A WHITE WOMAN STORIES TO DECOLONISE (HERSELF)

SEEPING, OOZING, BLOOMING

Melissa Razuki
SLEEPING, Oozing, Blooming

MEANDERING WITH NATURE

(COUNTRY IS ALIVE)
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Culture frames the identity of all people.
Our senses see, hear, taste, feel and smell the world through culture.
Culture is as necessary to a sense of meaning and identity as air is to living.
Culture is the air our minds breathe.
Culture is our eyes onto the world.
Culture explains the world to us and us to the world.

Muriel Bamblett, CEO, Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA)
MEANDERING THROUGH NATURE

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It is July 2018. We are gathered in Adnyamathanha Country in the Flinders Ranges, South Australia. A hard-baked landscape littered with carcasses of roos and wallabies that perished in the drought. There is the odd dead merino too, nothing but a mound of wool. It has not rained for more than sixteen months. We are about to go in search of a piece of rock art along a long, dry river bed. I had wandered down there earlier. I can feel the river red gums suffering in the dry. But first, we need a lesson.

1 I am the Weaver. This is my meandering voice in the margins, weaving threads, filling in the gaps, revealing the holes, making connections across the multitude of works I am sharing with you. My meanderings are designed to lull you into your comfort zone and then unsettle or surprise you with fascinating or devastating anecdotes and stories about the shared legacy that is Australian settler and First Nations peoples’ history. My hunch is that my stories are best delivered in bite-size pieces to encourage you to read but not be overwhelmed: hence, the chapbook format. The voices of Waa (the crow) and the Weaver (in the footnotes) are representations of the layers and levels of knowledge and learning. Waa foregrounds First Nations peoples’ ways of knowing and being, and the Weaver is reflexively sharing with you my quandaries and questions about the thinking and making of the chapbooks from a researcher’s point of view.
‘Before we set off, you need to learn how to walk’, says Professor Stephen Muecke.²

He’s a wise, avuncular man, and I sense he is one who earned the capacity to switch lenses, white to black to white to black. As a younger scholar in the 1970s and ’80s, his teacher was Paddy Roe, an Elder of the Goolarabooloo (also written as ‘Gularabulu’) people, and over the years their connection deepened and collaborations thrived until Roe passed away.³

‘Allow me to demonstrate …’ Stephen instructs as he loosens up his long limbs.

First, let your shoulders slump. Relax them and let your arms swing free, they will follow the movement of your body.

Second, tip your whole body slightly forwards as you walk, leaning into your stride. With each step, you fall forward slightly.

Third, let your feet skim the ground. This is the opposite to marching, where you bring your feet up and down heavily. Skimming is a light touch and as you get going, you will notice that you are moving along faster, yet using much less energy. It’s easier in thongs or with bare feet and on flat ground ...

Loosen your busy mind, activate (or awaken) your senses. Trust. Be silent – don’t ask questions for a while. Attend to what is around you: the breeze across your cheek, the angle of the sun, the wheezy sound of the baby galahs.

Be led, allow the pause, value distractions, stay loose.

Drift.
Roam.
Wander.
Weave.
Meander.
Be curious.

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² In July 2018 I joined a Creative Practice Retreat hosted by the JM Coetzee Centre based at the University of Adelaide. We travelled to the Flinders Ranges to stay at Oratunga Station. One afternoon, Professor Stephen Muecke taught us how to walk on Country. This is written from that experience and supplemented by a paper he has written called ‘Light Touch: The Lurujarri Heritage Trail in Broome’ (paper presented at the International Festival of Landscape Architecture, Gold Coast, Queensland, 11–14 October 2018).

³ Goolarabooloo means ‘the coast where the sun goes down’.
Stephen Muecke is an important person for me to listen to. Unbeknownst to him, he is part of my ‘community of thinkers’. This community (of my imagination) comprises the fine and creative minds I align myself with in my research and writing. This means I stand on their shoulders; I lean on their knowledge; I immerse myself in their work to find launching points.

In 2012, before I met Muecke, I walked the Lurujarri Trail in Goolarabooloo Country in Western Australia. The trail covers a vast region stretching from La Grange in the south, through Broome, and north to Dampier Land; our main guide on that walk in 2012 was Paddy Roe’s grandson, Richard Hunter. It was Muecke’s writing that had brought me there. I find I have shadowed Muecke in the eight years since I walked Lurujarri and I am often drawn back to Muecke’s works and insights that detail his own experience of this trail. I must confess I was very pleased to make his acquaintance, to tell him how my nine days sleeping in a swag and walking with the Goolarabooloo was one of the most incredible experiences in my life, how his work deepened my understanding and experiences of the unique adventure that is the Lurujarri Trail. Since that time, his insights have showed me how to pay attention and how to build bridges.

I begin with the latter.

ON BUILDING BRIDGES

In his book Gularabulu: Stories from the West Kimberley, Paddy Roe generously announced the ‘trustori’ (or ‘true stories’) he was sharing with Muecke were for everybody, including white people, so ‘they might be able to see us better than before’:

4 Hunter referred to his people as both sundown and saltwater mob. ‘I’m a salty’, he said. Hunter holds the stories for that Country now and he told us he carries on his grandfather’s dream that we walk this Country together. He talks for Country: ‘It’s a gift looking after and talking to Country. Now there is no practice [traditional ceremony and ritual] and that’s all I’ve got left. My stories. Ask questions. We are willing to share.’
This is all public
You know (it) is for everybody:
Children, women, anybody.
See, this is the thing they used to tell us:
Story, and we know.⁵

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Muecke, as an early career researcher, found in Roe an Elder who was willing to share his language and culture. Perhaps Roe knew intuitively his stories would be safe in Muecke’s hands. In the introduction to their collaboration, *Gularabulu* (1983), Muecke describes the tension that emanates from the academic structure that ‘sets up a line of difference, separating its culture [its economy, its organisation, its concerns and beliefs] from that of another culture, which is always “the other”’ and the kind of trade that occurs across this line of difference.⁶ Muecke tells of that ethical trade down the line, ensuring it is good for both parties, ensuring the negotiation is not losing what is important to those being studied and ‘equally useful’.⁷ In this intention, he distinguishes himself from the ‘smash and grab ethnographers’ who would fly into the field, mine the First Nations peoples of their stories and fly out, never to be seen again.

In *Gularabulu*, there are nine poetic stories narrated by Roe in Aboriginal (Broome) English and transcribed by Muecke. He explains this hybrid language is a ‘vital communicative link between Aboriginal speakers of different language backgrounds’ as well as a link between black and white Australia.⁸ Muecke recognises Aboriginal

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⁷ Ibid. Another member of this ‘community of thinkers’ is Minoru Hokari, who also challenges the way we view history and the dominant culture’s production and maintenance of certain ways of knowing and being. I discuss his work in the story ‘Right Way’ in *The White Woman*. See Minoru Hokari, *Gurindji Journey: A Japanese Historian in the Outback* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2011).

⁸ Muecke, introduction to *Gularabulu*, iv. For more information on the breadth and current state of First Nations languages, see my story ‘Trumped Up’ in *My Conscience Is a Many Feathered Thing*. 
English as a ‘bridging’ between the vastly different European and Aboriginal cultures and also a chance for him to play a second role of listener, which is a vital element in the performance of the narrative. In this situation, Muecke is ‘a kind of generalised representative of white Australia’ who brings his influence to bear on the texts through which Roe strives to address the white reader. But the texts are not only for white readers.

Since those days, Muecke has continued to negotiate the complexities of the cross-cultural experience in Australia and teach new generations of scholars keen to build bridges. A few years later, Muecke deepens his collaboration with Roe and they enlist the lens of Berber artist Krim Benterrak from Morocco to co-create the text *Reading the Country* (1984). The back cover of the book has an evocative invitation from Roe:

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You people try and dig a little bit more deep
you been digging only white soil
try and find the black soil inside
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The final section of the book has an interview with Muecke to unpack his ‘writing’ of the book, and there are two points he makes that I relate to my own approach in this research. First, he articulates his overall problem as ‘how to rewrite the Aboriginal-white

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9 Muecke, introduction to *Gularabulu*, v. In *Reading the Country*, Muecke stresses that he is ‘in no way a spokesperson for the Aboriginal opinion, or its interpreter’. His function for Paddy Roe was to be ‘the scribe’ while Roe was ‘in charge of the words’. Stephen Muecke, postscript to *Reading the Country*, by Krim Benterrak, Stephen Muecke and Paddy Roe (Freemantle: Freemantle Press, 1996), 257. I cannot help but dwell in the parallels between Muecke and Roe and Richard Frankland and myself, particularly in the role of listener. I envisage Muecke as a collaborator and conduit for Roe (whose first language was not English), a way of accessing and reaching a wider, English-speaking white Australia with his message of shared pasts and futures. What am I to Richard, who is already an accomplished and acclaimed communicator over the cultural abyss? What is my role of listener here?

10 In particular, I am thinking of the poet Stuart Cooke and his rich and poetic engagement with the song cycles of Roe and his kin in *George Dyungayan’s Bulu Line* (Glebe: Puncher & Wattman, 2015). I was most interested in Cooke’s description of the Bulu song poems as ‘new’. They came to George in a dream in the early 1900s, not via ancient song cycles that are passed on through generations over millennia. Richard says his poems and songs fall out of him, so I told him about these ‘dream’ songs from the Kimberley. This is how they come, he says, no new, no old, there is no time. Timeless. How little we know.
encounter’.\textsuperscript{11} Thirty-five years later, I am dwelling in the same space, wondering how I write about the relationship between black and white Australia in ways how I write about the relationship between black and white Australia, adding my voice to others who strive to build a bridge over the cultural abyss. Muecke says his hope was to ‘clear away the debris of ways of talking which impose on, interpret, remove or just ignore the words of Aboriginal peoples’.\textsuperscript{12} As I look out upon \textit{that} landscape, I see more of a quagmire than debris; I see the cultural abyss I am writing a bridge over.

