TEXT SPECIAL ISSUES

Number 63 October 2021

ISSN: 1327-9556 | https://textjournal.scholasticahq.com/

So many birds/one river: A fictocritical response to the Port-Yarta Puulti River, Kaurna Country

Jennifer Eadie

To cite this article: Eadie, J. (2021). So many birds/one river: A fictocritical response to the Port-Yarta Puulti River, Kaurna Country. In M. Saward and D. Wain (Eds.) *Writing through things 2: The thing as writing prompt*. TEXT Special Issue 63. https://doi.org/10.52086/001c.29719

Flinders University

Jennifer Eadie

So many birds/one river: A fictocritical response to the Port-Yarta Puulti River, Kaurna Country

Abstract:

This article is a fictocritical exploration of the Port-Yarta Puulti River which runs through Kaurna Country in South Australia. Since the establishment of a shipping port in 1837 the river and the land that surrounds it have been heavily industrialised. This use/misuse of land and water exemplifies the human capacity to become socially dependent on the objectification of non-human environments. Such objectification both informs and limits how we use language: we find ourselves calling a river by its 'resource' name (Port River) rather than its living name (Yarta Puulti River). The repetition of this framing (in colonial/settler historical archives, policy, road maps, media, planning documentation) makes it easy to forget that this is not a port; it was made into one. In turn, this limits the kind of narratives that consequently emerge from and about a place. This article is composed of a series of experiments that creatively and theoretically engage (via image prose, image, and poetry) with the following question: how might we unhinge the intentional/unintentional censorship of the stories we write and learn from Country?

Biographical note:

Jennifer Eadie lives and works on Kaurna Country. She is a PhD candidate and Research Assistant in the College of Humanities, Arts & Social Sciences, Flinders University, South Australia.

Keywords:

Environmental humanities, posthumanities, fictocritical writing, Indigenous Country

Part 1: Introduction

‘I am haunted by waters’ (Laing, 2011, p. 3).

I have begun to pay attention to the river that shapes the country where I live. Stones and debris let the tide carry and wash over them. Along the shoreline dirty foam is stuck on mangrove root. My feet stepping into/under water. I say to it: I do not know you, so I am going to attempt to follow.

To begin, it is important to acknowledge the Country I am attempting to write with and about in this text. [1] Looking at a road map, it is the Port Adelaide River in an area called the Lefevre Peninsula in South Australia. In understanding sovereignty as the ancestral tie between the land and people it is Yarta Puulti, Mudlangga and Wongayerlo on Kaurna Country. The water that forms the easterly border of Mudlangga (the Lefevre Peninsula) is the called the Barker Inlet. This inlet carries the Port River out to what becomes Wongayerlo (the Saint Vincent Gulf). [2]

