sense of this country entering into you. Perhaps we all enter the Dreaming of this place. You may begin to be seduced by the rhythm of the tides, the rhythm of the stories as they come and go, wash in and out. It wants you to grow a second skin, invites you to see the world through blackfella eyes, which is still via whitefella eyes. You, the reader, perhaps you, too, become saltwater man/woman as the narratives invade your being.

There is a definite attempt here to have country as central, always insinuating itself into your being as determinedly as flies chasing the sweat on your back. When you are in this country there is no escaping its strong presence. The heat, the crumbling red rocks,

the aqua water, the sandflies, the smells, all contrive to deliver the visceral experience of the flesh in the embodied experience.

Like the layering in Aboriginal art, which informs on many levels according to the level of knowledge or Law possessed, this piece of writing is saying a lot, not all of it readily accessible. There are two important narratives that hold the story together, linking the threads of smaller narratives or anecdotal snatches. Both narratives are speaking something of Aboriginal culture, of the history and present-day treatment of Aboriginal people by whites: bones of a dead baby have been desecrated; blacks have been murdered; sites are powerful with strong spirit presence; sacred sites today are still being desecrated, not treated with respect; some whites are feeling the grief and the remorse of our shameful acts on this land; black people are still dispossessed, unable to access traditional land. So this is quite overt and easily cognised, and, hopefully, felt strongly through the narratives.

There is knowledge being shared here, too, that is less overt; knowledge that suggests or implies, rather than states. For example, the imputation of power in the presence of the *Wandjina* painting in my home and the experience of meeting the ‘big boss’ *Wandjina* is traditional knowledge being expressed. As Watson states: ‘Although evidence of Ancestral presence may often be received... through the sense of vision, Dreamings and other elements of the conscious country can also be perceived through other senses. Their power can be felt... through their action of revealing their presence (Watson 2003, p. 57). Also Munn elaborates: ‘Any object created in any way by an ancestor is thought to contain something of himself within it, and the various models all imply a consubstantial relationship between the ancestor and his objectifications’ (Munn 1970, p142).

And what of the role of the Aboriginal Elder, Donny? He wafts in and out of the narrative like the tides themselves, saying very little, but revealing much. When he refers to himself walking in the night as ‘might be my spirit’, or the snake under the tent as ‘spirit’, he enjoins us in another world. It makes us start, in the shock of the unfamiliar, and we notice. Although we may reject the unfamiliar, which challenges

belief, it nevertheless intrudes our consciousness. Donny's view of the world, his way of being in it, seeps into us, ever so gently.

When we hear of Donny travelling in spirit to access the young girl with problems, what do we make of this? Does it begin to unhinge our Western way of understanding, open the door just a little to Indigenous way of knowing? Or when he repeats the ceremony that his father had done on the young girl with problems, demonstrating the ongoing tradition of Aboriginal ways of healing, do we dismiss this out of hand as superstitious nonsense, or lend an ear to hearing the other voice? Can the reader pick up the echo narrative of this girl with bone-development problems to the bones of the other young Aboriginal girl, leered at by insensitive whites, and buried with due respect by all of us, white and black?

In etching with her fingernail the outline of Namarali, the 'big boss' *Wandjina*, on her daughter's back, so she can draw it and know it, and in wanting to buy a pearl *Wandjina* for her daughter to wear on her body, what does this hint at? Do the mother's actions around her daughter suggest an openness, a willingness to open to the other? Can the reader do this as well?

Perhaps it is easier to dismiss the Indigenous experience as incomprehensible, just as many cultural practices are incomprehensible to those not of that culture. However, when I describe my experience of the pearl *Wandjina*, of the electricity moving through my body in the night, how can this be explained? Or my experience of deafness, of losing the ability to speak- is this seen as mere fictional licence, the ramblings of an insane woman, or can the truth of the experience resonate just a little, provoke a certain perturbation in those of us more versed in Western ways of knowing?

In stating my direct experience of the presence of Ancestral forces in the land—in a painting, in a person, in a pearl figure worn around the neck—I am acknowledging the power of that Aboriginal worldview that circumscribes an inspirited world of meaning and signification. The process of really integrating this worldview into my being, initially begun in the writing *Desire for Centring*, is enlarged here. As a white woman, I begin to change my identity when I inculcate these teachings. My view of reality also

begins to alter drastically in line with new assumptions being adopted. Is this, in fact, the same notion espoused by Shepard in describing the way places themselves become distinctive elements of the self? (Shepard 1982, p. 34).

Human centredness, as a way of being in the world, drops away. I feel as if the Kimberley is now part of my being, defines who I am, a person very different to who I was before going there. The dream I had while in this country could be seen as the prototype of this new self who has ingested the experiences of the lifetimes of people from this land. And it is these and my own experiences that have become elements of my new self.

But there is something else going on here, too. My identity, my sense of belonging, is also predicated on places that are Aboriginal. Randall had asked, in the Literature Review if it were possible for white Australians to go beyond the conceptual to an experience of an 'inner eye' where one could 'feel our situation, to read people, to talk to country' (Randall, 2003, p. 21). This does seem possible, from my own experiences enunciated through these narratives. Aboriginal country is speaking to me.

There is some light being focused on what has emerged as an unexpected aspect of the black–white encounter.

Parallel processes in the narrative prod the unexpected and continue to dislodge firmly entrenched Western ways of knowing: the link between David Mowaljarlai and me; Donny and me and David and Donny; and Uncle Max and David... all these separate threads that are not separate at all, but join hands in the world of intentionality of spirit. Or can they be construed as mere coincidence? And, of course, the literal kinship relationship that links Donny, David and me through the same skin grouping (me through adoption into this classificatory system) refers to more than coincidence, does it not?

What is the nature of the personification of the boat *Badmarra*, sea eagle, who waits, flag flapping, as witness to the experiences and as central player? Is this poetic licence or consciousness of the sentient world, the world that witnesses, that relates, that speaks?

If the story is well told, the underbelly will be known. Unlike the shucking of fresh oysters, which demands considerable force and leverage, I prefer a whiff, rather than a good hard sniff at the messages that want voice.

e. Reflection

i. Emplacement in the wider world

With such an emphasis on cycles, my writing appears to be tapping into some wider than personal human urge to be attuned to the natural world. The Literature Review gave considerable attention to the state of alienation of the Western world from nature. Plumwood calls it the ‘rationalist hyper-separation of human identity from nature’ and has called for ‘a deep and comprehensive restructuring of culture that rethinks and reworks human locations and relations to nature all the way down’ (Plumwood 2002a, p. 8). I contend that I am in the process of reworking my relations to nature ‘all the way down’. I have exemplified what Plumwood describes as an ‘intentional recognition stance... of recognising earth others as fellow agents and narrative subjects’ which then leads to ‘openness and attention that are preliminary to dialogical and communicative relationships of sensitivity, negotiation and mutual adaptation’ (Plumwood 2002a, pp. 169, 175). Plumwood and I share a similar recognition of mind and consciousness that accepts its presence in other species, hence yielding a rich ground of discourse and mutual intelligibility between species.

ii. Water as place/identity

The relatively recent enunciation into Western consciousness of Indigenous people’s rights to water as equally significant as rights to land, is as politically sensitive as any other challenge to sovereign rights. Sharp, in her book, *Saltwater People*, has examined various groups of Indigenous people in Australia whose ‘connections with seascapes spring from enduring attachments to place and ancestors’ (Sharp 2002, p. xiv), giving us a rich and varied tapestry of lives informed by the sea, with narratives as rich as any from the land.

The majority of non-Indigenous Australians live by the sea, in the south-east coastal area of the continent. Being one of these coastal-based inhabitants, born and raised by the sea, I have deep connections with these areas ('As soon as I am by the sea, the sounds, smells, sights evoke childhood pictures and I feel I am at home. Peace. Belonging. I ease into the familiarity of place'). But what might it mean to take on the deeper stories that inhabit the sea, which reveal to us another world of meaningful relationships? To be interested in our identity as Australian means to be interested in how the oceans/waterways intersect with our lives, inform our being.

In *A Deepening Relationship with Place*, the ocean is the primary relationship in a practice of place, perhaps disguised under the location of land places contiguous with the sea. In many of the photos included here in this piece, the sea is central to the engagement, whether it be the rock platform where I move or dance ('When I approach this place, the singing of the stones as the waves sweep them back and forth opens something in me, perhaps my heart') or the beach as site of installation ('On the beach I am inspired to create an installation using a dumping ground of long-exposed white sticks. I have no idea what I am making; I just begin to create, pausing every now and then to photograph the organic growth of sticks'). It is the place of the sea meeting the land that dominates my psyche.

The Kimberley seascapes dominate the narratives in *Digging Beneath the Kimberley Skin*, attenuating my 'skinness' to stretch beyond the confines of an east coast identity into assuming further identity as saltwater Worroro woman, grandmother or 'gadga'. Living and journeying on a boat, living in rhythm with the tides, becoming aware of the Indigenous stories that emerge from the sea, the spirit manifestation just as potent, expand my notions of country and how I fit into it.

The imprint of spirit in the waters and in the land, the imprint of culture, must surely impact on our lives through living on this continent. The question remains, are we able to receive it, or will we be receiving it regardless of awareness or consciousness or recognition? When water is acknowledged as place, then I too may assume its identity as part of mine.

f. Photographic essay: White skin interface

I run through the series of slides of me moving on the rocks by the ocean with long, white fabric. I rarely see myself moving. I am deeply moved to see me from the outside instead of the usual experiencing on the inside. I feel like weeping and cannot understand the saltiness of those tears. There are no words for months and months. Every now and then, I look at the images and some part of my body is there again, in the fullness of the experience. Whichever part of my body it is that returns to the feelings, the smell of the salt, the wetness of the cloth clinging to my body, the shuddering of the wave as it impacts on the narrow rock passage, the billowing of the wind underneath the fabric, it remains determined to shut out meaning from my mind. I remain mute.

Then, one day, words come. Poetry is called forth. It is not the same as looking at images of my installations in place or even seeing images of places I have moved in. To figure as central to the images themselves confronts me as embodied presence. I am present to myself. As I see myself moving in dialogue, there is a push-me, pull-you effect: I am pulled back into the experience while I am simultaneously observer and outside of the experience. The rawness of the immediacy of the experience resonates in my body while the witness assumes a different role in reflecting on the experience and taking in a far wider view than I would normally be aware of when immersed in the movement response itself. It is the watcher who is being watched.

And what of the story from this place? It is sinewy and wet, slippery like the fabric and my wetted body it wraps around. It is a story nonetheless. It tells of the binding of human body to the earth and the desire to break free, to enter into the being of sea, of wind, of rock. It speaks of fabric as second skin, as mediator between worlds, as life force when animated by natural forces. It is nature reaching out to human, and human reaching out to nature. There appear in the story angels and butterflies and snakes; it is enacted on living, responding surfaces; it feels sacred and reciprocal. I am reminded, in the reflection, of Heidegger and his idea on 'truth', that truth is a process, the event in which Being opens up to man (Spiegelberg 1982, p. 351).

g. Reflection

All of the above essays have narrative as central, whether that be through words or images. It is significant to have writing that is place-specific, that seems to emerge from that particular place. This is not new, and is characteristic of much of the sense of place literature. My narratives are aware of the reader—in some cases, they are meant to be read aloud, like *Digging Beneath the Kimberley Skin*, as narratives emerging from Aboriginal country have done for millennia. Could this be following on with the oral tradition that this country demands? In other words, if I travel through country, could the stories that spring out of that country demand to be told in the form that they have always been told? This notion could be extrapolated to my creative response to places. Places in Australia are accustomed to being narrated in a variety of artistic forms.

In earlier discussion, nomadic writing was mentioned as being a powerful form that seemed to reflect my own writing experience. Through these other stories, we see that the elimination of linear narrative/time/place acts as a dislodger of ordinary reality, creating openings to altered realities.

There is also an overriding theme of white woman as outsider on this land, attempting to become insider. She is becoming insider through a combination of her own creative practice in place, through allowing places to become enstoried through her, and through Indigenous teachings. In fact, she is beginning to represent *ganma* as that very place where two cultures meet, a very potent place, as we have already explored. Her embeddedness in country is the newly realised reality. She is ‘being’ in country, and all that that implies.

In addition to the continuing pivotal role of relationship between self and place, other issues that seem to have arisen tease out the dynamics of the psychology of self and place, particularly extending notions of projection and offering alternative suggestions, such as the idea of the land as a psychic mirror, and the notion of a gendered landscape—both important influences in how we ‘are’ in place, how we respond to place, and what meaning we make of these experiences, irrespective of our cultural background. If a white woman is subjected to an Aboriginal Law of Respect, we then

get some idea of how this transfer from one cultural context to another is acted out. It is obvious that psychology is only a small part of the explanation as to what is going on in the encounter between person and place. It cannot account for the complexity of, say, how the theme of bones/white bleached sticks carries across the disparate stories that link places in an extraordinary confluence of psychic relatedness. Bones and death, bones and landscape, bones within stories, seem to run like an ocean current in all pieces of writing. Why does this occur?

The presence of country itself is as palpable as any other person in the stories. Whether it be the power of certain sites to affect us in all sorts of ways, country that knows the stories of pain and dismemberment that it holds, the Ancestral spirits that made and continue to influence people and events within country, it is difficult to ignore the potency of its presence.

Finally, it is mandatory to include reference to the sense of healing that also echoes through all the stories. It could be my own personal healing, felt in *Desire for Centring*, as if the land accepted me once I had completed what had to be done to earn that acceptance; or the putting of the spirits to rest, in replacing the bones of the dead Aboriginal child, executed by both whites and blacks in *Digging Beneath the Kimberly Skin*; or my dance with rocks/ocean/white cloth, where the cloth may be symbolic of rapprochement of the two worlds, human and nature. Healing as power and as reconciliation stands out as a movement towards, as an ever-present offering.

I turn now to the experience of others, to enquire as to whether each person's unique experience of Indigenous teachings on sacred sites on the south coast of NSW shares anything of similar content to that brought out of the discussion thus far.

3. Third-Person Phenomenology

There is no doubt that all participants in the south coast journey with Uncle Max took part in a very powerful experience of place. Anne, in fact, called it the strongest experience of her life. Rowena and Michael, in re-experiencing earlier traumas, would no doubt acknowledge the forcefulness of their time on the mountain. Margarita, after

the south coast journey, no longer felt 'external' to this country, and made precious insights into her place of belonging on Australian soil.

I wish to draw out meaning by examining important themes or aspects that arose through the phenomenological accounts of third-person research, interspersed with related segments from the text of Uncle Max Harrison. At the same time, I take these discussions into the meaning derived from first-person phenomenology to build upon and deepen the understanding, as demanded by the phenomenological endeavour.

a. Silencing

Anne was able to share her experiences both before and after she entered into the sacred sites, but was loath to discuss anything about the sites themselves:

It is so hard. What I can say is that some experiences are beyond words...

It is understandable that there are no words to describe an experience, but something more was operating here that demanded silence for other reasons, reasons that were unknown and confusing to Anne:

It was something that was going on and it wasn't just me, and I don't pretend to understand, but I don't feel I can actually speak of anything inside there.

Whether that's me being over precious, I don't know, all I know is that I wouldn't be listening if I didn't follow that.

Could the mountain have imposed an injunction of silence on Anne? Why not others? My own experiences on the mountain reflect a similar situation. Before undertaking this research, I knew it was impossible to speak about the mountain. It may have been a self-imposed injunction, but like Anne, it seemed to be broader than this. For many years, I held this silence. Anne suspects that one reason for the injunction of silence concerns respect and protection:

In my limited understanding, I think it is about respect in part. I actually feel there has been a strong relationship between Koori people and that area over

time and there is much that I would not understand that has been placed there in terms of protection.

So it's not simply about respect. It's also about, I do not want to fall into the typical way tourists visit—the sanctity of that place can dissipate over time. It's partly protecting me from crossing the line of being a tourist, rather than a guest invited here by Koori people.

Imposed silence as a type of protection of the site that Kooris could have put into place over aeons, or maybe placed only since Western invasion, is a feasible explanation for Anne—as such, she respects that aspect, as well as respecting that, by being silent about the place, she is rejecting the role of tourist for the role of invited guest. In this role of guest, she will not ‘dissipate...the sanctity of that place’.

Can places hold ‘sanctity’ or power that can be ameliorated or dissipated over time? What is the role of people in affecting such places? Uncle Max is aware of the difference between being in a site as a tourist compared to going into a site through Indigenous teachings:

It's like that mountain, you can walk through there and the first thing you would notice there is the beauty, but you look at the beauty of it in a sort of scenic sort of way, through tourist eyes, you know, but then when you go through it with the teachings, then you can see the stories of Creation and Aboriginal Laws that were born, born through those Laws and those teachings, see.

Being silent about the place is different from being silent in the place, which was expressed by Uncle Max in remembering his first experience on the mountain:

The awesome silence, the silence that I had to go through. And my mind as we were walking up, it was head thumping by the time I got up there... and when they took me in through the sites then, the old fella, I think there were three Old Fellas that took me in, and by the time I left the Energy Rock, what's happenin' here [points to head] is gone, because of the total silence, see.

I just kept silent all the way, you know, and they said to me, ‘anything you want to ask?’ ‘Nuh’, I didn’t want to ask anything. I wanted to drink in what they was deliverin’ to me, and that was magic, it was magic, to know that I can hold that right through to the end and then come back out without speaking.

Perhaps they are one and the same. What is significant is that the mountain does have this powerful silencing on certain people. Uncle Max also mentions how silence can impact on very young people that he was teaching on the mountain:

I’ve taken thirty, forty, sixty school kids, primary school kids through there, and that was incredible, the kids never spoke.

And when I put the ochre on them and said, ‘No speakin’ through this very special place’, eh, what happened is they took the whole area as very special, see, not just that little walk from the Energy Rock to the Three Fellas, they took it right through, no questions, nothing. Not a thing.

b. Fear and the re-experiencing of trauma

Rowena’s and Michael’s stories mainly concern the re-experiencing of trauma that was triggered by experiences that weekend. Both had earlier experiences of the loss of safety in the natural world, translating as a sense of disconnectedness from that world. The emergence of intense fear when on the mountain was a natural outcome of that lack of safety, which then triggered earlier traumatic memories. For Michael, it was the reliving of the fear of being ambushed in a war zone; Rowena returned to the fear of her childhood abuse, the untimely death of two babies, and the trauma of being in a bus crash on a mountain.

Such triggers produced very strong emotional, physical and psychological reactions. What were these specific reactions?

For Rowena, emotional duress emerged through such physical symptoms as physical pain, choking sensations in her throat and intense fear due to an overwhelming sense of impending danger, as she walked up Gulaga Mountain, once again as she walked down

the mountain, and the following day driving on Biamanga Mountain. The woods, Rowena's equivalent of being in the Australian bush, represented the place of terror of her childhood physical and sexual abuse. In fact, she describes this place, walking in the woods, as going back into a 'death camp'. Likewise, her terror of being in a vehicle on a steep mountain road the next day took her also into a state of fear for her own life, as she re-entered the actual experience of the near-death accident. Coupled with nervousness in being away from her partner, home and familiar support, was anxiety about being in the group.

Although Michael referred minimally to his physically and emotionally demanding walk up Gulaga, I was a witness to the extraordinary effort it took for him to make it to the top. It was nothing less than a painstaking struggle to walk and breathe. I presumed he was a bad asthmatic and that his frail state of health may not hold out. It was I who was in fear over whether he really might die in this superhuman effort of pushing his weak body. When he spoke to me about the ambush in Vietnam, it was obvious that his fear was triggered by being in the woods again, the site of ambush. When he shared this experience with the group that night, it was as if the experience still actively haunted him, as it had done that day.

Is this mere coincidence, that these two persons both re-experienced their respective traumas at this place, the sacred mountain of the Yuin? What sense can we make of such an intensification of emotions, through the juxtaposition of these painful traumas? Why such delving back into the heart of those experiences at that time and in that place?