Second, knowing his role was to foreground Roe’s cultural authority, Muecke had to consider carefully how he chose the words to place alongside Roe’s: ‘I couldn’t just frame his words, explain them and otherwise disarm them by normalising them socially. I wanted to write in such a way that they would remain prominent in all the force of their opinion.’\textsuperscript{13}

This is such an important point and it comes from a deeply respectful place. Here, Muecke articulates a desire to honour the author’s voice that I had felt when immersed in Richard Frankland’s works. This is about cultural authority, deference, acknowledging and respecting the Elder, the Old People, the Songman and Songwoman.\textsuperscript{14}

Muecke observes that Roe’s discourse is one of \textit{affirmation} – you will have noticed how little he negates things ... Paddy Roe has always been talking about just that [rewriting the Aboriginal-white encounter], telling stories in joyous affirmation of his peoples’ will to survive’.\textsuperscript{15} This statement is significant as Muecke foregrounds a strengths-based approach to writing about the shared legacy. By this I mean he

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{11} Muecke, postscript to \textit{Reading the Country}, 258, emphasis in original.
\footnote{12} Ibid.
\footnote{13} Ibid.
\footnote{14} I have grown to understand how cultural authority is integral to the First Nations hierarchy of knowledge. In his cultural strengthening workshops, Richard Frankland explains this in terms of what was, what is, and what can be. What was before invasion was cultural safety, a social order and stability, which aggregates as cultural authority; what is today is the dominant culture, an unstable and fractured social order and a dearth of cultural safety, which adds up to limited cultural authority; what can be is cultural strengthening, which facilitates the rebuilding of cultural authority. More on this in ‘Ancestral Twine’, \textit{Can Anyone Tell Me What Is Missing}?
\footnote{15} Muecke, postscript to \textit{Reading the Country}, 258.
\end{footnotes}
writes positively about the strengths of First Nations cultures and peoples, highlighting resilience and keeping their culture in the face of oppression and adversity.

As I write, I have to consider this in relation to how I engage with the body of work Richard Frankland has shared with me. What do I do with his words, thoughts, wisdom? How do I present it so it contributes to his peoples’ cultural strengthening, so it both informs the non-Aboriginal reader and unsettles the dominant way of seeing his people, so it disrupts negativity? How do I ensure there is a fair balance of the beauty and tragedy in the legacy we all share, not the overwhelming ugly tropes and denial of diversity that is the ruling homogeneous lens? It reminds me of the times Richard questions me on whether I am being responsible with my freedom of voice.

### ON PAYING ATTENTION

Muecke’s lesson on walking and paying attention prompted me to consider further how his work has influenced my research and thinking, and there are two points worth discussing. The first is that Muecke’s insights helped me realise I did not pay enough attention to our guides on the Lurujarri Trail – at the time I was distracted by the many interesting people to chat with as I walked. I recall one Elder chastising us, ‘Stop talking you mob, you’re meant to be reading Country!’ I could have done with Muecke’s lesson six years prior, but, to be honest, I was not open to it then. I would walk that trail so differently now, open to Country as alive, as nurturing, ‘as our Mother’ as The Songman tells me. His insights (and my hindsight) have given me a bridge back to that time,

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16 See ‘The Songman’ in The White Woman

17 This reminds me of a workshop I took with Wiradjuri writer Anita Heiss to discuss culturally sound ways of writing about First Nations characters. She exhorted the need to send good stories about her people out into the zeitgeist, not be lazy and fall back on stereotypes.

18 Richard Frankland tells me there is more diversity among his people than there is between black and white people; in 1788, there were more than 270 First Nations, all grounded in their Country, which means the river people are very different to the saltwater people, to the desert mob, to the cold country mob. For more on ‘how does the dominant culture see Aboriginal people?’, see the story ‘Ancestral Twine’ in Can Anyone Tell Me What Is Missing?
those trail experiences I thought I had squandered. Muecke has given me a way of framing and connecting those experiences, to read and see Country as living, vibrating, ‘a living classroom’. To reappreciate it.¹⁹

His lesson sends me back to my notes from Lurujarri guide Richard Hunter’s teachings. His stories are a mythical blend of history, biology, botany, geology, medicine, meteorology, sociology and religion. I recall I was fascinated by the way Hunter would texture these stories with perplexing pauses, laughs, poignant silences. The words of his grandfather, Paddy Roe, in Reading the Country had the same characteristics, pauses, beat and rhythm.

At the time, through my one-dimensional Western lens, I wondered aloud to an academic who was working alongside the mob: are the pauses to collect his thoughts, or do the silences reflect the lack of common ground between our frames of reference? The academic was bemused: ‘They are all deliberate you know. I have heard him tell those stories before and he knows them well. He doesn’t need to stop to think ... he stops because it’s important.’ Hunter allows his words to hang for resonance. His stories were also punctuated with laughs. The academic explained to me that the laughs are a poetic ploy to break up the seriousness of their Law. ‘You can die out here.’

Reading through my notes, I find a list of Hunter’s anecdotes (jotted down when I was paying attention):

19 My supervisors (also asking me to dig deeper, beyond the white soil) prompted me to ask: did Muecke offer me a richer experience than Lurujarri guide Richard Hunter? Was I taking the lead from a white man? It is such a good question and I suspect it is partly true. Was I foregrounding Muecke’s cultural authority? Did I engage more with his words as he is a white guy who has done the hard yards and he is an academic? On reflection, Muecke gave me a bridge back to those experiences to reclaim what I may have missed and to build on that.
I also find a note where I had commented on the way Hunter and his kin walk together, silent but speaking with gestures: ‘lean and wiry with a graceful gait – see Muecke p. 248’. I was sending myself back to *Reading the Country*. Muecke had told me then: In the Aboriginal science of tracking, following someone’s footsteps means there is an imitation – not a reproduction – of the whole movement of their bodies and for this reason Aboriginal groups know how to walk together, their bodies have the same movement, a technique which will ensure that they stay together over long distances. I feel like Muecke has sent me walking in a wide circle. I started out in 2012 reading his work in preparation for the Lurujarri Trail and then met him in person six years later, where I learned, belatedly, how to walk attentively. I am now revisiting both these experiences to share them with you.\(^{20}\)

Today, I can reflect on the nine-day trail experience as the experience of being pared back to essentials: food, shelter and company. No mirrors, no ability to wash, dirty clothes, no pretences. I was stripped back but also liberated from consumerism, from my enclave of conspicuous consumption. I was learning from people who had no need to appropriate territory, no sense in enclosing and measuring who has what. In their way, the people, plants and creatures are distributed in their own indefinite space, tracked and charted by song. They are their own creators. We were shown this as part of their Dreaming, their way of talking, seeing, knowing: a set of mysterious and mythical practices as resonant as poetry. I travelled a living spoken word. We were being trained to walk and read Country at a pace where nature becomes visible.

\(^{20}\) To answer my own question in the previous footnote, it took Muecke’s insights to help me see what was there. His lens helped me see deeper into the connection to Country, to the black soil. My hope is that my insights might take you into the black soil, too.
For the past four or five years, I have had the pleasure of roaming in research. It all began when I was told a sky story on the Lurujarri Trail, a tale of a wicked and lusty creation hero. The Anangu call him Wati Nyiru. He is best known for chasing seven young women across our night sky, replayed every evening for eternity. One version alludes to his two wilful appendages (‘two dongas’, one Anangu lady said) with the ability to tunnel underground on his chase.

Seven Sisters Dreaming is a long songline covering 486,000 square kilometres in the remote tri-state area of Western Australia, South Australia, Northern Territory and into Queensland and New South Wales. The Sisters are chased through deserts, waterways, rainforests, savannah grasslands, up mountains and ridges, to coasts and eventually into the sky. Their constellation is a celestial calendar for the weather, seasons, food sources, reproductive cycles for fauna and flora, ceremony times and much more. In First Nations cosmology, the Seven Sisters is an important creation story, especially pertinent to women.

As I followed my (research) nose, led by a concerned conscience and curiosity, I encountered unfamiliar terrain, criss-crossing disciplines, stumbling upon surprising places and the odd dead end. I began learning how to listen (although I am still not great at it). I collected as I wandered, amassing stories,
statistics, anecdotes, feelings, facts, images, poems, soundbites, feathers, leaves, scents. These all mingle and muddle in my mind as I seek connections, tangents and links to weave a story that I hope will engage and resonate with non-Aboriginal readers.

My mettle has been tested, as is often the case when non-Aboriginal people work in a community or research capacity with First Nations peoples. I have had several moments and experiences which have been humbling – they sent me out of my comfort zone to the edges, where learning happens.

One such time was a colonial quandary, a lesson in paying attention and embracing the unfamiliar. We were camping in inland New South Wales, an eclectic group, gathered to watch the heliacal rising of the Seven Sisters constellation over Seven Sisters Ridge before dawn on the winter solstice. The plan was to climb the ridge before we all went our separate ways.

I asked an Elder if she was joining us to climb the ridge. She barely said anything, but I knew she was saying no. I sat with her a while, waiting, wondering, desperate to ask more, nevertheless knowing that if she wanted me to know more, she would say more. Somehow, intuitively, I got the message that it was more than wrong to climb, it was deeply disrespectful. It says it all in the name of the place, it is a women’s special place. Discreetly, I put it to the group that we should not climb the ridge.

It was not well received, particularly by the men. A local man had told them it was okay to climb, there may be rock art to see. It was put to a vote. The ridge remained unclimbed, unviolated that day.