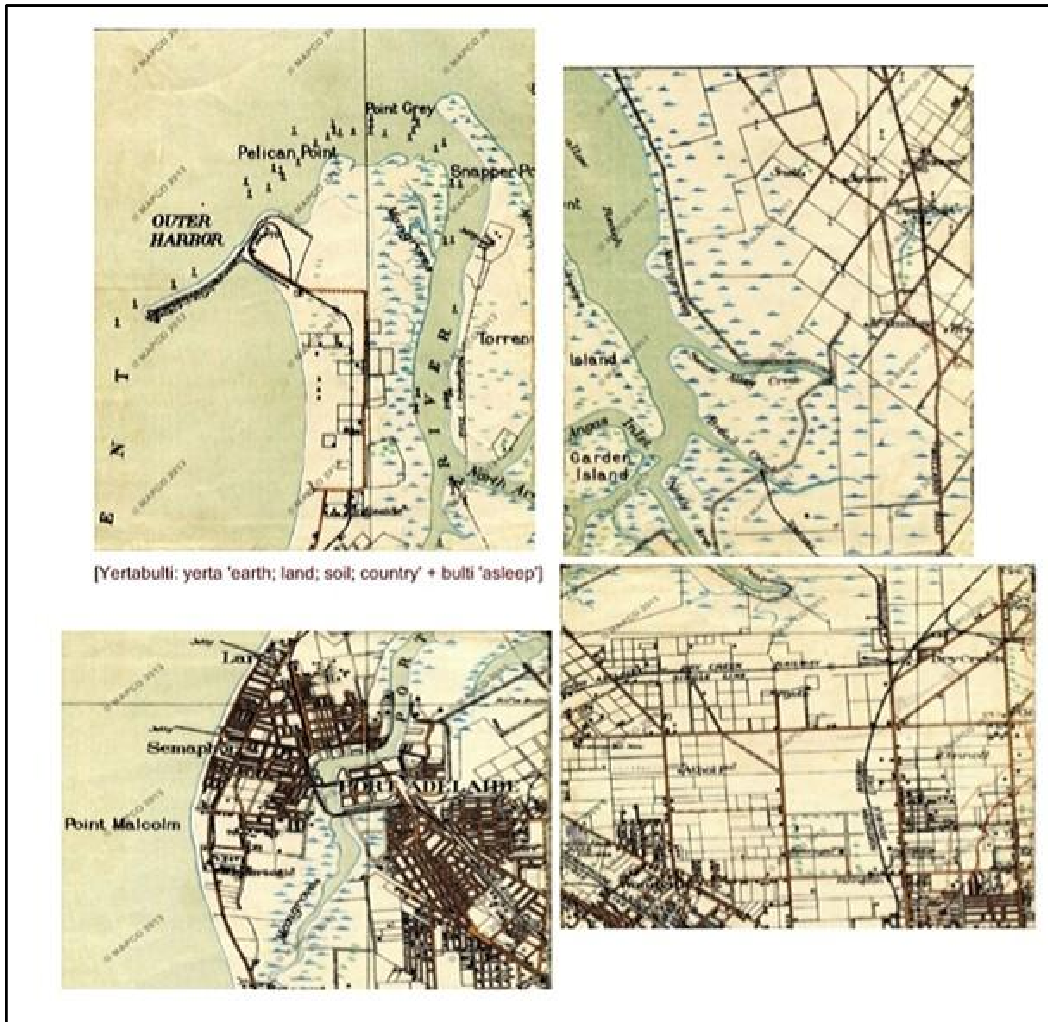

Figure 2: Broken map (Eadie, 2021b; original image Hale, 2019)

The Port-Yarta Puulti River has experienced spectacular mistreatment over the last 120 years. The use of the river and the land surrounding it has been characterised by heavy industry including the establishment of an international shipping port, naval facilities, sewage and waste-water treatment plants, explosives manufacturing and testing, a cement factory, landfill storage and processing, chemical, fertiliser and wheat production, salt fields, along with major gas, and electrical stations. There are areas so contaminated by industrial use that the land is deemed 'unsuitable for any building construction without extensive treatment' (Johnston & Harbison, 2005, p. 294). For decades, the sewage, fertiliser, and chemical treatment plants here let their waste run into the river. Yet, there are river dolphins, and more than one hundred and twenty species of birds choose to dwell in this place (Johnston & Harbison, 2005, p. 300).

The intensive use/misuse of the Port-Yarta Puulti River exemplifies the human capacity to become socially dependent on the objectification and singularisation of non-human environments. Such objectification both informs and limits how we use language: we find ourselves calling a river by its 'resource' name (*Port* River) rather than its living name (*Yarta Puulti* River). The repetition of this framing (in colonial/settler historical archives, policy, road

maps, media, planning documentation) makes it easy to forget that this is not a port; it was *made* into one. In turn, this limits the kind of narratives that consequently emerge from and about a place. This article is composed of a series of experiments that creatively and theoretically engage (via image prose, image, and poetry) with the following question: how might we unhinge the intentional/unintentional censorship of the stories we write, share, and learn from Country?

Part 2: Three proposals

1.