Here is a very strong example of the question raised in earlier discussion about what each of us brings to the encounter with place, referred to as our psychological 'baggage'. Could the psychological contents of each of these persons have impacted strongly on the place itself, and hence on the experience they received in that place? Could it not be said that, wherever either of them went in nature, trauma could be triggered?

There is a plethora of research materials that attest to the psychological effects of trauma, known as post-traumatic stress disorder, and the re-experiencing of that initial trauma, or re-traumatisation (Herman 1992). Rowena and Michael both felt that their

lives were at risk again. In re-traumatisation, what happens is that the whole experience is as real as when it originally occurred. Often, the original trauma has been deeply buried in one's unconscious, yet symptoms of that trauma can be still felt. In Rowena's words:

For most of my life, I never remembered the actual facts of my abusive childhood. Psychologists tell me this is called repression. Whatever it's called, I do know that I always had a feeling that I was much less than everyone else around me, and more than that, I knew that I was a bad person, it's just that nobody else knew it. I always felt that I was a good actress and could cover up all of my 'badness'.

What both Rowena and Michael also shared was a sense of disconnectedness from the natural world—Rowena due to her inner city slum upbringing in Los Angeles where nature was to be feared and avoided at all costs, and nature as the site of her abuse; Michael, who had been 'robbed' of places 'through war played out over time', both in Germany and Vietnam, had been left with a feeling of a 'tainting' of the landscape for him, with 'peace nudged out by disquiet and distrust':

This same awareness of a character to the land was also present during my tours of duty in Vietnam and in Germany. Triple canopy rainforests, lush delta land and again the mountains—all held a quality that somehow remained separate from the horror of combat.

Yet, in all honesty, they were, in a sense, robbed from me, because the reality of war was played out in those landscapes. And though rationally, I knew better, the peace had been nudged out by disquiet and distrust. They no longer were really 'safe' places. Later, even the Black Forest and the alpine regions were, somehow, tainted.

The natural world was an unsafe place for both of these American-borns.

Could this fractured sense of place for Rowena and Michael, their 'unsafeness', have anything to do with their re-experiencing trauma?

Yet Michael had also undergone some reclaiming of his ‘tainted’ relationship with the natural world, and some reclaiming of his ‘Divine in nature’ through a family move to the coast in Florida some years earlier:

The ocean remained a safe place and one in which the unstoppable hand of God was visible, raw and untarnished by other memories.

c. Relationship with death

Let us turn to another of the respondents in the research, Anne. Anne’s childhood loss of her mother could very easily be defined as a trauma. Was she, too, re-experiencing trauma on the mountain?

Unlike Michael and Rowena, Anne had a relationship with the natural world that was her real safety in an unsafe world, where she had lost mothering on the human level. In fact, she described her childhood as ‘the bush grew me up’, yielding a strong indication of just how vital her connection with the natural world was. Hence, her coming to the mountain was more of a ‘coming home’. She described her experience of being with the mountain as benevolent and as feeling natural and accepted by the mountain—‘I had permission to be there’. Yet she, too, had a time of intense fear just before entering the sacred teaching sites. At the threshold of entering into the sacred, Anne faces the possibility of her death right there and then.

Could Anne have been exaggerating the personal danger to her at this time, or could there be a link between what she feels at that moment and the fear and re-experiencing of death that Michael and Rowena described also on the mountain?

Uniquely to the group, Anne is suffused by the feeling of the honour of being on this sacred mountain, both because of being invited to be taught by Elders there, and by the mountain’s welcoming presence: ‘The mountain was tolerant of me, tolerant of my ignorance and walked me up anyway’. Is it not unusual that Anne, feeling safe and accepted and very much at home in her surroundings, should suddenly face a crisis in facing her own possible death?

It is interesting to note how Anne herself makes sense of that moment, and sees it as a meeting of forces that coalesced precisely a few minutes before entering into the sacred sites. Those forces embraced the enormity of being there, including the enormity of what had been forged between humans and the land, what she referred to as a ‘well’, or strong spiritual presence, and the enormity of her own personal response. Her response in the face of the forged spiritual ‘well’ was a feeling of unworthiness: unworthy to enter into the realm of the mother, Mother Earth; unworthy as a member of the race that had decimated, raped and desecrated the land; unworthy as the product of a fundamentalist Christian upbringing, to enter into a sacred place; unworthy and full of grief about the loss of her own mother.

Such unworthiness led her to believe she was not adequately prepared for the entry into this sacred place at this time: ‘I better go in with the right attitude, but could I?’ ‘Not prepared’ meant her own spiritual weakness, as well as a lack of focus in her mind, and a lack of overall spiritual development. It was this lack of preparation that she believed could lead to her death, especially when confronting the mountain with its ‘spiritual matters I do not understand, that are bigger than me’.

Anne’s depiction of this highly charged emotional state as similar to the biblical story of ‘old wine into new skins’ is an exquisite metaphor for this momentous situation. The ‘new skins’ of whites on this land, the pouring into a new vessel of a very aged wine, the pouring into the whites of a very ancient culture that in many ways it is unprepared for or unworthy of receiving, seems a most apt analogy. The death and desecration on this land wrought by whites is part of the shame Anne feels in belonging to this culture:

I was very aware of my unworthiness, partly connected with the history of the culture I’d come through: the domination, the desecration of the continuity of the culture, the rape of the land.

What I was conscious of, was, I may not survive.

Jung could contribute to the discussion here, and would perhaps put this shared event down to ‘synchronicity’, or the notion of meaningful coincidence, where ‘the

independence of time and space brings about a concurrence or meaningful occurrence of events not causally connected with one another' (Jung 1927a, p. 464). In Jungian terms, such events construe the 'universal interrelationship of events' (Jung 1927a, p. 464), which is very similar to Indigenous notions of interconnectedness. Uncle Max in one instance, defines this interconnectedness as being totally inseparable from the environment:

*See, they can't take us out of the environment, 'cause we are the environment.
We are the environment.*

*All I have to do is communicate with that part of the environment, then I know
where I am. You know, that I'm home, that I'm among my relations.*

Anne's experience, however, is far more complex, and encompasses many diverse factors beyond the psychological, yet it is obvious that psychological factors are involved as well in her account.

In *Desire for Centring*, I, too, faced up to the real threat of my impending death, literally in the night, as well as the impending death of my fertile child-bearing years, and my own mortality; I faced the death of Aboriginal culture, the death and destruction wrought by whites in this land; in *Digging Beneath the Kimberley Skin*, I faced again my complicity in the dismantling of Aboriginal culture in that I faced the death of the young baby, whose bones were to be reburied, setting her spirit to rest— certainly, I had no direct involvement in either her death or the actions of white voyeurs coming to the cave to see her bones, but the legacy of being white has to be addressed in all sorts of ways. This is part of Rose's 'ethics for decolonisation' (Rose 2004). My working with sculptures of white sticks across a variety of places seems to connect with bleached bones. My own confrontation with death does not, from what I know, link with any personal trauma. It arose spontaneously, and seemed more linked to the place itself than to significant psychological damage. However, it does appear to me to be part of a teaching that was being delivered to me, through a conscious sentient landscape.

It is worth including, at this point in the discussion, Margarita's experience of death. This was not her own impending death, but while she was on the mountain, Margarita was again confronted with her grandmother's death. She just had a sense that her grandmother was with her then on the mountain. In her story, we hear how, at the exact time of her death, some twelve months earlier, Margarita was working on the land in California and felt the spirit of her grandmother:

I just went up to a couple of rocks on the beach. I lay down in the hot sand and lay with my legs around the rock, the soles of my feet in the wind. I had my eyes closed, I could feel the wind blowing in off the ocean—the Pacific Ocean.

I could feel the wind going between my toes, wrapping around, spiralling around.

All of a sudden this cold, cold chill, unearthly cold, passed right through the core of the sole of my foot, up my legs, then it came up through my body, up there round my solar plexus, and then it pulled out.

If this was the spirit of her grandmother passing through her body at that moment of death, there was more to her presence than what came to be known later as her death announcement. It seems as if she also had a role to play in terms of removing unused/unwanted parts of Margarita as she fled out to sea.

I was lying on the beach and kind of convulsing a bit and the image I had was that it was pulling out all these old bits of me, all these old parts that did not serve me any more, old cobwebs.

They were pulled up and across the ocean and were scattered.

Why did the grandmother return at this moment on the mountain? Were there other unwanted parts of cobwebs that still needed to be removed? Why was the pure memory of that momentous death being evoked for some reason then?

Rowena had very strong death associations on the mountain. Three of these have been briefly mentioned earlier. One was her ‘death camp’ feeling that was triggered through childhood abuse:

Walking up that mountain is like being marched back into a death camp for me. It felt to me that I was being led back into the woods by my stepfather, who was a wicked and evil man.

The second concerned the premature deaths of two of her children:

When not one, but two, of our babies died soon after birth, it was for me, a confirmation that I was indeed being punished for something very bad that I had done.

It is interesting that the language Rowena uses in relation to these tragic deaths and her own ways of coping also implicate death:

It was also another nail in the coffin I was making for myself in trying so hard to be the best mother in the whole world, that I was actually killing myself in the attempt. No one could measure up to be what I had set myself to be.

Finally, there had been a near-death bus accident for her and a group of school students:

No one knows that my whole ordeal began six years ago when a school bus that I was on nearly crashed over a cliff on a mountain road. We all thought that we would die that day and the experts told me that what I was suffering from afterwards was Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

... So here I am, driving myself up another bloody mountain road, I must be out of my mind! The road is rough and rocky, at one stage there is even a tree in the road, I can't believe I'm driving on this road. Any minute now, I expect the car to pitch itself over the side for no reason at all and then we'll all die.

Where's my peaceful feeling? Gone. Abandoned again. I think I didn't breathe the whole way up there.

All of these situations involving death or a fear of death affected Rowena while she was on the mountain, each one compounding the initial trauma. It was as if they were all triggered at different times on the mountain, compounding her fear and distress. Was this so unusual? Perhaps not, considering her background, yet she was not the only one who was in touch with death issues. Once death issues were triggered in her, was it more plausible that death associations would be more present in her, hence projected as psychological contents in various situations? Take for example, Rowena's interpretation of what was occurring on the Teaching Rock:

We were sitting between absolute death and Uncle Max. Max was on one side, and we were on the other, and the sheer drop to death was on the other side. We were between the two.

It was hard to pay attention to Uncle Max's teaching because it was like, 'if you don't listen and get this, you're going to die, you're going to die; I'm here teaching you this stuff and if you turn away from me and go that way, you die'. And his teaching was all about respecting the land, respecting the earth.

I would like to comment on two aspects of her comments. In stating that 'we were between the two... absolute death and Uncle Max'—it is as if Rowena has immediately inculcated the teachings of the Three Rocks given by Uncle Max earlier. Perhaps she may have been thinking at this time, that yes, The Teaching Rock was up very high, and yes, there was a dangerously steep drop off the edge, but to express it in these terms, as 'between the two', is a direct encapsulation of the earlier teachings. This is how she later described that particular teaching:

The Three Rocks, one on top of the other. Yeah, I've got pictures of those ones: where you've been and where you are now and where you're going. Pay attention to where you are. They resonated for me because at that time I was so heavily into looking back to where I'd come from—still processing all those memories; in order to process it, I had to go back there. Much of my days I was actually spending living in the past—the only way I could process.

Also, rather than being specifically about personal fear of her own death in this place high up on The Teaching Rock, Rowena may be referring to a broader sense of humanity turning away from the earth in its lack of respect, turning away from Indigenous knowing about the earth that will result in death of the land.

It may be purely coincidental that Michael died exactly to the day two years after the day he was on the mountain. Or could it have been significant? Uncle Max seemed to think so, in terms of believing that his spirit had been healed when he had been on the mountain with the group. And let us not forget that the day he was labouring up the mountain, I had a very strong premonition that the strenuous walk could kill him. Obviously, there was something about death that was influencing me that day. I have not had before this time with Michael nor since, feelings about anyone's potential death.

It is rather intriguing why there was a confluence of these fear–death feelings, death experiences and associations that occurred for all participants on Mt. Gulaga. It is also interesting that the theme of death is so prevalent in several of my own land-based experiences.

d. Releasing fear as a healthy practice

In Chapter Four Uncle Max refers to an Indigenous method of traditional teaching when young men are being taken through Law. This is the deliberate intensifying of fear or tension in order to produce a greater release—in the particular case he was referring to, this release was through blood-letting in the initiation of young men.

The young fellas are goin' out, see, and they don't know what's comin' up, see, cause they are goin' through some secret-sacred ceremony, see. And before they go through that, see, their mind is focused on what's gonna happen, they don't know what's gonna happen, and they can't ask the fellas that have been through—those fellas become the aggressors and they say 'come on, don't even look around, don't speak'.

And because all that becomes discipline, right. So if they can just sit there, it's not, 'what's happenin' next?', or 'could this happen?', and all that causes a lot of tension and a lot of worry and anxiety.

Could it be that, traditionally, all those approaching the mountain, to enter into sacred/secret teachings, were naturally in fear? After all, they were approaching Creation Mountain, source of all life. Meeting the potency of such a place could readily reveal the awe, power and might of such a sacred site, let alone the fear of what would be entailed in the initiation process itself.

Van Gennep, in his examination of rites of passage across many cultures, came to the conclusion that all initiation rituals involve death: the blood-letting or circumcision rites that define initiation are a kind of death—the death of the old immature self, who becomes transformed through that act into a responsible adult community member (van Gennep 1960, pp. 86-92). So it appears that fear and death go hand in hand in these circumstances.

Uncle Max states that the deliberate intensification of fear in the initiates forces them to release that fear, as an ongoing healthy mechanism, both for the individual, the group and the whole culture. It also serves to heighten the final release of painful physical endurance as part of blood-letting in circumcision.

Because it's released all that they have been building up and holding and then starting to get rid of by sitting there... Oh it becomes so good for them, it strengthens them in every department of discipline!

A question needs to be asked as to whether Uncle Max deliberately induces fear in the whitefellas for a similar purpose.

I doubt this. In my years of observing groups that Uncle Max has led, I have never witnessed a deliberate initiation of fear in the group; nor does he escalate fear if and when it does arise. If anything, he quells that fear. What he does do is inject respect in others for his role and knowledge, and that of his culture. Uncle Max may rely on a traditional method with whitefellas by not informing them in advance what will occur,

so the element of secrecy, of surprise, is deliberate. This may, of course, initiate fear in some persons and especially those ones who are more vulnerable because they already hold a lot of fear, such as Rowena and Michael.

However, it must be noted, that entering into the unknown world of Indigenous Australians may induce fear in the individual in his/her own right, especially in the politically loaded arena of black–white relations in Australia today. To be taken to a sacred place, especially an Aboriginal sacred place, to be taken through ceremony and particular rituals of entering in to that site, may imbue each participant with excitement, anxiety and a sense of awe. Anne expressed this in a particularly astute way:

A well... a strong spiritual presence forged between humans and the land

... the enormity of being there

... spiritual matters I do not understand, that are bigger than me

I better go in with the right attitude, but could I?

... A shock for me to meet my spiritual smallness

When people are out of their depth in unfamiliar cultural terrain, fear is often prevalent. Rowena speaks about her fear, not only driving down to the south coast, but also on the first night in being part of the group. This is apart from her moving in and out of intense fear when she re-experiences her traumas, as described earlier; likewise, Michael's terror in reliving Vietnam on the mountain. Margarita does not call it fear, but expresses concern as to how she is to be with an Elder, and how to be with a group. Her concern could be termed a mild form of fear. Anne's fear is overwhelming, initially.

Let us speculate about the mountain and the prevalence of fear. Here is a place that fear has been visited upon for millennia. Could not we non-Indigenous persons also be moved into that same sense of fear, the traces of which were laid down over millennia? Is it possible for something as palpable as fear to be imprinted on the land? Pogacnik (1997) and Devereux (1992) I am sure would lean towards this as not mere speculation.

Alternatively, does the energy of the mountain intensify already intense feelings/psychological dispositions?

In either case, there appear to be far more issues implicated than a person's own psychological projections. The presence of the mountain is a force to be acknowledged in this discussion. Mt. Gulaga is a healing mountain. Is this process about healing? Uncle Max puts a lot of store on self-healing as well as the importance of releasing emotions:

So always the culture is kept healthy by working at release. Cause that's a cultural thing, see, it's a living part of the culture, it's so important for them to be able to talk about some stuff that's sittin' in on them.

It seems as if all of the participants had strong emotional releases on the mountain. This could be a part of each person's health as well as health for the culture as a whole, as enunciated by Uncle Max. Does the intensity of the experience have to be exacerbated in order for healing to erupt through into consciousness? Is it not possible that strong emotional release in order to open oneself up to healing is being enacted on the mountain, by the mountain? Is there a template here that seeps into the consciousness of those who are opened up to it, mediated by an Elder?

In one sense, Uncle Max see his teaching role in assisting the release of emotional contents as bringing the responsibility for that emotional release back onto that person:

See, I getting them to learn to do their own counselling, see. And doin' their self-counselling and doin' their self-healing.

Ungunmerr inserts the notion of allowing things their own time for healing:

We watch the bush foods and wait for them to ripen before we gather them. We wait for our young people as they grow, stage by stage, through their initiation ceremonies. When a relation dies, we wait a long time with the sorrow. We own our grief and allow it to heal slowly (Ungunmerr in Stockton 1995, pp. 179-84).

Is there some type of intelligent collaboration occurring for those people who really need healing, when they come to the Healing Mountain? Is something triggered for them when they are on the mountain that facilitates their healing?

We are examining now the notion of the land with its own psychological contents, with its own agency, which are erupted into human consciousness. If so, then perhaps a person's own psychological makeup is then added to the mix, to create a complex intensification of emotional drama enacted towards some form of healing mechanism in that interface between human and the land.

e. Land as influencing, intelligent presence

Both Rowena and Michael, as mentioned earlier, had been subjected to a disconnection from the land, very long-term for Rowena, since her initial trauma was in childhood, but more recent for Michael, dating from his time in the Vietnam war.

Margarita, too, was experiencing a disconnection from the land when she came to the mountain, yet hers was not derived from fear, trauma, or the facing of the possibility of death, but more the dislocation from having strong emotional ties to another country she had recently left. Her words to describe this state were of being 'barred out from the land', this land, Australia—unaccepted, or being treated as a foreigner by the land:

I was like a cat clawing at the glass. I couldn't get through—it was a ten-inch glass, and I was looking at the land, and I couldn't feel anything.

As a person who usually has a deep and abiding relationship with the place of her birth, and a strong practitioner of movement/dance in natural environments, this 'barring' was in itself very disturbing and quite intense. The words she has used also give us a very vivid representation of exactly what that feeling is like to be blocked by the land.

In *Desire for Centring*, I, too, was blocked by the land; but it was not that I couldn't feel anything. That blocking catapulted me into crisis and extreme emotional states. The 'ten-inch glass' screen keeping me separate from close intimate contact with the land

was initially how it felt in the Kimberleys in *Digging Beneath the Kimberley Skin* before I felt the land soften and open itself to me.

In contrast to the other participants' accounts, Margarita's overall experience on the mountain was not intense, but more one of detachment:

And even then on the mountain, I could not say that I felt connected at a conscious level.

She knows how, and is used to engaging with a place. So to be vague and numb and disconnected would have been very distressing. The question needs to be asked, whether Margarita's experience on the mountain is solely a response to her own psychological inner state, or, in the light of what has been postulated earlier, that the mountain itself was a contributing factor also.

