

Cross-Kingdom Encounters

Journeys to the New England Tablelands

Katherine Wright
Bachelor of Media (Hons)

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Media, Music, Communication and Cultural Studies
Macquarie University, 2013

Table of Contents

Abstract	i
Statement of Candidate	ii
List of Figures	iii
Acknowledgements	vi
Preface	ix
Introduction. Unsettling Blood's Country	1
Part One. Stone Country	27
Chapter 1. The Australian Standing Stones – A Temporal Monoculture	31
Chapter 2. Encounters – A Road Trip through Stone Country	67
Part Two. Trees	95
Chapter 3. Pining for the Present	98
Chapter 4. Armidale's Imported Autumn	128
Part Three. Animals	153
Chapter 5. Lucy	155
Chapter 6. Down the Rabbit Burrow	171
Part Four. Water	213
Chapter 7. Droughts and Flooding Rains	217
Chapter 8. Can the Shower Sing?	235
Part Five. Sky Country	257
Conclusion. Thinking Like a Storm	261
Works Cited	278
Ethics Approval Letter	297

Abstract

This thesis is about human relationships with the more-than-human world, analysed through the frame of the New England tableland region of New South Wales, Australia. I spent my childhood in New England, and it is where I first developed intimate connections with nonhumans. My central aspiration for this work has been to promote environmental and social justice by mobilising locally-based perceptions of ecological connectivity. In the wake of the environmental and social devastations of colonisation, I tackle the question of how we are to live ethically in places which are both damaged and beloved.

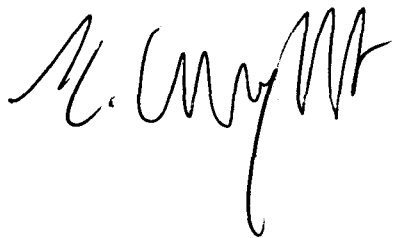
The research is divided into five parts, with each exploring cross-kingdom encounters between humans and a particular ‘genre’ of nonhuman life in New England. The following pages are peopled with stones, trees, animals, waters, and skies. Inspired by the work of Gregory Bateson, this study is predicated on the notion that the organism-plus-environment is an inseparable unit, and that the self is permeated by the “outside world”. Adopting a relational approach to place-based study, this thesis avers proximity as a kind of methodology which acknowledges our entangled position in connected, living systems.

In the contact zones between flesh and fur, skin and bark, lies the potential for reworking the way we understand responsibility and commitment in a postcolonial country.

Statement of Candidate

This work has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other university or institution. Ethics approval was sought and gained for this project from the Macquarie University Ethics Review Committee (Human Research) on 9th May 2011.

Ethics reference number: 5201100591

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'M. Wright', written in a cursive style.

List of Figures

Photographs are the author's own, except where noted.

Figure 1: Bald Rock, Tenterfield, 2010	27
Figure 2: The Australian Standing Stones, Glen Innes, 2010	31
Figure 3: Close-up of the Australian Standing Stones, Glen Innes, 2010	34
Figure 4: Excalibur sword sculpture at the Australian Standing Stones, Glen Innes, 2010	39
Figure 5: Rock formation in the New England tablelands, 2010	43
Figure 6: A 'granite exile' at the Australian Standing Stones, Glen Innes, 2010	44
Figure 7: The main plaque at the Australian Standing Stones, Glen Innes, 2010	46
Figure 8: Carhenge, Nebraska (image reproduced with the permission of Friends of Carhenge).	57
Figure 9: Mum at the Australian Standing Stones, Glen Innes, 2010	64
Figure 10: The main commemorative stone at the Myall Creek Massacre Memorial, Bingara, 2010	68
Figure 11: The site of the Myall Creek massacre, Bingara, 2010	69
Figure 12: Memorial path at Myall Creek Massacre Memorial, Bingara, 2010	70
Figure 13: Memorial stone at Myall Creek Massacre Memorial, Bingara, 2010	71
Figure 14: Stones left by visitors against the main memorial stone at Myall Creek Massacre Memorial, Bingara, 2010	79
Figure 15: Stones, leaves, bark and feathers left by visitors at Myall Creek Massacre Memorial, Bingara, 2010	80
Figure 16: Bluff Rock 'viewing area,' 2010	81
Figure 17: Bluff Rock viewed from the 'viewing area,' 2010	82
Figure 18: Ochre residue at the Mount Yarrowyck rock art site, 2010	85
Figure 19: Mount Yarrowyck rock art site, 2010	91
Figure 20: A wattle tree on my parents' property, Armidale, 1995 (Vic Wright)	95
Figure 21: The Armidale Pine Forest, Armidale, 2009	98
Figure 22: The Armidale Pine Forest, Armidale, 2011	105
Figure 23: 'Your Forests are in Safe Hands': State Forests sign at the Armidale Pine Forest after clear-fell, 2009	111

