

## 8. Lingering Inheritance

'We were brought up with this ... stuff'

Julia Torpey Hurst

My doctoral research focused on developing a spatial approach to oral history storytelling to create a biographical landscape history scattered across locations in the Blue Mountains, Western Sydney and areas of coastal Sydney, as directed by the Aboriginal storytellers. Together, our aim has been to illuminate the subtleties of attachment to place that inform Aboriginal identity – the contemporary and historical, political, environmental, and artistic representations and connections to, and in, place. In our project, 'place' refers to a chosen locality significant to the storyteller's history. It has become a metaphor or signifier, a catalyst to connect, add to, or withdraw from, dominant historical narratives of Aboriginal Sydney as storytellers choose to locate and to frame their own history and ways of being/belonging.

Following these ideas, this chapter will focus on these stories: the 'intangible' ones, the unreal, the peripheral knowledge and feelings for place which many people are developing, or asserting. People's way of telling and knowing, when talking about their relationship to place and history in urban locations, challenges their previous erosion as Aboriginal people who continue to have place connections.

This chapter draws upon research around the production of an enhanced ebook, *At the Heart of It...Place Stories Across Darug and Gundungurra Lands*, which is linked with a larger Australian Research Council-funded project at The Australian National University called 'Deepening Histories of Place: Exploring Indigenous Landscapes of National and International Significance'. The stories in this chapter have been reproduced with the permission of the storytellers.

With the assistance of Aboriginal people living in Western Sydney and the Blue Mountains, we visited places of personal significance – talking and listening. We have often come across a voice, a wind, a shadow and a lingering feeling of the land ... or something. What is it that we are experiencing? A warning? A welcoming? A testing?

As I began to invite people to talk with me, to record and film their history in place, I was given a list from a local Aboriginal community organisation of people who might 'be the best to talk to' to inform my research. I was warned

not to talk with people who were described as being 'off with the fairies'. This direction implied, purposefully or not, that such people's ways of being were not a good representation of the Aboriginal people, or the Aboriginal history of the area, often identified as 'Darug'. Such people's history does not fit within the conventional practices of academic history<sup>1</sup> and they are not a 'good' representation of 'us' (referring to the community who in this case at the preliminary stage of my research project was the representative organisation) as urban Aboriginal people or of who and what 'we' think our Aboriginality should be.

Within this project, the personal and spiritual narratives of the storytellers have been recorded and honoured to create a larger historical narrative about the places 'in between' more dominant narratives of Aboriginal history in Western Sydney; the important personal places that inform a person's history, identity and connectivity to the people around them and the landscape they frequent. As Aboriginal philosopher Mary Graham has commented, 'The two most important kinds of relationship in life are, firstly, those between land and people, and, secondly, those amongst people themselves, the second always being contingent upon the first'.<sup>2</sup>

To complete my oral history research, I have worked with a 'storywork methodology' as defined by Jo-ann Archibald, a Sto:lo woman of the Lower Fraser River of British Columbia. Archibald explains:

the words *story* and *work* together signal the importance and seriousness of undertaking ... [the] work of making meaning through stories, whether they are traditional or lived experience stories. Seven principles comprise storywork: respect, responsibility, reverence, reciprocity, wholism, interrelatedness and synergy.<sup>3</sup>

Positioning my research within a storywork methodology is important as the research seeks to honour the traditional, cultural and ecological knowledge each storyteller shares in our conversations, and to also bring together and to bind the historical and the contemporary stories that inform their identity and the process of being able to 'tell'; that these personal histories and experiences in place are valid irrespective of *known* traditional stories or established place-based narratives. This process of storytelling is informed by the relationship between the listener and the storyteller and, most importantly for this project, the 'relationships among the self'.<sup>4</sup> Many of the storytellers who agreed to work

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1 Hokari explains that a conventional practice of history which is based on time-oriented chronology, teleology and historicity is only one mode of exploring the past. See Hokari 2000: 1.

2 Graham 1999.

3 Archibald 2008b: x.

4 Archibald 2008a: 373.

with me have had to look inwards to find the courage to talk, to be filmed, and to be open to their own insecurities about their history and to heal from the criticism their stories have historically incurred from family members, friends and their own community.

This project has occurred against a wider landscape that has been re-inscribed, erased and over-written;<sup>5</sup> a product of colonialism and the ‘recalling and forgetting, selecting and erasing [of] memories’.<sup>6</sup> A postcolonial discourse of power has emerged as a result of this forgetting, erasing and selecting within and between Aboriginal community groups, government and corporate institutions and even within families.

As George Morgan has explained in his book *Unsettled Places: Aboriginal People in Urbanisation in New South Wales*, it was not until the late 1940s that some academic researchers began to notice Aboriginal people living in cities and towns.<sup>7</sup> When they were eventually noticed, Morgan explains, ‘there was almost a universal perception among researchers, that those living in cities had experienced “cultural loss” and were in a state of stalled transition between tradition and modernity’.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, urban Aboriginal people were seen as ‘stubbornly adhering to remembered cultural remnants, supplemented with the folklore of persecution’.<sup>9</sup> Marcia Langton has commented that previous researchers have framed urban Aboriginal people’s lifestyle negatively against assimilationist assumptions and ideals and the ‘culture of poverty’ theory to ‘explain away the tragic living conditions of Aboriginal people which has resulted from their dispossession’.<sup>10</sup> Failing to perceive the insider’s view – how Black people themselves perceive and understand their conditions<sup>11</sup> – it appeared that the movement of Aboriginal people from their original homelands and their survival in urban areas resulted in the loss of attachment to land, as if the original people of Sydney had moved somewhere.<sup>12</sup>