I refer back to Anne's experience just before entering the sacred sites. Perhaps this was a form of blocking, too, or a 'barring', as Margarita called it. In the face of all those emotionally overwhelming feelings in that moment, she may easily have decided to choose to run from the tangible prospect of death. Instead, she surrendered to the death place, the real possibility of her impending death, which appeared to then open the door for her permission to enter the sites and in so doing, survive. Was she then granted permission by the mountain to enter? Anne has a definite sense of the influencing presence of the mountain when she declares, as stated earlier:

The mountain walked me up—I had a sense of the mountain walking me up—I don't know how to describe that, really. I would say that the mountain was tolerant of me, tolerant of my ignorance, and walked me up anyway. I felt like I had permission to be there.

Let me refer to *Desire for Centring*, where there, too, I postulated the land as central player, as protagonist in a drama that was not going to admit my presence until I somehow surrendered or faced up to the death place. Once I did really face my impending death, life seemed to welcome me back. I also had to follow the protocol of respect, endemic to the cultural lineage of this land. I was tested as to if I had

sufficiently inculcated these teachings of respect to be worthy of this land opening to me, accepting my presence. In this journey of ‘meeting country’ there seems to be two levels of teaching operating: one from the land itself that links strongly with personal or psychological issues particular to me at that time; and the other from my long-term teachings from Uncle Max.

The notion of whether place chooses to reveal itself, and to whom and when, has been raised earlier in the discussion. In *Digging Beneath the Kimberley Skin*, it was only after several days of being in the country with an Elder, the proper and traditional way to enter into country, that ordinary rocks became transformed for me into spirit beings; whirlpools became living entities, and rock paintings began to communicate. It was not possible to record via audio tape some of my stories there.

Doing movement practice in certain sites may require weeks or months or years for that place to reveal itself, if it ever does.

Anne was unable to speak of her experience in the teaching sites of Mt. Gulaga. Her sense was that she was not given permission to speak. Permission from whom? The mountain? Uncle Max? Aboriginal spirits of that place?

Margarita was unable to take photos on Mt. Gulaga. Who or what was preventing her? She acknowledges that ‘the mountain was working on me’. This is the mountain having its own presence, similarly identified by Anne.

Rowena was the only one in the group to have seen spirit presences—‘them Old Fellas’—on the mountain. She did not speak about this to anyone until one of our conversations much later to the event. What was it about her that enabled her to see such presences? Uncle Max refers to these presences:

It was probably the calling, the Old Fellas that were around, see. ‘Cause I said, ‘You know, just watch those Old Fellas that are around, ‘cause they can pull you right away’.

Spirit presences are a given in Uncle Max's world, so had he known about Rowena's visitation, he would not have been in the least surprised:

So that kind of stuff when dealing with the unseen spirits, but it's a knowing that it's there, you know, just a quick flash. You are going through the motions of feeling all the stuff, see, and seeing it sorta, and that gives you a better understanding what you are dealing with, you know.

So there seems to be a very individual factor in the nexus between person and land, both from the point of view of the person, and from the point of view of the land.

Perhaps the potency of the site is an added consideration. Not all places are the same. Uncle Max states, 'Ah, there are some special places'. No doubt due to its importance in the mythology, cultural practices and psyche of Yuin people, and in addition its spiritual significance, make Mt. Gulaga a place of great spiritual potency. If the inherent energy is very strong in a place, then perhaps the experience will be very strong, too.

In any case, land is being recognised here as having intelligent presence. Could this not be the intelligence that Stanner has referred to as 'the enduring plan of life...' for Aboriginal people, 'the apparent evidence of design in the world; design in the sense of pattern, shape, form, structure; given design that seemed to them [Aboriginals] to point to intent' (Stanner 1979, p. 114)? Or is it more akin to Mathews' adoption of the animation of matter by spirit:

If land is expanded to encompass the concrete given-all that is actual in a physical sense-then...spirit animates the given rather than existing in the realm of the abstract, so we connect with spirit by engaging—and not unnecessarily interfering—with the given (Mathews 2005, p. 48).

Anne had an awareness of 'a strong spiritual presence that had been forged between humans and the land' on Mt. Gulaga, which she described as a 'well', indicating the depth of the lineage:

I actually feel there has been a strong relationship between Koori people and that area over time and there is much that I would not understand that has been placed there in terms of protection.

This certainly pertains to Uncle Max's acknowledgment of special sites as well as the potency of Anne's own experiences on the mountain through which this knowledge and understanding came.

Let us turn to some of the teaching sites on the mountain to see if any sites evoked a particular or more general response.

f. The specificity of a teaching site

Within the sacred mountain, the teaching sites that are located here own certain teachings within a line of interconnected teachings. It is up to the Elder to draw out these teachings for students. Over my many years of being present at these teachings, I have observed that Uncle Max represents each teaching place in a very similar fashion, with a core of unassailable teachings, rarely diverted from, but elaborated in a different way at times.

A certain teaching site, The Pregnant Woman Rock, evoked in Rowena her role as a mother and the loss of her babies:

... confirmation in defence of my children

... mothering as a mission

... my babies were still with me

That same site evoked in Margarita her own broken relationship in America, hence the finality of no childbearing with that man, and also recalled another relationship with a man earlier in Australia, who subsequently had had a child with another woman.

Rowena and Margarita described a strong-bodied reaction to The Energy or Healing Rock teaching. For Rowena:

I felt a buzzing vibration right up my arm... sent a wave of something through me. I felt it go through me.

Margarita felt the rock as light:

...this light, a white light, but it's not an earthly light... and it was so bright and it was in my eyes. And the rock was warm and soft in a way. Bizarre. And I was just totally in this light and having this feeling, so clear.

Michael had a particularly strong connection with the whale rock.

Anne was unable and unwilling to refer to any specific teaching sites on the mountain, but referred to her experience overall as one of 'deep awe', and was at pains not to 'dissipate... the sanctity of the place' through speaking about it.

Rowena's reaction to the whole site released her from the panic she had been experiencing to date:

...this place is somehow blessed in such a way...that it can quell my fears. The fear can't mix, like trying to add water to a place that's oily.

It is obvious that even though a particular site holds specific teachings, as revealed by the Elder, there will be some type of association or personal identification with that site as well. I refer now, in this connection, to Margarita, whose relationship with the teaching site of The Three Rocks arose after her day on the mountain. At the time, she had no strong reaction at all:

And of course the Three Rocks: the before life, this life, the afterlife rocks. The interesting thing about them, was that there in the moment, there was not necessarily any really strong experiences. I was just open and sat there listening and absorbing it.

Once she started to experience anxiety and stress, several weeks later, the image of The Three Rocks on the mountain immediately came into her mind:

I guess it is like a visualisation, I feel like I have a photograph in my memory... I was quite strongly seeing the form of the Middle Rock, which was so clearly contained by the Rock on the Earth, the 'before life'. It had a clear outline, obviously the energy of it could expand and contract, but the actual substance outline of it was very clear.

The 'now-this life', was shaped and contained by the 'afterlife', pointing up to the sky. Even the shape of the rock is reaching upwards.

So when I have felt challenged, the containment of the 'here and now', this life in that form tells me that I'm not trapped in what's happening now. It's something about its position in relation to the other two. One reminds me of where I've come from and the afterlife one kind of gives me hope of moving on to something else.

It was very soothing, very calming, because I felt those things so quickly when I visualised it the very first time. I then have chosen to use it often, because the effect was so clear to me then. And every time I have used it, it's had a very calming effect.

Given that there are specific teachings on the mountain, which then tend to resonate with individuals by drawing to the surface certain life events or emotions, are any of the participants able to make sense of this? Margarita had obviously given this aspect of her experience some thought:

The essence of it, particularly in relation to Uncle Max, is very humbling. There is a knowledge, a wisdom, a teaching, that has been there for so long, that goes so far back, that on the one hand it can make me feel very small and humble, and nothing in this life.

This meaning is reminiscent of Anne's 'smallness of the human... the smallness of spirit... the severing of my lineage' in the face of 'the tallness of his spirit... in connection with the lineage'. Her own cultural shame manifested strongly.

Back to Margarita:

I think inseparable in that there is some kind of teaching that is coming through it—that is there, it's kind of its essence, it is what it is.

And I think too there is that thing of inner/outer, like the environment is my mirror, that it's reflecting back who I am or what I need. So how much of me is projecting on to the rocks, and how much is the pure teaching?

This is fascinating, that Margarita has identified three separate strands that impact one's experience on the mountain: the first is the lineage of the teachings themselves, that come through the Elder; the second is what she calls the 'essence' of that particular teaching site; third, is the notion of place reflecting back 'who I am' or 'what I need'.

Her final question, 'So how much of me is projecting on to the rocks, and how much is the pure teaching?' deals exactly with that complexity with which we have been grappling throughout the discussion.

g. Birthing

It was many months later that Margarita was urged to draw the Three Rocks with herself sitting in the middle one:

I started to draw today. I drew first the images I had about sitting in the rock. These drawings are all black and white, no colour, unusual for me. The first one is the Middle Rock, me in it. The dark border is the outside edge of the rock. it's the 'now' rock, the rock I constantly returned to.

As I was drawing it today, I was thinking 'God that rock is so big—she [me] is taking up all the space, like edge to edge in the rock'. I felt so much smaller. If you turn over, this is what I really felt like.

When I drew that, this other feeling came up, of wanting to rest in that rock, be in that rock, and wanting to be in a foetal position... I have not done the drawing yet...

Why would she be wanting to draw herself as a foetus in the rock? Is she alone in this depiction? Certainly, no-one else spoke of imaging themselves in this manner, but it is relevant to notice the emerging theme to do with birthing or giving birth that arose not only in the languaging of participants on the mountain, but also in my own writing.

First to Anne. It was she who, in expressing the whole mountain experience as the strongest experience in her life, likened her reaction, immediately afterward, to childbirth:

I think that was the strongest experience I've ever had in my life. If I were to describe it in one word: deep awe, deep awe. Even the fear seemed irrelevant somehow.

The fear of death seemed minor and what I can say is that afterwards I could not stop shaking. It was extraordinary, all I could do was sit down and weep and shake.

In a funny kind of way, it reminds me of the weeping and shaking after childbirth. With my second birth, my whole body was really shaking and I was weeping and crying, you couldn't describe it as happy or sad, it was a mix of feeling.

Perhaps this is not such an unusual bodily reaction, considering Anne had probably been in a state of shock following her confrontation with the real possibility of her death.

Post- birth could also be described as a body in shock. We could put her response down to this... Yet, how interesting it is that she spontaneously chooses to use the analogy of giving birth in this context.

Rowena, when referring to a site on the mountain where Uncle Max spoke about an important teaching given to him, described it thus: 'the whole place looked like a giant vagina', and then added that it seemed to her that Uncle Max was 'returning back to the womb' when he spent several days in that place.

We can return here to Margarita to find that notions of birth are strongly in her consciousness. For a start, she was able to note a link between two places—Gulaga and

Fraser Island. Certain teachings that she was given on Fraser were related intimately with those teachings of The Three Rocks from Gulaga. The place on Fraser where she received these teachings was a sand dune blowout called a sandblow. In her words, this sandblow was just like a womb:

The form, the shape of the place, was very much like entering into a womb.

She is also able to recognise her own disconnectedness in America as linked with it not being the place of her birth:

It made me feel how important the spirit of the place is, the spirit of the land, and something about the spirit of Australia, where I was born.

I'm born in the residence of this land. This is my place of birth. That's what I felt like at the time in America. I could not quite get it. I always connected, but there was something that was missing... and I always felt it was partly the amazing energy of this land and very much because this is where I am born.

I was carried in my mother's womb here and born into this energy. It's what you know—you've been sleeping it, breathing it, eating it, drinking it, from dot. Here. Even before you are born, your mother is sending it to you, through her cells. I believe it is vibration that is here and you just receive it on an unconscious level.

That's what I couldn't feel in America, the vibration. There's an essence of vibration, a core essence, that was not me, because I wasn't born there. That was the piece that was missing.

Is this one important factor for all of us? That the land that births us will have some energetic 'core essence', some 'essence of vibration' that identifies us as belonging to that land?

Rowena certainly shares this sense of the importance of one's place of birth:

... my relationship to my land [America] before I left home was not good at best, non-existent at its worst. Now that I have eyes to see it, I feel great compassion and sadness to see what has become of it and its inhabitants.

Do I feel that I belong more to this place than to the other? No. I'm inextricably bound to both places now.

I wish that I could leave the other place behind and forget about it, but I can't. It spawned me. How does one forget about one's own mother?

For Michael, once he was able to recognise the sacred meaning of places in Australia, through his exposure to the mountain and Uncle Max's teachings, all places then automatically shared that sense of the sacred for him. Within this worldview, acknowledgment of his own birthplace, America, too found its place:

I am already nurturing the longing to look again upon my Atlantic from my beaches.

And I use 'my' not in the sense of private possession, but in the sense of unique personal identification with what has shaped me as a 'Floridian'.

And Anne, of course, knew that she had been mothered by the land of her birth, literally and metaphorically:

The bush was my mother, my bigger mother, and even though I couldn't comprehend that in my mind, all I knew was that I loved to be down there.

... So I came to love all the many life forms around me, even the ones I was scared of. I didn't mind feeling afraid of seeing a snake, it was kind of like a fear I looked forward to. There was in me an acceptance of all these things that I did not have in my human existence. So, for me, this is more my natural home.

It is not just that the site of one's birth is definitive for Margarita, since she uses the whole analogy of conception, labour and childbirth to explain her psychological journey of the last few years:

It's like it started there in a way—it took me back to a womb. I went out from that in America, through the turmoil. Maybe that was the passageway of birth over in America, life and death all in one—and maybe I am only now in a different part of the cycle now.

Perhaps leaving America and coming back here was the final last movement or exit from the birth passage. The wrenching away, the disconnection, just floating in space here. It must be what it's like when you go from being in your mother's womb to being out in the world. It would be very dislocating...

Are all these conjunctions merely coincidental? Recall that Gulaga is a women's mountain; that she is sometimes referred to as a Birthing Mountain, as Creation Mountain. There is a white quartz umbilical cord still attaching the mother mountain with her two sons that we walk on when we climb up the mountain. Does this mountain evoke birthing notions within all of us? Or is it specifically a female evocation?

And what of my own focus on birthing in my essays? Yes, certainly having given birth and being of the age to no longer be capable of such, may make me keener to explore this topic in general, but is that an adequate explanation?

Desire for Centring although appearing to focus on death, has a very strong birth and rebirth corollary. In being pared back or broken down by my gross exposure to this extreme desert country, some new essence is revealed in me following a death-like state. Is this not similar to Margarita's enunciation of America, the 'passageway of birth over in America, life and death all in one?'

The glass snake sculpture I made in the desert was symbolic of that rebirth—the one I made in red dirt and left on my lounge room carpet for several weeks kept that notion close to me.

In the Literature Review, Stanner articulated the Aboriginal world view that places 'vitality, fertility and growth' at the heart of the corpus of Indigenous knowledge:

The whole religious corpus vibrated with an expressed aspiration for life, abundant life. Vitality, fertility and growth; the conservation, production, protection and rescue of life: themes such as these seem to be widely implicit and, in some notable regional cases, quite explicit (Stanner 1979, p. 119).

If there is such an insistence throughout Aboriginal thought/philosophy on fecundity and creation, then being on strong Aboriginal country may draw this out strongly. If then the mountain is a specific teaching site of birthing (Birthing Mountain and Creation Mountain), then the 'explicit' nature of such insistence might be even stronger.

h. Ongoing teachings of the mountain

It was noted at the beginning of the discussion on birthing that Margarita only received teachings from the mountain several weeks after being there. They spontaneously arose in her at a time of intense stress. I would like to investigate this a little further to see if others and my own experiences indicate that the teachings themselves may continue way beyond the initial event.

Margarita's words echo the specifics of Uncle Max's teachings around the mountain. He always mentions that 'the mountain will call you back, physically, emotionally or spiritually':

You reminded me what Uncle Max said, that the mountain will call you back, in all sorts of ways.

But I didn't register it. I think I literally thought, yeah, I'll go back to the mountain.

I suddenly registered, Oh I don't have to go there—I am going there. I'm not physically, literally, going there, but it's already calling me back.

Psychologically and emotionally, the mountain, as Margarita described it, was 'working on me'. What it managed to do for her was calm her immediately and locate and ground her through imaging herself in relation to those Three Rocks. She had no doubt the role

that the mountain and Uncle Max's teachings had on her ability to settle back into this land that had until then been blocking her out:

I always felt external until I went to the mountain with Uncle Max...

... I always felt then that something turned in my experience, something shifted. I knew the mountain was working on me when I came away from it, but I did not know how, because I couldn't feel it.

... There is a lot of energy around that association. It's like going back, that image hooks me in even at an unconscious level, to my emotions.

Knowing Margarita had been 'barred out by the land', knowing she was in a very raw and vulnerable state in any case, was her experience on the mountain with the Elder and his teachings all part of her healing process, a gesture towards enabling her to feel once more at home on this land?

It is Michael who has restored to him, through his teaching experiences, the forgotten language of a Divine landscape:

For me, it was like Uncle Max was providing the grammar, syntax and vocabulary of a forgotten language—he gave me something which made it possible to reclaim and articulate my own sacred connection to the land.

Once 'reclaimed', the sacred was imbued in the land once again, as all of 'God's plan...the universal sacredness' inherent in all places:

... a oneness in God's plan and a oneness of humanity... which I see as PART of God's plan.

... It has made it possible for me to experience Australia not just as an exciting, foreign place 'down under', but to experience it as sharing in the sacred meaning of another, and a discovery of it that makes it sacred – not foreign – to me.

The first concrete result of this is that I shall always be able to consider Australia as 'home': far from family, the familiar and old friends, but filled with new and wonderful people, places and things which can never again be entirely foreign.

A vision of the world as sacred, where identity and home have been identified as 'sharing in the sacred meaning of another, and a discovery of it that makes it sacred, not foreign, to me' certainly seems to me to constitute the ongoing nature of the teachings' continuance and relevance in another time, another land.

Back on this land, Anne's ongoing relationship with the mountain takes several forms, all of them underlined by a permanent connection not only to the place, but to the interrelationship between all things, what she refers to as 'that spiritual connection' to which she is slowly awakening:

I feel a protectiveness for that area. I don't go around saying, 'Oh, I've been to Mt. Gulaga'. I feel quite protective... it goes beyond feelings. There's a felt sense of having met in a place where that connection is there always—at some level I can never forget.

In view of the language Anne used earlier in referring to the 'protection' afforded to the mountain by its Aboriginal custodians, and how she was 'protecting' herself from being a tourist and hence dissipating the sanctity of the site, her description of now feeling 'protectiveness' for that area, is perhaps not out of the ordinary. What I find more interesting is that, once the relationship was forged for Anne with the mountain, that connectedness remains with her always: 'I can't be totally removed from it, having experienced it'. This is not dissimilar to Margarita and her Three Rocks—once the relationship was forged on the mountain, she was able to tap into that connection.

There is some inculcation of the mountain into Anne's being. How does it manifest? With protectiveness and a certain wariness, too, that may produce fear. It is that fear that confirms to Anne that she has once again gone through the teachings on the mountain, if not in person, then through mind:

I've felt fear in relation to the mountain too—that's been around my ignorance:

'Oh, what moved me to do that?

Was that ok to do that?

Can I trust that?'

In going through that process, I feel like I've gone through teachings, even though I'm not there.

Such a process confirms Uncle Max's dictum that 'the mountain will call you back', and registers yet another voice of fear engendered in relation to the mountain, one of my first themes for discussion in this section. However, there is more than the fear aspect that the mountain continues to teach Anne:

I've really taken on board opening my senses, to be aware of the teachings all around me, and that the teachings are there, if only I pay attention. And with that comes respect, as well as paying attention.

... I use the word awakening, a slow awakening. The awakening to the interrelationship between all things, that spiritual connection.

Uncle Max refers to an 'awakening' through his own teachers—perhaps not a 'slow awakening' like Anne, but an awakening nonetheless:

And some of what they showed me and taught me about, I had to go and look for—'if you go out there, out that way you'll see this there for yourself'.