The experience was an opportunity to see the Country through decolonial eyes, to acknowledge it as sacred and steeped in spiritual connections. It was more than a rock formation in a rural paddock and a group of stars, but it takes a leap of faith and respect for unfamiliar ways to get there. The possibility is that with a leap of faith and by embracing the unfamiliar, the land will offer you a lens to show you that Country is alive.

Standing up for the right way to be on Country was one of many tests or hurdles I have been confronted with in my engagement with First Nations peoples. To ‘succeed’
proves worthiness, deference, humility. Each time has been transformative. I don’t always get it right.

Sometimes, learning how to walk entails learning where not to walk.²²

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²² Throughout my research with First Nations peoples I have encountered others speaking about the ‘right way’ to act, be, live, according to each First Nation’s Law. This is what I mean when I say, ‘learning where not to walk’. I build on this in my story ‘Right Way’ in The White Woman.
The brief was to walk on out in Country and write what you see and feel.

I already knew the river red gums had seen too much.

We were a collection of ‘scholarly creatives’, gathered for four days of ‘practice’ at Oratunga Station on Adnyamathanha Country. This was part of the ecopoetic workshop.

I was drawn back to the dry creek bed and the sad gums. There was one I had sat with before. On my way, with purpose, perhaps almost a march, I came across rocks in the riverbed that seemed to be seeping blood. Stained, coagulated, livid. I stopped dead in my tracks.

I cannot say this poem fell out of me; rather, it seeped like the rocks. There was a massacre of the Adnyamathanha people not far from Oratunga station in the 1800s.
I'm on my way  
to a friendly tree  
my totem tree  
she said

on a sundown hill  
an eagle tree  
a watching tree  
to see

nearby a rock  
with right way moss  
once beard, now moss  
she said.

the dry creek bed  
dead fur, rod bones  
of sharp, smooth stones  
I stop
THERE'S BLOOD
ON THE ROCKS
STAINS
JAGGED WOUNDS
RAISED
COAGULATED SEAMS
CRUSTED
SHINY METALLIC
BLEED OUT
I TURN
TO THE PAST
FEELING THE UNSEEN
SEEING
A CRIME SEEN
SURFACES
SEEPING IN
SEEPING OUT

I LOOK TO THE TREE
A WITNESS TREE
MY TOTEM TREE
SHE SAID
'Mum! Muuuum! Quuuick, I need something for my autumnal feast.'

The first born is compounding the chaos of the morning rush to school. Four kids, four lunches, swimming bags, football boots, tram passes, two kelpies who need walking, etcetera.

An autumnal feast?

It seems his Year 10 English teacher is hosting a feast of autumnal fayre this morning ... I have English-class envy. I am sure the first born had more warning than he gave me, thereby scuppering any opportunity for me to send him to class with some artful arrangement of harvesty goods, a sign to all of enriched creative mothering,
bound to send the staff a-tittering in the lunch room.\textsuperscript{23}

I toss a lazy bag of mandarins his way and he is off on the tram.

As my son and his mates drift into the classroom, their teacher, Dr B, is playing a mournful tune from Lord of the Rings on his violin. The boys say Dr B’s doctorate explored Tolkien’s world of hobbits and elves, and legend is he speaks six languages, including Elvish.

While the students feast on the autumnal spread, ripe cheeses and ‘fruit with ripeness to the core’ (and a magnificent bag of probably dodgy mandarins), Dr B treats them to verses of Keats’s ‘To Autumn’.\textsuperscript{24}

In a classroom on the edge of the city of Melbourne, teenage boys had their ‘hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind’ whilst ‘Drowsed with the fume of poppies’, filled with images of swollen gourds and bosom-friends, a ‘sweet kernel’ and plump hazels, bees with ‘clammy cells’, ‘o’erbrimmed’ and ‘last oozings’.\textsuperscript{25}

I am taken aback as I reflect now; Dr B was beguiling and indoctrinating my first born with poetic propaganda. ‘Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find’ they cannot see’th what is in front of them.\textsuperscript{26}

Autumn in Melbourne is fake news. From late March onwards, we anticipate the city’s majestic oaks, maples, elms and other immigrant trees to turn gorgeous hues of burnished copper, ruby and gold, spin a yarn of old – a snapshot from European climes. People smile at these trees, take photos, travel to see the leaves change, kick the autumn

\textsuperscript{23} Cultural capital comes in many guises. What would I have sent … a board of artisan cheeses with sun-dried Muscat grapes and seeded sourdough, crafted by monks from the Abbey? The teachers do talk about us. On one occasion one School Master asked me if our family had fallen on hard times … he noted the first born was parking his Hyundai among the P-plated BMWs and Audis of his peers in the surrounding streets.


\textsuperscript{25} Keats, ‘To Autumn’.

\textsuperscript{26} What do I mean here? Do I mean fantasies of English beauty in a land that Britain brutally subjected to its colonial economy? Am I saying that there is a language of the Australian landscape that remains unspoken, buried, deliberately concealed in wistful narratives of a ‘homeland’ that may as well be Tolkien’s fantasy world populated by creatures, histories and languages that never existed? Am I saying that colonial lenses prevent us from an authentic engagement with the land we live in?
foliage on carefree walks; and I do concede this seasonal fantasy makes people happy. It is all part of the wind down from summer, the segue into the foretold dormancy of winter where nature snoozes for a while. This is the autumn story we are taught: warmish days, cool mornings and nights, leaves changing, cozy fires, hibernations.

Venture outside the city into the bush and this notion of autumn vanishes. On our small farm in the Mornington Peninsula hinterland, there is no sign of the season so loved in Melbourne a mere hour away. The shade and shadows around our home come from trees that keep their leaves and shed their bark (everywhere, very messy). These eucalypts are hardy specimens, adapted for a life in poor soil, with little to invest in their leaves, making them tough and long-lasting. By contrast, Melbourne’s imported autumnal colour is delicate, soft and seasonal. Unlike the heavily textured bark of the introduced trees, many eucalypts drop their bark, keeping just a sock of rough bark on the lower trunk and branches, while the upper falls away in ribbons, draping over their limbs. The smooth skin-like exterior keeps it cool in a fire.

These trees are part of the rhythm of the bush. They are inclined to shed limbs (often with no wind and no warning – hence the moniker ‘widow-maker’. Never camp under a gum tree). Obliging decay develops in the wound of the tree, creating cozy hollows and homes for mammals, birds and insects.

One such tree is what the Kulin Nations call *binap*, the manna gum. It is both home and smorgasbord to native fauna. While the elms are turning, preparing to sleep in the parks of Melbourne, the *binap* is bursting with pale-yellow blossoms as insects, parrots and honeyeaters madly harvest the nectar. Possums covet the tree’s sap and koalas favour the leaves. *Binap* oozes energy all year round.
Across the seasons, the tree seeps a white sugary-sweet sap through tiny holes bored by insects in the foliage and trunk. At up to 60 per cent sugar, it’s meant to taste like sweetened flour or wedding-cake icing. The settlers saw the First Nations peoples collecting it and would do so themselves, calling it manna as a nod to the mythical biblical food.

The Kulin calendar at the Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre in the Melbourne Museum reclaims and foregrounds First Nations seasonal knowledge. Pre-contact, seasonal knowledge was intrinsic to everyday existence, taught through daily chores, movement around Country, via the night sky, fed to every child as they grew up on their Country. The stars, winds, rain, insects, mammals, plants, birds and fish are all signs and signals of times of the year. They are part of reading Country and affirming everything in nature is connected.

'Koorie' is a word that drifted south on the tongue of those moved around by white authorities and untethered to their homelands. It started as a secret name, whispered among the mob to say who they were, away from white ears. Being Aboriginal meant shame then. In 1969, it had its first public use in the ‘Aborigines only association’ Koori Club in Fitzroy. Today, it is widely used by people and groups in Melbourne, a reflection of pride and a resurgent identity and culture.

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27 Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre has given me permission to use First Nations words, terms and knowledge for this story. The process of gaining permission to repeat this Kulin Nations’ knowledge was guided by the City of Melbourne’s protocol as the piece was being written for Melbourne Knowledge week. The seasonal information was on the Melbourne Museum website, so I was directed to their administration office and then the Bunjilaka Centre. The entire story was sent to them for their approval and when I was granted permission to use this information, the City of Melbourne published the piece on its website.

28 I have made a conscious effort not to infer that First Nations knowledge and knowledge practices are in the past. It means I have to be vigilant when I use past tense. For example I had to check myself when I wrote, ‘They [the signs] were part of reading Country ...’; ‘They are part of reading Country ...’ My knowledge around the areas of seasonal intelligence was gleaned from scholarly research I immersed myself in during the early stage of my doctorate, specifically the domain of Aboriginal astronomy. I make special mention of the generous wisdom of Eleanor Gilbert and Michael Ghillar Anderson, specifically in the documentary film Star Stories of the Dreaming (2016), and the encyclopaedic knowledge of Dr Duane Hamacher, Trevor Leaman and Robert Fuller. See Eleanor Gilbert, dir., Star Stories of the Dreaming, documentary (Ainslie, ACT: Enlightning Productions, 2015).
The Kulin calendar is a modern interpretation pieced together by Koorie people and non-Aboriginal academics.29

The Kulin calendar tells us that the flowering binap is one of many signs that tell the Kulin people the season is changing to Iuk, eel season (around the month of March), when the eels are plentiful. It is not leaves but flowers that indicate the arrival and passing of the season of Iuk. When the casuarinas (she-oaks or ironwoods) flower and the late storms begin, Iuk is left behind, and Waring, wombat season (April, May, June, July), begins.