Figure 24: The Armidale Pine Forest after clear-fell, 2009	112
Figure 25: The Armidale Pine Forest after clear-fell, 2009	113
Figure 26: The Armidale Pine Forest after clear-fell, 2009	116
Figure 27: Reforestation at the Armidale Pine Forest, 2011	119
Figure 28: Nature's resilience at the Armidale Pine Forest, 2011	120
Figure 29: Tree-planting at the Armidale Pine Forest, 2011	122
Figure 30: The Armidale Pine Forest, 2009	124
Figure 31: The Armidale Pine Forest, 2010	127
Figure 32: Armidale's autumnal hues (image reproduced with the permission of www.localguidesigns.com.au)	128
Figure 33: Deciduous trees in the Armidale streetscape, 1990 (Vic Wright)	132
Figure 34: Table of Aboriginal seasons, Bureau of Meteorology, Indigenous Weather Knowledge Project (http://www.bom.gov.au/iwk/climate_culture/Indig_seasons.shtml)	139
Figure 35: The Chinese pistachio tree (Wikimedia Commons, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pistacia_chinensis)	144
Figure 36: A bare gum tree branch on my parent's property, Armidale, 2008	145
Figure 37: A blue wren at my parents' property, Armidale, 2008 (Vic Wright)	151
Figure 38: Me and Lucy, 1996 (Vic Wright)	153
Figure 39: Lucy, 1995 (Vic Wright)	155
Figure 40: Lucy chewing a branch on my legs, 1999	156
Figure 41: My documentary film about Labradors, made in 1997	157
Figure 42: Lucy and those longing brown eyes! (Vic Wright, 2002)	158
Figure 43: Lucy playing soccer, 1998: sometimes she would even kick the ball!	165
Figure 44: Me and Lucy, 1996 (Vic Wright)	168
Figure 45: Shaun Tan illustration from John Marsden and Shaun Tan's <i>The Rabbits</i>	176

Figure 46: 'Bunny' eating my Mum's plant at my parents' house, Armidale, 2009	199
Figure 47: 'Bunny' at my parents' house, Armidale, 2009	203
Figure 48: 'Bunny' at my parents' house, Armidale, 2009	208
Figure 49: Dam on my parents' property after heavy rain, 2010 (Vic Wright)	213
Figure 50: Lucy swimming in a dam on my parents' property, 2005	214
Figure 51: Rainwater tank in Uralla, NSW, 2007	217
Figure 52: Dam in drought on my parents' property, 2003 (Vic Wright)	220
Figure 53: The domestic water supply tank and pump on my parents' property, Armidale, 2007	238
Figure 54: Flowers in Mum's garden, Armidale, 2007	247
Figure 55: Lucy's grave, Armidale, 2011 (Vic Wright)	252
Figure 56: Sunset reflected in a dam on my parents' property, Armidale, 2011	255
Figure 57: Summer Lightning Storm over Sofia (Boby Dimitrov, available on Wikimedia Commons: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Boby_Dimitrov_-_Summer_lightning_storm_over_Sofia_(by-sa).jpg?uselang=en-gb)	257
Figure 58: Banded stilts in Governors Lake, Rottnest Island, Western Australia (Wikimedia Commons, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Banded_stilt)	262
Figure 59: 'Cloud-to-ground Lightning' (C. Clark, available on Wikimedia Commons: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3ACloud-to-ground_lightning2_-_NOAA.jpg)	268
Figure 60: Me in snow, Armidale, 1994 (Vic Wright)	277

Acknowledgements

Having spent the past four years writing from the contact zone between species, as I sit down to write my acknowledgements, I am conscious of a tendency to thank only humans, or at least to thank humans first. I guess that my *Homo sapiens* companions are far more likely to read this thesis. Well, they probably won't, but at least a few of them might cast their eyes over the acknowledgements section!

It would be remiss of me, however, to acknowledge only the bipedal creatures who have supported and cared for me along this emotionally treacherous journey, as so many furry and feathered critters have made what is sometimes a cold and hard task warm and worthwhile. It also seems unjust to acknowledge only those beings I have encountered directly, and forget those who have nourished me in countless ways but who I have not met because the limitations of my experience.

So, to begin, I would like to acknowledge all of my 'shadow friends', all those who I have not been able to meet, but who have provided the material conditions for me to be able to spend four years pursuing such an unusual task. And of course, there are those critters who I have met, some of whom have made their way directly into this work, some only implicitly. Thanks to Bunny, Barney and Harry, the birds that sing at my Newtown terrace, the pine trees of Armidale, and the countless other lives I have encountered along the way, particularly those who made my childhood home the perfect place to meet the world. And, of course, thanks to Lucy, who taught me some hard lessons in loss, but most of all, showed me how to really love a home. This thesis is dedicated to you.

And thank you to all the humans who have supported me with their kindness, generosity, patience and love of good fun!

My principal supervisor Catherine Simpson has been a source of encouragement and support, without fail, for the past four years. She has been an intelligent colleague, a warm friend, a patient therapist, and a meticulous editor. Her generosity and wit have kept me going through the tough times, and she has been there to cheer me on through the best times.

My co-supervisor, Deborah Bird Rose, has helped me think more deeply and encouraged me to write with passion and honesty. Her own work has been an inspiration throughout this thesis. To have a scholar of such high intellect and integrity engage with my work has been an honour.

