Deakin University and RMIT University

Emily Potter and Brigid Magner

Kurangk/Coorong atmospheres: Postcolonial stories and regional futures

Abstract

This paper proposes an atmospheric understanding of regional writing, and considers a critical methodology for assembling a literary history of the Kurangk/Coorong region of South Australia. In opposition to literary history guided by national forms, this methodology works from within the shifting entanglements of postcolonial place and its many stories, recognising the material impacts of poetic practice on more-than-human environments. The future of the Kurangk/Coorong is caught up in how this place has, and continues to be, imagined and narrated.

Keywords: place, stories, postcolonial, atmospheres

This article argues that place-stories matter to environmental futures. In a context of colonisation and the related devastation to people and ecologies, this connection has a particular inflection. Colonisation proceeds not just through material forces and practices but through poetic means also, via the narratives told about a place and its more-than-human communities. Just what stories gain ground over others, and which ones are lost or sublimated, is a matter of power that literary texts are implicated in. For this reason, the literary history of a place is far from benign. We take up this argument in relation to the Kurangk/Coorong region of South Australia, where the Murray River meets the sea, and where environmental pressures and poetic histories coalesce. Here, we consider how a critical literary methodology might engage with this coalescence to offer alternative place-visions and, with these, potentially different futures for the region.

Our interest in Kurangk/Coorong literature comes from our wider project which explores the literary history of the Mallee region in northwest Victoria, much of it little-recognised. The Mallee, also environmentally beleaguered – the result of large-scale clearing and agricultural industry – connects to the Kurangk/Coorong; it hosts part of the Murray River that flows along its northern Victorian boundary. As our study has advanced, it has become clear that such connections are not just a possibility of regions: they are innate to their constitution. Regions come into being because they extend dynamically to elsewhere. At the same time, localness, and the specificity of the local, is crucial, even as it is always produced in relation to much more than just immediate geographies. Recent scholarship (Mead 2009, Moore 2010, Hughes-d'Aeth 2017) agrees that regionality is a productive frame for considering literary practice and its history, particularly in postcolonial

circumstances, where the ‘nation’, as a default logic for the literary field, is particularly problematic and inadequate.

The methodology that we advance here we call ‘atmospheric’, meaning that it is dispersed without hierarchy and a central point of origin. It also attends to the compositional qualities of a humid environment such as the Kurangk/Coorong, that bridges water and land, and that extends out into a riverine network across the Murray–Darling Basin (encompassing Australia’s two longest rivers), intimately imbricated in the lives of millions of humans and many millions more non-human animals. An atmosphere refuses disentangling: it results from connections and the reactions of meetings. Towards an atmospheric literary account of Kurangk/Coorong, we track and bring into relation a range of stories and texts that trace out a shape of this place formed by encounters with and openings to elsewhere. We understand ‘literary’ here (which we acknowledge can be conservative in its meaning, and Western in its orientation) in a broad sense, to reference performative narratives of meaning-making that deploy aesthetic and poetic tactics of composition. To this extent, creation stories, oral history, characters on trees, telegraph messages, pamphlets, novels and poems potentially comprise a literary history that seeks inclusion and diversity rather than exclusion and singularity as its rationale. Importantly, too, these are all modes of place-making – these narrative practices all create atmospheric resonances that reciprocally enter into how Kurangk/Coorong becomes and is known. Considering the Kurangk/Coorong atmospherically in this way, as a diverse assemblage of Kurangk/Coorong-related texts, gives rise to place-narratives that are multiple and sometimes in competition with each other, and because of this, renew rather than close or fix what the story – and the place – of the Kurangk/Coorong might be.

Postcolonial entanglements

Named ‘the Coorong’ by its colonisers, to its traditional owners, the Ngarrindjeri, ‘Kurangk’ is a series of lagoons extending along the southern coast of South Australia, 180 kilometres south-east of Adelaide. Kurangk means ‘narrow neck’. It is a vast reach of water one-hundred kilometres long and up to five kilometres wide, and, as the mouth of the Murray, is where freshwater meets the sea. It is a coastal stretch of minglings. Much of it is quite shallow – less than two metres deep – with an indented shoreline that veers and swings into nooks, necks, promontories and bays, and that varies from open salty flatlands to margins of dense scrub. The Kurangk/Coorong is a distinct bioregion, notable for its high natural salinity (three times higher than the surrounding sea, in parts) and distinctive biota, including Ramsar-listed wetlands that attract large numbers of native birds. It is also in steep decline. The Kurangk/Coorong is currently under serious threat as a result of ongoing changes in the hydrological regime of the Murray River, at the end of the Murray–Darling Basin (MacGill et al 2012). As Ngarrindjeri elder Grant Rigney explains:

It’s slowly dying. You can smell what’s happening in the Coorong and people in the city don’t get to see that. They live within their four walls and are not seeing what degradation is happening to country. What happens to country happens to you. (Rigney qtd in Brealey 2018)