That was a couple of trips out to different areas, 'cause I could feel the presence of what they were telling me, but I couldn't see it until an awakening came then something really big would happen.

Then I would see what they were tellin' me, so crystal clear, no mistaking that that area there was what they was talkin' about.

For Anne to open her senses is to be like dragonfly:

Yes, like dragonfly, I can have a larger vision, a larger hearing, a larger sense of feeling.

In this place, Anne can communicate with a wider world:

It's important for me to understand where I'm coming from with this. I think once I used to think it was hubris to imagine that kookaburra is speaking to me, but to me, that's just normal now. The whole world is speaking. Speaking is not probably the right word—we connect and we don't connect.

4. The Process of Facilitating Others into a Deep Engagement with Place: The Cross-cultural Dialogic Process

I would like to say more about the impact of the specific role of the Elder, Uncle Max Harrison, and the potency of his particular leadership, along with the potency of the land on which he teaches, both of which contribute to an understanding of the cross-cultural process of dialogue that is at the centre of the engagement.

How does this process of facilitating others into a deep engagement with place work?

For most people embarking on a weekend journey with Uncle Max, this is the first Aboriginal person they have met, let alone received teachings from. This is significant in itself. From a white space/place-dominant colonial perspective, where 'I am Australian', 'this is my land', 'this is my country', tends to express our comfortable (or not-so-comfortable) relationship and ownership of this land, exposure to an Aboriginal person's knowledge, stories and perspective can be unsettling, to say the least.

However, what is also obvious is that participants in my research have an interest in and a desire to learn from an Aboriginal person. Could they be the 'enlightened minority' of Dodson, 'who have been willing to open their eyes and ears to allow the space for Aboriginal people to convey their Aboriginalities' (Dodson 2003, p. 28). Already, the

so-called norm of white Australia, that cultural adjustment has been mostly one-sided, has been tempered by this willingness. Recall the words of Trudgen in this regard:

If the dominant culture trained its professionals in the Yolgnu language, Yolgnu world view and Yolgnu cultural knowledge base... then Yolgnu would not have to do all the hard work to cross the cultural knowledge barrier (Trudgen 2000, p. 120).

It is not that participants are having to learn another language, but they are knowingly accepting the provocation to be exposed to another cultural knowledge base. They are inviting in an alternative worldview that may have all types of loaded personal and political associations. From the perspective of Mosquito, 'too long people not listening to women... Not listening to Aboriginal people' (Mosquito in Crugnale 1995, p. xv).

In fact, I believe an unhinging takes place, as soon as one enters into the teachings. The feelings might be expressed something like this: 'I do not know this land, nor do I own it. I am now foreigner who knows nothing. I am also in Yuin country, Uncle Max's country. I am following strange and difficult protocols.' In this place where pre-existing beliefs, knowledge and understandings are suspended, a liminal space (Turner 1990, p. 12) is opened, a place between worlds where not only is time irrelevant, but a receptivity, an openness and a vulnerability appear, perhaps more conducive to the influx of the unfamiliar. The above dialogue may continue like this: 'I may hold to my rational Western way of seeing the world for some time, but the teachings slowly and inexorably insinuate into my being'. And the dislodging of the normal world, of reality as we know it, begins its work.

a. Power of stories, both personal and from the land

On the one hand, we have the presence of a very skilled imparter of knowledge, with an authority that few if any dispute; and on the other hand, we have an inveterate storyteller. Uncle Max draws on a broad and deep narrative, both personal and cultural, in order to illustrate many of the teachings. In this telling of story, he weaves in the listener through his heartfelt expression and authenticity. These are his stories, his

Dreaming, belonging to him, his country, his mob. Whether it be the story of the massacre on Bawley Point, with us on the site and picturing the events as they happened, his dingo stories, or hearing of how the 'Old Fellas' taught him, or the one about how he almost lost his arm to medical intervention, we are drawn in and captivated by the narrative. This, in turn, opens the heart and minds of participants, as they feel a personal connection with the stories and the storyteller, and of course, the land from which this story has sprung.

Stories tap into emotions. This comes across strongly to the group as we are taken on a roller-coaster with Uncle Max: now laughing, now grieving, now sombre and contemplative, now reflective. He guides us easily from one transition to another, from the superficial joke-sharing to the deep spiritual truths of a sacred site. Whenever the intensity is too much, he shifts the emphasis. It is in the new, the unknown, which is revealed, that takes people by surprise and draws them in to know further: one plant that is an intoxicant, another that produces the strongest glue; the communication between plants, animals and humans; the Sydney basin is Whale Dreaming; the way Wind spirit can be called up. All these Aboriginal ways of knowing are being shared with those whom one would imagine to be the last people any Aboriginal would want to share: white Australians.

As the stories unfold, we are confronted by our shameful past/present. The bare facts are unassailable: when we view the mountain that was an important high energy point of communication between tribes utterly destroyed with a microwave communication tower erected in its place; when we see the litter and pollution clogging waterways and are told of the ecological balance due to the way foods were harvested traditionally; of how Uncle Max and his young relatives were sent off with specific instructions for catching muttonfish, through which they had to figure out the meaning of sustainability; when we hear the stories of the harsh and unjust treatment of the missions and the tragic breaking up of families through government policies; the stealing of children and the fleeing of Uncle Max's family when their totem, the black duck, warned of the white coming abductions. In all of this outrage, we cringe to be white. If these stories are new to that person, then unsettling emotions may lead to further unhinging of the self.

Rose provides a salient comment on our white problematic in this type of facing up through her articulation of an ethics needed for decolonisation:

... we cannot help knowing that we are here through dispossession and death. What does this mean for us and for country? What alternatives exist for us, and what is asked of us? (Rose 2004, p. 6).

But even then, Uncle Max is not intending these stories to diminish any of us, to lay blame or guilt. He is telling us his truth, and although the rawness of the burden is almost too much to bear at times, instead of separating the individual from Uncle Max, it tends to make them closer through compassion and empathy. Is this a deliberate ploy of his, to resist making people feel uncomfortable about what we whites have brought to bear on this land? Could it be that he knows only too well that people under attack tend to shut down or go into defensive mode, thus blocking the advance of any new teachings? I am sure he is not sympathetic with Prime Minister John Howard's 'black armband' view of history, wherein all Australians are coaxed to feel at ease, even 'comfortable and relaxed' with our history (Howard in Attwood and Foster 2003, p. 13). I veer towards the former explanation, knowing that Uncle Max is not only a skilled group leader understanding the intricate nature of group dynamics, but also has understandings of people in general, perhaps due to his long-term education of whites and people of other cultural backgrounds. He has chosen to teach with a different emphasis, one that rarely alienates through blame, but encourages understanding through valorising the other, yet still revealing the history as it must be told.

It is Anne, more so than the other research participants, who articulates the moral dilemma facing many whites in Australia today:

I was very aware of my unworthiness, partly connected with the history of the culture I'd come through: the domination, the desecration of the continuity of the culture, the rape of the land.

Her sense of unworthiness is expressed time and time again in the face of the lineage of what blacks had created on this land.

For my own writing, a strong thread in most of it embodies the confrontation of white person facing up to an insidious past/present. For both Anne and I exhibit what Rose defines as ‘a moral engagement of the past with the present’ where violence has to be acknowledged along with the ‘moral burden of that knowledge’ (Rose 2004, p13). For Anne, perhaps her moral burden cannot be hidden, since it is an expression of who she is in the world. My ethical stance emerged through my writing, through my experiences and through examining the literature. My moral burden forced its expression into my texts. As Rose says, ‘it follows that part of our moral burden is an injunction to hold the memory of violence within our texts. To write as if the suffering of those who were harmed never mattered would be to perpetuate violence in the present’ (Rose 2004, p. 14). My description of making the art installation in Digging Beneath the Kimberley Skin fits in with this type of ‘injunction’ Rose is speaking about:

The white sticks are carefully placed, joining the rest. I even place a paperbark root on a ledge; it looks just like the baby. There is much grief here, in the laying of the spirits to rest. I think of my own losses, those dear ones who I still grieve. This is an acknowledgment on a personal level, and yet the grief goes further, far beyond the personal. In laying these bones to rest, I am also representing all whites, for all the grief, all the damage we have wrought. I kneel before the ancient old rock face and ask forgiveness, over and over again. And finally, I allow my aching throat its freedom.

b. Foundational teachings that reconcile

The land begins to come alive with the memory of the stories it holds. We find consolation in the reminder from Uncle Max that all of us on this earth need reconciliation with the Mother, with Mother Earth. The type of reconciliation is a spiritual one. This teaching is emphasised time and time again: the unnatural separation between human and the rest of nature:

See we’ve all got to walk the land together, as I always say, breathe the same air, use the same water. So the more that non-Indigenous people go into the depths of spiritual connection with the land, they can look at Aboriginal sites through

white eyes and walk out of some of those places with black minds. And that, to me, is a form of reconciliation, you know, of the full understanding.

The localised teachings have ramifications far beyond the local, and tend to tap into broader notions connected with a sense of place and identity in Australia or anywhere else in the world, as illustrated by the experiences of Michael and Rowena. The teachings cannot be confined to one place and time. Sometimes they continue to inform months and years after the teaching experience, exemplified by the stories of Margarita and Anne.

The languaging Uncle Max uses when addressing ‘things’ of nature demands a reorientation, as one not only becomes accustomed to the terminology, but also begins to identify with them in the same way. ‘This fella’, in referring to a tree, an animal, a bird, a fish, immediately states a kin relationship, an acknowledgment of relationship. It is a gesture of respect to a relation that locates self in the natural world:

Then they [Koori men he has taught] can start to do things, start standing up and talking about spirit, start standing up and talk to a tree: ‘I talk to the waters, I talk to a rock’, you know, ‘and now I can see my spiritual connectedness to all my relations, the animals, the birds, the plants, the trees’.

It is not that he is just speaking about his relations in a detached theoretical manner. He is embracing them with love, respect and gratitude. It evinces in every gesture, every touch, every word. And we find ourselves adopting that loving reverential attitude as well, just slipping into it. At another time in conversation, Uncle Max again brought up the idea of our relatives in nature:

That imagery, of what the Old Fellas were trying to tell me, about that oneness. So when they pointed to the rock, they’d say, ‘do you think you’re different from that, or do you think you’re different from that tree there, or the moss on the rocks, or the other plants...?’

To participate in a world of consciously forged relationship further reinforces transformation into another world of being that is less human-centred. In this same vein,

Plumwood extols a 'partnership ethics', which 'means abandoning the tough hyper-rationalist stances that emphasise human superiority, reason, mastery, and manipulation' by 'more mutual, communicative and responsive ones' (Plumwood 2002a, pp. 11–12).

The fact that the teachings are on the land is also significant. Experiential teachings, where one is immersed in the experience, are very powerful and bring the known world into sharp relief. That is not to say that Uncle Max's teachings indoors are not very effective. I have witnessed the strength of their reception, particularly after a day out in the bush, when teachings can be drawn upon, memories jogged, learnings revisited. But Uncle Max holds emphatically to the belief that if one is going to enter deeply into country – to look through white eyes and walk out of some of those places with black minds' – then one needs to be on and with the land. This is of course the traditional way of teaching in Aboriginal culture. Uncle Max often names it as 'opening our third eye', which is also specifically addressed in the placing of ochre between the eyes when entering ceremony on Mt. Gulaga, sacred mountain of the Yuin nation.

Many of the instructions given by Uncle Max are to do with survival—knowledge unknown to most of we newcomers to this country. It is not knowledge most of us have ever had to know. If perhaps the overall teachings were still for some time accompanied by scepticism by participants, that scepticism I have rarely observed in groups, despite the fact that serious analytic juggling must take place in order to accommodate alien notions that turn the rational mind on its head. As Stanner said, 'one cannot easily, in the mobility of modern life and thought, grasp the vast intuitions of stability and permanence, and of life and man, at the heart of Aboriginal man' (Stanner 1979, pp. 25–8).

The other aspect of land-based experiential teachings is that they may open one up more immediately to the unseen world that is being exposed by Uncle Max's teachings. Rowena is shocked to see the Aboriginal spirit men all painted up on the rocks, and chooses to say nothing about it; Anne believes she will die if she enters into the mountain teachings; the huge tree falls before our very eyes; Margarita has a profound connection with a particular teaching on the mountain that echoes through her life months and years later.

A firmly entrenched Western way of seeing and knowing the world is being nudged out, perhaps even forcefully prised out in some cases. I contend that this occurs as a result of the dislocation of the new exposure to a different world. Perhaps this is the consciousness entertained by Said as one which ‘detaches itself from the dominant culture’ ...that strives to ‘know another culture in its own terms’ (Ashcroft 2001, p. 69). But this is not a product of a mental discourse, a purely cognitive function, as Said would have us believe. Here the text is the land, and Uncle Max as mediator between cultural worlds, is teaching how to ‘read, see and feel the sacred text of the land’. This affirms the exhortation in *Reading the Country*, that country needs to become text to be read and collectively produced, and even more so in the demand from the same source for a ‘new sensitivity... of people’s perception of the environment... through seeing the ‘already there’ in a quite different way (Benterrak 1996, pp. 12–13, 72).

c. Altered subjectivity through dislocation

I think this experience that non-Indigenous persons are going through on the land is an ‘altering of subjectivity’ like that demanded by Moreton-Robinson (2003, pp. 250–2) where one is placing oneself in the subject position of the other, in order to see the world through that other’s eyes, hence the ‘other’ becomes not-so-other. Once people are made uncomfortable, then subjectivity is no longer able to resist disruption, as was articulated in the Literature Review. I strongly suspect that being out on the land with Uncle Max, being exposed to these radically different worldviews, being out of a normal comfort zone, combined with what may emerge from a person’s own psychological predispositions and the potency of a particular site, dislodges Western understanding and opens to seeing the world ‘through black mind’, or ‘thinking black’ as Uncle Max and Stanner (1979, p. 25) would say.

I did ask a serious question in the Literature Review as to what the possible consequences of a detached consciousness might be: ‘Could this not lead to fragmentation of the self and be quite dislocating?’ Such a view of the experiences of people in my research could readily conclude that this is indeed what happened when they were on the mountain. However, as discussed at length earlier, the complexity of

the responses, the distinctiveness, yet also the similarity, of many of the themes that emerged tend to move me away from thinking along the lines of a pathological determination, to one more about health and healing in that nexus between humans, spirit and place.

d. Teaching practice

When Uncle Max teaches, he is inclusive, and whether that person is Catholic priest (he may be invited to share a prayer for the dead women and children at the massacre site), rigorously scientific (she may be invited to give the scientific explanation for a particular phenomenon), Jewish (similar terminology may be adopted by Uncle Max to show the similarities in the two bodies of knowledge), or young child (can be given a specific task to perform), each person is accepted and acknowledged in their own right. All religious beliefs can be embraced into the bosom of this person's Aboriginal knowing. Such a generosity of spirit in the face of the social/political/economic/environmental history and present-day circumstances of black–white relations on this land, is not lost, I am sure, on group participants.

There is another means whereby Uncle Max reiterates a particular teaching. This is to introduce it at one time and then return to it again, in a circular form of flow, cycling through a teaching in another context, even expressing it differently, but revisiting it nonetheless. He seems to stay very alert to whether the group has absorbed a teaching, and he often asks questions to determine this. I suspect this is linked to teaching Indigenous young men, whose readiness to go to the next higher level of teaching had to be ascertained by testing the knowledge already gained. It is also something I have experienced first hand through my teachings by Uncle Max, and also observed in his working with others.

A less overt role, but a very crucial one nonetheless, is where Uncle Max remains alert to those in the group who are particularly vulnerable, or those who require additional attention for a whole host of reasons. With those persons, he will seek out a time to speak with them on his own and give guidance and individualised teachings appropriate to their situation. It was Rowena and Margarita with whom spoke personally during the

journey; Michael and he had several conversations after the weekend. He is usually very private about these occurrences, and the only way I have ever found out about them is through research participants' comments. I have been surprised by the amount of extra time and care that is being given—the kind word, the spiritual teachings, the guidance, the personal advice. Often different persons have spoken about the profound effect these conversations have had on their lives and the importance of this personalised time and compassion from Uncle Max. He tends to people, and tends to the group, and tends to his role as Elder. Rowena's poem to Uncle Max at the end of her story, entitled 'Just for today', not only exemplifies the care she has been shown by Uncle Max but also the way she has inculcated much of his advice and teachings:

Just for today, I will wait and not worry over what the next moment in my life will bring. Just for today, I will trust to the lessons you taught me, that I am part of something far greater than the microscopic world my eyes can see.

e. Short and long term impacts of the teaching experience

Of course, one would imagine that these short-term relationships (the three-to-four-day journey) that participants had with Uncle Max would have minimum impact. The Literature Review attests to mutuality, long-term, deeply informed relationships, collaborative dialogue and experiential learning from the land as indicators of significant outcomes between white and black, in order to produce mutual understanding. However, now through my research, also implicated is the power of the teacher and the receptiveness of the receiver of the teachings and the site itself.

I believe that my conversations with Uncle Max over many years, in addition to my own immersion in culture from long-term exposure to land-based teachings, along with my 'individual work ...developing "treaties of affiliation"' (Shepard 1982, p. 34) with places, draw forth such richness of ongoing mutual understanding. These conversations produce the depth of dialogue that they do because of my long-time immersion in the culture. Uncle Max and I have worked out through respect (often hard-earned) a relationship that builds on the knowledge I have gained, and the understandings I have reached, expressed through our mutual collaborative dialogue. It surely fits into the

model espoused by Langton as ‘constructions generated through dialogue between Aborigines and non Aborigines in which both subjects participate in their constructions as they try to find forms of mutual comprehension’ (Langton 1993, pp. 33–6).

However, from my research findings, a one-off, relatively short-term experience of land-based teaching with a powerful and skilled Elder does also indeed yield a rich and productive exploration. One could perhaps argue that the participants, in that they were self-selective in choosing to embark on Indigenous teachings in the first place, and that they then chose to be part of my research in the second place, makes them more receptive to these land-based teachings. Granted. Yet we still cannot deny that other factors are at play in the exchange between land and person, between Indigenous and non-Indigenous.

What has been revealed through this research is also insightful into the nature of the encounter itself, largely missing from the literature. To a lesser extent than my own relationship with Uncle Max, cured over many years, is this encounter between Elder and students one of ‘mutual comprehension’. It is more a traditional Aboriginal relationship between Elder and student, where Elder is holder and transmitter of knowledge, and student is receiver. Nevertheless, although not overt, there is definitely some form of ‘mutual comprehension’ occurring between the two because of the powerful nature of the experiences of the participants.

f. Land as teacher

And what of the power of the land itself? Let us turn from a focus on Uncle Max as teacher and Elder to the land on which he teaches, Yuin country, and specifically Mt. Gulaga. Uncle Max acknowledges the power of certain places (‘Mmm... there is special places’). As Elder and knowledge holder, he has the authority to teach about these places, about the teachings they hold, that have been passed on to succeeding generations. And he has the desire to pass on his teachings to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous persons. These sacred sites must be entered through ceremony and through respect (‘I would ask you to remain silent...as a sign of respect’). He does not underestimate the power of those sites and the power of those teachings to have a big

impact on all those exposed to them ('You will always be called back to the mountain—physically, mentally or spiritually').

Mt. Gulaga remains the most potent of all sites on Yuin country. It is Creation Mountain, the source of teachings that are to do with the origins of humanity, plants and animals.

I believe that once people have entered through ceremony onto the teaching sites on the mountain, the mountain itself and the strong teachings present here, in such extraordinary physical form, take over. Uncle Max would have the strong presence of spirit to support the work of facilitating people into a deeper engagement with that powerful place and the Ancestral spirits who watch over it.