Kaurna elder Uncle Lewis Yerloburka O'Brien explains how there is no word for horizon in his language, rather 'there is a reflection of each vastness into the other, a merging of the sky and water, the two becoming one' (2019, p. 49). The wetlands across the Adelaide Plains are reflections of the Wardlipari – the homeriver in the Milky Way (p. 49). The idea of horizon as a limit is replaced with continuity that is revealed as reflection. In this sense, the interconnection between language and Country is not symbolised by the reflection of sky-wetlands but *produced by it*. Here, Uncle Lewis reminds us that language, sky, and water bodies are not static parts of a whole: their being-in-the-world is fundamentally relational.

2.

Kaurna people are in the process of reclaiming their language (Amery & Buckskin, 2014, p. 187). In the case of Kaurna placenames, researchers have found that many of the etymologies proposed since colonial invasion and settlement have been incorrect or false (Amery, 2002). This is not necessarily intentional: it is a case of learning/re-learning what is sleeping. Amery and Buckskin explain that 'pinning down the form depends on pinning down the meaning and vice-versa' (2014, p. 187). Understood in this way, words are not static; they have agency and can (and should) be interrogated. Language does not hold but rather reflects meaning.

3.

In a 1992 interview, Jacques Derrida proposed that 'we must invent (a name) for those 'critical' inventions which belong to literature while deforming its limits' (as cited in Muecke, 2002, p. 108). A decade later, Stephen Muecke (2002, p. 2018) suggested that such marginal and hybrid inventions/acts are possible within fictocritical writing, which, as Anne Gibbs reminds us, 'is a way of writing for which there is no blueprint and which must be constantly invented anew in the face of the singular problems that arise in the course of engagement with what is researched' (2005, para. 4). Understood in this way, there is a commitment made by the author to engage and acknowledge the multiple realities they encounter. This engagement could be

understood as an attempt to reflect rather than define shared ways-of-being. This way, as Muecke writes, 'the 'detached' and all-knowing subject' cannot do anything but collapse into the text (2002, p. 102).

When placed beside each other, it is evident something similar is being shared in these proposals. To begin, each suggests that *ways of knowing* cannot be accessed or represented directly. Instead, meaning is gleaned through experiencing ways-of-being (stories) that are enabled, shaped, and hindered, by human *and* non-human language. Importantly, this sort of knowledge-sharing is relational and therefore can be dormant or emerge unexpectedly. Of relevance here is the role *reflection* plays in this process: its potential as a space in which plural meaning is produced and shared. Likewise, we see how a negation of a singular narrative is what motivates this idea: 'the author' is simply part of multiple relational voices that respond, argue, explore – all while forming a text (i.e., word, image, story, or know-how) – that presents itself *not* as a definition but as reflection of the plurality it has encountered.

With all of this in hand, it is worth considering whether this framework can be used to follow and respond to the Port-Yarta Puulti River. Acceptance of the singular colonial framing of Yarta Puulti as a 'port canal/resource' limits our ability to access the 'vastness' described by Uncle Lewis. So, if our intention is to unhinge the reflection of the river as resource so as to enable it to become 'a merging of the sky and water', what might a movement towards this look like? Part 3 and Part 4 of this article attempt to reflect and respect that vastness via a series of fictocritical experiments.

Part 3: Theoretical considerations

A conversation while walking along the shoreline:

> … This place has become wild. [3]
>
> … Yes, the shoreline itself is broken; it does not follow the river.
>
> … Despite this, there are painstaking attempts to reign in the breakages via:
>
> steel framing
>
> cement blocks
>
> ground covers
>
> warning signs
>
> sealed up drainage pipes
>
> underground gas expulsion.

… None of the borders have been successful; everywhere is contaminated. It is difficult to feel comfortable or safe here.

… Nonetheless, those breakages steal our attention.

… Yes, they demand we *look at* rather than *through* them.

… In the same manner malfunctioning objects do (Brown, 2001).

… So, you think this place has become a 'thing'?