The many creation stories of the Murray River demonstrate that the narrative history of a place is intimately involved in its making. The Ngarrindjeri (a post-

colonisation identifier), comprising five tribal groups – including the Tanganekald, whose country is the Kurangk/Coorong itself – have occupied this region for an estimated 300 generations, laying out a dense poetic network into which colonial occupiers entered in the early 1800s. This was a network in which the colonisers violently intervened. Acknowledging our own position as non-Indigenous subjects, participants in and beneficiaries of the colonial system, we seek to think through what storytelling can mean for a region such as the Kurangk/Coorong, in a context of post-colonial devastation, and going forward, what non-Indigenous stories can, potentially, contribute to the project of colonial remediation, both human and environmental. In Australia, Indigenous storytelling is foundational and authoritative, and as Tanganekald legal scholar Irene Watson puts it, there are ‘too many stories to tell’ than what colonising culture allows (Watson 2014: 46). Watson continues: ‘The colonising mission continues to aim at dismantling our cultures and laws. Our stories were marginalised, proscribed and some lost to living memory (yet to be dreamed back)’ (2014: 49). After almost 230 years of colonisation, non-Indigenous place-stories are a constitutive force now contributing to the Kurangk/Coorong’s unmaking and remaking as poetic interventions. We argue that one contribution – potentially a very small step on the path of decolonisation – might be to think critically about regional literature as a place-making force, and that to understand this is to see opportunities for imaginaries, and the futures they suggest, that resist repressive colonial paradigms. We consider these through the affective and situational frame of ‘atmosphere’.

Ngurunderi and Ponde

One of the most prominent creation stories along the Murray is that of Ngurunderi, a powerful ancestor of the Ngarrindjeri, who chased Ponde throughout the river system, from eastern Australia down to the Kurangk/Coorong. Ngurunderi’s journey reflects the Ngarrindjeri as ‘people of the sea, Lower Lakes, Kurangk/Coorong, and Murray River’ (Berndt et al 1993: 13) – a complex and entangled water system that wends over land for more than 2000 kilometres from Mt Kosciuszko through to the river mouth and the ocean beyond. Further up the Murray, other creation stories from the near fifty Aboriginal Nations whose Country form what is now known as the Murray–Darling Basin, tell the history of the River’s making and its journey to sea. In Yorta Yorta/Bangerang Country, it is the ancestor Baiame, a long, winding serpent, who is the central creation figure (Murray–Darling Basin Authority 2019). North-west of the Ngarrindjeri nation, the Kurna of the Adelaide Plains tell the story of Tjilbruke, an ancestor whose journey of mourning along the coast of the Fleurieu Peninsula, down towards the Kurangk/Coorong, established an interconnected system of freshwater springs. These stories all describe the hydrological formation and composition of south-eastern Australia.

David Unaipon, a Ngarrindjeri man born at the Point McLeay Mission (now Raukkan) in 1872, was the first Indigenous person to commit these creation stories to paper in the 1920s, initially as pamphlets that he disseminated in Adelaide [1].

It was not until 2001, however, that Unaipon’s original text was finally published under his own name (edited and introduced by non-Indigenous scholars Stephen Muecke and Adam Shoemaker) as *Legendary Tales of the Australian Aborigines* (Unaipon 2001). Unaipon’s story is indicative of how Indigenous storytelling post-colonisation has been subject to interference, control and denial. Irene Watson contends that the prevalence of the Ngurunderi creation story is a legacy of

patriarchal colonial power rather than a reflection of its ascendancy in pre-colonial culture. This story, she explains, ‘first became big when the missionary man George Taplin put the story down in its written form, and then it was expanded upon’ (Watson 2014: 47). Taplin could map his Christian vision against a single ‘man God’ who was an ‘all powerful creator’ (48). According to Taplin’s account, Ngurunderi was chasing his two runaway wives when he encountered Ponde. It was an attempt to bring the wayward women back into his control. Watson contests this as the one dreaming story of the Kurangk/Coorong, and points to other accounts in which the wives, seeking to escape an oppressive husband, run along the Kurangk/Coorong as creators of the place: ‘[T]hey called out to each other; they laughed and stopped and ate fish, danced and sang songs as they laid down their story’ (2014: 46). ‘Before the invasion,’ Watson continues:

[W]e had no hierarchy of gods looking down and over the people: our stories place as much importance in our animal and female beings as the way their stories wove our being into existence as they did the stories of the men. Once the colonisers had embedded the agency of the missionary and Christianity, Ngurrunderi himself was replaced with the myth of Jesus. (2014: 50)

This legacy is one of power, but it is also one of minglings, of many stories (rather than a Christian mono-myth) coming together. A post-colonial place is inevitably a site of mingling, although as Watson makes clear, so were pre-colonial places – these were always sites of many stories weaving together. But in the still-colonising context of contemporary Australia – for, as Patrick Wolfe observes, colonisation is a structure rather than an event (Wolfe 1999) – we need to denaturalise place-making, and see the work of storytelling in this process. Places do not emerge without the work of imagination and narration. They are innately poetic productions, which does not mean immaterial/unreal. Far from it. Storytelling has profoundly material effects. There is a connection between the environmentally distressed Kurangk/Coorong today and a colonial narrative history in which Indigenous knowledge was repressed or co-opted, and stories that denied agency to women, to Country and to non-Christian gods, prevailed. Can we disrupt this colonial paradigm with other stories that collectively, atmospherically, assemble to suggest a place which is not confined to representations of the exploited Murray–Darling Basin, and the dying Kurangk/Coorong nearing its end? In part, this involves thinking about regions.