Stanner is once again a vital force of instruction in this aspect when trying to make sense of experiences that tap strongly Aboriginal conceptualisations, such as that of the 'potential of life pre-existing in totem places': 'Men could—should— help the child spirits do their work and could—indeed, must—ritually facilitate the release of the potential. But they did not create that store and without it were helpless. The manifestation of life on a material plane was thus a spiritual function. So was the power of humans to subsist on that plane' (Stanner 1979, p. 120).

Thus, humans can assist the spirit world, but it is this world that is all-powerful and that holds all potency for life. Humans must know their place, and humbly acknowledge the ubiquity of spirit presence. I have had numerous conversations with Uncle Max when he expresses the respect and wariness one must take in dealing with the world of spirit presence:

There is another area on Nadganuga [a smaller mountain known as 'son of Gulaga], but there's another area around Bega where I was taken into this clearing and that was a pretty powerful area. You can almost see this swirly thing, you know, you can feel it, it was so easy to feel it and then to start looking to see. And you can just see that whatever leaves there was, or a bit of dust, just sort of see it moving, just going around, and that was it. And all this here and all

this on the back of my neck was standing up. It was so scary that I couldn't move but I just focused on what was there, and for me to get out of it, I had to look right into the centre, see.

This unseen world of such unknown power may be very dangerous to one ignorant or oblivious of those worlds. It is a strong argument for mediation with that world by those who know how to deal with it.

So we see that, as a mediator between non-Indigenous persons and the land, Uncle Max has a vital role to play. Uncle Max acts as a conduit who facilitates a deep engagement with place for others through knowledge, narrative, including personal story, ceremony and wisdom. His teachings also tap into the power of certain places. As he eases people into entering the land, so the land opens to them. What emerges then for that person is out of anyone's hands. Uncle Max is able to draw on a whole host of skills, knowledge, wisdom, personal qualities, a teaching template with an extraordinary lineage, the nature of the engagement between student and teacher, and the power of certain sacred sites to enable others to engage deeply with place. Then there is the unknown world, the more-than-human presence that has its own agenda, the intelligent, influencing land...

g. Cross-cultural engagement as dialogic process

My conversations with Uncle Max are always within very specific parameters: the Western–Indigenous context of the political realities of the past/present; within these parameters are also those set by the protocol of teacher/student, of Aboriginal Elder/student, of male Aboriginal Elder/woman, and male Aboriginal Elder and white woman. Although our conversations are not totally shaped by these parameters, they provide a major context, and do impact in various ways and at various times. As well, the dialogue is embedded in the land and in the teachings themselves. All of these factors feed into the nature of the dialogue.

I have discussed earlier the significance of gender in relationships with place. It is relevant to question how gender may affect the dialogic process itself. This is difficult to quantify, but it does seem to create an extra layer of reserve, perhaps a bit more

respectful distancing in the relationship between Uncle Max and myself. There is already a respectful distancing due to the teacher/student roles and due to my background of whiteness. In terms of knowledge being passed on to me, I am sure that being white means I will be given particular knowledge, and I know that being a woman may also determine the type of knowledge I am given. However, the nature of the relationship over many years, the building of trust and respect, also come into play strongly, so it is extremely difficult to judge what has more weight or in what situations certain factors are dominant.

The building of trust that goes hand in hand with learning about respect is a constant process in any relationship, but with a loaded political situation like that which exists in Australia today between blacks and whites, it takes on added significance. I believe I have been, as others who are the recipients of Uncle Max's teachings are too, given the Law of Respect by the Elder. Respect has to be learned and earned in relation to the Elder, to the Law itself and to the culture as a whole, including respect of certain sites and teachings. I am constantly being tested, as in the old ways of traditional teaching, to see how much of this Law has been owned by me.

In Chapter Four, I outlined a graphic example of my teachings around respect that concerned Uncle Max instructing alcohol-affected American students. Also, in 'Desire for Centring', a major part of this piece of writing concerns how the Respect Law constantly asserted itself through the umbrella notion of 'right relationship'. In these and many other examples, the situation arises that may be a testing ground for Respect Law. This is the tentative ground on which I tread, keeping alert to the many sources of instruction at any one time and how they may impact on the dialogic process. Obviously the long-term relationship between Uncle Max and myself allows many opportunities for teachings to be tested!

Bell refers to her long collaboration with Mowaljarlai as a 'mutually enriching discourse' (Bell 1998, p. 9). Could my conversations with Uncle Max be similarly described? To a certain extent, yes, but if 'mutually enriching' implies equality, then I do believe there is a strong weighting towards me being more enriched through our dialogue than Uncle Max. In what is fundamentally a teacher-student relationship, there

is more knowledge being imparted, of course, by the teacher than the reverse. That said, many of the conversations reveal complex explorations of certain topics where mutual exchange of ideas is more characteristic, as is evidenced through the nature of the topics discussed such as mental health, drug and alcoholism, counseling, stress induction and release, to name a few. The sharing of ideas about these areas from each differing cultural perspective is certainly informative and enriching for both of us.

5. Conclusion

This chapter has had the task of drawing together the many diverse and fertile results of a deep engagement with place and Indigenous culture. It has been the first stage in delving more deeply into the experiences of self and others, all influenced strongly by the Indigenous teachings of an Aboriginal Elder. The next stage is to extract the essence of the meaning from the discussion through the following chapter, Meaning-Making 2. Here I return to the guiding metaphor of *ganma* introduced in the Literature Review chapter as a way of conceptualising the black/white encounter. Now I ask how this notion of *ganma* can be viewed in the light of my research findings.

CHAPTER EIGHT

MEANING-MAKING 2: RETURNING TO GANMA

1. Introduction

The pervasive metaphor of the Literature Review was *ganma*, the Yolgnu concept referring to the rich diversity of the meeting place between fresh waters from the land that merge with saltwaters of the sea. I saw this metaphor, as Yolgnu people do, as a really useful way of exploring the relationship between whites and blacks on this land. Most of all, it exposed through an examination of the literature, the complexity of that meeting place. The complexity was characterised by the problematic nature of the encounter wherein two systems of knowledge so fundamentally different, come together, and particularly when meaning is ascribed to relationships with place. The path of mutual understanding seemed to indicate that a means must be found to render each knowledge system in the terms of the other.

Scholarship on Aboriginal and Western ways of knowing the world provided some guidelines for how to navigate the waters. In particular, I was exhorted by postcolonial theorists such as Said (1978) to get to know another culture in its own terms, especially through the separation of consciousness from the dominant culture. I realised the necessity to engage with Indigenous subjectivities as self-representation, not only because of the construction of Aboriginality by non-Indigenous whites, but also due to the ownership and control of knowledge in any dominant settler culture. Indigenous intellectuals such as Langton stated the necessity for both Aborigines and non-Aborigines to dialogue in order to produce their own ‘constructions’ based on ‘forms of mutual comprehension’ (Langton 1993, pp. 33–6). I gleaned from anthropologists such as Stanner (1979) that long-term relationships of respect and experiential learning from the land characterised Aboriginal cultural understanding; Trudgen (2000), working with Yolgnu of Arnhem Land, stressed good cross-cultural communication as critical. The ‘intercultural space’ identified by Myers (Myers 2002, p. 48) was raised as a radical concept that signified the dynamic, flexible nature of contemporary black–white

relations. This concept not only undermined the rigidity of the earlier argued cultural barrier, but also pointed to its consequent destabilising and the opening up to new ways of thinking about cross-cultural relations (Myers 2002, p. 48).

Once again, I heeded the wisdom and experience of Stanner, who coaxed me to either ‘think black’ or ‘transfer knowledge into our own system of knowledge’ (Stanner 1979, p. 25). Benterrak suggested that any understanding would only come from ‘the landscape itself’ and in ‘consultation with Aboriginal people’ (Benterrak 1996, p. 222). This collaborative project also called for a ‘new sensitivity’ that would ‘see the “already there” in a quite different way’, in a reading of country through creative response (Benterrak 1996, pp. 12–13). It was Brady who tipped the scales further into the significance of the ‘poetic quality of existence’, that ‘genuinely metaphysical and properly religious sense’ (Brady 1996, p. 80), which is also that which is fundamental to Aboriginal culture. Finally, Read extolled the virtues of ‘mature belonging’, that state wherein we develop ‘our own attachments independent of Aboriginal people’ and ‘leave the spirits to the people who made them or were made by them’ (Read 2000, pp. 204, 208).

From all these contentious currents and counter-currents swirling together in one body of water, what stands out in the literature as still paramount, despite a few exceptions, is the continuing dominance of the cultural divide between Indigenous and non-Indigenous persons in Australia. This cultural divide reveals itself as a formidable barrier that delineates Westerner and Aboriginal as inhabiting vastly different worlds. In addition, there is precious little insight into the nature of the encounter itself. The literature has taken us thus far. Now we are heading, as a result of the discussion in the previous chapter, to a re-examination of the cultural encounter.

The discussion of the results is the outcome of a phenomenological practice of deep engagement with place and a deep engagement with Aboriginal culture. It now becomes possible to delve more into what has been revealed to be the crux of the literature as it pertains to my research. Where these two strands meet is the subject of this final chapter. Although this may appear to be a narrowing focus, it is to be seen more as an ‘enlarging vision... in which the focus of our deliberation is not held fast in our gaze,

but is given the opportunity to gaze back, to ask us questions about our very own being'. (Wood 2004, p. 33).

2. The Complex Nature of the Engagement

Let us turn to the freshwater environment and the saltwater environment wherein *ganma* locates itself. There are species of plants and animals that only survive in one world or the other. Freshwater fish cannot survive in saltwater. Likewise, saltwater species will be killed in non-saline environments. The lines have been drawn, the boundary between established clearly. This cultural divide is usually a matter between life and death.

To date, most whitefellas in Australia keep firmly to their own cultural milieu, know the world on Western terms only, choose to know or have access to that other foreign world in very limited ways, if at all. Now, through the research, we are speaking about whites who choose to enter the black world and are able to encounter both worlds in a profound way. This encounter with the black world is not through superficial exposure, borrowing, or wholesale appropriation. It is one of deep engagement through direct experiencing and through direct dialogue.

Although the extrapolation of this natural environment to the human meeting place is not necessarily a matter of life and death (although some claim it is this very thing), it still brings to the surface the vexed question as to whether a shared sense of place is possible in Australia today. The ongoing Aboriginal and European response to country and new ways of thinking about the bringing together of these two worlds, is at the heart of the question.

In the *ganma* depiction, I am reminded of the Kimberley region of Western Australia, site of one of my encounters. The Fitzroy River is one of the largest river systems in Australia, and flows into the ocean at Derby. Even in the Dry season, the enormous estuary that takes at least half a day to traverse by speed boat, is muddish brown colour, whipped up by the huge daily tidal influx, whipped up even more by the Wet season drastic rains and debris that transform the river into flood, whipped up to even greater highs and lows by the influence of certain moons on the tides. And do not forget the

impact of the seas themselves—big seas whipped up by big winds, combined with some or many of the other influences will determine additional critical factors, as will ocean currents, whether local or long travelling. The estuary is where all these factors come together in an extraordinary co-mingling.

To make some sort of a description of the estuary demands far more than looking at the confluence of saltwater and freshwater. If we were, in addition to the above geographic characteristics, to include local stories of the estuary, stories of the spiritual ancestors growing from the land/sea/skies articulated through a lineage that transmits this knowledge over thousands of years; add the presence of the non-human realm; still more, add recent tales of the relative newcomers to this land—it is now possible to see something of the nature of this place.

What I am saying, again through this founding metaphor of *ganma*, is that the human/place co-mingling discussed in this thesis produces a veritable mix of complexity comparable with the multi-textured Fitzroy estuary.

3. Barramundi: The Straddler of Both Worlds

At the beginning of the Literature Review, I presented three scenes that depicted what my research was about. The first scene was a white woman moving on rocks, expressing a creative relationship with place; the second scene was that same white woman travelling through country, on her own or accompanied by an Aboriginal Elder; the last scene showed a group of non-Indigenous persons sitting together on the land, learning from an Elder.

I would like to explore another scene by introducing barramundi fish in their natural environment. Barramundi is one of the few species of fish (in fact they comprise one per cent) that are diadromous—adapted to both salt and fresh water environments. It seems very appropriate to choose barramundi as my final informative scene, since it brings forth a model of a species that is capable of crossing so-called rigid natural boundaries and not just survive but also thrive in both.

I suggest taking this aquatic scene as a correspondence to the crossing of the cultural divide between blacks and whites. I offer the framework as not only a container for what takes place in the black—white encounter of my research, but also as an exemplar as to how it may take place. It seems that those elements that have allowed barramundi to make both worlds home may shed some light on new ways of thinking about our human/place/culture context, as disclosed in the discussion section. Moreover, new such ways of thinking, although nascent in their development, provide new directions for research.

The barramundi is not only a primary food item holding a major role in mythology among many Aboriginal people, both saltwater and freshwater people, but has a high profile as a desired Western ‘catch’ throughout Australia. How does it manage to acclimatise to both vastly different environments?

Saltwater and freshwater environments make ‘strikingly different demands on water balance systems so these fish must make the necessary physiological adjustments whenever they pass from one type of aquatic habitat to another’ (BookRags, September 2006.) Such adjustment is termed an ‘osmoregulatory ability’, and it seems that this highly evolved speciality enables barramundi to quickly adjust to changes in salinity (NSW Department of Primary Industries, September 2006). The common pattern is that young males live in the freshwater reaches of rivers then move to a brackish environment to breed. All barramundi are hermaphroditic, starting life as male then changing sex to female at a certain weight. Thus, barramundi also have a complex gendered response to place.

In being capable of osmoregulating, barramundi are able to maintain their specific ‘concentration of body fluids independent of the concentration of the outside environment’ (Biobulletin, September 2006). These special physiological changes, to do with the way oxygen is obtained from the water, usually occur in the transition spaces between freshwater and saltwater habitats, that is, in the intermediate brackish water of estuaries.

Place here assumes a crucial role. In this dynamic estuarine environment, ‘boundaries materialize in interactions’, they are ‘active places of negotiation and translation’ (Klaver 2004, p. 52), as Yolgnu people from Arnhem Land have always known. Given that land plays such a vital role, as evidenced through my research, is it possible that whites have developed some means of crossing over, adapting and surviving in a black cultural environment where the body of knowledge is so vastly different? It certainly makes sense to define the black world as making ‘strikingly different demands’ on whites, as attested by the literature.

I intend to limit discussion to the movement of whites into the black world (and back into that white world with new eyes), since this is what my research focused on. However, in not deeming to speak for flow in the other direction, that is, blacks moving into the white world, I do want to recognise the wider context of my research. It cannot be denied that the contemporary situation in Australia today affords a choice over that movement for non-Indigenous people, whereas Aboriginal people have not had, and continue to not have, choices around such movement. Aboriginal people are often forced to be in both worlds. A different thesis would focus on this topic.

Four factors mentioned as crucial in the crossover of barramundi from saltwater to freshwater are to be addressed here, since I think these may be most relevant to the discussion: the estuary as the site of transformation; the fact that barramundi must make necessary adjustments when moving from one environment to another; further, when barramundi are in one environment, they must ‘adopt the tactics’ of that environment; likewise, when they move into the contrasting environment, they ‘adopt the tactics’ of that environment; lastly, the fact that barramundi have a gendered relationship with place. There is one other facet I would like to include in the discussion, which is that barramundi, in being diadromous, take on a distinctive identity.

Barramundi straddle both worlds, freshwater and saltwater. Can the venturer into the new *ganma*, as personified by the white receiver of deep land-based experiences, straddle both worlds too? Is he/she able to move from one cultural environment (Western) into the other (Aboriginal)? What does this take? How might we conceptualise the experience?

4. Place as Site of Transformation: Place is Sentient, Place is Inscribed

Barramundi choose the brackish part-saltwater, part-freshwater of the estuary to be the medium for physiological changes that must occur to transfer from one domain to the other. It is the estuary that is the threshold to the other world.

What is the threshold for non-Indigenous persons moving into an Aboriginal world? Land/country/place becomes the transition medium for the movement from a white world to a black one. Like the estuary for barramundi, land is the site of transformation, country is enabler, place is potency. Land holds elements of both worlds, is the shared space common to both cultures. Country becomes crucial as a milieu of change with its own agency as the third force linking and flowing between the other two. This notion of country, as articulated through my research discussion, is a stridently different one from that normally perceived by Westerners. I refer here to the Literature Review, where Cameron maintained that:

... the interaction between Aboriginal and Western senses of place must start from the recognition that Aboriginal people have a completely different conception of the relationship between consciousness and place than most Western people (Cameron and San Roque 2003, p. 77).

Here country is consciousness, manifested overtly for some of my participants, and less so for others. My own experiences of being in different places, my Aboriginal instruction, as also of my research participants, are on the land. We all have been taken by the hand onto Aboriginal country. In this respect, through land/place/country, the absoluteness of the differences between the two cultures is moving towards being reconciled. Land as consciousness enjoins. We have moved from one familiar cultural milieu, the Western white world, into the unfamiliar Aboriginal world, with an Elder as mediator.

What does this tell us about the role of place in the nexus of the black—white encounter? First, notions of place and the black—white encounter as examined in the literature, barely scratch the surface of this interchange. The nexus is revealed to be an

exceedingly complex structure where land/place/country is central to the engagement. Place is no blank space. It is alive, sentient, responsive and intelligent. It has agency in its own right, and develops significant relationships as it erupts into human presence. When Anne exclaims, ‘The mountain walked me up’ this is a serious statement of fact for her. When I first encounter the land in Central Australia, it has a looming, undeniable presence:

I am disturbed... I am disturbed... Disturbed by who knows what, but disturbed at being here. I feel alien yet familiar. I am known here yet stranger. Seeking, asking permission from the spirits of this land makes little difference. I am still disturbed. I take myself to the dry old riverbed through snaky shivery grasses to old grandmother tree.

Rowena knows that on the mountain she is ‘watched by many pairs of eyes and they’ll protect me’. Margarita instinctively experiences that the land of her birth is ‘blocking’ her, ‘barring’ her out, making her feel foreign in her own land. Michael reconnects with the Divine presence in the land, ‘God finding expression in diverse ways beyond my own experience’.

In response to one of my initial research questions, it is obviously possible for non-Indigenous persons to enter deeply into Indigenous ways of seeing/knowing place. The whole country is saturated with meaning that continues to evolve, inform, exert its influence, reveal itself. Country with this type of consciousness is being met by whites. The notion of place responsiveness must broaden to include the idea of place itself having its own response. Place is inscribed—it holds teachings, cultural memories, residues of spirit/Ancestral presence, the non-human world.

Biddle refers to the manner in which Ancestral presence continues to make its presence felt, not only through the inscribed land, but also through contemporary art of Central Desert Aboriginal women artists. Here, painting canvas is identified as skin, as country, hence the medium of ‘intercultural and inter-corporeal exchange’ (Biddle 2006, p. 28).

Even if disengaged from the body of Ancestors, these sites, places and marks continue to hold precise affiliations and identifications, as well as powerful and potentially dangerous forces. Hence the constitutive power and effect associated with putting these marks by contemporary Walpiri—rejuvenating country or species; controlling fertility; causing illness or healing; regulating social relations and relatedness are some of these effects (Biddle 2006, p. 28).

The ongoing nature of the ‘constitutive power and effect’ of these sites as they are painted on breasts through the artwork is interesting enough, but what is more interesting, in terms of my research findings, is the impact of these sites on non-Indigenous persons. Biddle names it as ‘an imprint literally tied to its referent’ (Biddle 2006, p. 25).

There is no where, no way, to position ourselves, as spectators, as outside of this experience and expression... The effect is to merge subject with matter—a merging not only of Ancestral body with country, not only Ancestor ‘skin’ with ‘surface’ of canvas, but with the body, the skin of the viewing subject. These works captivate literally. Our bounded bodies, like that of the Ancestors, dissipate. In viewing these paintings, it is impossible not to become in the fleshy enfolding of their animation. A certain dissolution of the self occurs (Biddle 2006, p. 28).