… Maybe it has. Did you know that the Old English word *þing* alluded to a 'meeting, assembly, council, discussion'? [4]

… Thinking about this place as 'as a meeting' is useful, it acknowledges the *pluriverse* of beings that constitute this space. [5]

… It is a *meeting* of stories, histories and beings that are competing, exchanging diplomacies, killing, eating, loving, defecating, imploding, and so on…!

… When you write, you should try and reflect this dynamism: welcome it to take a foothold in the narrative.

… I agree but am not sure how.

… Maybe take into consideration Donna Haraway's advice that fiction must be understood as always 'in process and still at stake, not finished' (2003, pp.19-20).

… I think the kind of story telling we are proposing here risks being difficult specifically because it refuses closure.

… Yes, that demand may be exhausting, but it prevents apathy.

Part 4: Experiments in reflection

Experiment: Respond to things encountered along the shoreline

It must start with a   cleansing

No.   it started with a carcass.

‘People think I’m a cannibal’ [5]

Walking there

I saw the road in front of me disappear

in front of me it slipped:

Figure 3: Experiment in reflection - part 1 (Eadie, 2020)

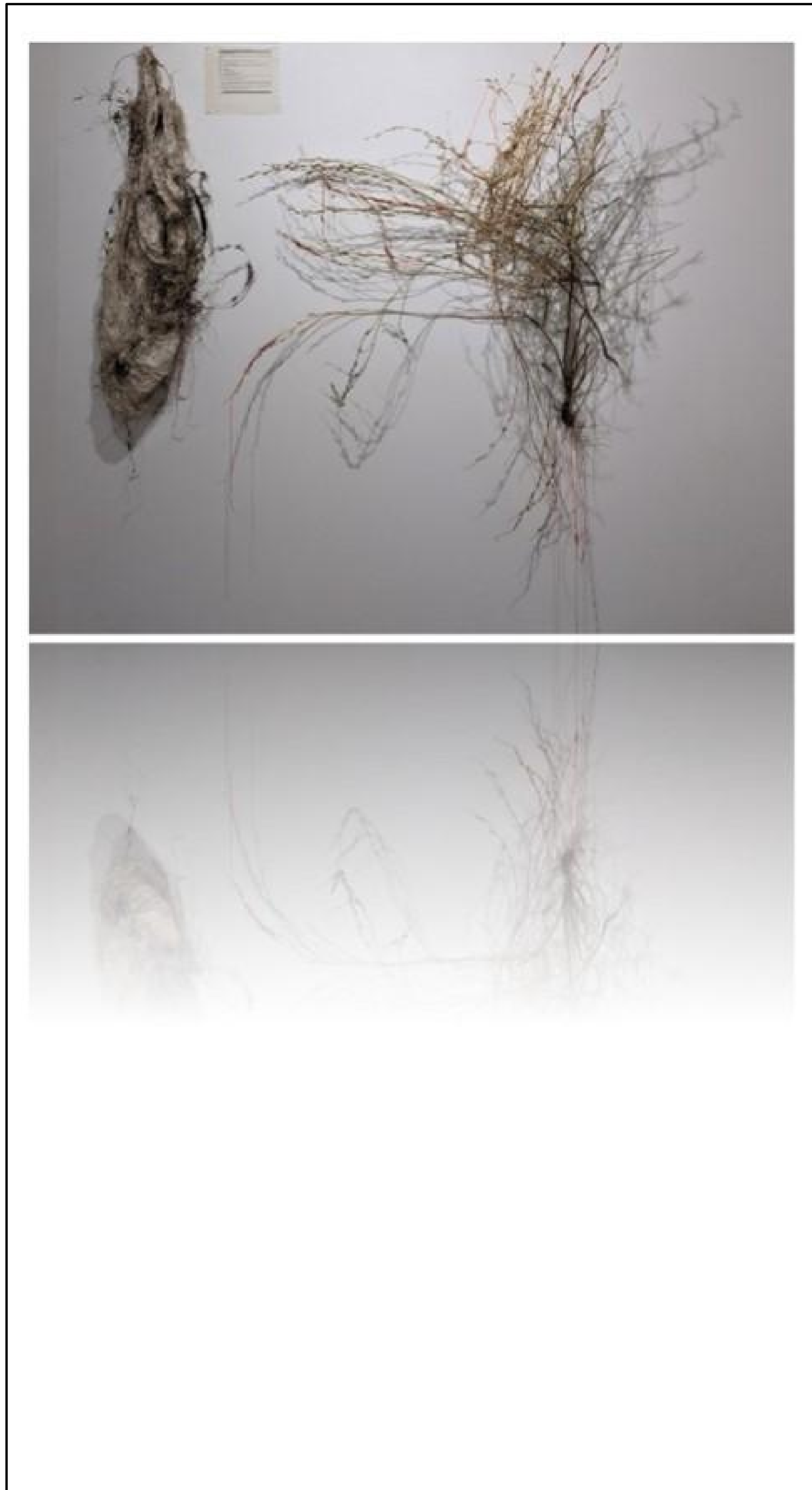

Figure 5: Experiment in reflection - part 3, (Eadie, 2020)

Experiment: The stages of naming

That is the Port River

In this naming, we are announcing this river as resource. The words we are speaking say: this place is property. The story is one of ownership enabled by colonialism.

This is the Yarta Puulti River

In this naming, we acknowledge the connection of this water to the Kaurna people and the knowledge it carries in it. Before invasion, these shorelines were the main source of food for the Kaurna people living here. For example, at low tide they would 'walk amongst the seagrasses and use their toes to feel for clams hidden in the mud' (Telfer & Malone, 2012, p. 50). These stories are for us to walk beside and listen to: now when I walk along the shoreline and feel the mud with my toes, I cannot ignore this story alongside my own.

This river is thing

Here, there is no naming. There is acknowledgment that the stories are fractured, unclear. We recognise this 'Thing' as a meeting of:

[ ].

