Walking Notes:
Memoir with Landscape

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Note to examiners

The assemblage of texts that you have in front of you constitutes the full submission for my ‘PhD in a non-traditional format’. It has two main components, a contextual text which I’ve titled a ‘Preface’ and the main text. The Preface is a brief account of the way the quest for knowledge evolved, the research questions impelling the work, and my methodology. The main text, titled *Walking Notes: Memoir with Landscape*, addresses the research questions in a specifically creative and applied way, working within the genre of what is termed either literary nonfiction or creative nonfiction. It uses an amalgam of personal narrative, memoir, travelogue, and cultural and environmental history. It is preferable that you read the Preface first.

Included at the end of the main text is Appendix 1, comprised of photographs taken by me, documenting abandoned cars left along the length of the Sandy Blight Junction Road in central Australia. Detailed reference to the cars is made in Chapter 15, explaining their role in my mapping of a desert landscape, and in understanding the distinct ecology of the ‘arid zone’.

Images are also used throughout the text, positioned in groups after some of the chapters. Unless otherwise specified, they also are taken by me. I have chosen not to use captions as I intend the images to work in relation to the text without explanatory detail. Appendix 2 lists photographers, sources and, where appropriate and illuminating, information about what the images depict.

Appendix 3 is comprised of a series of stills from Francis Jupurrurla Kelly’s *Larpi Larpi* video, and used with his permission. (Thanks are due to Rob Nugent for composing and extracting the stills.)

CERTIFICATE OF AUTHORSHIP/ORIGINALITY

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Signature of Candidate

Acknowledgments

My first thanks goes to Ross Gibson for keeping faith with this project and for prompting me on numerous occasions to both extend and refine the scope of this work. I owe much to his perseverance.

Deborah Bird Rose acted as adjunct supervisor from 2007–2008 when she held her former position at the Fenner School of Environment and Society, ANU (currently Professor of Social Inclusion, Macquarie). Her suggestions and insight enabled me to grapple with anthropological material, and notions of Indigenous placemaking in ways that, as a writer and non-anthropologist, I had felt previously unauthorised to do. I thank her for drawing my attention to research materials associated with the Central Mount Wedge Land Claim, which enabled me to 'hear more clearly' the voices of Indigenous people connected with settlement histories of central Australia—as was her suggestion.

At various stages of the thesis I benefited from participation in PhD workshops and programs, most especially 'Challenges to Perform' run by Professor Greg Dening at ANU in 2004. It was a privilege to take part in his program, and to be encouraged through his passion and dedication to consider the thesis as a book. I benefited, too, from discussion and reading materials associated with: the 'Environmental History PhD Workshop' held at ANU in 2008; and the 'Emerging Scholars Workshop: Memory' held by the Institute for Social Research, Swinburne University in 2008. My understanding of environmental history was further enriched by participation in the Environmental History Reading Group@ANU, convened by Professor Tom Griffiths in 2009. Just as I was completing the thesis I thoroughly enjoyed the 'Varuna/*Griffith Review* Masterclass: Exploring the Essay' run by Peter Bishop and Robin Hemley, director of the nonfiction writing program at the University of Iowa.

Portions of *Walking Notes* have appeared elsewhere and I acknowledge their earlier publication: Chapter 1 appeared as 'Walking: Western MacDonnell Ranges' in *HEAT* 10, 2005, and was republished in *Best Australian Essays 2006*. An earlier version of the chapters on buffel grass appeared as 'Desert Grasslands' in *Overland* 181, 2008. A section of Chapter 12 appeared as 'City of Skies' in *HEAT* 21, 2009. A slightly shorter version of Chapter 2 is forthcoming in *The Iowa Review* in 2011/12, under the title 'Ground Glass.'

I am grateful to the Fenner School of Environment and Society, ANU, which provided me with a Departmental Visitorship during eighteen months of my candidature. Thanks also to the Centre for Historical Research at the National Museum of Australia for providing desk space in association with the Fenner School, and to Libby Robin for suggesting this arrangement.

Dave Albrecht and Sally Mumford offered generous hospitality over a number of years in Alice Springs, which in numerous ways contributed to the content of this thesis. Thanks are due, also, to Dave for his extensive conversations and knowledge about buffel grass.