If boundaries collapse and such dissolution of the self occurs even when viewing an Ancestral marking, then how much more potent must be that direct experience with the Ancestral site itself? My research attests to this potency. Land that is imprinted will likewise imprint itself upon persons who enter deeply into the country, ‘to become in the fleshy enfolding of their [Ancestors] animation’, as Biddle states.

This is how Uncle Max Harrison views the meeting with inscribed land, vital and responsive, and his role in facilitating the experience for whites:

We walk the land, start feeling it out; look at different areas, what to keep away from; where people can just go and sit and meditate, and sit and get in contact

with all the Old Fellas; try and teach them how to get, to receive those spiritual emails; try to let people start to learn to look at the land talking to them, and listening to the land talking to them.

As Elder and senior Lawman, he can be a conduit to that other sentient world of presence. This is a crucial role. Each person's unique experience is out of his hands. San Roque has identified the importance of how we enter country and how we make sense of the experience: 'My comment would be that there are techniques and protocols for becoming accustomed to Aboriginal country and there are techniques (emerging) for recognising and decoding the communications from country' (Cameron and San Roque 2003, p. 78)

Uncle Max would concur:

They got the library all around Sydney, the atlas there. All they gotta do is follow the path. You know, it's all there for people to tap into and understand... there is a great expanse of road maps or directories. All people need to do is latch onto people who know where they are. If they sit down and set up the map and have a look at that oral book of knowledge.

There is much in these statements that resonates with the literature examined: from the invitation to learn about Aboriginal culture from such Indigenous persons as Perkins (2000), Randall (2003), the Western Desert women and Langton (2003); to the deep listening to country of Ungunmerr (in Stockton 1995) and Tredinnick (2003); and lastly, to the conceptualisation of country as known and experienced as 'library' into which humans can be 'inducted', as discussed by San Roque (Cameron and San Roque 2003, p. 76).

The participants in my research have, as Uncle Max stated above, 'latched onto' a person who 'knows where he is', who has the knowledge and is willing to induct them into the 'library' and the 'road maps' of country. Such action creates an opening up of dialogue between an individual and the land, an individual and another culture, an individual with him/herself, an individual and a teacher. These persons do see and know

the land in a different way. It concurs with the way Benterrak suggests we whitefellas need to go, through ‘...understanding the landscape... from the landscape itself’ and ‘developed in consultation with Aboriginal people’ (Benterrak 1992, p. 222).

The notion of land being enunciated in this way is the same land of Rose’s Yarralin people that possesses a ‘consciousness and a will toward life’ (Rose 1996, p. 7); it is the country of Carey’s novel character Oscar, with its ‘presence’ of ‘sacred stories more ancient than the ones he carried in his sweat-slipping leather Bible’ (Carey 1998, p. 492); it is Neidjie’s tree: ‘He watching you, You look at tree, he listen to you’ (Neidjie 1985, p. 52).

This is land/place/country that one enters into deeply, and that enters into oneself just as deeply. In this context, when we speak about country, when we write about country, when we sing about country, or paint about country, it matters. It matters to both the person/group/culture, and it matters to the country. It matters to my research participants; it matters to my own experiences in place; it matters to Uncle Max and all those he teaches. Relationships are expressed, they are reciprocated. It is a vital relationship. Cameron and San Roque have identified, through the Central Australian Sense of Place Colloquium, this vital presence:

It is as though we had an active non-human partner in proceedings, the place of Hamilton Downs itself. Maybe the interplay between the two is what generates the *temenos*, the sacred space. Neither solely human-created or solely place-created, but requiring both (Cameron and San Roque, 2003, p. 85).

Thus, when a person engages with a place, what they are carrying with them, their own self saturated with meaning and life experiences impacts on that place too. Add to the mix, beyond the human and non-human worlds, a place that is sacred, a place of potent forces that continues to make its presence felt in all types of indeterminate ways, and the potent teachings of an Aboriginal Elder skilled in knowledge, skilled at imparting that knowledge, practised in communicating with those forces, and what do we have? A mix of elaborate proportions. The notion of ‘cultural transference’ goes some way towards explaining this type of engagement:

Cultural transference is a term adapted from psychotherapy and in this instance it means attending to the subtle movements in feeling, thought and bodily sensation that go on inside oneself, between oneself and others and between oneself and the country (Cameron and San Roque 2003, p. 85).

If land, particularly sacred land, holds knowledge, experiences, emotions, as Aboriginal people believe and my research points towards, then engagement with the human who also holds knowledge, experiences, and emotions may bring forth a myriad of responses: land may reveal certain specific teachings; it may act as a psychic mirror of inner process back to that person; it may receive certain psychological projections; its site-specific teachings may be transferable to other places, other times; the power of forces in certain sites may act as a catalyst for destabilising and/or intensifying emotions; a place may contain healing potential. We are introducing a very new notion of *ganma* here, one where a shared sense of place brings up new meanings and associations. Underlying this new notion of *ganma* is the aliveness of the land as an organic influencing presence, which in turn is influenced by humans and mediated through persons and through cultural lineages. It is a reflection of the ‘constitutive power and effect’ of the Ancestral sites, of the ‘merging’ of Ancestral body with country (Biddle 2006, pp. 20, 28).

5. Switching Modes as a Process of Adjustment from One Culture to Another

Barramundi can be saltwater fish in the estuary and/or freshwater fish. However flexible this transition zone may be, however, once barra enter into the zone of determination, either salt or fresh, they must adopt to being either freshwater species or saltwater species. As far as it is possible to know, humans do not have a physiological adjustment as barramundi do, with their ability to transform saline intake. However, it is interesting to posit that perhaps some other type of adjustment takes place for whites in order to be able to enter into the Aboriginal world. Could it be one of switching modes from experiencing the world through the normal Western lens into experiencing it through Aboriginal eyes? If the two worlds remain separate, then it seems that knowledge and way of being in one cannot be reconciled with the other. Could it be that a switch takes

place that allows some sort of reconciliation with the new black world while not forsaking the old white world of meaning?

Brady, in speaking of the fluidity of human behaviour, has affirmed that Westerners can change the meanings we make of our experiences and hence our 'modes of perception' (Brady 1996, p. 79). However, it appears that the switch that we are talking about here may not necessarily be a conscious choice, but most likely arises spontaneously or could be forced in some circumstances.

Anne's experience, right at the entry point to the sacred sites, arose immediately and spontaneously; in fact, it could be described as a forceful imposition, which just as rapidly dissipated. This is more like the rapid adjustment of the barramundi in the estuarine waters. There was no conscious choice of hers to switch into another mode of operating, but immersion in such forceful death thoughts and feelings took over her, leaving no choice but to yield to those powerful forces that came together in that moment. This was immediate and full of intense emotions in response to a specific situation. Could it be that Anne had switched into a mode of being strongly contrasted with her 'normal' state of Western being?

In exploring this notion of switching modes, I am reminded again of the triune brain theory of MacLean (Kheper 2006), mentioned in the Literature Review. Could his designation of how our brain works, in that the switch happens from one brain centre to another, be similar to what I am assuming takes place in a switch of modes from a Western way of inhabiting the world into an Indigenous way of being in the world? San Roque has enunciated how he sees these ancient brain structures brought into play through 'sliding consciousness down the neural pathways to the early or so called primitive brain which we share with lizard and his relatives' (Cameron and San Roque 2003, p.82):

Aboriginal people have set up a closely observed association with flora and fauna and read the behaviours of birds and animals in a syntonic manner, as though they were part of the same 'mob'. A kind of associative symbiotic

reciprocity is set up, which is portrayed quite clearly and delicately in ceremony, body painting and depictions of the Dreaming pathways.

My guess is that when human and country set up an associative syntonic communication, the mid brain and the so-called lizard brain are mostly in action. The way to establish communication with this level of perception may not be by conscious deliberate thinking, but by following the example of Aboriginal people who have been doing it for thousands of years (Cameron and San Roque 2003, p. 79).

It is relevant to recall Anne in conversation with me, deliberately pausing abruptly to listen to the kookaburra. She is consciously choosing to engage with this interruption, which puts her into a different mental frame:

Yes, like dragonfly, I can have a larger vision, a larger hearing, a larger sense of feeling.

If something pricks in, like kookaburra, I suppose that is learned significance: I have learned to listen to kookaburra. There may be other things that I don't pay attention to, that I don't listen to.

I have made contact in a place of real knowing, so there's a history between me and kookaburra.

I use the word awakening, a slow awakening. The awakening to the interrelationship between all things, that spiritual connection.

From San Roque's point of view, Anne's 'awakening' may have involved the switching of modes into lizard brain, sometimes consciously, other times unconsciously, sometimes immediately and spontaneously, other times slow and gradual, from a Western way of being in the world to inhabiting an Indigenous worldview. It could be said that, over time, Anne has devised an 'associative syntonic communication' as a way of perceiving the world, based on Aboriginal modelling (Cameron and San Roque 2003, p. 79).

Let me use the example of Margarita to illustrate gradual adjustment in the switch of modes. Margarita is blocked out from this land of her birth for some months, having returned from living overseas. She is certain that her experience on the mountain with Uncle Max was the turning point of no longer feeling ‘external’:

I always felt then that something turned in my experience, something shifted. I knew the mountain was working on me when I came away from it, but I did not know how, because I couldn't feel it.

There is a sense in Margarita of consciously knowing something is going on, something has altered in her once she leaves, but also she is unconscious as well as to how or what is happening. She also knew that the specific teachings of one site, the Three Rocks, on the mountain weeks later provoked a very strong response in her to facilitate dealing with intense stress at that time. The image of The Three Rocks comes to her, and the Middle Rock teaching in particular offers her solace. She did not conjure up The Three Rocks. There was no conscious imagery being evoked. This is no longer the subdued unconscious response of earlier, but an intense anxiety that only finds relief through specific mountain teachings. Could there have been a switch in her that materialised these teachings at a moment when she really needed them?

It was months later that she was able to connect these Gulaga teachings with another important place for her—Fraser Island and the teachings from the womb-like sandblow. Once again, the emergence of the connectedness between these two places was not something contrived by Margarita. They just happened. Still months later, a drawing came to Margarita of her as a foetus sitting in the middle of The Three Rocks.

It was a gradual process over a year. As she said, ‘the mountain was working on me’ all this time, in many different ways, through different incidents, different places, different means of expression. The timing of the shifts into being returned into that Indigenous world of teachings had been gradual, and the emotional response was varied. Margarita seemed to be a conduit for the teachings to come through her. She was mostly operating in her Western mindset, with an injection of teachings, both Indigenous and other, that

then intruded on that mental space. Such intrusions would have irrevocably altered her perceptions of reality and her way of being in her 'normal' world:

I did not get the connection of those Three Rocks with Uncle Max until afterwards, it only came afterwards. It is not like I had a lightning bolt moment when I was sitting there in front of those rocks—it grew over the weeks when I left. It just happened one day, and since it happened then I have chosen to use it since...

...You reminded me what Uncle Max said, that the mountain will call you back, in all sorts of ways. But I didn't register it. I think I literally thought, yeah, I'll go back to the mountain.

I suddenly registered, oh I don't have to go there—I am going there. I'm not physically, literally, going there, but it's already calling me back.

It has to be an enormous leap in conceptual understanding to acknowledge that a mountain, a certain set of specific teachings, is accessing one's psyche, even when one is not physically present.

Another context in which I have been aware of this process of switching modes is through my practice of creative embodied response to place, where the switch from one creative mode into another has enabled a different perspective, a deepening of the relationship between the place and me. In this situation, it was me choosing to switch from one modality, say painting, into poetry, although recognition of unseen 'pullings' towards certain expressions certainly seemed also to be beyond self. I have stated that the shift from one creative modality to another reveals a qualitative shift in the relationship between place and self, so that, to take an example, my working with white sticks over five days or so making a stick dome at Culburra on the south coast of NSW establishes a particular relationship around light, patterns, the weaving process, space, resilience, impermanence, building and structure, the link between wood and beach, wood and ocean, wood and rock, and human insertion into all the above.

What is created initially is then added to by viewing and reviewing photos over many weeks on a daily level, of the step-by-step building of the dome. This sheds a different light on the relationship either incorporating unnoticed aspects (like the role of wind/air on the structure and tides) or revealing more strongly certain traits, such as embeddedness (how the cliff at the back of the site impacts), or allowing me to get in touch with emotional states (e.g. vulnerability) of both myself and the structure/place now and then. I may then use poetry to further deepen the relationship by adding another layer. This, too, will draw out another flavour of the place and my place in it. If I were to respond through painting the dome, the description again broadens and deepens, as does my relationship with that place over time. It is organic, evolving, and each new embodied response generates a fullness or richness of further responses as well as insights into the nature of that place that have become incorporated or ingested into me.

I have earlier raised the notion of my practice having similarities with an Aboriginal response to country, where country is sung, painted, danced, dreamt up, and enstoried as a means of keeping the connection going. Shifting modes of expression may be a vital component to maintaining connection with country on various levels for all of us. Country may demand this, in that it recognises and responds to these forms of engagement that have been practised for millennia.

When I begin to inhabit the psyche of seaweed and move/respond as if I am seaweed, dragging myself between slabs of granite with each wave push/pull, I may be switching modes of reality. This, too, is a well-known and practised Aboriginal way of transforming into the Ancestor or animal/plant species. I am interested in the way San Roque conjectures that this switching of life forms is a process of 'sliding consciousness down the neural pathways to the early or primitive brain'. Specifically, he spells out what he imagines to be occurring when Aboriginal people communicate with country:

First, you observe the activities of animals, insects, reptiles and birds very closely and name them. Then you imitate them by cultivating a kind of identification mimesis. Then you condense this observation and identification into ceremonial performance where the closely observed actions of the fauna and

flora are poetically imprinted into the human nervous system. Intellectual activity begins which nevertheless uses the pulsating animation of the animal, reptile, insect and bird world as the basis for the construction of thoughts and conscious mental activity. So, the human distinguishes itself from the animal but still retains the syntonic alliance with this part of the living evolutionary continuum (Cameron and San Roque 2003, pp. 79, 82).

The notion of imprinting is again raised as a component of communicating with country. My step-by-step process of switching modes from one creative modality into another seems to be occurring along similar lines to those described by San Roque, which suggests unconscious identification preceding poetic imprintation, then intellectual activity, as a response to place. Such a 'communication linkage' is kept alive by my continuing to evoke that place through various artistic forms. In this case, the 'syntonic communication' (Cameron and San Roque 2003, p. 79) is with the place, not the particular species, since my inhabiting the psyche of the other species arises far more spontaneously and is devoid of varied creative/ceremonial expressions. However, this depiction gives an alternative way of viewing how I may attach myself to a place and that place becomes attached to me so that it feels deeply a part of my being and identity. It also hints at a model of communicating with country modelled on Aboriginal ways.

Having initially denied the probability of any human physiological changes taking place in the transfer from one cultural milieu to another, I reintroduce the notion. San Roque challenges us to contemplate that very possibility through expanding upon what he imagines may be happening in 'cultural transference':

... I think these subtle internal movements of feeling, thought and sensation can be viewed as elements in a communication sequence that runs along the evolutionary continuum from plant to insect, fish, reptile, bird, animal and complex animal. All of this sequence is held in the human nervous system and is located at specific sites along the spinal column, lizard (lower) brain, midbrain and higher cortex. There is an as yet undefined linking process between these sites in the nervous system and sites in the Australian country (Cameron and San Roque 2003, p. 85).

San Roque's 'communication sequence' retained in the nervous system of humans and corresponding to sites in country is an extraordinary concept! I hold this notion as linked with my depiction of inscribed country, but the type of grafting he is referring to here, while moving far beyond what I had envisaged, resonates with much of my discussion concerning the human/place relationship. It is a way of conceptualising the depth of the organic living relationship between self and place that not only implicates the human organism being worked upon in organic ways but also incorporates the reciprocal notion of country being worked upon by the human, which I have been at pains to elucidate throughout my thesis. The living, evolutionary, symbiotic relationship enunciated by San Roque is a communicative linkage that produces profound shifts, as attested to by his and my research participants and my own experiences in place. The assigned role of the spinal column and the concomitant human nervous system as the site of linkage between person and country offers an aperture into a rethink of the dominant imagery of the spine of the land and the human spine in *Desire for Centring*. The 'undefined linking process' that has been advanced here bears serious further examination, and uncovers an exciting field of utterly new and far-reaching research possibilities.

6. 'Thinking Black': Adopting the Tactics of an Aboriginal Cultural Environment

By 'adopting the tactics' of whichever natural environment they are in, barramundi have developed strategies that enable them to adopt that environment as their own. Is there any similar process occurring when non-Indigenous persons move into the unfamiliar terrain of an Aboriginal cultural environment?

'Thinking black' is Stanner's term (1979, p. 25), referring to the ability of whites to adopt an Aboriginal worldview. Uncle Max has a similar expression of 'going in with white eyes and coming out with black mind'. The participants in this research have not only had an experience of being on the mountain and various other sites wherein Aboriginal country was speaking to them, but that the experiences seemed to translate over a longer period of time. What must occur in order for a Western educated person to

be able to enter deeply into Indigenous ways of seeing or knowing place, or to ‘think black’?

a. The unhinging of Western consciousness

I have raised earlier the possibility of an unhinging or dislocating of one’s normal Western consciousness when non-Indigenous persons enter deeply into Indigenous country/teachings. I suggested the unhinging serves to open up one to other realities, other worldviews. It may facilitate the shift from a Western mind to an Indigenous ‘third eye opening’ (Randall 2003, p. 3). This certainly could be perceived as Said’s detaching of consciousness (Ashcroft 2001, p. 69), but it is not obtained, as he declared, through an examination of texts and the locating of oneself within that dominant discourse. It is a transfer of Indigenous experience and hence knowledge into one’s own knowledge system, as Stanner has enunciated.

Such unhinging is not a matter of a choice—witness Rowena’s shock and later silence at the sighting of Aboriginal spirit men all painted up as they gazed down at her from rocks above—but can be forced through the power of the land experience itself. It is many months later that she is prepared to even admit to anyone else that this apparition had happened. So the nature of the experience in that Aboriginal world may determine if and how and when it can be allowed into the Western mindset. Likewise, I did not share with many people the *Wandjina* experience in the night, when it was like lightning raging through my body. It is much easier to deny or delay facing such experiences that could have pathological connotations in a Western worldview.

San Roque and Cameron, in reflecting on the experientially-oriented place colloquium in Central Australia, acknowledge the power of the land to affect change in people:

CSR:...the ability of country itself to derange and rearrange the sensibilities of the human being.

JC: What actually happened in those opening days certainly affected the sensibilities of the group, if not rearranged them...

CSR: [they] understood they were in different country in which different forces were at work on them... (Cameron and San Roque 2003, p. 78).

These statements acknowledge the power of Aboriginal country to impact on non-Aboriginal persons and affect deep change. My own experiences on country and that of my research participants affirm 'the ability of country itself to derange and rearrange the sensibilities of the human being'. Future research could take this aspect further and begin the inquiry into how sentient country itself may be 'deranged and rearranged' by human impact.

If an unhinging of the Western way of inhabiting the world takes place that may allow the shift from one mode of being to another, is it correct to assume that one has to drop one's own cultural container in order to embrace the new culture? Despite the fact that some mention has been made in the literature about the necessity of doing this, and despite the fact that barramundi seem to drop all their 'freshwaterness' when they inhabit the saltwater, it appears that there is not essentially a wholesale dropping of one's conceptual framework of reality in order to adopt that of the other. Perhaps there is a dislodging of reality as the Western world of acculturation moves sideways, allowing the Aboriginal worldview to nudge in alongside, or it completely supplants that worldview in certain circumstances. Here, too, is a rich source of future research directions.

b. Protocols of entering into country

Protocols of entry enacted on the land are important. They often characterise the transition space of leaving behind the old familiar world before entering into the new one. Those protocols facilitate an opening in the person, in the land, to the newcomer. They could be capable of enabling the switching of modes in the adjustment process from one world into another. The protocols in the first place may be mediated through an Aboriginal Elder. In this case, they would follow the protocols laid down and followed religiously over millennia as ceremony known and responded to by the land. Uncle Max does not underestimate the power of ceremony in guiding unknowns into the sacred sites on Gulaga, nor do the recipients of that ceremony, such as Rowena:

Uncle Max instructs us about clapping in. He says he'll clap the sticks once for each one of us to alert the Ancient People that we are coming and to seek their approval for entering the sacred place.