A special thanks to the New England Aboriginal Elders who so generously shared with me their stories, feelings and thoughts. Steve Widders, Pat Cohen, Lorna Hague, Christina Kim and Margaret Walford have been profound teachers and I could not imagine this work without their words.

Mona-Lynn Courteau provided a thorough and professional technical copyedit of this work.

Marcus Baynes-Rock, Thom van Dooren, Dinesh Wadiwel, and Elaine Kelly all provided helpful feedback on parts of this thesis. I would also like to thank the many anonymous referees who have reviewed articles which have made their way, in bits and pieces, into this work. Thanks to my many colleagues and peers at universities throughout Australia for their kind words of support.

A special thanks to my family: Vic, Mum and Ben. Moments I have spent with each of you pop up in the following chapters, reflecting the immeasurable influence you have all had on the way I think and feel about home and belonging. Thank you for all the shared years that led me to begin this project, and all the support throughout it. I love you very deeply.

Thanks to all my fantastic friends: Claire, Dave, Alex, Beth, Polson, Kieran (Post-it Note) Aylward, Em, Lou, Andre, Josh , Paul, Flea, Katzy (stick and bone), Skinner, Bon, Chop & Mike who have been there to remind me that there's more to life than a thesis – there's also beer!

I like to think that despite our tendency to love a few and forget the many, this love, if it is generous and wise, can lead us to a love for the world and all the lives within it. With that hope, I thank my lover and best friend, Derek, for his laughter, his kindness, his blunt - yet tender - honesty, his patience, his cuddles, and his reassuring refrain: 'It'll be worth it – just finish the bloody thing!'

Preface

This thesis is written about a home-place, from a position of intimacy. It is experiential and subjective, seeking out inter-species proximity, love, friendship and curiosity as ways to engage with a connected, multi-species world. Because of this it does not follow the trajectory of a traditional thesis.

I have written in shifting registers, as I move from place to place, and alter my point of view. At times this work is critical, at other times personally reflective, at others I lose myself in memory and the immersive experience of place. This movement across writing styles and landscapes is fluid, and not signalled in the text, except by the use of italics for poetry.

Throughout this work I incorporate the writings of New England poet Judith Wright to point to the problematic condition of settler belonging in a place that is also the site of environmental and social violence. Like Wright, my own longing for home is for a 'clean, lean, hungry country': for muscular hills stripped bare, for stretching barbed-wire fences, for cattle, for the smell of agriculture, for the taste of a colonised high country.

I have used footnotes as a referencing system, but the additional information contained within them is not necessary to cover the main arguments, and they need only be reviewed if the reader seeks more in-depth information about a particular topic. All sources are referenced in footnotes, except my interviews with Aboriginal Elders, because I do not wish to treat their words as 'material' but instead as part of an ongoing decolonising dialogue.

I met with the Elders as a group on 13th December, 2011 at Hughes House, 141 Faulkner Street, Armidale. Attending this meeting were Pat Cohen, Lorna Hague, Christina Kim, Steve Widders and Margaret Walford. I met with Steve Widders alone on

23rd December 2011 at Caffiends café, 182 Beardy Street, Armidale. I met with the Elders as a group (except Christina Kim) on 17th September 2012 at Hughes House, 141 Faulkner Street, Armidale. I met with Christina Kim at her home in Armidale on 20th September, 2012.

Parts of this work have been published in the following articles:

Wright, Katherine. 'Bunnies, Bilbies and the Ethic of Ecological Remembrance'. *M/C: A*

Journal of Media and Culture 15, no. 3 (2012). <http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/viewArticle/507>

Wright, Katherine. 'Pining for the Present: Ecological Remembrance and Healing in the Armidale State Forest'. *Journal of Environmental Philosophy* 9, no. 1 (2012): 109–126.

Wright, Katherine. 'Armidale's Imported Autumn'. *Transformations* 21 (2012).

<http://www.transformationsjournal.org/journal/titles.shtml>

Wright, Katherine. 'An "Upside-Down Land": Contested Rock Formations in the New England Landscape (Australia)'. Proceedings of the 24th Permanent European Conference for the Study of Rural Landscapes (23 – 28 August 2010, Riga), 2012.

http://www.lza.lv/LZA_VestisA/66_3/16_Katherine%20Wright.pdf

Wright, Katherine. 'Signatures of Resistance: Graffiti as a Form of Self-Inscription at Thunderbolt's Rock, Uralla (NSW)'. In *NEO: Journal for Higher Degree Research Students in the Social Sciences and Humanities* 3, edited by Anthony Lambert, 2010.

http://www.arts.mq.edu.au/documents/6_Katherine_Wright.pdf

Wright, Katherine. 'Manicured Nature: Nativism, Authenticity and Belonging in the Armidale State Forest (NSW)'. In *Provoking Texts: New Postgraduate Research from the Edge*, proceedings of Curtin University 'Creative Margins' Conference (5- 6 November 2009, Perth), edited by Julie Lunn, 2009.

http://hgsoconference.curtin.edu.au/local/pdf/Wright_Katherine.pdf

for Lucy