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Thanks to Francis Jupurrurla Kelly for granting permission to write about and use stills from his video, and for discussion of his reasons for making the film. Des Nelson was more than generous with his recollections of the spread of buffel grass. And David Nash was equally generous in his offer to view Francis Jupurrurla Kelly's *Larpi Larpi* video with me, and to make translations of the Warlpiri. Jeremy Long also viewed *Larpi Larpi* with me, and I am grateful for his recollections of the site, and his knowledge of people depicted in the video.

Librarian Margaret Ellis generously assisted with research enquiries at the Arid Zone Research Institute Library (Department of Primary Industry, Fisheries and Mines); as did Carolyn Newman at the Northern Territory Archives Service in Alice Springs. I am grateful to staff at the State Library of New South Wales, National Gallery of Australia, National Gallery of Victoria, Museum Victoria, Northern Territory Archives Service in Darwin, National Archives of Australia and the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies who responded to my queries.

My understanding of central Australia was furthered by conversations with a number of people who have lived and worked in the region, or whose research interests are connected to the region, including: Peter Latz, Fiona Walsh, David Jagger, Peter Bartlett, Ann Mosey, Vikki Plant, Lindy Allen and David Brooks. Mary Laughren responded to my email queries about translation of the Kukaja term ‘Lapi-lapi’. I thank them all for their willingness to enter into discussion.

Alan Goode was enthusiastic about our numerous desert expeditions, plotting routes, and helping orchestrate travel into remote areas with a young child. Without his support this thesis would not have been written. My final mark of gratitude is to my daughter Olive who has not yet known our household without a PhD in the making. Profound thanks are due to her patience. At last the ‘two more weeks’ until the thesis is finished are up.

Preface

Walking Notes is a PhD thesis submitted in what UTS designates as a 'Non-Traditional Format'. It combines memoir, or life-writing, with enquiry into environmental and cultural histories of the central Australian desert. It seeks to enhance our understanding of placemaking in the instance where the geographies we inhabit are underpinned by a history of dispossession and loss.

I was led by both circumstance and a piece of my own writing to use central Australia as the lens through which to frame my questions. In 2002 I went on a 10-day bushwalk in the Western MacDonnell Ranges, which culminated quite unexpectedly with my being trapped inside a rocky water-filled gorge where I developed hypothermia. Not long after the experience, which was not life-threatening but could have been, I wrote an account of the event. A year or so later I developed the account into an essay.[1] I did not walk in the desert with a view to writing about it. And I did not write the essay with a view to turning it into a research question. Nevertheless, both the event and the piece of writing invited further reflection and consideration.

The research questions I first formed from this material ran along the following lines: I chose three sites in the western desert and through them asked what might constitute a cross-cultural understanding of place. How can one physical site be understood through multiple knowledge systems? How can it be differently understood from Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives? And how might these different perspectives overlap and/or usefully inform one another? I used the three sites—Central Mount Wedge, the Sandy Blight Junction Road, and Lapi-lapi—to frame and contain the research. Thus at each site I explored its specific portrayals in nineteenth century exploration literature, settlement accounts from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, arid zone science, popular non-fiction accounts of central Australia that flourished in the first half of the twentieth century, and Indigenous understandings as

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[1] S Beudel, 'Walking: Western MacDonnell Ranges', *HEAT*, vol. 10, 2005, pp. 7–25; republished in *Best Australian Essays 2006*, D Modjeska (ed.), BlackInc, Melbourne, 2006, pp. 292–310.

they come to us through anthropology and land claim testimonies. To a lesser extent, I also considered geological and archaeological interpretations.

Visiting the sites was central to my research and writing process. From the outset I planned to use personal narrative as a way to hold diverse materials together, to form a kind of travelogue, and to reflect on the place and its histories. I travelled to central Australia each year from 2005 to 2009, most often in two-month blocks. From Alice Springs I journeyed into the western desert to Hermannsburg, Papunya, Central Mount Wedge, Newhaven, Yuendumu, Kintore, the length of the Sandy Blight Junction Road to Warakurna, and to Blackstone in Western Australia. I also spent time in Alice Springs conducting research in libraries and archives, and doing informal interviews that were more like conversations. I spoke with people from the fields of ethnobotany, botany, anthropology, linguistics, and Indigenous health, along with filmmakers, former Northern Territory Administration employees, the manager of an Aboriginal mining company, long-term central Australian residents, and others. Of my three chosen sites, Lapi-lapi is the only one I did not visit. It lies just north of Lake Mackay on the Northern Territory and Western Australia border beyond the reach of roads. For logistical reasons it was not possible to journey out there.