The stories here are not neat but this means opportunity arises for 'space of the unknown, of what cannot be known' (Wills, as cited in Lobb, 2019, p. 5). Unknowability assembles and disassembles this space. Maybe it is here where truth-telling begins: clumsily, but honestly.

Experiment: Follow the stories held in the placenames

The Barker Inlet

Barker is a dead man.

In white fella history this inlet was first named by Captain Collet Barker, in 1831.

C

ap

tain Barker of the 39th R

e

gime nt.

The captain was said to have discovered the river while further south, on Country that would be proclaimed 'the colony South Australia' 5 years later.

The captain was killed by Aboriginal people at the mouth of another river. Kumarangk is the name of that Country (Yarluwar Ruwe).

Historians have suggested his death was a result of a misunderstanding: men coming from the direction of Karta/Kangaroo Island were sealers.

There is a book of the biographies that refers to the stories of women held on this island (Clarke, 1998). These women were abducted and.

In the book, the biographies are brief and vague.

Barker was killed by accident but what was done to these women was not.

Stare at my feet and the incoming tide is just touching, too gentle. I say to them: I do not know how you women got through what was done. The damage was not only in your bruised skin.

In the book, the bi

o

graphies arebr

ie f

and v

ague.

In the book, the biographies are brief and vague. I concentrate on the names:

Letter to the names I read

What if we draw up what is lost/ sweat from chest and armpit

sweat mixing with shards underfoot.

Colour of sharp rust. seaweed thick suddenly too bright.

put hand on the sea floor

watch it scatter!

We will face this body: this opening/ she said/ even when used as thing/ us women, we know this too well.

Let water draw up into my nostrils/ she said/ making everything smell soft/ like the inside of your baby mouth.

Those names/ covered in salt/ which is becoming what we are holding: this opening/ carry it close.

Between

Between the river and the Barker Inlet are two islands: Torrens and Garden Island. The islands were mangrove, bulrush, salt marsh and sapphire marsh: tidal sand flats. After invasion, one was used as colonial quarantine station for human and non-human animal arrivals, and the other became a landfill dump.

