

## **Shaping the Murray-Darling Basin: the significance of culture and identity**

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### **Abstract**

In this paper we will address the conference theme ‘Understanding and shaping regions’ through the findings of a research project about water in the Murray-Darling Basin, Australia. The project, *‘Bubbles on the surface: a place pedagogy of the Narran Lakes’*, was funded by the Australian Research Council as a three year project centred on the Narran Lake in western NSW. The Narran Lake is a large inland lake located between the northern river catchments in southern Queensland and the Darling and Murray rivers to the south of the Basin. Because of its geographic location, its importance in Aboriginal stories, and its ecological significance, the Narran Lake is an iconic site in the Basin. It is a contact zone of Aboriginal and settler stories, of agricultural and environmental discourses, and a physical pulse of environmental wellbeing.

There have long been concerns about the health of the Murray River but the Murray - Darling Basin only relatively recently arrived as a region in the public imaginary. In 1990 the Murray-Darling Basin (MDB) Ministerial Council launched a strategy of ‘integrated catchment management’, in response to the declining health of the system of water. Over ten years later, however, they reported that water quality and ecosystem health were continuing to decline (MDB, 2001, 2). While the Commission emphasised ‘the importance of people in the process of developing a shared vision and acting together to manage the natural resources of their catchment’ (MDB, 2001, 1), a scoping study on Aboriginal involvement in the MDB initiatives found a ‘chasm between the perception of the available opportunities for involvement and the reality experienced by Aboriginal people’ (Ward, Rys et al, 2003). The most significant barrier to Aboriginal involvement was identified as a ‘lack of respect and understanding of Aboriginal culture and its relevance to natural resource management’ (Ward, Rys et al, 2003, 8). The situation had not significantly changed by 2008 when the federal government began a process of buying back water entitlements to put water back into the system for environmental purposes against continuing public opposition.

*Bubbles on the surface* is underpinned by the feminist poststructural and postcolonial approach of ‘storylines’ (Sondergaard, 2001) that our relationship to place is constructed in stories and other representations (Somerville, 2009). The process of re-shaping regions, then, can be seen to be about changing the stories we tell. We use the concept of *story* here to embrace the expressions of visual artists, sculptors, and poets, as well as scientists, policy makers and agriculturalists. An *Aboriginal* story incorporates song, music, dance, body painting, and performance, which intersect powerfully in a particular place (Somerville, 1999). Dominant storylines of place position us as separate from the places we live in. They ‘deny our connection to earthly phenomena, ... and construct places as objects or sites on a map to be economically exploited’ Gruenewald, (2003b, 624). In this project we asked what are the alternative stories of place in the Murray-Darling Basin? This paper examines one aspect of these alternative storylines - the oral stories and artworks produced by Aboriginal artists in response to the questions about water in the Murray-Darling Basin posed in the research.

## Introduction

In this paper we will address the conference theme ‘Understanding and shaping regions’ through the findings of a research project about water in the Murray-Darling Basin, a large region in south east Australia. The dire situation of water in the Murray-Darling Basin is well recognised internationally (Barlow et al, 2008) and the region has entered the Australian nation’s imaginary as a system in distress. The Murray-Darling Basin covers approximately one seventh (14%) of the total area of Australia. It includes most of inland south-eastern Australia, incorporating parts of the ACT, QLD, NSW, VIC and SA and is important for the major metro centres of Brisbane, Sydney, Canberra, Melbourne and Adelaide. The Murray-Darling Basin contains two thirds of the country’s irrigated lands and produces 40% of the agricultural outputs. The region is in its second decade of severe drought, believed to be the result of climate change effects which impact large areas of the southern hemisphere where much of the world’s food is produced. The fact that agricultural production in the region is dependent on irrigation that is no longer sustainable is recognised by some constituencies, but highly contested in others. Significantly, the map of the Basin, as a region, overlaps almost perfectly with what is described as the ‘Riverine Language Groups’ of Aboriginal Australia, a fact that has not been explored.