The colonists were ignorant of such seasonal intelligence. From the start, the new colony was given four seasons of equal length, based on the Gregorian calendar and the cold temperate northern hemisphere model. Seasons in Britain begin and end with the equinoxes and solstices, but colonial Australia introduced an administrative correction to begin each season on the first day of that month. This ‘efficiency’ began in early days of the colony when the New South Wales Corps changed from its summer to winter uniform on 1 March, and its winter to summer uniform on 1 September. For bureaucratic reasons, it simplified record keeping, and professional meteorologists prefer the tidiness of reporting on four quarters. Our lens on this continent’s seasons is tinted by those of the Mother Country and constricted by the housekeeping of British soldiers from two hundred years ago.

‘Autumn’ is a whitewash, a colonial lens which views this land as the first settlers intended, their own curation, cleared and planted to seem more like ‘home’. But there is another lens – that of the First Peoples who had already made sense of this world, know how everything was connected. This connectedness was shared across more than 2,600 generations.

Perhaps it is timely to challenge the ill-fitting colonial imposition of four seasons. When I began to ground my daily observations in traditional seasonal knowledge,

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29 ‘Koorie’ (also Koori) derives from the word ‘people’ in the First Nations languages of the coastal groups of central and northern New South Wales. It has evolved into the way First Nations peoples from Victoria and New South Wales describe themselves collectively. Other examples are Murri for peoples from Queensland and northwestern New South Wales; Yolngu for peoples from northeastern Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory; and Noongar for those from the southwestern corner of Western Australia. For more about research on reclaiming First Nations seasonal knowledge see my story ‘Decolonising the Seasons’, this volume.
I began to see that Country was thronging and alive, lifting me out of the mundane day-to-day and plugging me into the circuitry of Country. Now when I look at ‘autumn’, I see less decay and dormancy and more busyness, bloomings and endless oozings.

*A version of this story was first published on the City of Melbourne website for Melbourne Knowledge Week 2018.*

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AN INTERVIEW WITH A HYACINTH ORCHID

I’m here with the hyacinth orchid, an orchid indigenous to Greens Bush.

You may say I am indigenous, or even native, but please don’t say that about the First Nations peoples. I am one of those who takes issue with the term -
You are the tallest orchid in this region, known to grow a metre tall and resembling a purple asparagus stalk. I must say, before your lovely pink blooms emerged, you looked as though an asparagus spear had escaped the vegetable patch and gone bush. (The hyacinth orchid is not impressed.)

If I could frown I would, as I elegantly rise out of the leaf litter, I am enigmatic stem brimming with potential. Once ready, I bloom with measured abandon, up to forty flowers, much prettier than asparagus.

I understand you have quite the life cycle underground. Could you tell us a little about your dormant months?

I sleep with my tuber and fungus lover, fed by decay. Some years, when it is too dry, we don’t even wake up, we sleep right through.

You strike a lonely pose here in the mottled shade of the bush.

I am not lonely, I just wait here patiently to be pollinated so I may set down seed and breed.

You could come home with me; my garden is lovely?

Any attempt to move me ends in death, I cannot be replicated or cultivated. I am untameable.
DECOLONISING THE SEASONS

Last night’s storm has swept the bush track pristine. It was a south, suffering wind, wild, moaning, groaning around the walls of the house.

I’m sure this wind had a name and a story once. Old People will have told their young people about it. My friend The Songman calls the south wind in his Gunditjmara Country the *koorreen*.

The First People of the Mornington Peninsula, the Boon wurrung, would have known this wind and when and why it comes. I have read that the ancestral spirit Bellin
Bellin, a crow, was the keeper of the winds.  

I love this story. I have banked it as one to share with my future grandchildren as it grounds me in the lore of this place. I can imagine them tickled by the naughty crow and hope for them to know a sky filled with home-grown stories. Why do we allow Greek myths to dominate our Australian night skies and hijack the stars with imported tales like Orion and the Pleiades when we have our own Seven Sisters story in the sky? 

The Bellin Bellin story, as with all First Nations stories we are told, is an active agent with the power to connect us to place and engage us with narratives of who was here. Their stories, if we pay attention, are imbued with possibilities of sharing their history and lore in a future Australia.

Perhaps it was a Bellin Bellin wind that swept the bush path. The fresh footprints ahead of me tell a story, layers of nature, a reading of Country. First and foremost are the kangaroo tracks, the Eastern Grey, known by the Boon wurrung, the First People of this place, as guyeem (pronounced goo-y eem). The roo’s sharp nails leave deep holes in the soft grey sand,

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31 The bird Bellin Bellin is referred to as a musk crow, possibly a currawong or perhaps an Australian raven. This is a story from Kulin language groups. See A. W. Howitt, The Native Tribes of South-East Australia (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, [1904] 1996), 430. See also Fred Cahir, Ian D. Clark, and Philip Clarke, Aboriginal Biocultural Knowledge in South-eastern Australia: Perspectives of Early Colonists (Clayton South: CSIRO, 2018).

32 Greek mythology is the oral-poetic tradition of the ancient Greeks, the stories they told to make sense of the world. They explore the world’s origins, heroes, creatures and the genesis and significance of the ancient Greeks’ own cult and ritual practices. Cartwright speculates the Greek myths were initially propagated by Minoan and Mycenaean singers starting in the eighteenth-century BCE, about 20,000 years ago. The First Peoples of what we call Australia have been telling these stories for 50,000 years at least, so the Greek stories in our night skies are much younger than the homegrown ones we should be sharing. Curiously, the Seven Sisters narrative of a lusty man chasing seven beautiful young women and the myth of Orion and the Pleiades are virtually the same in both traditions. See Mark Cartwright, ‘Greek Mythology’, Ancient History Encyclopedia, 29 July 2012, https://www.ancient.eu/Greek_Mythology/.

33 I include this story as it questions the status quo. It foregrounds and reinstates the knowledge and narratives of the people first here. It opens discussions on how the stars heralded the seven Kulin seasons, not the European overlay of four, and how this wind was probably expected and is here for a reason.
and trotting over them are the softer prints of my companions, Reg and Raf, the family kelpies, the ultimate colonial dog.34

Off to the sides of the path are scratchings, traces of an echidna digging for dinner. I know now they breed in deep winter during a season the First People of this place call Waring, wombat season. I see a Running Postman vine scrambling its way through the grasses with its scarlet pea flowers harbouring a delicious nectar that is safe to sample. Native insects, especially butterflies, love this plant. The First Nations people knew to use the vine to make twine.

As we skirt the boundaries of Greens Bush National Park (staying within the dog-friendly boundary) I recall a passing comment from a friend. She suggested that autumn was a picturesque time of year for us to be at the farm. My mind’s eye tried to muster the image in her imagination of trees with leaves turning to warm tones of yellows and reds before they fall and blow away in the winds. It struck me that the leaves were not changing in autumn on the Mornington Peninsula (aside from the few imported trees). There was colour, but it was from the native blossoms. Everything around us was less approaching than recovering from dormancy. The hot dry summer puts many plants to sleep and March’s rains and cooler temperatures encourage some plants into a recovery mode and they begin to thrive and bloom. From March into August, eucalypts, banksias and wattles around the farm begin to flower and ooze nectar and throng with life. And in chilly August, the orchids arrive.

Bellin Bellin was a cheeky fella. He kept the winds in big skin bags. One day Bunjil asked him to open his bags and let out some wind, but Bellin Bellin opened all the bags at once and a whirlwind came out, blowing Bunjil and all his people into the sky where they live in plenty and look down on the world as stars.

The Murrawarri people believe that when new life is created and a child is born, a star falls. Everything is written twice, in the sky and on the land.1

34 The Australian Kelpie is bred to drove and muster sheep with little or no guidance. A good kelpie will do the work of several men. Ours may (or may not) be pure kelpie, but they are welfare bludgers according to a sheep dog trainer who led me in some herding classes once. He scornfully decreed that they didn’t earn their keep and he is right. I affectionately call them Schlepies as they are part scatter cushion.

1 This snippet is told by Ghillar Michael Anderson in Star Stories of the Dreaming (2016).
As I began researching the seasons in Melbourne, I became acutely aware of the mismatch between what we expect is happening in our environment through the rigid colonial lens of four seasons and what is actually happening on the ground.

I found I had been brainwashed to see only what I think I should: leaves turning rich hues in autumn, bare branches in winter or budding leaves in spring. The inability to see what was in front of me galvanised me to challenge the prevailing narrative, to remove my colonial lenses and to reimagine this Country as I attempt to decolonise my perception of the seasons.

After more than 230 years of occupation, it is time to challenge the pretence of four seasons. It is farcical to pretend the seasons across this land correlate to that of Britain’s. Our ill-fitting seasonal divisions fail to address the dynamic climactic systems and patterns of the continent. They demonstrate a continuing disconnect with the land, an attachment to old colonial habits and a disrespectful denial of the seasonal intelligence of the First Nations peoples.

Recent years have shown an increasing awareness of First Nations knowledge of the seasons. There is a slow realisation that such seasonal intelligence is relevant and reflective of individual environments around this complex continent. Today, the Bureau of Meteorology and State Parks are beginning to pay attention to First Nations knowledge of
how to care for country and manage climate change.\(^{35}\) In places such as Kakadu (six seasons) in the Northern Territory, where Traditional Owners are still on Country, ancient knowledge is mainly still intact and put into practice. In Melbourne, because of dispossession and disruption of cultural practices through colonisation, that information is more difficult to access, but not completely lost. The Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre at the Melbourne Museum boasts an indigenous garden that shares seasonal intelligence and traditional uses of plants.

In southeastern Australia, there have been several passionate individuals and groups who have collected and collated old and new seasonal intelligence. There are attempts to reconstruct and revive the bounties of knowledges which have been lost. I include a little about them as they demonstrate a curiosity to see beyond and through the dominant colonial narratives around our environments.