Figure 6: The Port-Yarta Puulti River (Barket Inlet), South Australia (Eadie, 2021c)

Torrens Island

Arrivals were held.

This was South Australia's first quarantine station. Enormous red gum and she-oak grow here.

The boats from overseas drifted down the Barker Inlet before docking at Torrens Island quarantine station to drop the seasick men, women, children, and animals at the jetty.

Once they step down from the jetty, they are advised to walk past the wooden shed which had/has 'CYANIDE' painted on it in large capital letters:

Arrivals congregate under the she-oak.

The she-oak leans over low. She looks cranky. The air is thick and quiet between the wooden shed and the old tree.

See over here, there are the quarters for the sick.

Those pebbles on the ground mark another area.

Strange mix of geranium flowers and dry grasses follow rotting fence lines.

Every building at the station is labelled: women's waiting room, men's waiting room, doctor, veterinary surgeon, decontamination chamber, hayshed, linen, church, dry goods, firewood.

It is believed that the water used in the shower blocks had chemicals added to ensure adequate disinfection of arrivals.

Before coming to the defunct station, I was warned about wild bees and snakes. Of which, I see neither. What I do encounter however, is a group of twelve, maybe fourteen swallows. Hovering and perching on the electricity wires above me: they follow. Each time I look up, they are there.

The church is on the outskirts of the station. It is not clear what faith the church held. A tree and long grass have grown through broken floorboards. Further away, is a cemetery.

Down next to the shoreline, see how the salt rush and mangrove have been able to hold ground? The gesture is small but it is an act, nonetheless.

Brushes of orange and soft rusty pink. I look up and the swallows are looking down at me and I look back at them.

Garden Island

Figure 7: Garden Island, South Australia (Eadie, 2021d)

To reach this island you need to cross a small bridge over a body of water that is called North Arm Creek. Once you are over the bridge the ground rises up on each side of you. There are three decades worth of landfill that form these grassy slopes.

Where the land drops down to the river there are dirt tracks that lead to rubble, mangrove, and burnt-out tyres rims. This place is unsteady:

She told me the wind is cheeky here

it knocks around old bones

it draws into nostrils and sticks

making everything smell damp.

She took me to a dug-out church

carved-out slopes/ smell of burnt

and showed me how there are

prayers held

in the ridges of these slopes/

underground

safe

from dust (and sunlight and people and hungry foxes)

but not from me/

I bowled and cut through their low hum

I asked her: where are the black swan

and just like the wind outside/ I was too clumsy in this

place attached to another dreaming

and despite my best intention   all I could see was a carcass

caught in the/

St Kilda

Figure 8: St Kilda, South Australia (Eadie, 2021e)

There is no saint with this name. This place is named St Kilda because it reminded a Scotsman of his home. Standing on the shore, you are looking across the Barker Inlet – Mudlangga. See there, on the far left, white, that is the wheat factory at Mutton Cove.

Imagine this: not far behind these rocks are salt plains from which salt brine is extracted. The brine is then pumped underneath the inlet to a processing plant that converts the liquid into soda ash. All the by-products of this chemical conversion are drained into the river: calcium chloride, ammonia salts, and other insoluble residues mix with the river floor, which becomes so thick that regular dredging of up to eleven metres is required so that ships can continue to enter the port.

In 1924 the telegraph office requests the suburb name be changed to the Kaurna word Moilong (*where the tide comes in*) but local protest puts a stop to that (Taylor, 2003).

At the time of writing this text, around 10 hectares of mangroves and 35 hectares of saltmarsh in this sanctuary are dying or dead from salt brine leeching into the mud flats. [6]

Every summer, when inland waterways dry up, thousands of black swans migrate to this mangrove swamp.

There is a sign at the entrance of the mangrove sanctuary that has nothing on it. When I inquire about it, the woman at the kiosk answers by saying ‘this is council land’.

You might say:

that sign is a warning to those swan, but they would let you know: they have seen death before.

The ground is too full: too much salt.