The Basin is watered by a series of rivers and networks of tributaries. These begin in the headwaters of the Balonne and Condamine Rivers in Queensland, flow down through the Narran, Culgoa and Bokhara Rivers to the Darling, eventually joining the Murray to flow into the sea at the Coorong, a vast wetland ecosystem at the mouth of the Murray River in South Australia. In 1990 the Murray-Darling Basin Commission (MDBC) launched a strategy of ‘integrated catchment management’, but over ten years later they reported that water quality and ecosystem health were continuing to decline (MDBC, 2001, 2). They emphasised ‘the importance of people in the process of developing a shared vision and acting together to manage the natural resources of their catchment’ (MDBC, 2001, 1), but research has continued to emphasise the physical, rather than the social sciences (Ward et al, 2003) and to describe the severity of the problem rather than offering possibilities for change.

Aboriginal people continue to inhabit all of the waterways of the Murray-Darling Basin but the stories and practices through which they have survived as the longest continuing culture inhabiting the world’s driest continent are largely unacknowledged. A scoping study on Aboriginal involvement in the MDBC initiatives found a ‘chasm between the perception of the available opportunities for involvement and the reality experienced by Aboriginal people’ (Ward et al, 2003). The study found that there is a strong case for involving Aboriginal people because of the ‘collective and holistic nature of Aboriginal people’s concerns about the natural environment and their Country’ (Ward et al, 2003, 29) and that ‘Aboriginal people are concerned and angry about the decline in health of the Murray-Darling Basin’ (Ward et al, 2003, 21). The most significant barrier to Aboriginal involvement was identified as a ‘lack of respect and understanding of Aboriginal culture and its relevance to natural resource management’ (Ward et al, 2003,

8). This barrier remains unaddressed: 'The problems of the river have also been amplified by the persistent failure to recognise the importance of Indigenous custodians in deciding how the river should be managed' (Potter et al, 2007).

The issues of the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous understandings of water and country, identified by the Murray-Darling Basin Commission (2001), are echoed in the recent literature relating to Natural Resource Management (NRM). Suchet-Pearson and Howitt (2006, 118), for example, found that 'the presence of Indigenous others in NRM debates shifts the terms of the debate to include issues of justice, history, identity and recognition' and concluded that 'literacy in cultural landscapes is fundamental to reframing these relationships'. However, similarly to the MDBC, they found that 'key stakeholders have limited capacity and been unwilling and ill-prepared to take this on'. Others who have considered the implications of changing our approach to water through Indigenous knowledges have also posed problems rather than offering solutions. Allon and Sofoulis, (2006, 54), for example, suggest there is a problem of 'cultural misalignment' and that narratives of 'Big Water' must be re-imagined for patterns of consumption to change. Similarly Gibbs (2006, 79) and Garrard (2007, 373) have noted that while Natural Resource Management includes 'the triple bottom line', the reduction and simplification of meaning fails to capture the interrelatedness of environmental problems with economic and social issues.

Indigenous knowledge about water and water places is expressed in stories that have been translated into different forms since the first settlement of the Australian continent. These stories 'of care for country' have survived as hidden and often inaccessible alternatives to the dominant storylines of domination and exploitation. It is important to recognise that these stories are deeply impacted by the histories of colonisation. Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians are mutually entangled in issues of water, as a non-Indigenous writer articulates: 'The story I am part of is one thread of a global web of stories about displacement and resettlement, dispossession and environmental degradation, and will be familiar to thousands of people in rural Australia' (Findlay, 2006, 311). The colonial history of Australia is a shared history in which we must learn to work together to care for this country, albeit from our fundamentally different perspectives and experiences. Changing our approach to water in the Murray-Darling Basin, and to Aboriginal cultural place knowledge and attachment, then, requires the development of fundamentally different and new approaches to how we understand the region, its people and communities.