Regional forms

The turn to thinking about stories regionally has, in part, been inspired by the recognition that ‘the nation’ – despite its persistence and prevalence in our cultural imaginaries – is far from ‘the final and logical horizon’ of literature’s expression in Australia (Moore 2010: 49). National framings for literary culture in a context such as Australia’s deploy an innately violent logic, naturalising a shared spatial and imaginative boundary for everyone, including Indigenous people whose own sovereign claims contest it. Caroline Levine has argued in the broader context of nationalism that ‘nation’ invariably invokes belonging claims that tend to limit inclusion to autochthonous or ‘native born’ definitions, and thus connect into troubling, dark histories of racialised, exclusionary discourse (Levine 2013). For this reason, Levine argues, the ‘nation’ is a weighted and irresolvable problematic reference point for thinking about the connections between literary practice and place. Instead, she posits the ‘network’, rather than the nation, as an affordant

form for thinking about this relationship. This includes ‘all kinds of travelling and deracinated influences’, and ‘cultural shapings that come from afar’ (Levine 2013: 653). Levine’s network resonates with, and opens up to, an atmospheric approach to place, and the multiple stories that entangle in its making. In the Kurangk/Coorong, briny minglings of salt and freshwater, sea and air, generate particular atmospheres that open up imaginaries to a constellation of bodies, places, times and stories. In post-colonial stories can we find the Kurangk/Coorong as place composed by these meetings? Such a mutable composition challenges singular colonial visions of the Kurangk/Coorong which flip between its utility, and now its death. In this vision there is no space for the Murray River, as Indigenous man Lee Joachim states, ‘a living being which sustains itself and the lives of others’ (qtd in Weir 2015: 21).

While the profoundly relational watery life of the Kurangk/Coorong, and its constitution by its links elsewhere, will be of no surprise to Indigenous worldviews, in the Western episteme such visions are relatively recent. Over the last twenty years, critical perspectives in geography, and place studies especially, have come to the understanding that places are always porous. As Nigel Thrift puts it, ‘[E]very space is shot through with other spaces. There is no such thing as a boundary’ (Thrift 2006: 23). If regions are always open to elsewhere, they must also always be in the process of forming, and thus open to the outside and to change. Regional literature must be considered in this light, then, as its possible field of attachment expands and diversifies.

While critics such as Philip Mead acknowledge the ambivalence of regional classifications, traditionally often produced as a strongly colonial artefact, timed to celebrate anniversaries of settlement (Mead 2009), we find regionality an affordance for thinking. It is a form, within and by which other forms are enabled. Paul Carter argues along these lines, stating that regions are constantly form-*ing* networks of spaces, materials, passages, and stories (Carter 2010). In this sense we could say they emerge atmospherically, without a point of origin or linear descent, and always in process, moving into and out of other stories and forms. But the Kurangk/Coorong has its own atmospheric logic, too – not one that is generated by critics, but that emerges from the lived and living conditions of the region itself. These humid atmospheres mark, in Richie Howitt’s terms, the blurred ‘edges’ of colonial modernity’s fixed forms, with its planar surfaces exposed to the light of discovery and control. They are ‘zones of transformation, transgression and possibility’ that refute the colonial logic of exclusions, boundaries, and linear temporality (Howitt 2006: 240).

Kurangk/Coorong atmospheres

‘Atmosphere’ is a complex word. Hsuan L Hsu reminds us that, in a literary sense, atmosphere often refers to ‘the emotional tone pervading a section or the whole of a literary work, which fosters in the reader expectations as to the course of events, whether happy or (more commonly) terrifying or disastrous’ (Hsu qtd in Abrams & Harpham 2015: 20). It can indicate the ‘style, tone or mood’ of a poetic work, as well as a general historic or social tone (Hsu qtd in Abrams & Harpham 2015: 1). It also describes the material milieu that surrounds life on Earth as gaseous, fluid; that is ‘the wider sphere of forces and relations comprising our weather-world’ (Ingold 2011: 151). It is, at once, environmental and cultural – in the context of post-industrial modernity, this is particularly clear. Climate change forces a recognition of this. In the context of colonisation too, and its ongoing

effects – and which belong to the same legacy – atmospheres materialise invasion. The impact of European settlement on the Indigenous people of the region of the Kurangk/Coorong, like elsewhere, was catastrophic. Smallpox travelled down the Murray in the 1830s and decimated local populations. Reverend Taplin, who spent twenty years among the Ngarrindjeri, wrote in 1879:

They have a tradition that some sixty years ago a terrible disease came down the River Murray and carried off the natives by hundreds. This must have been smallpox, as many of the old people now have their faces pitted who suffered the disease in childhood. The destruction of life was so great as to seriously diminish the tribes. The natives always represent that before this scourge arrived they were much more numerous. They say that so many died that they could not perform the funeral rites for the dead, but were compelled to bury them at once out of the way. I think there must have been more than one visitation of this kind, judging from the age of those who were pockmarked. (Taplin qtd in Dowling 1990: 109)

The environmental legacies of colonisation are also atmospheric: declining water levels in the Lower Lakes, for instance, have imperilled the ecosystem as the acid soils of the lake beds are exposed to the atmosphere and degraded. Yet the qualities that make atmospheres a threat, also enable possibility. This is atmosphere as a ‘shared climate’ (Sloterdijk 2005: 944-951), a context for profound relationality, which always opens new stories, and new points of seeing, knowing and becoming, together.

Atmospheres speak of our trans-corporeality, our porous bodies, and our entanglements with others and with history. They suggest open networks, and the diverse poetic histories that track through, and emerge from, a fluid constellation of communities, cultures, industries and environments. Atmospheric form dethrones the colonial ‘year zero’ (Rose 1997) as the foundation of place-stories that naturalise the nation. It refuses colonial blindness and enables complex histories. It is always emergent and therefore never total. Atmospheres suggest diverse ways of being, ‘encompassing single, multiple, non-human, or more-than-human interactions’ (Gandy 2017: 358). As a concept, atmosphere helps us ‘rethink the logic of materiality’ (Ingold qtd in Gandy 2017: 358) in a way that acknowledges Western culture’s behind-ness in our realisation of an agential more-than-human world (Todd 2016).