Through visiting and travelling, I hoped to inform the writing with my own impressions of the places under consideration, through chance encounters, mood and atmosphere, and immersion in the landscapes themselves. My approach could be considered as something along the lines of pyschogeography, but instead of exploring an urban setting, I was forming encounters with a desert environment and its residual layers of natural and cultural history. My approach also has strong parallels with what is broadly termed ‘nature writing’ whereby narratives are formed through personal experience in and reflection upon the landscape incorporated with other research materials such as history, anthropology, archaeology, biology, zoology, and botany. While I don’t necessarily designate *Walking Notes* as nature writing, I owe much of my methodology to Barry Lopez’s *Arctic Dreams: Imagination and Desire in a Northern Landscape*, a luminary interplay of lyrical literary non-fiction, travel writing, personal reflection and rigorous research. Other influential works that employ a similar interdisciplinary tack held together by personal narrative include: William L Fox’s *The Black Rock Desert* and *The Void, the Grid and the Sign: Traversing the Great Basin*; Rebecca Solnit’s *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*; Johnathon Raban’s *Bad Land: An*

American Romance; and Rob Nixon's *Dreambirds: The Strange History of the Ostrich in Fashion, Food, and Fortune*.

Through my initial cluster of research questions combined with desert-based flâneurism (if that is not a contradiction in terms) I gained a far more detailed understanding of our inland colonial past, but I also reached a cul-de-sac. I did indeed locate the multiple perspectives that are a hallmark of any place we might choose to consider. As Doreen Massey notes, '"places" have for centuries been ... complex locations where numerous different, and frequently conflicting, communities intersected'.[2] Experience of place is never unmediated. Further, geography gives rise to multiple forms of cultural response. Edward Said, for example, notes that Simon Schama's book *Landscape and Memory* shows us that 'forests, villages, mountains, and rivers are never coterminous with some stable reality out there that identifies and gives them permanence'. Said goes on to observe, 'Geography stimulates not only memory but dreams and fantasies, poetry and painting, philosophy ... fiction ... and music'.[3]

But I was left with an almost inert conclusion: yes, any of my three sites could be diversely constructed through the disappointments of nineteenth century exploration, underpinned by its desire for expansion of economic opportunities; and simultaneously through the at once besieged and besieging early settlers; along with knowledge belonging to Indigenous people with their deep historical connections and understanding of their location. But, put in a nutshell: so what? Where to from here?

This impasse was followed by a slow accommodation of the desert understood as a distinct ecological system, running in tandem with a slow accommodation of encountering self through family history. What emerged is a webbing that holds these two concerns together. *Walking Notes* contains, then, what may at first seem an improbable combination of elements: a reflection on family history, in particular on my father with his colonial past in Indonesia, his migrancy, his ambivalent relationship with his 'homeland' of Holland, and his equally ambivalent relationship with Australia where he settled; all this interwoven with meditations on desert landscapes. On realising that my original questions (productive as they were) were not the right ones to sustain me throughout, my revised research questions became: What relationships can I draw between personal and family history, on the one hand, and an appropriate means of

[2] D Massey, 'A Place Called Home?', in *Space, Place, and Gender,* University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2007 (1994), pp. 163–64.

[3] E Said, 'Invention, Memory and Place', in W J T Mitchell (ed.), *Landscape and Power*, University of Chicago, Chicago, London, 2002 (1994), pp. 246–47.

developing an intimate and immersed understanding of the desert, on the other hand? I asked, too, what happens to our sense of belonging in a landscape that once belonged to other people? And from my earlier cluster of questions I retained my intention to explore some of the differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous understandings of the landscape.