## **Methodology**

In order to provide the conceptual shift required to address the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous approaches, our research has taken up the new conceptual framework of 'Place studies' (Somerville et al, in press). Place studies is a key multi-disciplinary formation within this new direction (Rose, 2004) that has great potential for addressing research questions that link the social and the ecological. Place is productive as a framework because it bridges paradigms grounded in physical reality and the metaphysical space of representation: 'the relationships among place, identity and culture are varied and complex and ... emerge in the terrain of culture, ideology and

politics' (Gruenewald, 2003b, 627). Place has long been noted as an organising principle in Aboriginal ontologies and epistemologies and this relates to waterscapes as much as to land: 'Aboriginal waterscapes are construed not only as physical domains but also as spiritual, social and jural spaces, according the same fundamental principles as our affiliations to places in the landscape' (Langton in Behrendt and Thompson, 2003, 1). Water is a fundamental economic resource for Indigenous cultures, embodied in the songlines of the great creation ancestors which mark water resources as sacred sites: 'For Aboriginal people, issues of community health, economic development, care for Country and culture are all intertwined' (Rose in Ward et al, 2003). The concept of place enables a conversation about the complex social, cultural, spiritual, economic, ideological, and political realities of Indigenous/non-Indigenous relationships to country.

With the conceptual framework of place, *Bubbles on the surface* is underpinned by the notion that our relationship to places is constructed in stories and other representations (Somerville, 2008). Story is understood here as a basic unit of meaning and the concept of story is expanded to embrace visual and oral forms as well as the discourses of scientists, policy makers, agriculturalists and so on. The feminist poststructural concept of 'storylines' enables us to identify how stories shape our relationship to places: 'A storyline is a condensed version of a naturalized and conventional cultural narrative, one that is often used as the explanatory framework of one's own and other's practices and sequences of action' (Sondergaard, 2002, 191). Stories, people, and places are mutually constituted: 'Landscape does not just shape language; the land itself is transformed by words' (Bonahady and Griffiths, 2002, 6). The concept of storylines enables the identification and analysis of dominant and alternative stories and how each of these positions us in relation to place, and in turn, shapes the places we inhabit. Changing our relationship to places means changing the stories we tell about places: 'If human beings are responsible for place making, then we must become conscious of ourselves as place makers and participants in the sociopolitical process of place making' (Gruenewald, 2003b, 627).

Dominant storylines of place position us as separate from the places we live in. They 'deny our connection to earthly phenomena, ... and construct places as objects or sites on a map to be economically exploited' Gruenewald, (2003b, 624). Sinclair (2001), for example, describes stories about the Murray River as part of a 'broader cultural and political narrative of technological and agricultural progress'. Such stories of separation are shaped by 'the vision of barren land being made productive; of a silent and timeless place being transformed and brought into history by the energy of an industrious and resourceful society' (Sinclair, 2001, 43). Pastoralists' dominant storylines about land in the study area have been described as 'inescapably adversarial' Griffiths (2002, 240) because of the harsh dry conditions that European settlers found so confronting. These dominant storylines depend for their justification and legitimation on the suppression of alternative stories. So, for example, Sinclair (2001, 42) remarks on the 'uncoupling of past from present Aborigines', even when there are signs of Aboriginal presence in the actual places. Pastoralists' emotional and aesthetic attachment to land is also suppressed 'because it can weaken their right of occupation' (Griffiths, 2002, 240).