Atmospheres also help us to understand the mobile nature of textual exchange. Texts flowed into all corners of the colonies, even the Kurangk/Coroong, but the traffic also went the other way. The colonisation of Australia provided popular and sensational subject matter for the British media and firsthand accounts of explorations and life on the frontier were highly sought after by British publishing houses (Love 2004: 224). Janeen Webb and Andrew Enstice have drawn attention to the extent to which the colonisation of Australia was an ‘eighteenth-century media event’ (Webb & Enstice 1998). They note that the journals, letters and reports of explorers and settlers were never written as private documents: ‘they were written as literature, intended for publication and designed to be read by a popular audience “back home”’ (Webb & Enstice 1998: 4).

The *Maria* massacre

The *Mariam* massacre in 1840 set the tone for many subsequent Kurangk/Coorong-based narratives, establishing it as a place of murder and violence in the Anglo-Australian imagination. The settler colonial texts which feature the *Maria* incident allow the telling of only one side of the story, serving as a partial justification for the subsequent subjugation of Ngarrindjeri peoples. The brigantine *Maria* was shipwrecked near Cape Jaffa after leaving Port Adelaide. Between twenty-four and twenty-six settlers survived the shipwreck and tried to walk back to Adelaide but were killed by members of the Milmenrura clan, a group of people who are part of the collective now known as the Ngarrindjeri. To appease settler outrage Governor Gawler ordered the hanging of two Milmenrura men (of the Tanganekald people) – ‘without trial or proclamation of martial law’ (Watson 2002: 261) – and their bodies were hung over the gravesite of the murdered European survivors. This gruesomely situated practice served as a warning and a deterrent against any further defensive warfare on the part of the Milmenrura clan. According to Watson, many more Milmenrura were killed in ‘silent unacknowledged’ retribution (Watson 2002: 261); a fact that is noticeably absent from dominant accounts, indicating yet another blind spot in colonial versions of Kurangk/Coorong history.

A newspaper article in *The Advertiser* written by Norman B Tindale, a non-Indigenous ethnologist at the South Australian Museum in 1934, tries to show the Indigenous perspective on the event as told by an informant named ‘Milerum’ (also known as Clarence Long) upon whom Tindale relied heavily for information and knowledge (Bell 1998: 51). In his words: ‘Who bin killem whitefella? Didn’t hang all the guilty ones. You come here! Gallows for three. When the ropes went round their necks they hung them. After that no trouble’ (Tindale 1934). There were a number of reports regarding the *Maria* incident (Bull 1884: 116-129; Berndt C & Berndt R 1951: 68-69) yet none of these accounts include reasons for murder of the *Maria* survivors. Historian Graham Jenkin has proposed, on the basis of information from Clarence Long ‘Milerum’, that the real cause was that sailors assaulted Indigenous women who were present during the rescue. Pinkie Mack, a local elder, also substantiated that narrative (Berndt et al 1993: 292).

Peter Bell and Susan Marsden have observed that the story of the *Maria* has been kept alive in South Australian history, commemoration and fiction while an earlier incident was largely forgotten. When the schooner *Fanny* was wrecked in Lacepede Bay in 1838, the Milmenrura cared for the survivors and helped them travel north to safety. According to an article in the *South Australian Chronicle and Weekly Mail* by ‘an arrival of 1838’, the passengers ‘were most mercifully saved from the raging billows, and on the wild beach were kindly received and succoured by the untamed blacks, on or within a short distance of the spot where ... the passengers and captain of the *Maria* were subsequently slaughtered’ (South Australian Chronicle and Weekly Mail 1877: 17). The *Fanny* survivors were the first Europeans to give an account of the size of the Kurangk/Coorong, as its presence was previously unsuspected by maritime explorers. Despite the rescue of the *Fanny*’s passengers, accounts of the *Maria*’s shipwreck – and the bloody demise of its human cargo – tend to function as a prevailing place-story of the Kurangk/Coorong, contributing powerfully to its dark atmospherics.

Yakunga

The texts produced by Jane Sarah Doudy, a police trooper’s wife who took the pseudonym of ‘Yakunga’ (which was supposedly given to her by Aboriginal

people), provides insight into the life of a settler woman living near the Kurangk/Coorong in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. A series of pieces by Doudy aka 'Yakunga' were published in *The Register* from December 1927-February 1928. Yakunga writes about a kind of friendship formed with an Aboriginal woman named 'Queen Catherine', which began in earnest after Catherine saved Doudy's husband and son when their boat capsized. This acquaintance continued despite Catherine's 'questionable past', which Yakunga salaciously recounts:

It was said she was present when the crew of the *Maria* were murdered, and that on one occasion, after the whites came, she killed and ate a child belonging to their own tribe, carrying it off into the bush herself. (Yakunga 1928: 14)

As Kay Schaffer has argued, cannibalism was often used as a literary tactic to denote Aboriginal inferiority and legitimise the theft of land (Schaffer 1995: 108). Daisy Bates, author of the controversial book *The Passing of the Aborigines* (1938), alleged that Aboriginal women killed their children and ate them [2]. Berndt et al argue that 'such opinions are most unreliable, grossly exaggerated' and distort the picture of traditional Indigenous life (Berndt et al 1993: 138). Both Bates and Doudy – in common with the notorious Eliza Fraser [3] – seem less interested in writing faithfully about their experiences among Indigenous people than producing bloodthirsty stories which would attract a wide readership and much-needed earnings.