Figure 9: This is government land she said (Eadie, 2021f)

Mutton Cove – Mudlangga

Now we are back on Mudlangga. We are facing the estuary. Deep breath in. It is so beautiful here. Ignore that dank smell. This river which has held/holds: unburnt limestone, lead, sediment, sewage, salt, mercury, fertiliser dust and a ship graveyard.

This river which carried/carries so many birds whose names I do not know.

Figure 10: Standing with/in the river (Eadie, 2021g)

Need to watch where one walks around here, a man with a dog says as he passes me.

Shells and small crabs and stone and mangrove roots dance around the rumble and fresh dog shit. Low and muddy and humming. I agree with him.

Conclusion

I am

standing at the river mouth

there are so many birds that I do not know the name of

Yarta Puulti and Mudlangga are names of this Country, Kaurna Yarta.

I do not know if I am pronouncing the words correctly, but you explain that this should not stop me from learning them/

you explain that respect is measured by feet on

ground and

that the water

flows through the mouth from two directions/ I say:

you seem to be able take our shame and eat it not only that you caress it.

you explain:

the sound the river refuses when meeting saltwater takes such a deep breath as the ocean washes her

but the translation

it is not in order because we

are still speaking different languages which the wind tries to cut so as to form shared gestures but

we

trip over

moving how pilgrims do:

still misunderstanding

what should not be taken.

Notes

[1] Professor Mick Dodson explains: 'For Aboriginal Australians, Country has an altogether different meaning. When we say Country, we might mean homeland, or tribal or clan area and we might mean more than just a place on the map. We are not necessarily referring to a geographical place… For us, Country is a word for all the values, places, resources, stories, and cultural obligations associated with that area and its features' (Para 1, 2009). Accordingly, the word 'country' will be capitalised in this article to respect and prioritise the Aboriginal relationship to place that is embodied in the Aboriginal-English word Country.

[2] 'To the west, Wongayerlo (the water where the sun sinks – Saint Vincent Gulf), flowed past Mudlangga (the place of the nose – Lefevre Peninsula) which was separated by a sea creek from Yarta Puulti (the place of slumber – now the Port Adelaide district), believed to be where the birds flew each night to sleep' (Manning 2002; also see Telfer & Malone, 2012, p. 49).

[3] This is a nod towards the incredible work, *Wild Policy Indigeneity and the Unruly Logics of Intervention* (2020) by Tess Lea. Lea demonstrates how it is government policy that is wild, not the places and people who are their target. Walking along the river it becomes sharply apparent that the industrial development is the unruly force, not the degraded or contaminated zones themselves.

[4] See: https://www.etymonline.com/word/thing /

[5] For further exploration of what might constitute a *pluriverse* in context of understanding place as Country, see: Muecke, S & Eadie, J 2020 Ways of Life: Knowledge Transfer and Aboriginal Heritage Trails. *Educational Philosophy and Theory 53*(8): 1208.

[6] Writes Yambo Ouologuem in his poem 'Tomatoes' (1975).

[7] See: https://energymining.sa.gov.au/minerals/mining/mines_and_quarries/dry_creek_salt_field; https://www.epa.sa.gov.au/articles/2020/12/18/investigation_into_dieback_of_st_kilda_mangroves and; https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-01-06/urgent-action-needed-to-save-st-kilda-mangroves-near-adelaide/13035768.

Works cited

Amery, R. (2002). WEEDING OUT SPURIOUS ETYMOLOGIES: TOPONYMS ON THE ADELAIDE PLAINS. In *The Land is a Map.* (pp.165-180). ANU E Press.

Amery, R. & Buckskin, V. K. (2014). Pinning down Kaurna names: Linguistic issues arising in the development of the Kaurna Placenames Database. In I. D. Clark, L. Hercus & L. Kostanski (Eds.) *Indigenous and minority placenames: Australian and international perspectives*, (pp. 187-213). ANU Press.

Brown, B. (2001). Thing theory. *Critical Inquiry, 28*(1), 1-22. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1344258

Clarke, P. (1998). The Aboriginal presence in Kangaroo Island, South Australia. In J. Simpson & L. Hercus (eds) *History in portraits biographies of nineteenth century South Australian Aboriginal people*, (pp. 14-48). Southwood Press.