One contributor was Amy Mack (1876–1939), originally from Port Adelaide and later a journalist and eventual editor of the ‘Women’s Page’ of the *Sydney Morning Herald* from 1907 to 1914. In 1909, Mack published *A Bush Calendar*, a charming nature diary resulting from her observations of the seasons in the Australian bush (Sydney region) 115 years ago. I discovered a fabric-covered edition of the book, republished in 1924, and it is a treasure. Her tone is chatty and friendly, she shares what she is wearing, how the weather affects her, and each month there is a comprehensive list of the flowers that are blooming, the birds that are arriving, those who are breeding and something new to look for. She writes of a ‘delicious early misty morning ... soft and cool ... It rests on your cheek like a fairy down’ as she walks into a banksia patch where dozens of ‘white-cheeked honeyeaters ... were darting about, playing chasings through the bushes and calling to each other as they flew, “You saucy girl, you saucy girl”’.\(^{36}\) Mack does not

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\(^{35}\) In 2002, the Bureau of Meteorology partnered with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) and Monash University’s Centre for Indigenous Studies to create a website that formally recognises the traditional weather and climate knowledge that has been developed and passed down through countless generations by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. To date, fourteen First Nations have their unique seasonal knowledge available on the website. The Kulin Nations seasons are not there. See ‘Indigenous Weather Knowledge’, Bureau of Meteorology, 2016, http://www.bom.gov.au/iwk/.

\(^{36}\) These quotations are collected from Amy Mack’s March chapter in *A Bush Calendar* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1909), 75–7. I have made a mental to note to listen to what our honeyeaters call to each other.
remind her readers there were peoples before her who already knew this. Amy Mack’s love of the Australian bush is infectious and it inspired me to get outside and take notice of nature. Her words still resonate, reminding us how valuable bush conservation is today.

An English-born career school-mistress, who was an amateur botanist and plant ecologist, authored the second excellent resource on the seasons and flora. Winifred Waddell (1884–1972) arrived in Melbourne in 1915 and quickly developed a great love for the Australian bush. She devoted much of her spare time and enthusiasm to educating the public about the need to preserve native flora, founding the Wildflower Preservation Group and helping to establish wildflower sanctuaries all over Victoria. The *Victorian Wildflower Diary* (1976) is a collection of the articles Waddell wrote for the ‘Junior Age’ between 1960 and 1964, offering a comprehensive resource arranged on a calendar basis. Waddell makes no reference to the First People of the areas she writes about, but I wonder whether her passionate curiosity sparked interest among future generations in listening to traditional knowledge.

Contrasting the absence of First Nations knowledges is *Koorie Plants, Koorie People: Traditional Aboriginal Food, Fibre and Healing Plants of Victoria* (1992), which is grounded in First Nations knowledge. Published by the Koorie Heritage Trust, the book is a fascinating journey through the human history of Victoria’s indigenous plants with more than 150 images of plants traditionally valued by Aboriginal people. Authors Nelly Zola and Beth Gott collaborated with Elders from all over the state to identify Victorian plants used by Koorie people for food, medicines, implements, shelters, canoes and other uses.

In 1995, veteran environmental educationalist Alan Reid produced the nature diary *Banksias and Bilbies* to encourage and assist individuals and community groups with monitoring, recording and analysing seasonal events. He saw the value of


a community-oriented, observation-based project and advocated pooling of natural history observations within a region of shared climate and topography. He connected local naturalists of all persuasions, encouraging them to bring their notebooks and diaries and work methodically through the calendar, looking for true seasonal data. Reid’s Middle Yarra Timelines project produced a database of over 2,500 observations and the research resulted in an interim local calendar of six seasons for the Middle Yarra region. *Banksias and Bilbies* opens with examples of Aboriginal seasonal calendars, offering frameworks for different parts of Australia. Arranged into weekly information, the diary gives the reader an insight into what is happening in flora and fauna in different regions and habitats.

In 1997, Dr David S. Jones, in consultation with Elders of the Wurundjeri tribe, devised a calendar for the Upper Yarra region around Healesville. The *Victorian Naturalist* published the paper ‘Patterns in the Valley of the Christmas Bush: A Seasonal Calendar for the Upper Yarra Valley’, which introduced a pattern of seven cyclical seasons and two infrequent but overlapping seasons: a fire season (approximately every seven years) when fire from lightning strike burns the region, and a flooding season (approximately every 28 years) when the Yarra River breaks its banks and floods the lowlands.

More recently, writer and social worker Jim Poulter collaborated with Wurundjeri Elders, Parks Victoria and the Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages (VACL) to put some of this knowledge in print in a modest publication called *The Eight Wurundjeri Seasons in Melbourne* (2015). The Kulin calendar at the Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre at the Melbourne Museum is another response to cultural loss and shows a combined effort to reclaim and foreground seasonal knowledge.


41 Poulter declines to cite any academic references, and there is no bibliography because ‘doing so would place greater weight in academic sources than the oral history relied on in this paper’. Poulter articulates an awareness of the colonised mind, which, consciously or unconsciously, imposes European ways of thinking on these fragments of data. ‘Doing so only leads to a situation of joining up the wrong dots and coming to wrong conclusions. Offering a single word translation of “autumn” is a simple example of this’, he remarks. Jim Poulter, *The Eight Wurundjeri Seasons in Melbourne* (Templestowe: Red Hen Enterprises, 2015), 4–5.
Demonstrating a modern interpretation, pieced together by both Koorie people and academics, the calendar is accessible on the museum’s website and is woven into narratives in the museum’s garden. I have used the seven Kulin seasons in this model as my anchor for seeing the Boon wurrung Country of our home.  

The month of March is *Iuk*, eel season. April, May, June, July is *Waring*, wombat time. August is *Guling*, orchid season, followed by the season of tadpoles, *Poorneet*, in September and October. November is *Buath Gurru*, grass-flowering season, and December is the time for Kangaroo Apple. The dry season, *Biderup*, extends through January and February.

**Reading the Country**

Adopting this paradigm is a step towards decolonisation, and by this, I mean understanding our own colonised minds and being open to alternative ways of knowing and seeing. During her time with the First Peoples in the remote community of Yarralin (also known as Walangeri) in the Northern Territory, writer and scholar Deborah Bird

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Rose came to learn of many environmental messages that indicated onset of certain seasons: ‘Crocodiles vary in their behaviour from year to year; using the western calendar it is only predictable that they will usually start to lay eggs between late August and late September. But for Yarralin people the event is entirely predictable: the marchflies tell them.’

Dr Jeff Corntassel, academic and member of the Cherokee Nation, gives further insight into this interconnectedness:

We cannot separate our spirituality from any aspect of our lives, such as the links between our Indigenous languages, living histories, clan governance, relationships to our homelands, ceremony and so forth. This interconnectedness is key to our existence as Indigenous nations, which is why we do not have rights as Indigenous Peoples – we have inherent responsibilities. These responsibilities come from our lived relationships with our homelands and the natural world, while rights are the artificial creations of the state.

The sum of the parts reveals the connectedness of the world we inhabit and the extraordinary width and depth of knowledge of the First Peoples in Australia, as in North America. The parts include

- **Reading the night sky:** the movements of the planets, stars and constellations
- **Reading Country:** through song and story, through environmental changes, the flow of rivers, the need to burn for renewal
- **Reading the flora:** the cycles, the blooming, the oozings, the decay
- **Reading the fauna:** life cycles, symbiotic relationships (I once visited Kangaroo Island to help track a certain type of goanna that laid its eggs in termite mounds, the termites keeping the eggs at the perfect temperature until they hatched)


READING the insects and birds

READING the elements: the winds and rains and storms

READING the people, knowing when ritual and ceremony are due and needed, respecting totems and moieties

KNOWING the stories and Law, passed on over millennia, pulling all these elements together for more stories and singing them back to and into Country.

I imagine all this knowledge in an infinite matrix, alive with multitudes of combinations and permutations that remembers, forecasts, regulates, reassures, promises and promotes balance. It has not gone away, it is here and now.

Understanding this connectedness through First Nations ways of seeing the world, what some have called the Butterfly Effect, finds me in a state of perpetual awe. It is a system of sophisticated awareness, visceral vigilance and a consciousness that has the ability to work on layers and levels we cannot comprehend.45

CIVILISING THE SEASONS

I call my stories meanderings because I can veer off the expected track to give you a chance to look at things a different way. The following is a more serious path, which explores the consequences that loss of traditional knowledge has had on First Nations peoples around the world, so that this might change your perspective on what you thought you knew about our environment and the seasons.

In Australia, colonisation in the form of cultural destruction, suppression, disruption and misinterpretation led to the rupture of 2,600 generations of First Nations languages, knowledges and cultural practice. To colonise a peoples, the colonial power needs supreme conviction in its purpose and total control over the conquered peoples and lands. In the chapbook, Skin in the Game I explore how colonial ‘supreme’ conviction is bolstered by the assurance of, indeed the intellectual creation of, different

45 One evening at a gathering for drinks, I mentioned to a fellow I was researching Aboriginal cosmology. It was a scant description as already by then I was able to read my audience. His response was that ‘it is so good of you to help them, they really are primitive Stone Age People, you know’.
‘types’ of human being. This is about the fabrication of whiteness, the creation of difference and the construction of the ‘other’. In this meander, I am thinking about how the colonisation of land inevitably led to the colonisation of spirit and body, as the land and peoples are inseparable.