For her part, Doudy both disparaged and patronised Indigenous people in her 'Yakunga' pieces, while at times claiming to care about their wellbeing. She commented on the poor treatment of Aboriginal people such as 'Pot Belt', who was paid a pittance by a local storekeeper. However, there is no suggestion that Doudy herself was willing to risk her own position to stand up for Indigenous people in the area. In many ways her writing reproduces contemporaneous stereotypes and ideologies, as when she describes Catherine as 'ugly', 'dirty' and 'ungainly' (Yakunga qtd in Hancock 2007: 314).

Janette Hancock argues that Doudy shapes her encounters with Aboriginal people through a 'white supremacist' lens, from the position of a 'white missus' (Hancock 2007: 320). Sue Kossew has described Doudy as an 'unsettling settler woman' who worked within 'complicated axes of power and position' (Kossew 2004: 10). Now almost completely forgotten, Doudy's unreliable writing, given credence by a position of power, presents uncomfortable and disturbing aspects of cross-cultural relations with the Kurangk/Coorong from the colonial period.

Dreary, melancholy, desolate

From the 1840s, the Kurangk/Coorong was associated with murder but also with the picturesque and the sublime. The Kurangk/Coorong – along with the Mount Gambier blue lakes – were first widely publicised in the 1840s by the English naturalist George French Angas, a prolific artist and travel writer. Angas accompanied two different expeditions into the region on the Lower Lakes and Kurangk/Coorong in 1844. His experiences and 'impressions' were published as two chapters of his *Savage Life and Scenes in Australia and New Zealand*. For Angas, it was difficult to apply the conventional definition of the concept 'beautiful' to the Kurangk/Coorong. Angas described it as 'truly a wild and

desolate place' (Angas 1847: 65) distinguished by a 'profound stillness' (145), 'a region of the most dreary and melancholy aspect' (145). As he looked over the lagoon to the ocean, Angas remarked that 'the utter and most awful solitude was unbroken by any living thing... All was one vast blank – a sublime and terrible wildness of nature' (146). These were words of praise in the conventional language of the sublime. Edmund Burke, who wrote the influential *Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757), argued that all that threatened human self-preservation caused terror; and the terrifying experiences were the source of the sublime. By contrast, Henry David Inglis proposed that power rather than terror is the more true and universal source of the sublime (Inglis 1837: 82). He notes that some 'objects' such as the starry night sky 'bear the impress of power' but do not necessarily inspire terror (1837: 82). Since British attempts to 'settle' the Kurangk/Coorong, it had been associated with violence and death and untameable 'wildness', thereby contributing to its reputation for sublimity, both terrifying and powerful.

Angas grappled with his powerfully ambivalent responses to the Kurangk/Coorong in his writing about it. Geraldine Love observes that Angas frequently uses words such as 'solitude' and 'desolation' to carry the difficult burden of the discontinuity between language and landscape in his experiences as a European visitor. Love argues that this use of language serves to 'homogenise all aspects of this environment that do not lend themselves to his colonialist vision', effectively negating the ongoing Indigenous presence in the Kurangk/Coorong (Love 2004: 227). In *My Life in the Open* (1908) Scottish poet Will Ogilvie channels Angas' ambivalence about the Kurangk/Coorong: 'It is all ghostly and strange and unreal, with a weird – almost – witchery, and yet, once seen it is never forgotten' (Ogilvie 1908: 4). Writing from Scotland, after spending twelve years working at itinerant jobs in Australia, Ogilvie claims that he would 'give a king's ransom to hear the sudden whistle of a black duck's wing and the little whisper of the wave upon the sand' (1908: 4). This romantic attachment to the Kurangk/Coorong landscape is echoed by Hester Finch in Lucy Treloar's *Salt Creek* (2015) published almost one-hundred years later.

Salt Creek

Hester Finch, later known as 'Mrs Crane', narrates her story from Chichester, England. Treloar draws on her family history, particularly that of her ancestor, John Barton Hack, from whose misadventures and failures Treloar has borrowed. Opening in 1855, *Salt Creek* is set in an area of the Kurangk/Coorong which has just been made available to graziers following frontier violence. Initially the Kurangk/Coorong is a strange, unearthly, unreadable landscape for the newly arrived Finch family. The first impressions of fifteen-year-old Hester were dark: 'the journey to that place was like moving knowingly, dutifully, towards death' (Treloar 2015: 8).

Hester is acquainted with the *Mari* incident from the time she arrives in the Coorong: 'I couldn't remember a time when I had not known how the survivors of a shipwreck had been helped by natives on the Kurangk/Coorong and after a time had been turned on and murdered' (Treloar 2015: 60). She later discovers that not only did her own father play a part in the *Mari* reprisals, but he also inducted his two older sons into sexual relations with women from a nearby Aboriginal settlement. Hester withstands tragedy, especially the deaths of her mother in childbirth and her toddler sister from a snake bite. The land seems to be against

them, thwarting their efforts in every direction. Their cheesemaking fails, the feet of their sheep begin to rot and their vegetables don't thrive, largely due to their misreading of their environment.