In response to my reframed questions, there's the theme of memory. How do we remember traumatic events in our family histories? And how do we remember dispossession, or encounter the forgetting that goes hand in hand with the colonial conquest that grounds our presence here in Australia? As Martin Jay reminds us, it is individuals who do the remembering, and they do it from an array of perspectives, not through a collectivised norm. He writes, 'No student of the mysteries of collective memory can fail to acknowledge that those who do the remembering stubbornly remain individuals whose minds resist inclusion in a homogenised group consciousness.'[4] It seemed to me important, in relation to my research questions, to be attentive to both registers of memory: one connected to personal and family history, the other to the particular histories of the desert location I was exploring. After all, our history here in this country is made up of a multitude of experiences, of waves of migration, settlement and movement, and of locations and relocations all threaded together and giving rise to stories that are entangled not discrete. This thesis is thus an attempt to both imagine and practice 'a tangle of historicities rather than a progressively aligned common History—however combined and uneven its development'.[5] To borrow James Clifford's words, it is 'an opportunity to inhabit, attentively, the contradictions of different historical dynamics'.[6]

To begin with I had no wish to be writing memoir or family history, and it took quite some time to accept the validity of this approach—to overcome my own resistance. Thoreau suggests that each of us has a bone to chew, to bury, exhume and chew again. He wrote, 'Know thy bone; gnaw at it, bury it, unearth it, and gnaw at it still.'[7] I have wondered whether my family history, my father with his fractured past haunting his present, is the bone I've been given to chew—to worry away at. In part

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[4] M Jay, 'Against Consolation: Walter Benjamin and the Refusal to Mourn', in J Winter & E Sivan (eds.), *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999, p. 221.
[5] J Clifford, 'Hau'ofa's Hope Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania 2009 Distinguished Lecture', *Oceania*, vol. 79, no. 3, 2009, p. 246.
[6] Clifford suggests, further, that the contradictions of different historical dynamics constitute, 'A dialectical realism, without transcendence'. Ibid., p. 244.
[7] Thoreau in K Mahood, 'Listening is Harder Than You Think', *Griffith Review*, vol. 19, Autumn, 2008, p. 166.

this study is an answer in the affirmative. But it is also more than that. It is a methodological response prompted by the desert itself: in uncluttered expanses of landscape memory surfaces.

In my attempt to understand a place new to me, as I camped and walked and drove and meandered, my own past vividly returned to me. I was unprepared for the clarity and force with which it did. I was turned back to the people and places I know intimately; they accompanied me in my wanderings. I was compelled, too, when I least expected, to write a eulogy for my father. A eulogy enmeshed in a desert landscape. As a result, (as noted), this study is a commingled effort to think about personal history along with broader historical concerns.

Once I knew I was writing a form of memoir, I turned for sustenance, sometimes repeatedly, to memoirs that are innovative in form or content (or both), including: J M Coetzee's *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life*, *Youth: Scenes from Provincial Life II*, and *Summertime*; Kim Mahood's *Craft for a Dry Lake*; Eric Michaels' *Unbecoming: An AIDS Diary*; Rian Malan's *My Traitor's Heart*; and Edward Said's *Out of Place*. I turned also to works of nonfiction that incorporate personal narrative, and learned much about use of language and sometimes a fierceness of intent from works including: James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*; John Berger's *A Seventh Man*, *Keeping a Rendezvous, The Shape of a Pocket* and *Selected Essays*; Annie Dillard's *The Writing Life*; Rachel Lichtenstein and Iain Sinclair's *Rodinsky's Room*; Barry Lopez's *Desert Notes/River Notes*; W G Sebald's *The Emigrants*, *Austerlitz* and *The Rings of Saturn*; Rebecca Solnit's *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*; Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* and *Walking*. For the pleasure of his language as well as his interdisciplinary approach, I drew often from Michael Taussig's *My Cocaine Museum* and *Walter Benjamin's Grave*. In particular, in Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* I found an illuminating ability to not only unflinchingly examine himself as a writing subject rubbing up against and embroiled within his subject matter, but also to be attentive to all that remains in excess of the writing project: the inexplicable, the cul-de-sacs, the efflorescence of material detail; along with yearnings and desires and apprehensions that seem to resist the domestication or imposition of seamless narrative structures.

In *Walking Notes* I have chosen not to foreground theoretical material because it interfered with the tone and pace of the work as a whole. Nevertheless I am indebted to writers and scholars whose works form an undercurrent, if you like, to my own.