We apply the feminist poststructural concept of storylines to place, and to link it methodologically with the Aboriginal concept of songlines (also known as storylines), which are inextricably connected to country (Somerville, forthcoming). A songline is a travelling route which joins the story places in the creation stories of the great ancestors. An *Aboriginal* story incorporates song, music, dance, body painting, and performance, which intersect powerfully in a particular place (Somerville, 1999). Songlines, especially in dry country, follow water story places. These special places are the sites of ceremony through which the place and all its creatures are sung into being. Contemporary Aboriginal art translates these stories and storylines into contemporary forms that are accessible cross-culturally as ‘public pedagogies’ (Giroux, 2004). Storylines are made and changed in community, and generating transformative storylines ‘that have the power to displace the old is extraordinarily complex’ (Davies, 2000, 79). Public pedagogies enable particular meanings to be constructed within broader discourses and relations of power (Giroux 2004) that allow, or prevent, resistance and change. Indigenous art is a powerful public pedagogy because of its aesthetic appeal and universal acceptance as a genre of communication for transforming our understandings of place and therefore re-shaping our regions.

In *Bubbles on the Surface* Indigenous artists from different language groups that belong to specific parts of country and water places in the Murray-Darling Basin region have responded in artworks and stories. The stories and artworks have been presented in a series of art exhibitions, accompanied by ‘catalogues’ which describe the research project.

### **Findings: alternative storylines**

In the following we present a small selection of the alternative storylines that were generated in this project in order to understand how these alternative storylines transform our understanding of the Murray-Darling Basin.

#### ***Intimate intensity***

Narran Lake, in the northern drylands of the Murray-Darling Basin, was the beginning point of our project. The Narran Lake is a large inland lake located between the northern river catchments in southern Queensland and the Darling and Murray rivers to the south of the Basin. Because of its geographic location, its importance in Aboriginal stories, and its ecological significance, the Narran Lake is an iconic site in the Basin. It is a contact zone of Aboriginal and settler stories, of agricultural and environmental discourses, and a physical pulse of environmental wellbeing. U’Alayi researcher Chrissiejoy Marshall was in a unique position to tell the stories of Narran Lake, or *Terewah*, as she knew it. By the time Marshall was born in the 1950s, the lake had long been locked away from its Aboriginal custodians; it was ‘private property’ according to white law. As the child of a white station owner and an Aboriginal woman, Chrissiejoy grew up in a camp on the lake with her Noongunburrah family. Noongunburrah, meaning water people, is a clan of the U’Alayi (Yuwalaraay) language group which inhabited the area in the immediate vicinity of the lake. Within her small family group, Chrissiejoy was protected by her white father, and they continued to live a semi-traditional lifestyle by, and with, the lake. Her senses

were formed by the lake—its smells, sounds, the feel of its air, its dryness and wetness, its tastes; eating from the lake. Before knowing, in a formative primal sense, to be a subject was to be in the presence of the lake.

I don't remember a time  
without the lake.

There were times  
when it dried back  
but they were quite rare  
it was always full  
and in season  
there'd be thousands and thousands  
of birds  
so you'd wake up  
in the morning  
to birds getting a fright  
and taking off  
and making a terrible clatter.  
And then going to sleep  
of a night time  
listening to all the birds  
that lulled chatter  
that you hear  
of an evening.

For Chrissiejoy, to be in the world was to be in the presence of the lake; to know the world was to know through the lake's stories.<sup>1</sup> Stories integrated the sensory experiences of the physical presence of the lake, the intimate knowledge of the cycles and seasons of the lake, and a cosmology or spirituality that taught Chrissiejoy what it means to know the world in this way.

The first stories  
are almost beyond my memory.

I grew up knowing the stories  
so I'm guessing  
I was told as a very, very small child.

They talk about Biaime  
who is the creator.

He was here on earth  
and he sent his two wives  
to go and dig yams  
while he went to  
gather honey or something  
and they were to meet at this waterhole.

He got to the waterhole  
and the wives were missing,  
so he figured out what had happened  
and tracked them.

It was Guria, the giant lizard,  
Guria had swallowed his two wives.

So he waited in ambush  
and killed Guria  
slit open his belly  
and got his wives out  
put them on an ants' nest  
and brought them back to life  
and everyone lived happily ever after.

But while he was killing Guria,  
Guria swished his tail around  
and knocked the big hole  
in the ground  
that then became the lake.