I am beginning to understand that every First Nations experience is framed by colonialism and imperialism.\(^46\) This is their modern world.\(^47\) Colonisation is about deprivation of experience. I see that colonialism brought systemic fragmentation and complete disorder to First Peoples, forcibly disconnecting them from their histories, lands, language, kin, social relations and many more elements of their identity. Being deprived of these cultural experiences has confused and compromised traditional ways of thinking, knowing, feeling and interacting with the world.\(^48\)

In 1950, Aimé Césaire (1913–2008), a French poet, author and politician from Martinique, published *Discours sur le colonialisme* (*Discourse on Colonialism*), an essay describing the tensions between the colonisers and the colonised. Viewed as revolutionary at the time, the book advanced uncomfortable insights into the consequences of colonialism, arguing that colonialism was never benevolent but was entirely exploitative. Césaire wrote: ‘I am talking about societies drained of their essence, cultures trampled underfoot, institutions undermined, lands confiscated,

\(^{46}\) I think it is useful to define these terms for you. Imperialism is the policy of extending a country’s power and influence through colonisation or military force. Colonialism is the philosophy or method of acquiring full or partial political control over another country, occupying it with settlers and exploiting it economically. Colonisation is the action or process of settling among and establishing control over the First Nations people of an area.


religions smashed, magnificent artistic creations destroyed, extraordinary possibilities wiped out.' Yet he also offered hope and the possibility of imagining a way out of the postcolonial predicament.

I am going to dwell on this statement, as it encapsulates the juggling I intuitively feel is necessary as I write these stories. I have been conscious of the need to balance the beauty and the tragedy of Aboriginal Australia and I have identified you as a reader who likes their comfort zone, who doesn’t want to feel any shame or guilt or compassion for a shared legacy. I do so because I understand your feelings. The more I was drawn in and generously guided by the Elders who welcomed me, the more I was exposed to stories of aliveness in Country, but also the great sense of loss (imagine bombing the State Library) and trauma passed on from generation to generation.

Let us look at Césaire’s words:

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49 Césaire, Discourse on Colonialism, 43, emphasis in original. I love the word ‘possibilities’; it fizzes with opportunity and is buoyant with optimism. It bulges for me in Césaire’s statement. What unspecified qualities of a promising nature did the settler-colonial state destroy, squander, lose through the colonisation of the First Peoples?

50 My hunch has been that the night sky and the seasons are good access points to discuss the effects of colonisation without guilt and shame, but the evidence is there to see. Everyone has access to the elements, they belong to all and they affect all. To appreciate the interconnectedness represented in First Nations cosmology is to deepen our connection to land and sky.

51 I sense this has been the case with other non-Aboriginal scholars who have researched and written in this space, whose shoulders I stand on, such as Deborah Bird Rose, Minoru Hokari and Stephen Muecke.
On the left is part of what First Nations peoples had pre-contact. (I unpack this in more detail in my story ‘Ancestral Twine’, in *Can Anyone Tell Me What Is Missing.*) To the left is Césaire’s array of verbs to describe what happened to what was. Any one of these verbs could be used to describe the colonial violence visited on First Nations peoples and their culture. In between the nouns and the verbs, Césaire explains that the mission to civilise the native is merely a smokescreen to destroy a peoples and their social order. The greatest irony is that the most savage forces of destruction are rationalised as beneficent and honourable. As Césaire writes: ‘Colonisation works to decivilise the coloniser ... Colonisation, I repeat, dehumanises even the most civilised man.’

Colonisation advances a whole way of thinking where all that is progressive, civilised and good takes form in a Western shape, best viewed through a Western lens and measured by Western standards. This is the lens through which I have been socially conditioned to see the world. It is a lens that ignores First Nations experiences and knowledges. It is a lens that dehumanises the ‘native’. It romanticises the other as the ‘noble savage’. This is the lens I am wrestling with in my research.

Confronting my white worldview and changing my perspective is difficult, so I have enlisted the guidance of an esteemed academic to offer some ideas of how to negotiate both Western and First Nations ways of seeing, particularly Dr

52 Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, 37, 41.

53 This is the Eurocentric, or white, lens, the worldview of the colonising culture.

54 In my meander to George Yancy, ‘Dear George’, I respond to Yancy’s assertion that because I am white, I am racist, I cannot help it. Good intentions are not enough to combat my whiteness and all that it colours.
Michael Yellowbird’s ‘Model of the Effects of Colonialism’ and I offer that the colonising of the seasons can be viewed within his framework.\(^{55}\)

A First Nations worldview foregrounds the interconnectedness of social structure, spirituality and the natural world, and ceremonies, rituals and rites of passage embody these connections. The loss of knowledges such as seasonal intelligence and other practices that govern daily living has affected colonised First Peoples in every way: intellectually through loss of language and story transmission; physically through loss of bodily connection to Country; socially through the interruption of free movement and the disruption of ceremony and ritual; psychologically through detachment from Country, Law and kinship structures; economically through the loss of land and food sources and rearrangement of trade patterns; politically through the erosion of autonomous self-government; and spiritually, through the imposition of an alien cosmology.\(^{56}\)

By challenging and condemning First Nations’ cosmologies, colonialism attempts to ‘redefine and censor the transcendental values, knowledge, and sense of meaning of ultimate reality’, says Yellowbird.\(^{57}\) This colonises the spirit by changing the meaning of First Nations relationships with other people, beings and the universe.

In imposing its own way of seeing and doing on the environment and social relations, the dominant culture denies the cultural agency of First Nations knowledge. By disrupting and forbidding cultural practices, the speaking of languages, and the performance of ceremonies, and by denying access to ecological custodianship and stewardship responsibilities, colonial settlement has impeded First Peoples’ capacity to transmit knowledge and broken their connection to Country and ancestors.

First Nations peoples removed from their Country and put into missions and reserves were made to believe that their ‘primitive’ practices should be left behind.

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\(^{56}\) An example of intellectual, social and political colonisation is found in ‘Ancestral Twine’ in Can Anyone Tell Me What Is Missing?, physical colonisation in ‘The Mopoke’ in My Conscience Is a Many Feathered Thing; and psychological and economic colonisation in ‘The Dog Licence’ in Skin in the Game. In my story ‘The Dog Licence’, I refer to Yellow Bird’s theorisation of the psychological effect of colonisation.

\(^{57}\) Yellow Bird, ‘A Model of the Effects of Colonialism’. 
Their sacred values and knowledge were undermined, and redefined as savage and backward in the ‘civilising’, Christianising process by which colonisers are able to frame the violent subjection of First Peoples as morally acceptable. Aimé Césaire explains that ‘the chief culprit in this domain is Christian pedantry, which laid down the dishonest equations Christian = Civilisation, Paganism = Savagery, from which there could not but ensue abominable colonialist and racist consequences’.  

Religion took over from spirituality. Over time, knowledges were lost, as were connections to ancestors and the spiritual past. From my research, I now see that a connection to Country brings with it an identity. It is kin, it embodies language, it is story, it is spirituality. The imposition of the Western paradigm of four seasons was a colonisation of the spirit of the first inhabitants of this land.

I share my insights into colonising the spirit to give you some appreciation of what was lost. I am mindful that this is not my story, nor knowledge to share. I approach this with the aim of finding an accessible and relatable access point for non-Aboriginal readers to see the depth and complexity of First Nations knowledge of the environment and its holistic ontology.

Enough of the heavy talk. I am sure you can see now what I mean about balancing the beauty and the tragedy of researching in the cultural abyss. I promised to give you some cosmological stories, so let us look at the night sky again with a story I have permission to share.

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58 Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, 33.

59 Another layer of spiritual colonisation is control of the deceased, such as grave robbing and cultural theft – examples would be Truganini and Mungo Lady and Mungo Man. There was a colonial mindset that believed they were rescuing and/or saving artefacts from loss or decay or destruction. This gave licence to theft practices. See Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 64.

60 In my early writing of this collection I was constantly referring to the ‘re-enchantment’ of the land, meaning that the small amount of knowledge I have about First Nations ways of seeing nature and place made me see how ‘magical’ it is. One day it dawned on me that the land was not ‘re-enchanted’ as it never ‘lost’ those qualities; I just couldn’t see them as I was moving too fast and not paying attention. Furthermore, using the word ‘enchanted’ infers mythical, fairy tale status, thereby relegating First Nations cosmology to myths and fables as has been done in anthologies by the likes of A. W. Reed and R. H. Matthews. See for example A. W. Reed, *Aboriginal Fables and Legendary Tales* (Frenchs Forest: New Holland, [1968] 1998); R. H. Matthews, *Folklore of the Australian Aborigines* (Sydney: Hennessey, Harper and Co, 1889). Best say ‘Country is alive’ and ‘the land is our Mother’, said The Songman.
Ghillar Michael Anderson is a Euahlayi Lawman and knowledge holder who believes that it is time to share their stories: ‘We know a lot about the whitefellas, but they know nothing about us.’

As experienced by many First Nations, white people have asked his people to share their knowledge since occupation began and they have taken those stories and written them down and claimed those stories as their own. Anderson says that to put a stop to the appropriation, exploitation and desecration of their stories, the Old People took the lore underground.

Anderson has given great thought to telling his people’s stories. He is adamant that their spirit places and their stories need to be looked after, those places need to be sung, 

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61 This account is from Star Stories of the Dreaming (2016). Euahlayi Country is in north central NSW and south-central Queensland. I have permission to tell this story from both Ghillar Michael Anderson and Eleanor Gilbert. It is a story that is in the public domain as it is taken verbatim from the Star Stories documentary.

62 Ibid.
to see ceremony.

The People need to pay homage. If they do not, the stories will die and the People will die, they will become lost souls walking this earth ... no ceremonies ... all them blackfellas walking corpses, no souls ... nothing for them in this world, they can’t find it, because the white man cut us off from our Country and those Dreaming place.

For Anderson, keeping the stories alive is vital to keeping his people alive, and seeing the suffering of the young people has prompted him to share his people’s stories in recent years.