Because they are not explicitly cited in the following chapters I acknowledge them here. (Other sources are clearly referenced in the main text.) As someone trained in the creative arts, first as a visual artist then as a writer, I have had to learn how to think and write historically (outside the fields of art and literature), while also remaining true to my more literary concerns, passions, and tendencies. The following propositions served as 'banisters' in my own efforts at history-writing.[8] They guided me in addressing the question of how 'we know a past beyond the reach of our immediate experience'.[9]

In his 'Fort Ross Meditation' James Clifford urges us to envisage history occurring on multiple and diverse temporal registers, so that, for example, history at Fort Ross resides in the 'long rhythm' of faultlines, the 'cyclical temporalities of weather', plants which 'keep their own times', the entwined histories of humans and animals, along with 'the mix of human times we commonly call history'. At Fort Ross Clifford searches for understanding of his 'location among others in time and space.' Through a particular location he asks, as Gauguin did, *Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?* but 'instead of a clear direction or process' he finds 'different, overlapping temporalities, all in differing ways "historical".'[10] I have often borne in mind Clifford's generous haul of things and processes that might be deemed historical. Thus, in grappling with exploration and settlement histories of central Australia I tried to think from the ground up, and to write of these periods from the perspective of an introduced grass called buffel grass (*Cenchrus ciliaris*). The grass keeps its own time, is bound up with colonisation, it travels with animals and people, humans have invested their desires and aversions in it differently over time, and it persists problematically in a postcolonial present (if indeed one can talk of such a thing in connection with a settler culture such as Australia's). Historian Greg Dening argues that what happened in the past leaves sign-bearing relics, and it's through these relics that we make histories. Far from holding stable meaning, though, 'relics of the past are always cargo to the present'. Each time relics 'cross cultural boundaries that lie between

[8] I draw here on Hannah Arendt's metaphor of the 'banister'. As Stephen Muecke interprets, 'Thinking without a banister' is a way to train the philosophical mind. Banisters are 'ingrained thought patterns which impede not only the ability to see things afresh, but to experience them afresh and tell new stories about them'. In my own work there were no banisters I could recognise and so I required what Muecke calls their 'virtual support'. Muecke, 'A Chance to Hear a Nyigina Song', *Joe in the Andamans*, Local Consumption Publications, Sydney, 2008, pp. 83–84.

[9] K Neumann, 'But is it History?', *Cultural Studies Review*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2008, p. 31.

[10] J Clifford, 'Fort Ross Meditation', in *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1997, pp. 301–02.

past and present they are reconstituted'.[11] In my chapters on buffel grass I like to think of the grass as a relic that takes on different meanings in each cultural zone it enters.[12]

Furthermore, buffel grass became for me a useful tool for sorting through what Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt refer to as 'the mass of traces that have survived in the archive'. They outline a process of identifying 'interpreting detail' or 'luminous detail' from a welter of textual traces. When trying to sort through a 'vast array' of material, the question arises as to which of the traces is significant. In reply they suggest, 'it proves impossible to provide a theoretical answer, an answer that would work reliably in advance of plunging ahead to see what resulted.'[13] 'Interpreting detail' is isolated from the morass. Whether this detail is indeed luminous can only be tested through the writing process. For a number of reasons, buffel grass became my 'luminous detail' lifted from a mass of residues of the past, which I tested through plunging ahead to see what happened. It became an object and a trace to think with.

Buffel grass is a way, too, to consider nature and culture as interrelated rather than separate fields of inquiry. As historian Dipesh Chakrabarty notes, the distinction between natural and human histories is 'artificial' but 'time honoured'.[14] He argues that climate scientists have recently and unwittingly destroyed this distinction through positing that human beings now 'wield a geological force'.[15] Although my approach to writing this study evolved over time, a constant intention was to consider natural and human histories as 'entangled', to use Donna Haraway's term.[16] Through a vivid example, Bruno Latour reminds us how used we are to encountering entanglements of nature and culture, of the scientific, the political and the social in our everyday lives,

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[11] G Dening, 'A Poetic for Histories', in *Performances*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1996, pp. 42–43.