Biaime said in honour of Guria  
it would fill up with water  
and there would always be water  
and many birds and things there.

Chrissiejoy was emphatic that these stories could not be reduced to Western concepts of 'myths and legends' as they have been by non-Aboriginal recorders in the past. They contain deep truths—scientific truths about the megafauna of the distant past. She knew the more secret, sacred stories of the lake, but even these simple children's versions were part of a different cosmology and knowledge system that was centred on the lake. The lake was the centre of creation. The stories had different levels of meaning. The simplest, public level was told to children as a cautionary tale: 'kept the kids away from the waterholes because, you know, "look out Guriya'll get you"', it was a story to keep you safe'. As she got older, the layers got deeper: 'they sort of change from men turning into birds or birds turning into men or whatever to something that's quite extraordinary, yeah'. The deeper layers concerned the methods of killing the giant lizard, the rituals to make things grow and flourish, the interconnection of all the life forms in and around the lake, and the interchangeability of spirit and human worlds. This is partially captured in her story of *terewah*, the black swan. The *Noongunburrah* name for the lake, *terewah*, is also the name of the black swan and the black swan is the main *yerti*, or totemic being for Chrissiejoy's family group.

Black swans  
were always there

even before the lake  
it was always *terewah*  
home of the black swan  
they were part of the lake  
and the lake was part of them  
they owned the land  
to us we belong to it  
they have more right to it than we did  
because they were there first.

When I asked Chrissiejoy about her mother's 'yerti', she said simply, 'she was swan'. This understanding of the complex interrelationship and connections between *terewah*, the lake, *terewah* the swan, and *terewah* her mother, reveals something of the complexity involved in the creation of her sense of self by the lake. It is more than a sense of identity, because it derives from a different ontology, epistemology and cosmology, in which self, place, time, and the meaning of life are differently conceived. Identity is as much about the material body of things and beings, as it is about their spiritual presence. Telling the stories of the lake makes knowledge; country creates connections between people, between people and country. Even at the simplest level of the story, the ancestral being is present, manifest in the lake, and in the story. The creator also leaves his marks at the story places. There are indentations where Biaime sat down and made 'bum prints' in the sand, there's a footprint and handprint and the tracks of Biaime's dog at the Lake. These marks in the landscape become code for the special places in a storyline, places of intensity in the flow of creation, highly energised and libidinous sites in the relationships between people and places. They also evoke powerful and important connections between one storyplace and another.

### ***Connections***

The web of interconnections through which we can know country and water places are further extended in Lorina's stories. Lorina Barker is a *Muruwari* woman who grew up at Weilmoringle, a hundred kilometres north west of the Narran Lake, cradled in a bend of the Culgoa River. However, even as a contemporary young woman from western NSW, Lorina's grandmothers and great aunts told her the creation stories linked to other places far distant from Narran Lake. Her grandmother lived on the Barwon River near the Brewarrina fish traps, so her first stories began with the fish traps, described as Biaime's 'stepping stones to heaven':

Biaime created the fish trap and that story relates to a lot of the communities, a lot of the different groups of people because the fish traps, Biaime not only created the fish traps in Brewarrina, he also created Mount Gundabooka and he created a waterhole in Nyngan [in] which he did his carvings and stuff, and then he moved, so he moved around the area and then he went to Brewarrina and created the fish traps and the fish traps are like his stepping stones back into the heavens. That's how I think all the tribes are sort of interconnected because the one sort of creator created the different—so Gundabooka, which is the mountain, is between Cobar

and Bourke, and then you've got Nyngan comin' towards Brewarrina and then you go, so he travels sort of in a circle.