The character of Tull plays a crucial part in the story, as a local Indigenous man who is also an honorary member of the Finch family. Tull recognises the Finchs' relentless bad luck, asking Hester: 'Who has cursed you?' Although she denies the possibility of a curse, Hester thinks: 'That word – the weight of it, as if the word itself carried the darkness of its meaning. I could feel it almost, as close as the salt air touching my skin' (Treloar 2015: 189). There are close intersections between history and fiction in this novel with references to the *Maria* incident, the Point McLeay mission run by Reverend Taplin and a character based on the infamous murderer Malachi Martin. 'When Travellers Feared the Coorong', an article in *The Register* in 1931, recounts a series of violent incidents in the Coorong including the murder of a young servant girl named Jane McNananim by Malachi Martin, who owned a public house with his wife (whose first husband had also been killed in unusual circumstances). *The Register* reports that at the time of writing, people in the southeast still told stories about the waters of Salt Creek running red from the blood of the murdered girl (The Register 1931).

In Treloar's novel, Hester's sister Addie is effectively sold to Mr Martin who runs the Traveller's Rest with his wife, whose first husband Mr Robinson vanished, along with a servant girl named Jane. Tull also knows of an Indigenous man who was reportedly drowned by Martin and later discovered sunk in a water hole. When confronted, Martin is unrepentant: 'Men, women, blacks, I hate them all, what is one less?' (Treloar 2015: 329). Martin is a psychopath whose hatred is indiscriminating whereas Hester's father harbours corrosive attitudes towards Indigenous people while assuming an air of benevolence. He supports a plan to move Indigenous people to Kangaroo Island for their 'safety' despite resistance from his children Addie and Fred. Fred observes that 'It is the Island of Death to them, where spirits go after they have departed ... They are in mortal dread of it' (149-150). He and Addie had previously learned about Karta, or Kangaroo Island, from Tull, whose mother Rimmilli was abducted from the Kurangk/Coorong by sealers and taken to the island from which she eventually escaped with her son.

Hester moves back to Britain after the death and dispersal of her family members; nonetheless, she finds herself keenly nostalgic for the Kurangk/Coorong, claiming that she never felt so alive as then, 'when we had so little and the possibility of death was our constant companion' – and for the family property which stretched as far as a person could ride across in a day (Treloar 2015: 6):

When I travel the Coorong in my mind, as I do often, it is like that day at the turning to cooler weather... The sky and the lagoon were sapphire, and the peninsula was that strip of white and green, and the sucks were pink rimmed and the last birds that left for winter were wheeling the sky and dipping to earth and sea to gather up more of their number before rising again, higher – clouds of them separating and cohering like shoals of fish. The noise of it. (Treloar 2015: 321)

For Hester, the Kurangk/Coorong is a place where she could get lost, whereas Tull feels at home there. He tells Hester the names of places they pass: 'Eel lagoon', 'Place to Trap Mullet' and 'Pelican island' (Treloar 2015: 322). For him every part of the lagoon has 'a name and a story and a meaning' (322). 'The stories were all around us wherever we went. There was scarcely a place without one and it felt as

if we were nothing but one more story inside this world and the stories were without number' (322).

Salt Creek references global transits in the network of British empire-building, which included the literary networks that flowed throughout the colonies and the telegraph lines which followed the stock routes. Hester's intellectual sensibility leads her to yearn for cultural lives elsewhere, and she is very pleased – and surprised – to learn that the father of her love interest, Mr Bagshott, once paid a visit to Haworth, the home of the Brontë sisters, where he met Mr Brontë senior, Emily and Charlotte (Treloar 2015: 124-125). 'Of all the strange things,' Hester reflects, 'that this man in the wilds of the Coorong had met the author of *Jane Eyre: An Autobiography*' – a book to which Hester is strongly attached (125). As Peter Pierce writes of *Salt Creek*, the novel offers a literary history in its depiction of Hester's reading life, and the significance of British novels to nineteenth-century readers in the colonies (Pierce 2017). The Bagshotts are based on Herschel Babbage and his son Charles who had connections with Charles Darwin and the Brontës (Treloar 2015: 401). The novel also offers a critique of Angas' paintings which are viewed as 'incorrect' and 'ridiculous' by Hester, especially the depictions of Indigenous people who are 'as fixed as pinned butterflies, for display only, when the space they lived in was vast and the sky without limit' (69).

The travelling nature of texts, and the porosity of places, is echoed in the elemental atmospheres of the Kurangk/Coorong itself, in which the settlers' houses, despite all attempts, are permeable, made of shipwrecked materials, and exposed to the elements: an 'insubstantial' house, 'composed of so many of the elements that lay all about' (Treloar 2015: 35). Wind whips through and unsettles any sense of solidity, suggesting the journeys and dispossessions that shadow the region. Hester dreams of the 'people who might have died in the wood [of the shipwrecked vessel], clawing for escape' (45), while around her is 'an uncanny sense of someone temporarily absent or recently departed, as if I were exploring a strange and empty house' (37). This is not a straightforward absence, of course – one that Hester simply observes – but a complex one of complicities and entanglements. It is an absence that speaks of violent histories, and the death and loss that make up post-colonial places, but also it suggests the uncanny effects of colonisation, and the ever-manifesting presences that refuse a settled sense of place.

Along the stockman's trail

Non-European textual presences in the Kurangk/Coorong have been accorded less attention than those of the colonisers. The Chinese miners who walked to Victoria via South Australia in the mid-nineteenth century left material traces which were illegible to most observers. *Yong: The Journey of an Unworthy Son* (Brian 2016) is a young adult book by Janeen Brian set in the 1850s, when more than 16,000 Chinese landed in Robe, South Australia, and walked more than 320 kilometres overland to the Victorian goldfields of Ballarat and Bendigo in order to avoid a ten pound poll tax (which was considerably more than their fare from China).