[12] In thinking about the forms that history-writing can take, I have also been influenced by Klaus Neumann's 'But is it History?' He asks why, within the academic discipline of history, historians have largely been unwilling to undertake 'experimental histories'. He characterises the latter as departing from the conventions of the discipline in that they don't privilege a single perspective of the past, use non-linear narrative structures, are not written in the third person, are self-reflexive and are not reliant on the logic of chronology and cause-and-effect relationships. He suggests that experimental histories are more concerned with the past itself, than with representations of the past, and are impelled by the concept that the past is not over and done with but is rather 'incomplete'. Neumann, op. cit., pp. 19–32.

[13] C Gallagher & S Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2000, pp. 14–15.

[14] In his 1959 Rede Lecture, scientist and writer C P Snow wrote of the chasm he negotiated each time he crossed between the two social groups he mixed in, the one literary the other scientific. '[O]ne might have crossed an ocean,' he wrote of his regular movements back and forth between the 'two cultures'. C P Snow, *The Two Cultures and The Scientific Revolution*, The Rede Lecture 1959, Cambridge University Press, London, 1959, pp. 2–3.

[15] D Chakrabarty, 'The Climate of History: Four Theses', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 35, Winter 2009, pp. 206.

[16] D Haraway, *When Species Meet*, University of Minnesota Press, Minnesota, 2008, p. 5.

and yet how segmented they frequently remain when unpicked by analysts, thinkers, journalists, decision-makers, and scholars. His example is that of reading the daily newspaper, and he uses the term 'imbroglios' to describe those hybrid articles we encounter, which 'in a single uncertain story,' mix up 'biology and society', 'science, politics, economy, law, religion, technology, fiction.' He is talking of holes in the ozone layer, the AIDS virus, frozen embryos, and whales wearing collars fitted with radio tracking devices. In these strange mixed-up stories, 'All of culture and all of nature get churned up again every day.' Rather than segmenting these imbroglios into tidy headings, 'habitual categories' and disciplinary compartments, his own work involves following 'the imbroglios wherever they take us'. To do so, to 'shuttle back and forth, we rely on the notion of translation, or network ... the idea of network is the Ariadne's thread of these interwoven stories.'[17]

Because my own work has seemed weighted at times by incommensurable time frames, characters, objects, locales, I have translated Latour's notion of 'imbroglio' to incorporate for my own purposes reflection on memory, self and family history, along with exploration of our shifting understandings of the 'nature' of a desert environment. The stories in *Walking Notes* are interwoven, networked, and I have found the 'fragile thread' knotting them together almost impossible to unpick.[18] I was further encouraged in this direction by Felix Guattari's notion of the 'three ecologies', or three ecological registers including 'the environment, social relations and human subjectivity'. In his view all three registers require equal consideration in order to question our 'ways of living on this planet' as it undergoes 'intense techno-scientific transformations' generating 'ecological disequilibrium'.[19] I attend here in this work to all three ecological registers. And so in the following chapters you will find reflections on art, a melancholic father, reminiscences of colonial Indonesia and of Japanese occupation during the Second World War, buffel grass, developments in arid zone science and ecology, cross-cultural encounter that occurred with the expansion of settlement in central Australia, and a chapter on the interdisciplinary efforts of anthropologist and biologist Donald Thomson.

[17] B Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. C Porter, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1991, pp. 2–3.
[18] Ibid., p. 3.
[19] F Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, trans. I Pindar & P Sutton, Continuum, London, 2008 (1989), pp. 19–20.

Thus, through diverse influences and materials, through visiting the desert and writing not only about it but from what it prompted in me, *Walking Notes* is a nonfiction meditation that enhances our knowledge about place-making, memory, and ecology.

Of all the diverse ways I could have approached the memoir component of this study, I have chosen to do it through the avenue of nature and landscape. I have traced something of my father's life's trajectory, ousted from Indonesia during its fight for independence which intensified in the wake of the Second World War, a brief interlude in Holland which failed to claim him as a homeland, his immigration to Australia where he lived largely in disenchantment. He found Australia as a nation and as a social system to be flawed, lacking in compassion, and frequently racist. Yet he connected deeply to its landscapes. For him, in terms of nation states, there was no definitive place to call home. Instead, I think, there were particular places, particular landscapes that were resonant. In them he felt a sense of belonging. To use metaphors drawn from arid zone ecology, his places to call home were a patchwork, a mosaic. In this way I hope that my father's story is not only one deeply personal to me, but also, less subjectively, a cipher for a broader notion of homelessness engendered by living on colonised land which is a legacy we all must live with. Even when this homelessness is experienced only momentarily, or as a subliminal undercurrent, it forms part of the strata that is our past in the present. As Coetzee writes of the fictional character of Coetzee in *Summertime*, he felt his presence in South Africa to be 'legal but illegitimate'. Here the fictional Coetzee's former academic colleague, Martin, speaks of both John (Coetzee) and himself, of their shared attitude:

> We had an abstract right to be there, a birthright, but the basis of that right was fraudulent. Our presence was grounded in a crime, namely colonial conquest, perpetuated by apartheid. Whatever the opposite is of *native* or *rooted*, that was what we felt ourselves to be. We thought of ourselves as sojourners, temporary residents, and to that extent without a home, without a homeland.[20]

Martin concludes: 'I don't think I am misrepresenting John. It was something he and I talked about a great deal. I am certainly not misrepresenting myself.' Similarly, I don't think I am misrepresenting my father in saying that he too felt himself a sojourner, and without a homeland. And it is this strained and attenuated notion of home that I most wanted to explore in this study, through nature and culture woven together, whether that

[20] J M Coetzee, *Summertime: Scenes from a Provincial Life*, Vintage, Sydney, 2009, pp. 209–10.

notion be overt, or so subtle as to be almost undetectable. Whether coupled to nostalgia and mourning, or to an enabling notion of the provisional, or of abundance, whereby you might have many places to call home.[21] I wanted to explore it in its many guises.

Having said that, and even though I intended not to end on a melancholic note, perhaps this study is above all a meditation on landscapes and loss. It is about personal loss, loss of animals and plants through extinction and environmental change, cultures lost through colonisation. Loss can be kept at bay but then, all at once, with power and seduction it sweeps in.

[21] In *Summertime* Martin continues: 'I did not regard our fate as tragic ... [i]f anything it was comic. ... [W]e cultivated a certain provisionality in our feelings toward it [South Africa] ... We were reluctant to invest too deeply in the country, since sooner or later our ties to it would have to be cut, our investment in it annulled'. Ibid., pp. 210, 211. In conclusion of her chapter 'A Place Called Home?' Doreen Massey writes, 'Of course places can be home, but they do not have to be thought of in that way, nor do they have to be places of nostalgia. You may, indeed, have many of them. ... And what is more, each of these home-places is itself an equally complex product of the ever-shifting geography of social relations past and present'. Massey, op.cit., p.172.

Abstract

Walking Notes: Memoir with Landscape is a nonfiction meditation on landscape, memory, ecology and memoir. It combines personal narrative with enquiry into environmental and cultural histories of the central Australian desert. It seeks to enhance our understanding of placemaking in the instance where the geographies we inhabit are underpinned by a history of dispossession and loss.

Visiting sites under discussion was central to my research and writing process. I use personal narrative to form a travelogue, to reflect on landscapes and their histories, and to hold diverse materials together. In the desert, my own past vividly returned to me. I was unprepared for the clarity and force with which it did. I was turned back to people and places I know intimately. When I least expected, I was also compelled to write a eulogy for my father. This thesis is thus a commingled effort to think about personal history along with broader historical concerns, and to respond to the challenge of discovering what webs them together. The thesis asks the following questions: What relationships can I draw between personal and family history, on the one hand, and an appropriate means of developing an intimate and immersed understanding of the desert, on the other hand? Further, what happens to our sense of belonging in a landscape that once belonged to other people? Resting beneath these two areas of exploration, lies the additional query: what are some of the differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous understandings of the desert landscape?

In addressing these questions, one of my central aims is to consider nature and culture as 'entangled' rather than as separate and discrete fields. Theorist Felix Guattari speaks of the notion of 'three ecologies', or three ecological registers including 'the environment, social relations and human subjectivity'. In his view all three registers require equal consideration. Encouraged by this idea, my chapters include: a narrative account of bushwalking in central Australia; reflections on my father's childhood experiences in colonial Indonesia, internment in Japanese prison camps during WWII, and ousting from Indonesia during its struggle for independence; a history of the spread of an exotic grass species, buffel grass (*Cenchrus ciliaris*) in central Australia; developments in arid zone science and ecology; accounts of cross-cultural contact in the region; and a chapter on the interdisciplinary efforts of anthropologist and biologist Donald Thomson.