You might recall earlier in this meander that everything is written twice in First Nations cosmology. Everything has two witnesses, one on earth and one in the sky... Everything is represented in the ground and in the sky. You can’t get away from it, because all is one, and we’re in it. Anderson explains how this works on his Country:

For most of Aboriginal life, when you look at our cycles of events, we can follow all our events by reading the stars ... we know where we are going, what we are doing, we know what part of the Country we are in. The stars are like a calendar, they are also a spiritual location, they tell us where things are, they tell how things work here, they tell us about how we are created, they tell us about our connection and they also tell us about what sort of weather we are going to have.63

On his Euahlayi Country, the waterholes are shown in the stars. The positions of the waterholes are reflected in the landscape, so the People know that when a star in this configuration is bright, there is water in that waterhole. The stars also tell the People

63 Ibid.
when emus are laying their eggs, once an important food source. The celestial emu can be seen traced out by the dark spaces in the Milky Way, and its position changes from season to season, changes that correspond to cultural and resource matters on the ground. The celestial emu has legs and is seen running in April and May, as she is chasing a mate on the ground. In June and July, the legs are gone and the celestial emu is perceived as male, sitting on the clutch of eggs, incubating them, as on earth. At this time, the People can take eggs for food, but they always leave two eggs for the emus. When taking an egg, a stick is used to roll the eggs out so the human scent is not left on the nest.

In the August and September night sky, the (male) celestial emu is getting up from the nest as the eggs begin hatching. The neck of the emu is no longer visible in the sky and the body resembles an egg. At this point, the celestial emu tells the People it is time for the *Bora*, the male initiation ceremony. October and November see the emu transformed to a featherless bird, imagined sitting in waterholes, whose role it is to look after waterholes and everything around.

Later in the summer night sky, the celestial emu sets below the horizon and cannot be seen. Meanwhile, on the ground, the emus leave the waterholes, which tells the People the waterholes on Country are dry, which is often the case at this time of the year. In February, the emu peeks its head above the horizon and its body shows in March and the whole cycle begins again.

It is written in the stars.

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64 The calendar that is the emu in the sky exists in many First Nations groups across the continent. This information is taken from the words of Ghillar Michael Anderson in *Star Stories of the Dreaming* (2016) and also the journal paper on which he consulted with Robert Fuller, Ray Norris and Michelle Trudge, ‘The Emu Sky Knowledge of the Kamilaroi and Euahlayi Peoples’, *Journal of Astronomical History and Heritage* 17, no. 2 (2014): 171–9.
‘Common’. It’s a complicated word.

Growing up, it had the power to inflate and deflate me in equal measure. My mum would on occasion deride others as common (meaning vulgar, showing a lack of taste and refinement typical of the lower classes) and I would instantly feel superior. If she was using it on me, it was devastating. Later, when I had my own children, the common snob possessed me too and I would decree the odd mate of theirs as common.

Whereas I was bemused and receptive to my mother’s words, the kids were amused and resistant to mine, often ganging up on me to parrot back my repertoire of ‘vile, vulgar and common’. They were impervious to my snobbery and I am ashamed
I harboured such airs and graces. There had been a curious osmosis of unfounded pretentiousness between generations that my kids cut dead.

I feel compelled to confess my issues with this humble adjective because it affected my early research into a butterfly and later a wombat. The moniker ‘common’ for these creatures evoked a haughtiness and disappointment in me I had to wrestle with. Here I was, excited about describing this delightful butterfly I would encounter on my bush path only to find it called a Common Brown. Why couldn’t it be an Amethyst Hairstreak or a Lemon Migrant, a Dingy Grass-dart or a Klug’s Xenica, even a Black Jezebel (sometimes called a Common Jezebel but that’s okay) or a Bright-eyed Brown?

A consoling anecdote is that its first ever recorded sighting was at Botany Bay in Sydney during Captain Cook’s first voyage in May 1770, and I am using it as a segue to my claim that ‘common’ is a colonial word. Of course, all our English words are colonial words, but I am aiming to reframe the colonial sentiment in the word which reeks of ordinariness and over supply.

If I consider what it means to be common, as in frequent (not vulgar), I read abundance and familiarity. The Common Brown’s prevalence means its habitat is healthy, there is some balance to its world. The other dimension to common is that it can be shared by all and, as a frequent occurrence, is a stalwart of our natural world, a point of resilience and fortitude. The Common Brown Butterfly is a welcome relief from the doom and gloom of threatened and endangered when not even a sexy name can protect you (Amethyst Hairstreak and its cousin Silky Hairstreak).

It is March and I am searching for the mother butterflies. They are larger than the males, with quite different markings
and more yellow colouring. The male is dark all over, with a very furry orange body and darker markings than the female.

After mating, the males die. The females feed on summer nectar and then these considerate mothers lay their eggs on sprouting grasses, so their caterpillar offspring have ready meals when they hatch, and it all begins again.

The term ‘common’ implies predictability, not inferiority. The First Nations peoples would know the butterflies’ cycles (just like the eels in Iuk); they are part of the rhythm of the bush. Each stage of nature is part of an intricate chain of interconnected events, and the custodians of each Country could read these.

In my eyes, decolonising also insists on acknowledging the loss of custodianship of Country and its effects. The Murray Darling Basin is a horrendous example of what can happen when First Nations peoples are dispossessed, removed and denied their ancestral responsibility to care for Country. Over the past two hundred years, colonisation has ruptured spiritual connection to water sites, springs and waterholes, where ancient water spirits travel and rest. For the First Nations peoples, these spiritual connections are what provided for the survival of water species, fish, crustacea and shellfish in extreme climate events, especially drought, which is a natural phenomenon. If they are ‘lucky’, Traditional Owners can be referred to as ‘stakeholders’, which gives them limited rights to say anything about water planning and management.

Large-scale human interference in the form of dams, weirs, 

Isn’t this like putting Dracula in charge of the blood bank?1

water diversion, water extraction, failing monitoring, buybacks, over allocation, combined with toxins and pollution, have led to dry beds and lakes, parched wetlands, and preventable catastrophes like the Menindee Lakes fish murder. Common sense should be telling us that Country is screaming something is wrong when over a million fish give up gasping for breath.

In other words, First Nations peoples have a common law right to all the water, surface and groundwater in the colonial legal system. Their rights to water have never been extinguished by colonisation, even though its management has been usurped and operates on a greed-based system promoted by irrigators and mining companies. First Nations Law and culture demands respect for all the members, the lands and waters of fellow Nations downstream.66

It is just common decency.
As I blink slowly to let in the barely morning light, I spy a curio on my bedside table. It was not there the night before. A tiny vial of clear liquid slowly blinks into focus.

I gather myself up to rest against the bed head and reach for the bottle. Attached, like something from Wonderland, is a note written in a child’s hand. It tells me that the tiny bottle is full of tears, shed (apparently) by the note’s eight-year-old author while I was sleeping deeply. Shed (and captured!) because I (her mother) could not be roused in the middle of the night for a rare request for a hug.

A vial of tears. My friend The Songman sings of tears as spirit babies, telling us to cry long and loud to give new spirits to the world. Perhaps when we shed a tear, a new spirit is born. Perhaps this is a vial of spirit babies ...
She was a spirited child: beguiling, different, often difficult. My intuition told me she was here to challenge the status quo.

She began school at four, as is the way in England. Her ponytails were at right angles above her ears and she had an early dislike for school tights that lasted until she left school thirteen years later. One day during her kinder year, a curious story wound its way to me.

It begins with a communal box of colouring pencils and around twenty boys and girls sharing them during a class activity. It seems that all but one of the red pencils had been lost, which bothered one little girl, who was blessed with a potent sense of fairness. Intent on ensuring every child had the equivalent amount of time with the last red pencil, the little girl became the (self-appointed) custodian, policing and enforcing each child’s ‘red time’ with gusto. Some poor little fellow was mid-fire truck when the ‘pencil sergeant’ swooped down to whisk it from his grasp, after which it was presented to the next child whose turn she deemed it was, although he never asked for it.

Her heavy-handed even-handedness proved to be distracting to her, baffling for her peers and bemusing to the teacher. This curious child made no sense to me, her mother, but I saved her skin by sending in a fistful of red pencils for her to add to the box.

Fast forward a few years to the preparations for Christmas. My email in-box pinged with a message from my little girl with a PowerPoint attachment detailing, with images, her wish list to be forwarded to Santa Claus. A few years later, she noticed she dressed differently to her friends. It was during the phase of the American Abercrombie & Fitch look that she researched in detail before she emailed me a detailed shopping list, her prescription for fitting in.

It was at this point I began to see the tension between the ‘normal’ and the not-quite-like-everyone-else. That societal pressure to fit in, which I had unconsciously subscribed to, is formidable.

Perhaps it’s worth looking at what ‘normal’ means?

**normal** | /ˈnɔːm(ə)l/  
conforming to a standard, usual, conventional, traditional, common, ordinary, typical, expected, fixed, prevailing, average, mainstream, free from mental and physical disorder. (How bland.)
My daughter’s natural disposition was, is, less the norm and more quirky, curious, unfiltered and sometimes affronting. People would judge and critique and gossip. She didn’t, and doesn’t, stick to the public script. But I did, and it mattered to me. I wanted her to be like everyone else. I set about trying to find out what was ‘wrong’ with her.

Eventually we found a useful framework for understanding and appreciating her differences and strengths, her fresh ways of thinking, communicating, seeing and being. It ended up being two for the price of one. She and her dad are both on the Asperger’s spectrum. He is not one for public scripts either.

One of our sons came up with a family name for Asperger’s ... asparagus.

The label of Asperger’s helps to explain my daughter’s idiosyncrasies: highly intelligent, clever in curious ways, certain hypersensitivities, not much of a gate between brain and mouth, sometimes cannot join the dots of situations, not very tactile, hates small talk. It is a spectrum and it is said when you meet one Aspie (an acceptable nickname used by the Aspies in my life) then that’s it, you have met one Aspie.