They would generally pay a guide to lead them via old stockman trails through the Coorong, often travelling in groups of up to 300 to share the cost of the guide. However, guides would sometimes desert them two days into the journey, leaving them stranded; a taste of the discrimination and cruelty they would soon experience on the goldfields of Victoria.

Mr George, the unreliable, drunken guide in Brian's novel, is not expected to take his 'load' all the way to the goldfields as it was common practice to take the travellers' money and depart soon afterwards, given the widespread dislike of Chinese 'gold thieves' among white Australians. Drunken, violent and unreliable, Mr George makes a poor impression on the Chinese yet they have no other option except to find their own way through unfamiliar terrain.

The entire trip took most Chinese travellers five to six weeks, requiring the building of stone wells to supply water. Yong's group survives by drinking from these wells. When Yong first encounters a Chinese well he is 'unexpectedly filled with joy': 'In the middle of this strange land with birds that laugh and animals that jump is this well, built by other Chinese who've come this way before us. It is a wonderful reminder of home' (Brian 2016: 53).

In this passage, the non-human life of the Coorong – and the wells left behind by his compatriots – are a source of comfort to Yong, who senses hostility towards Chinese from the Anglo-Australian community. In one instance, Yong is assisted by friendly Indigenous people who point him in the direction of a waterhole. Along the way, he also notices scratched messages but cannot make them out without stopping. Chinese travellers had begun a tradition of leaving messages inscribed in Chinese characters on trees, to be deciphered by those who followed. Often the messages contained the location of natural water sources or of a well which had been dug previously. Once they are abandoned by their guide, Yong's party comes to a junction which shears off in two directions. Yong sees a sign scratched on a tree in Chinese saying 'to Ballarat' which makes it clear which path to take.

These messages might be seen as forms of literacy other than that of grammatically conventional English. They have something in common with 'drover texts', which were written on the road and carved anonymously onto objects such as trees, water tanks and animal skulls by Australian drovers. As Michael Farrell has shown, 'gum tree poets' – usually swagmen, itinerant labourers or drovers – would scratch poems into trees. They would also leave notes or signs about which places were good to eat, or where water was to be found. In this sense they are 'outside, unhoused' texts drawing attention to the ways in which literary works are usually produced and consumed indoors (Farrell 2016: 411). Farrell observes that these writings are 'literally bush texts', outside the frame of the book, of any literary milieu, and of the homestead (2016: 411). Similarly, the Chinese characters inscribed on trees tell a specific audience of Chinese readers crucial information about the journey, but they are unrecognisable to Anglo-Australian eyes.

After Yong's father's death by dysentery, Yong makes inscriptions of his own, subtly marking the landscape with Chinese characters:

When the grave is dug, I toss in fresh leaves to line the bottom and then the men and I return to camp, where we wash and dress my father. I cannot look when the men fill in the grave. Instead I search until I find a stone large enough to place at the head and with a small pebble I scratch on it my father's name and the name of his village. Then I place a small container of wine, a few grains of rice and a white bush flower on the grave. (Brian 2016: 92)

Although Chinese travellers like Yong did not produce what has been traditionally thought of as literature, they scratched writing onto makeshift tombstones, wrote

messages on trees, letters to the English-language newspapers, petitions to parliament, letters of protest to the Government as well as letters and diary entries. We argue that these writings, mostly invisible to the Anglo-Australian gaze, have also contributed to the literature of the wider Coorong region, densifying the literary history of the place with multiple texts and journeyings that thread through it.

For sinewed miles that never end

Just as the novel *Jane Eyre* travelled to the Kurangk/Coorong in *Salt Creek*, so the *New Statesman* was imaginatively transported there through Max Harris' poetics. Harris, who is best known for his role in the infamous Ern Malley affair, broke his long poetic silence after the libel case and fallout from the hoax with a small book, *The Coorong and other poems* (1955). Harris' poem, 'On Throwing a Copy of *The New Statesman* into the Coorong' contains a sense of menace, or imminent threat, that earlier commentators such as Angas and Ogilvie have also expressed. For Harris, the Kurangk/Coorong is 'the home of the sand fox, the brumby, the fretful clan of Murray magpies' (Harris 2000: 44-45). It is a 'dead land' which 'traps another rise of sea'. Towards the end, there is a striking image of a sparrow hawk that claws its prey to the slowest 'Promethean death' (Harris 2000: 44-45). Here the reader may perceive echoes of the Kurangk/Coorong's murderous past. Farrell has described Harris' poem as 'one of our great beach poems', yet it goes beyond usual conceptions of the beach as a site of leisure, taking the reader into more contested territory (Farrell 2006: 178). The central image of the *The New Statesman* being thrown into the Kurangk/Coorong derives from the visit of Kingsley Martin, the editor of the newspaper, to Adelaide in the 1950s. In the poem, the newspaper stands for Kingsley himself, a Fabian socialist of 'aging gentility' who was reportedly unsettled by the egalitarian behaviour he encountered while staying on a sheep station in South Australia for a few days (Dutton 1994: 212). In a mischievous spirit, Harris chose to imagine Kingsley Martin as a copy of *The New Statesman* amid the wild terrain of the Kurangk/Coorong: 'Kingsley flaps and tatters on a branch of wild tobacco' (Harris 2000: 44-45). Harris links a product of a 'sophisticated' and 'civilised' society with a 'primitive' place inhabited by 'the Bloody Great Drongo' (45).