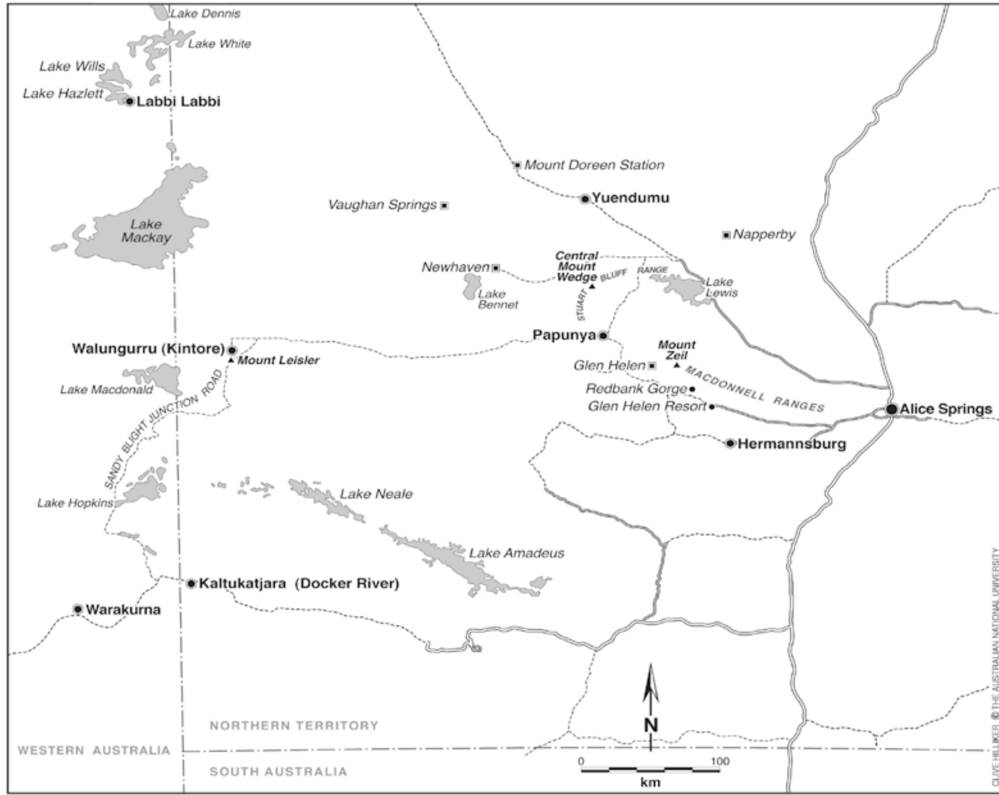
Through visiting the desert and writing not only about it but from what it prompted in me, *Walking Notes* enhances our knowledge about placemaking, memory, ecology, and their interrelationships.

Walking Notes:
Memoir with Landscape

How do people imagine the landscapes they find themselves in? How does the land shape the imaginations of the people who dwell in it?
—Barry Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*

Stories about places are makeshift things. They are composed with the world's debris.
—Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*

At my home, my dear home, Ulamba, rocky-faced, rocky-based
voices call, voices fall;
Parrot-flocks' voices call, voices fall.
—'Arintja of Ulamba Song', trans. T G H Strehlow, *Songs of Central Australia*


Lake Dennis
Lake White
Lake Wills
Lake Hazlett
Labbi Labbi
Lake Mackay
Mount Doreen Station
Yuendumu
Vaughan Springs
Napperby
Newhaven
Central Mount Wedge
Lake Bennet
STUART BLUFF RANGE
Lake Lewis
Papunya
Walungurru (Kintore)
Mount Leisler
Lake Macdonald
SANDY BLIGHT JUNCTION ROAD
Mount Zeil
Glen Helen
MACDONNELL RANGES
Redbank Gorge
Glen Helen Resort
Alice Springs
Hermannsburg
Lake Hopkins
Lake Neale
Lake Amadeus
Kaltukatjara (Docker River)
Warakurna
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Part One