Before this knowledge, their ways, which can be polarising and difficult to accommodate, made me uncomfortable. In the back of my mind, they were not ‘normal’. I am the norm, defined in the world of medical psycho jargon as neurotypical (called NTs), that is my brain and the way it works is typical. Reflecting now, there was an arrogance in my ‘normality’, a presumption that we normal folk are the benchmark and the yardstick for humanity. Their curious ways made me look at my attitudes and behaviour and confront my prejudices. This reflexivity training came in handy when my creative practice research found me in a similar place, but where the stakes are much, much higher.

I think I am a natural born storyteller and decided to grow this skill and return to study – this time, learning how to write. In 2011, at age forty-six, with three of the four offspring still at school and a twenty-four-year hiatus from study, I commenced the Bachelor of Creative Writing at RMIT University. Interestingly, our eldest son also began the course the year after me. Poor fellow had to avoid a cuddle from his nerdy, mature-age-student mum as we passed on the stairs in between classes.

I was searching for my voice, to share my experiences, to explore how I was feeling and coping. I am one who writes to discover what I know. I tackled the subject in a
variety of creative ways. My very first submission was through metaphor – growing asparagus – which I revisit and, eight years on, share with you in this collection. I also wrote a screenplay for a short film and then deepened my research and understanding of Asperger’s as it affects young women for my Honours thesis. I felt compelled to write about them, but it slowly dawned that this was more about me, my way of seeing the world. Their difference was my problem, not theirs.

My gaze was, is, outwards, a fascination with others, especially the ‘other’, a natural ethnographic eye. It’s a consuming and effective strategy to deflect the focus from the self; everyone else is always more interesting and exotic, and my restless eye is averted from the mirror.

My Honours year confronted me with a mirror and I was drawn into critical reflexive thinking, to wonder how much of what I ‘see’ are my own projections. However, revealing this natural ethnographic eye came at a price. I am told this process of turning the pen on myself makes for better practice: the observer participates made vulnerable, provoking what Jewish Cuban American anthropologist and writer Ruth Behar refers to as ‘anthropology that breaks your heart’. But whose heart?

I was being pushed to reflect on all things Asperger’s academically through my research and personally through our family therapist. My academic reflections began unassumingly with a paper written by digital ethnographer Lynn Schofield Clark discussing reflexive media practice and analysis. Clark encourages the researcher and writer to acknowledge their personal biases, intentions and assumptions, as well as the consequences of their needs and desires, which all help shape the construction of our narratives. She asserts that we all speak through these existing narratives.

Clark asks us to think about the societal pressures and public scripts in our spheres; are we protecting our own interests and norms?

Umm, yes ... Am I reinforcing dominant perspectives, or challenging existing discourses? Do I understand I am accountable, that my scholarly narrative (my Honours


thesis) could contribute to a cultural repertoire that shapes questions and concerns, and future conversations? This is the same question Richard Frankland asks: are you being responsible with your freedom and your voice?

In hindsight, Clark’s questions were pivotal to the shape and direction of my creative practice research. To recap, my aim is to tell these stories of my experiences with and about the First Nations of Australia in a non-confrontational way. I hope to help to expose whiteness and its accompanying attitudes, assumptions, biases and prejudices. To be successful in this undertaking, I must understand the narrative we tell ourselves, the lenses we choose, the approaches which keep us in our comfort zone.

As a neurotypical person, I was absolutely protecting my interests and norms and reinforcing that way of being and thinking as the dominant perspective. As I will explore in later writings, I have also asserted and defended my whiteness and privilege in the same way.

My love for my family, my maternal bond, made me step up and try to understand how the dominant culture’s attitudes affect outsiders, those marginalised. Interestingly, Professor George Yancy, whom I write to in a later piece, writes about the power of love to change our attitudes too.

My responses to Clark’s questions are that with my freedom and voice I should be challenging existing discourses, not for the sake of it, but because the dominant culture and its discourses are not open to other ways of knowing, seeing and being. Homogeny is bland and ordinary. My research and reflexivity have led me into creative practice that is storytelling that challenges the status quo, as I will unfold across this project.

None of this looking in the mirror to see your foibles and limitations is easy. We need our comfort zones to feel safe and ‘normal’ (there’s that word again). Most of us don’t even know the realm of our comfort zone and its role as buffer and screen. My creative practice research for my Honours thesis exposed my comfort zone and its ancillary armoury. This process was gruelling.

‘Put on your Aspie hat’, the family therapist would tell me when I’d be feuding with one of them. This ‘hat’ was her deft way of cajoling me to consider the world through their eyes. We were all adjusting to the labels, descriptions, explanations, our new normal. It was exhausting. I would mutter obscenities under my hat about effing Aspie Hats.
Around this time, our Lab Leader in the Honours class was urging us to acknowledge and trust in our tacit knowledge, be critical, think about reflection in action. We were to undertake a Precursor Project with the aim of provoking curiosity through physical creation. A flippant reference to my difficulty with donning an Aspie Hat ended up with the Lab Leader’s suggestion I make an Aspie Hat.

I began by brainstorming how it should fit. It was ill-fitting and uncomfortable. Perhaps it was a pith helmet, a safari hat or a hard-hat to withstand the knocks and debris, but not so hard as to not feel something when I should. An image of the wise Hogwarts’s Sorting Hat came to mind, but sadly, this wisdom could not be outsourced.

I moved on to textures and elements the hat could incorporate. On my list was sandpaper to represent my experience of their abrasiveness, a two-way mirror as we all reflect and project our biases, a blackboard to signify a clean slate approach and forgiveness, a translator to deal with their literalness, and a gag for me so I know when not to respond. I also found some oversized ears as I need to listen better. When thinking about Clark’s probing into which public scripts I subscribe to, I imagined a series of veils to represent my various selves, personas and lenses.

When I don my Aspie Hat, what are the veils I must peer through or peel away to see and be seen clearly? My own personal history is a mash-up of mother-daughter relationships from the present backwards; my expectations of how a girl and a daughter should be; public scripts on girls, family, family values and good parenting; and, of course, my open knowledge and expectations of Asperger’s Syndrome.

Looking back through my notes now, four years on, I see how valuable these questions and thought processes were and are in my creative practice research. I was asking questions of myself such as

- What do I bring to this research?
- How am I influenced by my own upbringing, my social environment, my own insecurities?
- What am I reflecting and projecting?

The process was confronting and transformative as I reflected on my own history and relationships, the social mores I had assumed and never challenged. I allowed
myself to be intuitive, honest, spontaneous and vulnerable as I stood in front of my peers with a hard safari hat, veils, a mirror and a pair of large plastic ears. It was risky, but cathartic. I was stimulated and liberated by the surprise revelations. It placed me in a better place to start my research.

Vulnerability evolved as a theme in my Honours journey, and credit must go to ethnographer and ‘vulnerable observer’ Ruth Behar for her considerable and enduring influence. When guiding readers on a journey, I need them to connect with me, to see themselves in the journey, and being vulnerable is the key to this as ‘when you write vulnerably, others respond vulnerably’. In that research and its subsequent writings, I made the most of my own emotional involvement with the material as I wanted to shorten the distance between the reader and the subject, thereby inviting them to reflect and review their own perceptions, judgements and prejudices against those not regarded as ‘normal’. Putting yourself in the research and the narrative can raise the stakes for the writer, so it requires skill and nuance. It’s not about exposure for its own sake; rather, it is essential to the argument.

This idea of putting yourself in the research and the narrative is the core of the genre of autoethnography. An expert in the area, Carolyn Ellis, advises that I need wilfully to contaminate my data and saturate it with my subjectivity. When making the Aspie Hat, I had to move reflexively in and around the experience, confronting the unflattering in myself to open a deeply personal space to find understanding. This writing to learn and know, writing as enquiry, writing the journey, summoning multiple layers of consciousness, offers new insights and has the potential to open the readers to fresh ways of seeing and knowing. These reflexive skills harnessed in my Honours year have been built on for this collection of works.

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69 Behar, The Vulnerable Observer.
70 Ibid, 16.
71 Carolyn Ellis, The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography (Walnut Creek: AltaMira, 2004).
‘NT is not the only way to be’ quipped writer Harvey Blume in a *New York Times* article on Aspies in cyberspace. Ultimately, this emerged as the main message to come out of my research, serving as a personal reminder to embrace difference. The Aspie Hat helped me to be a better researcher. It invited me to move in and around the complicated space. To confront my bias and assumptions which would reflect the unflattering back at me. It showed that I had been arrogant in presuming that my normal way was ‘better’ than those wired differently. I was guilty of othering.

Four years later, Professor George Yancy helped me see that my othering was more than just being neurotypical; it was because I was white (more on this in the story ‘Dear George’ in *Skin in the Game*).

The following is a found poem I constructed from all my research into ‘growing asparagus’.

HOW TO GROW ASPARAGUS

There’s asparagus in our garden
Adding to the plot
She’s a curious young shoot
From an old spear’s root
Whose seed
Is mercurial and moody

Do not disturb
Her bed should be deep and rich
She takes time
to establish
to thrive

Cultivation demands a patient gardener

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A SHELTERED SPOT
AND LET HER BE
FOR A LONG WAIT
FROM SEED TILL HARVEST

SHE'S A HUNGRY ONE
FEED WELL
RICH MULCH
DO NOT COVER
AS SHOOTS Emerge
SHE IS PRONE TO FROST

SHE LIKES FULL SUN
A LITTLE SHADE
IF TOO EXPOSED
SUPPORTING CANES
KEEP HER STRONG
IN WIND AND RAIN

FOR MUCH OF THE YEAR
SHE TAKES UP SPACE
FOR LITTLE REWARD
THEN SPEARSpoke THROUGH
DON'T BE TEMPTED
TO HARVEST EARLY

SHE CAN THRIVE
FOR TWENTY-FIVE YEARS
IN OLD ABANDONED GARDENS
ASPARAGUS can be SEEN
GROWING YEARS LATER
AMONG TALL WEEDS AND GRASS

I AM UNTAMEABLE.