I like this, somehow it makes me feel safe, as though I'm being watched by many pairs of eyes that are centuries old and they'll protect me...

San Roque and Cameron have identified the importance of protocols of coming into country: 'This required letting go of preconceptions and expectations, listening to the diplomatic party... and learning to listen to the land.' (Cameron and San Roque 2003, pp. 77, 78).

They also discovered the resistance to those protocols by non-Indigenous participants. Discomfort with these unfamiliar ways of being in country and a lack of understanding of the actual protocol process developed into what the authors saw as a split in the group between those who 'allow these techniques to sit lightly upon them and elegantly conform to the customs, and there are others who prefer to wrestle with their own demons' (Cameron and San Roque 2003, p. 78).

San Roque claimed this 'demon wrestling' prevented the process of entering into country: 'I have observed that there is a point at which personal preoccupations can be so dominant that they impede the process of coming into country' (Cameron and San Roque 2003, p. 79).

This opinion may shed light on the experiences of some of my research participants, who manifestly 'wrestle[d] with their own demons', and yet Cameron's additional observation also strikes a chord with my own understandings of the experiences of others in terms of 'coming into country':

One of the participants commented to me afterwards that when they were out in this country, fully engaged, their attention was also drawn to their own woundings. They felt that their personal healing was what enabled them to enter more deeply into country (Cameron and San Roque 2003, p. 79).

The deep-woundedness of Rowena, Michael and Anne rose to the surface in extremely forceful ways as soon as they stepped upon the mountain. It could have initially 'impede[d] the process of coming into country', but it also may have facilitated a deeper entry. I tend to lean more towards the latter explanation, but it certainly bears further investigation. In this respect, I would like to see attention paid to the role of releasing of emotional/mental contents as a factor influencing one's ability to enter into country. In the past, with traditional Koori education, such emotional releasing was built into the curriculum as the Washing Law, described by Uncle Max as that which recognised that the build-up of emotional 'baggage' can be unhealthy to the individual and the culture:

I'll let these fellas clear themselves... it's so important for them to be able to talk about some stuff that's sittin' in on them.

If such a clearing always had to be enacted before entry to the sacred sites, maybe the land demands it still.

Protocols may also be self-devised in collaboration with the sentient land, such as the rituals of entry I have designed and thus described in *Deepening Into a Relationship with Place*:

... I am negotiating my presence... even more so when I move on to ask permission from the spirits of the Old People (Aboriginal) who used to inhabit this place in the flesh, and who may still be present, and then permission from the traditional owners (Aboriginal) today.

... I then perform a simple ritual acknowledging the Four Directions, the earth below, the sky above. I kneel to each direction and touch my forehead to the earth. I circle around myself.

My own protocols of respect of entering into a place enable me to issue an invitation to ask permission to be in that site, to invite the presences of that place to engage with me. Whatever the protocols, they both act as conscious intentional acts. Or they may be forced, such as those protocols of respect that I felt driven to enact over and over again until some resolution with the Elder Uncle Max from the Alice Springs Central Land

Council, in *Desire for Centring*. I had no real knowledge of this forced protocol at the time. I was merely being driven to ask permission to be on that country. So it seems that even protocols may be enacted unconsciously. In other words, the protocol may be inflicted from some other source outside the person.

Whites develop relationship with the land. This is where 'real' relationship takes on its own nature, independent of any mediated forms, and/or mediated through Aboriginal teachings. The engagement is one of dialogue, which may be expressed in a multitude of expressive modalities, such as narrative, movement/dance, song, sculpture, painting, and poetry. Rowena used poetry to express emotional pain; Margarita was motivated to draw *The Three Rocks* and herself within them; Michael's thoughtful reflections on his experience amount to a poetics; Anne's narratives, as well, reveal the 'poetic quality of existence' (Brady 1996, p. 80); my own movement practice is a door that opens to another world of meaning and connectedness. The literature contained many examples of the significance of the creative response in relationships with country. San Roque highlights its inextricable link with his notion of 'cultural transference':

...reading the cultural transference (maybe it should be called country transference) is as much a poetic undertaking as a closely sensate one, and it requires cultivation of a mythopoetic sensate state of mind. I mean by this the way our imagination engages with our sensing of natural processes. It involves the arts as deeply as it does the sciences (Cameron and San Roque 2003, p. 86).

To sing country, to paint country, to write country, to poetise country, to know and be known by country, is to 'adopt the tactics' of Aboriginal Australians. It may prove to be the conduit, not just for professional artists, but for many Australians, to enter deeply into country.

7. A Gendered Relationship with Place

For barramundi, gender is important in their place relations. In saltwater, they are female; in freshwater they are male. In their realm of being, place defines gender and gender defines the place. Such a clean demarcation finds no direct corollary in my

research. However, it has been raised as an issue in place relationships, and its early formulations through my research are deserving of further attention. I have found three interesting areas where a gendered relationship with place demands recognition: first, where inscriptions are already in place denoting a gender-specific site—this would mean places defined as distinctively female through Aboriginal cultural practices. If country recognises its own or foreign presence, why would it not recognise if that presence is male or female? If a place over aeons has been known as female and had enacted upon it only female ceremonies or practices, then a non-Indigenous person venturing into such a site may have a very different experience according to their gender.

In *Desire for Centring*, I refer to my experience with the old grandmother tree, where I dug up and bound her roots in red cloth, engaged with her over several hours, building a canopy over these same roots, taking photographs of her, and then months later composing poetry of her. By what process did I come to know the femaleness of this tree, of this site? Later, when I became sick, I wondered whether I had transgressed Aboriginal Law by being in this woman's place perhaps accessible only to initiated women, hence was made sick as a punishment. It was many years later that I read about those old trees in the Todd River being women's sites. There are implications of a gendered place.

Aboriginal female cultural knowledge has been enacted through ceremony on this land since the beginning of human occupation—if land is marked through this, then is it not feasible that this can 'rub off' onto white women too? I am speaking here about the imprint of culture and within that, the imprint of gender. Biddle, who has written incisively on the significance of female breast paintings of Central Desert women artists as 'intercorporeal exchange' has raised this issue of the imprint of an artwork: 'In entering the painting—in being imprinted by it—we experience its relation effects; the condition of its emergence, its animational fecundity, corresponds to our animation by it'. This does not seem to be far removed from the 'rubbing off' I am speaking about. However, surely a further step needs to be taken by Biddle to examine whether she is identifying a female-only response to country/body/canvas typified by this statement of country as 'a culturally distinctive intimacy of breasted relation and relatedness' (Biddle

2006, pp. 26, 27, 29). A distinctive female response to country along these lines opens up an exciting world of research possibilities in Australia.

The second area of gender I wish to examine that is relevant to place relationships concerns a female's distinctive response to a certain site that may not be related to the specific Indigenous teachings of that site. There has been considerable earlier discussion concerning the personal life experiences that a woman brings to her encounter with places that will impact on those places. I am thinking now of Mt. Gulaga, where not only highly personalised issues relating to that particular female participant emerged, but also birthing issues emerged for all of the women, if not at the time of being there, then later, and irrespective of whether the woman had literally given birth in her life or not. I have suggested that Gulaga, being a Birthing Mountain, may have produced child-birthing effects or triggers on females who have entered deeply into ceremony on her sacred sites.

There is a Birthing Law for Aboriginal women—could it be possible that the mountain evokes that Law in all women who visit her in the traditional way, irrespective of cultural background? Here again, we tap into the notion of the power and agency of places to act in their own right. Gulaga is a female mountain—the male mountain Biamanga did not invoke a distinctively female response. Gulaga evokes silence, too, so why not childbirth issues or female sexuality issues? My own erotic/sexualised language in some pieces of writing may be tapping into this very specific response to and by place but it is not specific to me: Margarita referred to the 'womb' of the sandblow, the 'birth passage' from America to Australia; Anne speaks of giving birth as the same feeling she received on the mountain; Rowena describes the site of Uncle Max's story on the mountain as a 'vagina' and declares that Uncle Max 'had gone back into the womb' in that place. Would a male have experienced and used a similar terminology to what these women have expressed? It seems that Massey is accurate in stating that not only gender 'matters' but that its 'relative significance in practice need to be evaluated in each particular context' (Massey 1994, pp. 181, 182).

A final area of a gendered experience of place that comes through my research is where the earth reflects its femaleness; hence, a woman receiving this may have mirrored back

to her something of her own femaleness known through the earth. I have written about experiencing my body and the earth body as one and the same: my spine and the spine of the Western MacDonnell ranges in Central Australia; my sickness on this country and the sickness of the local people and the country itself; the spine of this old mountain range and the bony protuberance of the old dying horse; my mother's ancient hands as being just like the opaque landscape. In all of these body correspondences with the earth, it is a female body that is experiencing it in this way.

This gendered body and this earth thus described is the 'body/landscape' of Somerville (1999) and Davies (2000)-it is a notion of the body that is 'coextensive' with the landscape 'in which bodies are understood as taking up their material existence within landscapes and as landscape' (Davies 2000, p. 11). It also presages an Australian identity linked to belonging both on this landscape and as a woman belonging on this landscape.

a. From switching modes to switching being

Despite a relatively short experience of place-based Indigenous teachings, some of the research participants underwent changes in worldview, in identity and in belonging. Michael was able to reclaim a 'grammar, syntax and vocabulary of a forgotten language' that provided him with a deep reconnection with the natural landscape, as 'God's creation'. Anne reminds us that she is slowly 'awakening' to that world of connectedness as it infiltrates her being. Margarita has the companion teachings of the Three Rocks on Gulaga as ongoing teachers.

Gradually, over a longer period of time, it appears that the Aboriginal way of being in the world, rather than merely the taking on of an Indigenous worldview when one is inhabiting that cultural environment, may assume more and more space in terms of the way one now experiences the world. The Aboriginal way of being in the world, far from being still foreign, still other, something to be adopted and adapted to, and switched modes to when operating within that world, now shows itself as embodied being, part of one's reality, one's identity, one's sense of belonging on this Australian earth. This state of being is a divergence from the modelling of the barramundi fish.

Rowena, a year or so after her Gulaga experience, in taking me to her special place in the bush with the cave and the waterfall, exhibits more and more of that world when she finally realises that the place itself is not to be found until she realises she must ask permission to visit the site. A Respect Law needs to be enacted. Once enacted, the track to the site was revealed miraculously. She now identifies herself with this place. Also, she has taken on attributes of the Gulaga teachings as her own. I give three separate examples to illustrate this:

I now get up every morning and say 'good morning' to Grandfather Sun. I try everyday at some point now, to put my bare feet on the earth in the belief that connecting with the Mother in this way is like medicine for me.

... I can find almost instant calm just by looking. It is a specific look: it's a look out, see how big everything is, look at that tree—to look out and expand yourself. It helps you go 'Oh...Oh', that really, really helps.

... And if you accept these teachings that we are all part of the one spirit, all part of the one organism, then you cannot treat those things badly, you can't do that.

Rowena has begun to settle into her new self and her 'new family' of nature. I presume that each time she has experiences like this, her worldview is altered more in favour of an Indigenous one.

In being African American born, where does she see herself as belonging now? A strong sense of belonging in both America and Australia defines her sense of self – 'I'm inextricably bound to both places now'. Yet, there is something more in her identity that is also 'inextricably bound' to an Indigenous worldview. This takes place in the cave that was revisited in her story:

I chose on the side of the cliff these ferns that grow out of the rock – live, beautiful growing things that come out of sheer rock – I chose that as my totem – they still survive. All the stuff washes over them, but they still survive – so delicate, yet they flourish in that harsh environment.

It does appear that the development of an ongoing relationship with country as well as an ongoing relationship with Indigenous culture, is significant. Anne exemplifies this by referring to an ‘infiltration’ of Aboriginal teachings into her life that seems to inform how she is in the world through a mode of ongoing sensitivity that she calls ‘a gradual awakening’:

I've really taken on board opening my senses, to be aware of the teachings all around me, and that the teachings are there, if only I pay attention. And with that comes respect, as well as paying attention. I know that various words have been used by Koori/Yuin Elders with me in teachings, at different times; however, these are the main things that have really infiltrated my life, and for me that is a gradual awakening.

San Roque has asserted that the process of getting to know and understand country cannot happen over a short period of time, and that it is ‘accumulated’:

... this country is vast, perhaps overwhelming and full of intricate detail. You don't take it in at one perceptual sweep, with one click of the camera or one reading of an Aboriginal Dreamtime story. The process of attuning perception, of becoming attentive and attaining some knowingness about the place is accumulated (Cameron and San Roque, 2003, p. 81).

My research participants, with their extremely powerful experiences over a few days, seem to defy this categorisation. What San Roque fails to account for here is the ability of country itself and the teachings themselves to continue to act upon people even when they are not present on that country. This is still ‘accumulated... knowingness’, but it is being enacted in alternative ways that my research has already outlined. I can certainly attest to this Indigenous seeping into oneself more and more through my relationships with places in my phenomenological research extending over many years. Initially, I found many reasons to dismiss or be sceptical of the meaningful synchronous happenings, not only when I was on the mountain or travelling through country, but also in the everyday.

Through my practice, entering into the body, mind and emotions of turtle was undermining my own sense of reality; to discover that working with white sticks was not just about a very aesthetic medium, but involved entering into a world of meaningful design that underlay the whole of nature; that sticks were also about death and decay and redemption. All of the above occurrences had some sort of a cumulative effect in terms of how I was more and more living in a world informed by Indigenous notions of country and the consciousness of place.

Today, I am daily informed by a world of signs and significations, a unitive world of meaningful communication. This, too, could be termed ‘associative syntonic communication’ (Cameron and San Roque, 2003, p. 79). I mentioned the black cockatoos flying above my home while I was doing the transcripts of conversations with Uncle Max. This huge mob presence was signifying something to me at that very moment, which related to what I was listening to and writing down. This is living in a way that is ‘thinking black’. Although it is difficult to decide which aspects are directly informed from which areas of my life, there is no doubt that ‘thinking black’ is pervasive as a way of my being in the world.

So, when I was in the Central Desert, I did not take my sickness to be something incidental; in the Kimberley, both before and after the experience, the *Wandjina* presence is literally communicating with me; Mt. Gulaga and her teachings continue to inform me; Uncle Max’s teachings on respect keep unfolding, showing different layers of meaning and instruction. I have learnt to keep attuned and alert to what the land is offering me as teachings. I ‘think black’ as well as ‘think white’. I straddle both worlds.

Poirier, who has studied the Balgo community of the Central Western Desert, states that intercultural relations between whites and blacks are more than ideological—they are also ‘ontological and epistemological’ (Poirier 2005 p. 4).

Kartiya [whites] see the ancestors simply as beliefs and refuse to consider Aboriginal assertions as truth... the ancestral realm is inherent in the Aboriginal way of being in, knowing, and relating to the present day world and to places such as Balgo (Poirier 2005 p. 46).

If Aboriginal assertions are taken as truths, in fact become embodied through an experience with place, then the ontology and epistemology I have adopted, must surely have huge repercussions in terms of who I am, how I view the world, how I view my place in it, and my relations with Indigenous and non-Indigenous persons, and the land as ground of being that we may both, whites and blacks, meaningfully share.

In discussing my piece of writing, *Under the Kimberley Skin*, I state my evolving position in terms of Aboriginal ontological and epistemological notions:

The process of really integrating this worldview into my being... As a white woman, I begin to change my identity when I inculcate these teachings. My view of reality also begins to alter drastically in line with new assumptions being adopted.

How does place itself contribute to the changing of identity? The relationships forged are always highly personalised and distinctive to a particular place, with very likely a strong input of Aboriginal cultural constituents that serve to create an even more distinctive set of relationships, a distinctive persona.

Yet, while the individualised nature of the place/person relationship exists, at the same time an opposing notion is also present, which is the connectedness of shared responses with other people (fear, death, trauma), shared themes with other places (healing, death, birthing), and teachings that emerge across places, between people (teachings of the Three Rocks and the trees of Fraser Islands). In fact, could we not be speaking about those types of common connections as being at times related to the cultural context, yet also in other ways stretching beyond culture or beyond the fixed cultural barriers?

8. Identity and Belonging as Part of the New *Ganma*

The Literature Review highlighted a certain debate between Read (2000) and Plumwood (2000), on identity and belonging in Australia today. I now find my research, through discussion of the results, located firmly in the middle of this debate. It could be termed the debate between cultural independence versus cultural convergence. Although both

scholars stress the importance of intercultural dialogue, each has a different end in mind. Read sees there is a choice in how or even whether we belong in Australia, but urges us towards the choice of being independent from an Aboriginal landscape in our relations with places, whereas Plumwood urges the investigation of new forms of cultural convergence as part of the cultural decolonising process.

I include here two quotes that sum up each argument. The one by Read is the same as that quoted at the beginning of the Literature Review:

Leave the spirits to the people who made them or were made by them. Let the rest of us find the confidence in our own physical and spiritual belonging in this land, respectful of Aboriginality but not necessarily close to it. Let's intuit our own attachments to country independently of Aboriginals. We can belong in the landscape, on the landscape, or irrelevantly to the landscape. We don't all have to belong to each other. To understand that is a step to belonging (Read 2000, p. 204).

Plumwood's refutation is that:

I agree that non-indigenes should not aim to imitate Aboriginal society and its land culture, if that were possible...I do not agree, however, that non-indigenous Australians should aim to be independent in these areas.

These [Read's] alternatives seem to me to ignore all the more interesting options of dialogue, learning, convergence and hybridization, dynamically evolving and adaptive forms that are quite distinct from static cultural imitation. There is much to be said for cultural convergence, to evolve what Aboriginal philosopher Mary Graham calls "the embryonic form of an intact, collective spiritual identity for all Australians, which will inform and support our daily lives, our aspirations and our creative genius" (Plumwood 2000, p. 93).

I find that, in an interesting way, I have done through the research exactly what both have advocated: I have gone out onto country with Aboriginal guides, yet also have developed a practice of what Read has encouraged, an 'intuit[ing my] own attachments

to country'; I have established dialogical, ongoing, communicative relationships with Aboriginal persons, one Elder in particular, and have pursued that same project with others, as Plumwood advocates.

What is it that I can now say that contributes to this vital Australian debate?

First, let me take my own practice, the writing and other forms of textual representation that characterise it, and the places with which I engage in first-person phenomenological research. In 'meeting country', I have been involved over many years in a process of 'intuit[ing] my own attachments to country' often with Aboriginal guides—it is a practice of moving to/in country, of singing to country, of poetising country, of painting and photographing country, of narrating country, of making art installations in country. The outcome of this is not as Read has predicted. My own attachments to country are not independent of Aboriginal people; they are interdependent with Aboriginals and Aboriginal country. My practice does not exclude Aboriginal voices; in fact, it embraces them. In *Digging Beneath the Kimberley Skin*, I am exposed to Aboriginal spirit presences through my journey onto saltwater country—they are present and impinge on my daily life as naturally as the human relationships in that place. They continue to engage with me even when I have left the Kimberley.

In my relationships with place, I have become 'respectful' of Aboriginality and, unlike Read, necessarily 'close to it'. It is impossible not to be. The Aboriginal presence has transcribed itself onto this landscape. Those of us that engage with the landscape deeply will also engage with those inscriptions. This may be described as a co-evolutionary process. To contemplate that Aboriginal country can be separated out as if it had no impact on its non-Indigenous inhabitants is vigorously denied. In Plumwood's words, 'as if we can realistically divide the country simply into "ours" and "theirs"' (Plumwood 2000, p. 93), or, as stated earlier by Biddle, 'There is no where, no way, to position ourselves, as spectators, as outside of this experience and expression' (Biddle 2006, p. 28).