The creation story of the fish traps is, in particular, about how to share the resources of this special water place. It embodies and emplaces the coming together of the different language groups to care for and share the rich resources of the water there. Many of the stories of these places of intensity have an underlying pedagogical intent. As a young woman, Lorina's grandmother told her about Mount Gundabooka as a birthing place, the place of the last traditional birth. There are special waterholes associated with birthing and female knowledge. Although this place is no longer used for birthing, it was at that place that Lorina could learn the significance of her connections to other important places. On the rockface at Mount Gundabooka, Biaime made a drawing of the fish traps at Brewarrina that linked these special water-story places hundreds of kilometres apart:

[At Mount Gundabooka] there's pictures of the fish trap so there's a round sort of like stone pebbles, drawing and a fish swimming into it and there's men with spears, there's a woman giving birth and there's animals and handprints, yeah, and when I realised then that's where you can see the connections. I mean over the years I think that's how I realised the connections between places, yeah, seein' that little fish trap painting on Mount Gundabooka was amazing.

Narran Lake, Brewarrina, Mount Gundabooka, and Byrock are all special water-story places that tell about significant events in the movements of the great ancestral beings across the landscape. They are travelling water stories. Together they form a song cycle that connects special water-story places in a songline of travelling water stories. They are about the fundamental significance and sacred nature of water in a dry land. These stories about the sacredness of water places involve a sense of the interconnectedness of all things and a deeply held ethical responsibility. The marks which signify Biaime's presence in these places—footprints, drawings, landforms—continue to remind people of the events in the epic story and their responsibility to these places. Ngemba researcher, Brad Steadman, said Biaime's footprint at the fish traps in Brewarrina is 'a sentence in the Aboriginal story'.

### ***Intensities, connections and flows***

Our geographic and metaphysical imaginary of the Murray-Darling Basin is further extended in Badger Bates' stories, a Paakantji knowledge holder born in Wilcannia on the Darling River. The Darling River begins at the fish traps at Brewarrina, a hundred kilometres south of the Narran Lake and Badger lives at Wilcannia on the Darling, 200 kilometres further south. He describes the Darling River as his 'special sentimental place'. In our first interview we mapped two great sweeps of country—the map of the stories of the *ngatyis*, the rainbow serpents, in their travels throughout the region and the map of Badger's movements to 'dodge the Welfare'. In traditional times Paakantji people moved through their country in this way but by the time Badger was born much of this traditional movement had stopped. However, as a child born to a white father and an

Aboriginal mother, Badger was in danger of being removed from his family by the Aboriginal Protection Board. He was moved vast distances, learning stories from his relatives as he travelled from place to place:

[I learned those stories] off my grandmother and off old people when I used to dodge the Welfare ... we started from Wilcannia, up to Tilpa, Louth, Bourke, only went to Bre once in my welfare movements, I had to go up there for one of our relations had a car accident there, and then down here, down to Cobar and then there, Lake Cargelligo, Murrumbidgee Mission, and then out to Willara Creek with my old uncle for a while, back to here on the train, when you come to there, we'd come on a mail truck or people would come across and pick up in old cart, old horse and cart, to there. But when I was real small at a place I's reared up, Gran and them used to work on the Dog Fence, Uncle Ted and them, always around Brindleyabba, Yantabulla.

At each place where Badger stopped with his relatives, he learned more of the songlines that crisscross the inland and tell the story of vast areas of the landscape. Many of the places that Badger talks about in his stories are only marked on localised maps that can show only a small section of the country that Badger's knowledge spans. Other story places are too personal and local to be identified on any map, so we made our own in photos and artworks. Badger told stories of his granny's fishing spots on the Darling River, where he saw the 'water dog', and the special places where the broilgas fly to. Other places are known only as sites in songlines with Paakantji language names and we could not yet place them on these different maps. Deep mapping reveals story patterns, different orders of meaning attached to places, especially networks of water places. In the catalogue we produced, the inclusion of a conventional map of a portion of the Murray–Darling Basin was the closest we could get to illustrating some sense of Badger's story places. For the non-Aboriginal reader, these deep mapping conversations are confusing, opening us to the profound reorientation required to enter a different way of seeing the world. These maps are a process of unlearning and relearning. They are acts of translation, of moving across. They need to be built up slowly, and we have only just begun.