Dodson, M. (2009). *Speech by Prof. Mick Dodson 17 February 2009 : National Press Club, Canberra.* Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies. (AIATSIS) https://aiatsis.library.link/portal/Speech-by-Prof.-Mick-Dodson-17-February-2009-/AFDmXP2Dg5k/

Eadie, J. (2020). Experiment in reflection - part 1, 2, 3 [photograph, painting, collage]

Eadie, J. (2021a). The Port-Yarta Puulti River, South Australia [photograph]

Eadie, J. (2021b). Broken Map [collage]

Eadie, J. (2021c). The Port-Yarta Puulti River (Barket Inlet), South Australia [photograph]

Eadie, J. (2021d). Garden Island, South Australia [photograph, paint]

Eadie, J. (2021e). St Kilda, South Australia [photographs]

Eadie, J. (2021f). This is government land she said [photograph]

Eadie, J. (2021g). Standing with/in the river [photograph]

Gibbs, A. (2005). Fictocriticism, Affect, Mimesis: Engendering Differences. *TEXT: Journal of Writing and Writing Courses 9*(1). http://www.textjournal.com.au/april05/gibbs.htm

Hale, D. (2019). *MAPCO Map of Adelaide 1913. MAPCO Map and Plan Collection Online* http://mapco.net/adel1839/adelaide01a.htm

Haraway, D. (2003). *The companion species manifesto: dogs, people and significant otherness,* Prickly Paradigm Press.

Online Etymology Dictionary. Thing (n). In *Online Etymology Dictionary*. Retrieved 10 January 2021, from https://www.etymonline.com/word/thing

Johnston, G. & Harbison, P. (2005). Chapter 12 - Urban Ecological Communities 3: The Barker Inlet-Port River Estuary. In C. B. Daniels & C. J. Tait (Eds) *Adelaide: nature of a city: the ecology of a dynamic city from 1836 to 2036*, (pp. 287-312). Biocity: Centre for Urban Habitats.

Laing, O. (2011). *To the River,* Canongate Book.

Lea, T. (2020). *Wild policy: indigeneity and the unruly logics of intervention.* University of California Press.

Lobb, J. (2019). Relational ethics: writing about birds; writing about humans. In D. Hunn, F. Murphy, C. Noske & A. Surma (Eds) *Peripheral Visions* TEXT Special Issue, *TEXT Journal of writing and writing courses. 57*. http://www.textjournal.com.au/speciss/issue57/Lobb.pdf

Telfer, K W & Malone, G. (2012). City of Charles Sturt, Kaurna Meyunna Cultural Mapping: A Peoples Living Cultural Landscape. *Cultural Research Education Design*.

Manning, G. (2002). Aboriginal Australians 1837-1858. In Government of South Australia State Library, *Manning Index of South Australian History*. https://manning.collections.slsa.sa.gov.au/sa/aborigines/1858.htm

Muecke, S. & Eadie, J. (2020). Ways of Life: Knowledge Transfer and Aboriginal Heritage Trails. *Educational Philosophy and Theory, 53*(8), 1-13. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00131857.2020.1752185

Muecke, S. (2002). The Fall: Fictocritical Writing. *Parallax, 8*(4), 108-112. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1353464022000028000

O'Brien, U. Y.L. & Baker, A . G. (2019) Wardlipari Homeriver Vulnerable Observations. *ArtLink 39*(1), pp.48-53. https://www.artlink.com.au/articles/4746/wardlipari-homeriver-vulnerable-observations/

Ouologuem, Y. (1975) Tomatoes. In W Soyinka (Ed), *Poems of Black Africa,* (pp. 94-96). Heinemann.

Taylor, E. (2003). *The History and Development of St Kilda South Australia.* Lions Club of Salisbury: Salisbury, South Australia. https://catalogue.nla.gov.au/Record/877733