I also find myself agreeing with Cameron's concern raised in this debate about Read's saying we can belong 'irrelevantly to the landscape' (Read 2000, p.204), which implies

an acceptance of a white Australian identity divorced from Aboriginal Australia (Cameron 2001, p. 27). My research decrees an Australian identity strongly linked with the land and culture that has forged its presence over thousands of years. Country adheres. Non-Indigenous Australians will also bring new inscriptions; the land will speak to us in new ways, address the particularities of each person, and offer individualised teachings. Yet these accounts cannot be separated out from the imprint of the old stories.

One of Plumwood's critiques of Read stems not just from his notion of separate yet respectful belonging, but also from what she claims is his seeming lack of alternatives when he places himself in relation to Aboriginal culture, 'neither appropriating it nor being absorbed by it' (Read 2000, p. 15). Plumwood advocates a far greater range of interactional options than this simplistic polarity, 'including dialogue, learning, convergence and hybridisation, dynamically evolving and adaptive forms that are quite distinct from static cultural imitation'. In fact, she adopts the views of Graham for a form of 'cultural convergence' that could be 'an intact, collective spiritual identity for all Australians' (Graham in Plumwood 2000, p.93).

I would like to draw in the other aspect of 'meeting country' in my research, that of third-person phenomenological research, to demonstrate how my research has indeed adopted these 'greater range of interactional options'. The individual narratives could be easily criticised by Plumwood on the same grounds as her critique of Read for his focus on individual place relationships that leave 'the structural obstacles to getting a place-sensitive society and culture unchallenged' (Plumwood 2000, p. 96). Yet this narrow reading of the significance of individual stories of place does not recognise the potential for the emergence of those 'dynamically evolving and adaptive forms' that she advocates. I have clearly defined the richness of the intercultural space from which emerges a range of possibilities of new forms of engagement. Non-Indigenous participants clearly had their own particular dialogue with Aboriginal places occurring mediated by the Elder, as well as the significant influence of dialogue with the Elder himself, discussed at length in Chapter Seven.

All of the above examples of both first-person and third-person phenomenological research seem to fit Plumwood's new paradigm, '... [as] communicative, making ownership out in the essentially narrative terms of naming and interpreting the land, of telling its story in ways that show a deep and loving acquaintance with it and a history of dialogic interaction' (Plumwood 2000, p. 99). Hence, in Plumwood's designation, what is being spoken about here is a type of cultural convergence. She gives scanty attention to what this really means, let alone the deeper process that underlies such an undertaking. I believe I take this concept a lot further than she has envisaged through her 'cross cultural renaming project', to spell out the complexity of the dialogic process itself.

My conversations with Uncle Max demonstrate the exchange process, the interchange between cultures as ongoing dialogue. I have been involved for the last ten years in a deep intercultural dialogue that has yielded insight into the nature of the dialogic process itself. This goes to the heart of Plumwood's insistence on such a process being endemic to a place-sensitive culture, and Read's insistence on listening respectfully to Aboriginal voices, 'to find a shared belonging' (Read 2000, p. 199). This is where my research contributes by delving into the relationship between Uncle Max and myself, and exposing understandings that have arisen, both through our conversations and my observations of him teaching myself and others.

I have had to learn to hear, like Read with Foley, the stories of the painful Aboriginal history through Uncle Max's stories. Cameron identifies the 'whitefella contribution' of Read's dialogue in these terms: 'a verbal acknowledgement of having heard the stories, of understanding the history of dispossession and killing, expressing sorrow and acknowledging custodianship of the 'proper country' (Cameron 2001, p. 27).

It is obvious that that this type of witnessing, particularly on the land itself, often where those actual events took place, builds trust between two people, the colonised and the coloniser. I would also add that both our roles in the dialogue goes beyond this witnessing, to one of intimacy, of being brought into the role of 'insider', one who 'knows' the stories and who is altered as a result. Read states, 'how if we wish to belong to this land, shall we deal with such Aboriginal pain?' (Read 2000, p. 207). My

identity as Australian can no longer stand apart from these stories. I am implicated in their ongoing legacy. Both Read and I, through our encounters with Aboriginal personal and cultural stories on country, have had to face up to the problematic of our own white belonging in Australia.

Rose sheds light on the ethics of the decolonising project that we are speaking about here:

Our generations alive today may be the first wave of settlers to try to grasp the enormity of conquest, and to understand it as a continuous process. In consequence, many of us really search to understand how we may inscribe back into the world a moral presence for ourselves (Rose 2004, p. 6).

So I would like to consider these conversations between an Aboriginal Elder and a white woman as part of the seeking out of a ‘moral presence’ for whitefellas’ on blackfellas’ country, and all that this entails, as I am sure Read does. Yet my whitefella contribution to the dialogic process goes a lot further. My teachings on the land have been repeated and reinforced time and time again. It is highly significant that I have been to Gulaga twice a year for the last ten years, along with many other sites where the teachings have been reinforced, not only by Uncle Max but also by the land itself. The imprint of these teachings, of the sites themselves, must surely run deep. I carry this imprint into the dialogic process. In my practice of embodied creative response to places, I develop dialogue with the earth directly, often tapping into Aboriginal influences. This, too, feeds into the dialogic process. The depth of the exploration of the dialogue between Uncle Max and myself reflects the richness of these sources. It also adds to the complexity of the dialogic process.

I have explained in Chapter Seven how mutuality in the conversations is underlain by a host of factors, including the quality of the trusted long-term relationship, the importance of personal and cultural factors, the impact of the teachings themselves, the impact of the land itself, and the role of communication with the world of spirit. All of these factors need to be considered as part of the dialogic process. It is no straightforward matter. Read pays little heed to acknowledging the power of country to

teach him directly, let alone its influence on the dialogic process: ‘In the sandstone gorges I have felt neither wisdom nor violence... I have intuited nothing’ (Read 2000, p. 216), although he occasionally hints at such potential: ‘I need to believe that the voices in the river will never be silent, that the land bears our mark now as well as theirs’ (Read 2000, p. 223).

If land as influencing presence is denied by Read, so too are other factors that affect the process of dialogic encounter between cultures that have emerged through my research, such as the length of time of immersion in the culture (thus engendering repeated exposure to the teachings), the personal specifics of the Aboriginal person with whom the dialogue is being conducted (an Elder and Senior Lawman compared with an Aboriginal person of limited cultural teachings), including the extent of that Aboriginal person’s immersion in Western culture, the ability to teach cross-culturally, the skills of group leadership, own personal history, own personal skills, own ongoing cultural teachings—and lastly, the issues surrounding transmission of knowledge (age/gender/cultural background of students, mutual obligations, nature of the site of teachings, prior Indigenous contact/teachings). With regard to this latter factor, the actual process of intercultural learning, as I have examined it, and exhorted by Plumwood as one of her ‘dynamic evolving and adaptive forms’ (Plumwood 2000, p. 93), is shown to be far more intricate and richly textured than suggested.

It was indicated in the first section of this chapter that crossing the cultural barrier between blacks and whites in this country demands adjustment, adaptation and the adoption of an Indigenous worldview, more and more over time. In my *ganma* enunciation as it stands now, the new construct is the individual who is not only able to move with ease (and sometimes not such ease!) from a white world into an Aboriginal world, but who embodies both of those worlds. In that embodiment, something new in the form of a transcultural persona exists where leakage from both cultural domains constitutes that state of being.

In this respect, the new *ganma* may be viewed as a cultural hybrid, a new type that has evolved as a result of cultural convergence, just as barramundi evolved into a new diadromous species. If so, this is certainly a different notion to that which has been

enunciated by Plumwood, and thus also sheds different light on what she nominates as ‘cultural convergence’ (Plumwood 2000 p. 93). Her renaming project (whereby she suggests renaming places as a collaborative project between Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures) is certainly a proposal of cultural collaboration, a cooperative project that may yield something of value that is deemed to belong to both cultures, ‘generating some common culture’ (Plumwood 2000, p. 103), but it falls far short of cultural convergence, as I understand it through my research. The new *ganma* is a synthesis, a mix of both cultures—this is surely how we need to be thinking about this notion of cultural convergence.

Cameron criticises Plumwood for her ‘elusive’ use of these terms and acknowledges that the cultural hybrid ‘is most easily understood in the arts, where a fusion of cultural influences has occurred as a result of the explosion of activity in music, drama and painting by Aboriginal people using western arts media’ (Cameron 2001, p. 28). Cultural hybridity is no new notion. Muecke (1997) and San Roque (2000) have both referred to it in the Australian context. Bell, in her collaboration with Mowaljarlai and the enunciation of *Two Way Thinking*’ could be conceived in this same vein as a serious attempt to bring the two cultures together through a synthesis of knowledge based on gender: ‘I wanted to find imagery and knowledge that were familiar to people within my own culture in order to relate and amplify the wisdom of Ngarinyin Law’ (Bell 1998, pp. 13, 128). A very recent project of cultural hybridity is that between a European academic and a Nhunggal (north west NSW) Elder and painter in examining the sustainability of traditional culture through the lens of Western knowledge systems (Sveiby and Skuthorpe 2006). It may be worth mentioning in this context the way I have understood Uncle Max’s transmission of knowledge to non-Indigenous persons as a model that incorporates traditional and Western aspects. This, too, could be described as a hybrid endeavour. Although individual projects like these have been undertaken and are valuable in providing models of real syntheses, a more holistic overview of the nature of hybridity in the Australian context awaits future research.

Hybridity itself would appear to have its own problems in terms of an emerging identity that claims no place because of its ‘in-between’ cultural status. When San Roque claims

that ‘there are techniques (emerging) for recognising and decoding communications from country’, the operative word ‘emerging’ suggests something of the problematic here (Cameron and San Roque 2000, p. 78). If access to Indigenous teachings is unavailable for a whole host of reasons, I question whether cultural hybridity is sustainable, let alone if it is capable of moving towards ‘an intact collective spiritual identity for all Australians’, as suggested by Graham (Graham in Plumwood 2000, p. 93).

It may be too limiting to nominate what we have been speaking about as hybrid place relations. After all, consider the role of place itself. The earlier part of this chapter presented place as being a full participant in any enunciation of place relations. Place insinuates itself as part of the dialogue. Thus, it may be more meaningful to refer to a ‘trialogue’ in describing what is taking place here than a dialogue. This is the same type of notion Cameron refers to as the potential role of the ‘active non-human partner in proceedings, the place of Hamilton Downs itself’ as constituting the ‘interplay’ that then produces the ‘temenos or sacred space’, the third force ‘neither solely human-created or solely place-created, but requiring both’ (Cameron and San Roque 2000, p. 85). Since place has such crucial positioning, is it still meaningful to express our discussion in cross-cultural terms?

I believe so. An alternative framework may be demanded that embraces something that is deeply cultural, yet also extends beyond culture. It is thus not conceived purely in cultural terms through recognition of added complexity. In relation to this, I have already mentioned the suggestion that the interconnectedness of themes, places, people and responses in all of my research participants’ experiences hinted at a state of unity beyond cultural confines. Uncle Max draws on a vision of ‘reconciling’ all peoples with the earth, with Spirit. This, too, suggests something that is immersed in the dynamics of the cultural realm, while at the same time stretches to include broader notions. Relevant here is also Biddle’s concept of the ‘dissolution’ of boundaries (Biddle 2006, p. 28). The ‘dissolution of boundaries’, although an important aspect of this research, does not preclude the particularities of place and Indigenous relationships from future understandings.

I am interested in the following questions that have emerged as a result of my research findings: Is everyone sensitised or porous to receiving land imprints? If it is selective, then what determines who will be more receptive than another? What is the nature of receptivity to country? Can it be acquired, can it be taught? In what areas is it strongest? Is there dilution in certain areas? Why? And of course, what does it mean for the emerging identity and belonging in Australia, the incarnation of the ancient with the modern?

The new *ganma* must be still be reconciled with political realities of black—white identity in Australia today. There is controversy and sensitivity in the transference of knowledge from one cultural context to another. Because it questions who owns what, and who gives permission, eschewing claims of ownership and belonging in one side or the other, the whole area of the new *ganma* is fraught and highly contentious. Perhaps this is one reason why Read has adopted separate but respectful distancing from Aboriginal attachments to this country. My research results undermine his notions of leaving ‘the spirits to the people who made them or were made by them’. The spirits, it seems, are owned by no-one. The spirits, it seems, will decide how and when and to whom they will speak.

In an inspirited land, yes, the voices of those spirits have been for a long, long time articulated through Aboriginal culture, and this continues to be articulated along cultural lines. But they are also being articulated through all of us, whites and blacks, and there are many new forms that this articulation now takes on, some blending of the old and the new, some completely new strains. It is not possible that Creation Ancestors could be only relevant to Aboriginal people. They act on all of us. None of us can belong ‘irrelevantly’ to this landscape. The spirit of place straddles all worlds. The new stories are emerging with a distinctive voice, yet still bearing the indelible imprint of the old. This is the new *ganma*. It is impossible not to have a shared sense of place in Australia.

AFTERWORD

Uncle Max and I are presenting together at a conference in Tasmania. The conference title is *Senses of Place*. Our topic is going to the heart of the thesis. It is called ‘Whitefellas Experience of Blackfellas Country—Conversations with an Elder’. Like all of my conversations with Uncle Max, I am not sure where this one is going, but usually I do not have to deal with an audience when we dialogue. So on this day, I am somewhat nervous and full of anticipation. I begin tentatively... ‘Uncle Max, I do remember the first time I went up the mountain. What I want to bring out is the notion of silence, that the mountain actually silenced me and I am unable to still speak about what goes on for me in the sacred sites on the mountain. It is the same with photographs; I can’t actually look at the photos that students take. I am wondering about this thing of silence and whether it resonates with you’.

Uncle Max pauses, looks around him at all of the people in the room, each in turn, and his voice drops.

*If you remember when we first went up it was Easter time, an Easter pilgrimage. There was a lot of yackety-yak at the breakfast table, so I knew I couldn’t let this go up the mountain. I just asked people to go up in silence, and boy it worked. So they could listen to everything—not only listen to everything, but **feel** the power of the mountain.*

*And because when we get there, there is a procedure to follow before you enter into the sites of sacred significance. You get some ‘war paint’ put on ya, a dot here and a dot there, to open up your two minds, and a dot there to let you **see** what I’m talkin’ about. To let you **see** what I’m talkin’ about, not hear. To have that total silence for the respect of the Elders that has gone before, that dot goes onto your chin.*

I know these procedures by heart, have heard Uncle Max utter these same words when daubing the ochre on literally hundreds of people. Yet it feels new each time, as if I am hearing it for the first time. But it is more today, that what I am hearing, I am hearing differently. Has he really said that he wants us to see what he is talking about, rather

than hear? This is exactly what I mean when I say that, in being exposed to these teachings time and time again, something new imprints each time. I wonder if he knows of each new imprint in me?

*That's one of the things of **your** silence, 'cause of your respect of the mountain and the Law of the mountain, you carry that right through until you go down.*

I try and take this in; he is speaking about me, about me and respectful silence and the mountain and the Law. Suddenly, I feel noticed and vulnerable, and quite raw emotionally. I have forgotten that it is not only the mountain that takes notice. Uncle Max has been noticing my behaviour in relation to the mountain for nearly ten years now. I immediately become aware that the room full of people are also noticing my behaviour. I redden.

Then for some reason I become aware of the time I asked Uncle Max about his very first time on Gulaga. It was like that for him, too—the silence, I mean. He called it ‘the awesome silence’ that made his head thump.

One of the things I tell people is that when you leave here [the mountain], you take it with you. I like people to take the spirituality, the spiritual feeling, the spiritual significance of the sites of significance, with them.

I think of Margarita and how she unconsciously took The Three Rocks teaching with her; of Michael, with his reclaimed grammar and syntax, and his ongoing connection with the whale rock that I will never know anything about; of Rowena, who now walks bare foot in her garden and greets Grandfather Sun as a daily practice; of Anne, who converses with kookaburra. All of them have taken something of the spirituality of the mountain with them, as I have done. Even Uncle Max: he takes something each time he is on the mountain. I recall his words, when I get down to Gulaga:

all that stuff that I get down there can last me for six months, for twelve months you know, 'cause I'll come away with all that stuff that's there, all that healing stuff. Maybe this is what being custodians of the mountain mean also—we each hold these teachings in our own way.

[It's] so they can understand when an Aboriginal stands up and says, 'Don't go near that tree! That's a sacred tree. Don't go near that rock! That's a sacred rock. Don't go near that waterhole! That's a sacred waterhole'.

But to let them see why these Old People have given us and left us all these legacies of sacredness and awareness, and why we hold and still try to hold today the significance of those places of sacredness.

It's just a matter of opening people's minds up, not trying to get 'em over, but just opening their minds up.

Of course, we whites can have our minds opened, can see the world as through Aboriginal eyes. And in that opening, we have the knowledge of what it means for Aboriginal people in their relationships with places of sacredness, as well as developing our own relationships with sacred places. I blurt out, 'So coming back to that thing of "going in with whitefellas' eyes and coming out with blackfellas' mind", is that what we are talking about now?'

Oh yeah! Lots of things!

I can see Uncle Max's mind ticking over now. He is weighing up just how much he will say at this time; after all, it is a bunch of academic strangers in a room, not a mob of whitefellas on his country. I know him so well, realise how intimate our conversations have become over the years, how we have been building respect and mutual understanding and knowledge. My voice is softer when I pose the next question: 'You say, "I'm just wanting to open them up". How much of it is *you* opening them up and how much is it the spirits in that place, the mountain itself, that is opening them up?'

It happens, just like that. There is a definitive shift in him, recognised automatically by my body. The way I explain it is that spirit is speaking now. Uncle Max's voice is so soft; I can barely hear it, let alone others. We have both dropped into another way of relating, and the group, the room, all else disappears.

Oh yeah, it's what's in there.

It's what's in the land, what's in the rocks, what's in that breeze; it's what's in that rain that's comin' down, and all that stuff.

I breathe easily. Take in each breath, each word of the land, of the breeze, of the rocks, of the rain, as if I am breathing them into me, right into me. Maybe Uncle Max registers now that we have an audience, that I have left, am back with my precious mountain, pulling in on the umbilical cord. He turns to address them:

You see, what people gotta understand is that because of my eight and upwards thousand years of education and knowledge of the land and the environment...

I wasn't allowed to go to school in the thirties and forties, but I ended up going to Western Sydney University at Milperra. I couldn't read or write, but I began educating myself. So I went into the university with all my knowledge—I went in with a black mind, see, and I come out thinking white.

And that's what I like to do with whitefellas: take 'em into a black space and let 'em see Aboriginal teachings that's there, to allow them to come out differently and think. So that's why, when the old blackfella that's on the news and standin' there sayin', "That's a sacred rock, don't damage it! That's a sacred waterhole, don't fill it up with clean fill! That's a sacred tree, don't cut it down!", you see.

And if we don't share just that little bit of sacredness with people, we can never let 'em think black. We gotta do the best we can and form that relationship of walkin' the land together and reconciling back with Mother Earth. Reconcile with the land that's given you everything. And that's what I try to teach people, that's what I say when I'm takin' them onto the land... to show them how to look after the mother.

I hear these words from a long distance, like an echo down through the ages. I snatch at a couple of them: *form that relationship of walkin' the land together and reconciling back with Mother Earth...*

This is the path I wish to tread. It feels a long way to know how to look after the Mother, to reconcile back with Mother Earth, but this '*walkin' the land together*', this has at least begun.

The light breeze tickles my nostrils; the mist moistens my eyelashes. I can barely see the granite tors in the uncertain grey light.

I have begun to meet and know country.

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