We began our deep mapping work with an extensive road map of western NSW, extending into Queensland, South Australia, and Victoria. For example, we marked a place just over the border in South Australia where the rainbow serpent emerged from the underground waterways to travel over the surface of the land, making wavy parallel lines with his movements. The marks made by the rainbow serpent's body in the sand created the patterns of sandhills in that place:

This one where Ngatjyi went through and up this way and created and went back in the ground here. He came out here crawling along the ground and formed all the sandhills in South Australia and they run in that direction somehow, all the way through.

We marked the water places where the brolgas fly to, because Badger said that for Paakantji people the brolga is like a human:

[‘C]ause they depend on the same things nearly that we do, they depend on the water, and the brolga they mate for life, they’ll get out and they’ll all get around in a circle and have their dances and if something happened the other one’ll come and just put its wings over ‘em and cries.

Badger is intimately connected to the brolga and its places in the same way that Chrissiejoy identifies with *terewah*, the swan. Like the waters, the brolga’s move from place to place, and Badger’s finger roves over the map marking the places where he has seen the brolgas in his travels through this country:

Now I’m here doin’ a brolga, right and I’ll say if you look on your map the brolga gonna relate to number ten, Bridinyabba, right and I’ll say, also it’ll relate to Narran Lake and Wilcannia on the Darling. Yeah so I can say, that with this brolga this is where it’s relatin’ to, cause Narran Lake, I seen about twenty or twenty-five there and then at Bridinyabba, number ten, I see hundreds, but then you go down to Wilcannia and you only see one or two, they come and visit and they go. They’ll come down as far as Menindee or between Wilcannia and Menindee and then they go back home.

Badger’s travelling stories of the brolgas connect his places on the Darling River to Chrissiejoy’s stories of the Narran Lake through their migrations. We number each of these places where Badger will focus his art-making. The map becomes a tool of communication between us, and for my learning. It is another ‘bubble on the surface’, another means of ‘tracing out the creative ways people have tried to make sense out of their relationships with their environment’ (Goodall, 2002, 37). Each story place is numbered on the map so that when Badger returns to Broken Hill to do his art work and record his stories, I can follow where he is from the numbers on the map. Each place is a special water-story place, linking events in the epic journeys of the Ngatjyis, or rainbow serpents, to Badger’s contemporary experiences in these places. Mapping becomes story, translation, communication, physical grounding, and a place to make visual images. Even though this is only a beginning, there are already stories about the creation of the Darling River that map particular intensities in the flows of travelling water stories:

Gulawarra, another person from the Dreaming came through, caught a giant kangaroo near White Cliff and went to Mount Poole then up into Queensland a bit then he turned and came back to Peery Lake where his sister and her husband was. The people fed him a lizard and he thought they tried to poison him. So he took his sister and family, turned the other people into stone, clogged the mound springs up and he came up somewhere towards Bourke and Louth where he met the kingfisher from the Dreaming. He had to pull a tree root out of the ground. When the root was coming out he was singing the tree root and the tree root was all wriggly. When he was pulling it out, he was singing, and making the depression where he was pulling the root out go bigger and sink down, and then he poured the water he got from Mount Poole and Peery Lake and the mound

spring, so he poured the water from there into where he made the tree root depression, and he made the river, the Darling River. That's why the Darling River got a lot of bends in it, it's like a tree root.