Colin Thiele's children's story *Storm Boy* (1963) is one of the best-known representations of the Kurangk/Coorong. Phillip Butterss observes that this book – and subsequent film versions – gave Thiele and the Kurangk/Coorong national exposure (Butterss 2003: 118). Thiele characterised the Coorong as '[A] wilderness sloping away south-eastwards as far as the eye can see, and beyond that other distances, and again others, horizon after horizon, insulating the traveller from everything by sea, sky and sand ...' (Thiele 1963: 58). Given his forward-thinking environmentalism, Thiele would be saddened to know that the Lakes and the Coorong are suffering as irrigation, over-grazing, and pollution have left their toll on the Murray–Darling Basin. Diane Bell cites the late Ngarrindjeri man Tom Trevor on the impacts of this devastation:

The freshwater used to come from the southeast, from the next town down at Kingston, right through from Mount Gambier. And that water kept the Coorong alive. Now, when we look at the southern lagoon of the Coorong today, it's dying... And to us as Ngarrindjeri people, it's like, it's damaging us. It's like cutting one of your arms off, or one of your legs off. In the end you start

losing the full capacity of your body. We look upon the land in the same way. (Trevorrow qtd in Bell 1998: 252)

Conclusion

In this article, we have gestured towards a network of narrators and storytellers: texts and their travels, traditional owner, colonised, coloniser and migrant, all of which speak to the tissue of place-stories that flow in, through and from a region. This is to resist the colonial preference for a dominant place-story, a mono-myth of origin, that supports and sustains violent, exclusionary and dispossessing practices. ‘Is it possible for other stories of law and culture to coexist, beyond one just cut to fit into the dominant narrative?’ Irene Watson asks. There is no one ‘true story to tell, and one law, and one way of being’ (Watson 2014: 52). Thinking about regional writing atmospherically responds to this provocation – it aims to decentre a singular account of place, while acknowledging the inevitable entanglements of a post-colonial nation. The Kurangk/Coorong *is* a post-colonial place, even while its long history extends in other directions. To think atmospherically about place helps to work productively with this, towards an ultimate goal of decolonised imaginaries. This is a stance for the post-colonial scholar, working to assemble a poetic account of place; where single stories attempt to exclude, we can insist upon multiplicity. We can seek out resistance in literary history, looking for the pressure points where the cultures of Western modernity reach their limits and are exposed and denaturalised. Atmospheres are where, to paraphrase Hase, the complexity and dynamics of place ‘become perceptible’ (qtd in Gandy 2017: 353).

What we posit is that, in the atmospheres of post-colonial entanglements, new imaginaries – for literary history, for writing place, for living as non-Indigenous subjects on unceded and colonised Aboriginal land – might be located, not fabricated from thin air, in tracing out the dense, humid minglings of the Kurangk/Coorong and its many passages over time. In an age of environmental alienation and destruction, as our land burns and our rivers bloom with deathly algae [4], this is where we might locate the ‘still possible worlds’ (Osborne 2018: 4) that Watson identifies. Stories are crucial to this endeavour: they may not save the many lives currently at threat, or already lost in the Murray–Darling Basin, but they can help us to see what was always present, and to register coexistence as the condition of being here, right now, in this network of lives and places.

Notes

[1] Following a commission by the University of Adelaide to produce a collection of these stories, Unaipon authored several short booklets of ‘Aboriginal legends’ in the late 1920s, while also writing for newspapers and magazines across Australia on a range of topics, including science and technology, and Indigenous rights. Infamously, Unaipon’s largest work, a single collection of Indigenous creation stories, was published under the name of a white anthropologist, William Ramsay Smith, in 1930, without any attribution to Unaipon. [return to text](#)

[2] Bates even sent the bones of these alleged dead children to the University of Adelaide for investigation, where they were later discovered to be the bones of a wild cat (Shoemaker 2004: 51). [return to text](#)

[3] Eliza Fraser's partly fabricated recounting of her experiences on Fraser Island (known as K'gari by the Butchulla people) had negative effects on Aboriginal-settler relations in Australia and the questions surrounding her rescue and its aftermath led to lasting controversy (see Larissa Behrendt, *Finding Eliza: power and colonial storytelling* 2016). return to text

[4] During January 2019, a catastrophic event unfolded along the Darling River in western New South Wales. An estimated one-million native Murray cod fish perished en masse after water diversions upstream led to toxic algal bloom outbreaks. Experts have suggested that cod numbers may never recover in the Darling, with flow on effects to fish stock across the entire Murray–Darling Basin. This most recent necro-colonial event belongs to a history of settler-colonial violence against the river system and its traditional owners. return to text

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Emily Potter is a Senior Lecturer in Writing and Literature in the School of Communication and Creative Arts, Deakin University. She has a long-standing interest in literary practice and place-making, and her latest book is Writing Belonging at the Millennium: Notes from the Field on Settler-Colonial Place (Intellect 2019).

Brigid Magner is a Senior Lecturer in Literary Studies and founding member of the non/fictionLab research group at RMIT University. Her research is concerned with trans-Tasman literary culture, Australian authorship, literary heritage and place-making. She is the author of Locating Australian Literary Memory (Anthem Press 2019) and Book Reviews Editor of the Literary Geographies journal.

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