Water places at Mount Poole, Peery Lake and a mound spring, are linked in this songline to the creation of the Darling River. The material terrain and waterways come into being as intricately connected parts in a dynamic story of events and movement. For me they are an opening to a vision of how a map of the story places in these songlines is also a map for understanding our relationship to country and water in the inland Australia. It is a way of thinking through place. We sit with this conventional road map between us as Badger traces, with his finger, the length of the Darling River from the Menindee Lakes to Bourke, describing this vast stretch of country as home, the site of his most intimate attachments:

In all of that from down there where I went to Menindee right up to Bourke, that's where my really sentimental particular place is. Also over here on the Paroo, Lake Peery, and back on the Warrego is really sentimental to me, this area, because this is where I lived most of my life, right up to Brindinyabba, but it's sentimental where, more or less the triangle what I done from Wilcannia up to Bourke, across to Cobar, Lake Cargelligo, back to Ivanhoe and back home.

In its final year the project followed the flows down to the Murray River in our work with Treahna Hamm. The following conversation extracts from the catalogue that accompanied our final exhibition, 'Always unfinished business: of singing the country' (Somerville and de Carteret, 2008), illustrate the way connections are extended and enacted throughout the Murray-Darling Basin, linking language groups, creation stories, identities, personal and community histories:

### **Badger**

Connecting the river  
everyone's got different  
creation stories  
right along  
like just past Bourke,  
it changes  
from the Paakantji story  
to the Muruwarri,  
the Ngemba story -  
theirs is Biaime  
and his two dogs  
as the dogs go off  
that's all the tributaries.  
There's two Paakantyi stories  
theirs is the Goonawarra  
he's got the ngyatji  
in his bag

and it creates a channel  
there's another story  
about the mud lark  
pulled a tree root out  
he's singing it,  
and when the roots came out  
it was twisted,  
and the ground's caving in  
and he pulled the water out.

### **Treahna**

Even the name  
for the Murray River  
is different  
all the way down.  
Milawa up in Albury –  
we call it Dunghala  
in Yorta Yorta  
and Indiyi  
up Mildura way  
there's different names for the river  
all the way along  
and different stories.

### **Badger**

And we call the river  
Paaka, the Darling  
that's how the Paakantyi  
got their name  
the river people.

### **Treahna**

Biame sent  
the old woman  
down from the alps  
with her stick  
and two camp dogs  
she walked along  
and she created  
a line in the sand,  
and the camp dogs  
followed  
Byami then sent  
the serpent  
to follow her  
and he followed the line

she dug in the sand,  
which made the bed  
of the river  
he sent down the rain,  
that filled up the Murray  
she walked right down  
the river  
to the mouth of the Murray  
and she fell asleep  
in a cave  
down there  
you can hear the sea  
it's the old woman  
singing in her sleep.

Treahna inscribes these stories on possum skin cloaks, translating the traditional practice of using these cloaks as identity markers in ceremony to her contemporary art forms.

Imagine  
The river  
without a map  
having it in your head  
that's how people  
found their way  
if they got lost.  
The little ones  
would start  
with a small cloak,  
as they got older  
they could come along  
with it on  
just throw it down, and  
talk with the mob  
this is my country.  
where I come from.  
You could wear it  
as a cloak  
and use it as a map  
together.

### **Conclusion**

The connection between individual bodies, identities and country is evident in Treahna's conversation about wearing the possum skin cloaks as a map. The conversation between the artists from different parts of the Murray-Darling Basin, thousands of kilometres apart reveals the connections that are made across language groups, each with their own identity practices and creation stories. Each of the storytellers begins with home and the

primal sensory experiences of a dwelling place that forms their sense of the world even prior to language. A sense of connection to places and to people is made at all levels and inscribed in fundamental ways on people's bodies through representational practices: 'The little ones would start with a small cloak' and continues throughout life. Country is learned, practiced and imagined in this way. Through bringing traditional understandings of country into contemporary forms through artmaking and storytelling, our project has opened up new ways of understanding, and shaping the Murray-Darling Basin.

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<sup>i</sup> The scanned lines about the lake are constructed from three interviews that I recorded with Chrissiejoy Marshall and which have been reproduced in full in the catalogue of the first exhibition from the project, *Bubbles on the Surface: more than a catalogue*.