As such, conclusions regarding ‘who and/or what is/was a particular kind’ of Aboriginal group are derived from often patchy historical evidence and ethnographic interpretations.<sup>13</sup> The Darug language group whose landscape includes Western Sydney and the site of Sydney itself, was originally recorded by surveyor and anthropologist RH Mathews in the 1890s. As well as being affiliated through kinship ties and trade, and while acknowledging differences

5 Ashcroft et al. 1995, cited in Taylor 2000.

6 Healy 1997: 5, cited in Taylor 2000: 29.

7 Morgan 2006: 55.

8 Morgan 2006: 56.

9 See Rowley 1972: 17, cited in Langton 1981: 17.

10 Langton 1981: 18.

11 Langton 1981: 16.

12 Morgan 2006: 56.

13 Everett 2006: 63.

in vocabularies, RH Mathews considered the Darug people to have grammatical affinities with the Gundungurra people of the Blue Mountains, and with language groups that covered the 'Hawkesbury River and Cape Howe, extending inland till met by the great Wirajuri [sic] nation.'<sup>14</sup> Jim Kohen has also suggested a contested landscape of 'Darug Country', including the Blue Mountains in the west that stretched to the Pacific Ocean in the east, the Hawkesbury River in the north and Appin in the south.<sup>15</sup> Archaeological evidence suggests the Darug and Gundungurra were connected prior to European disruption, sharing an inter-tribal ceremonial ground in the Linden area of the Blue Mountains.<sup>16</sup> What is widely considered by the Aboriginal people I have worked with to be 'Right History' (tested, truthful, academic) versus 'Wrong History' (experiential and unverifiable experiences and knowledge) continues to be tested in Western Sydney and the Blue Mountains as the people I have been working with negotiate and renegotiate their place against a narrative of dispossession,<sup>17</sup> academic boundaries, emerging research, geographical landscape and changing cultural contexts. Historical, anthropological and archaeological academic re-writings of land and people are therefore powerful and often damaging tools; seeking the 'truth' through varied lenses and for often competing purposes, they can contradict or disregard beliefs held through Aboriginal oral history, family genealogy, family history, claims to Country and experiential events that cannot be easily explained.

Ideas of being, of what is the right way or the wrong way, the truthful way or the 'pretend' way to *be* an urban Aboriginal person in Western Sydney and the Blue Mountains are consciously and publicly debated. Kristina Everett has stated in her research on what she describes as a newly imagined Darug community, 'it is primarily the assumption that there is an on-going, continuous *genetic* link between living Darug descendants and the pre-contact Aboriginal people that contemporary Darug descendant identity claims are founded'.<sup>18</sup> Following what Marcia Langton has described as the 'insidious ideology of tribal and de-tribalised Aborigines',<sup>19</sup> Everett positions the Darug people in a historically colonial, administrative, assimilationist anthropological frame; that to be an urban Aboriginal person is to have lost the basis for any legitimate claims to be Aboriginal. This argument denies the lived experience of urban Aboriginal people as they have negotiated and survived colonisation and dispossession.

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14 Mathews 1902: 49, cited in Everett 2006.

15 Kohen 1993: 9.

16 Kelleher 2009: 100.

17 In her thesis Kristina Everett creates a narrative of early dispossession of culture and country claiming that urban Aboriginal people who now claim traditional ownerships are invariably culturally bereft and sometimes even physically extinct. See Everett 2006: 71.

18 Everett 2006: 64.

19 Langton 1981, cited in Carlson 2011: 35.

To be an Aboriginal person today then is to meet the official criteria<sup>20</sup> of the Australian government's three-point identification system endorsed since the 1980s. This system is often used as a framework to provide a means of 'formal' confirmation of ancestry and Aboriginal identity and 'belonging'. It is also used to identify 'access' to Aboriginal identified services.<sup>21</sup>

An Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander is a person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent who identifies as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and is accepted as such by the community in which he [or she] lives.<sup>22</sup>

This criterion maintains an assumed locality of belonging and way of being, and a presumed shared historical experience of Aboriginal people that denies a person's unique history and identity that often includes change and movement, disconnection and reconnection with family, community and country.

Bronwyn Carlson has commented, 'individuals find and express their Aboriginal identities in a range of ways',<sup>23</sup> via their employment, education, friendships and family, even choosing for example whether or not to publicly signal their Aboriginal heritage.

Many of the Aboriginal people I invited to share their stories have declined to be involved, concerned they might have been singled out to speak on behalf of the many – the representatives of a type of belonging, connection, or community. They were anxious about being called upon for this reason, despite my assurances that this was not what I was seeking.

I realised 'history making' is not for everyone. Some people just *don't*. They don't want to be filmed; they don't want to be identified. 'How did you get my number?' I have heard numerous times down the telephone line, fear and mistrust wavering in their voice. They *don't get* what this project is about, they don't get what connection with place might be, they don't have *it*, haven't experienced *it* and don't buy into *it*. They don't know why I would seek to talk with them.

I noticed during this process of invitation, and the establishment of relationships throughout my research, that there was a fear of community humiliation, which I think serves to further Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people's disconnection from valid and real urban Aboriginal histories and experiences that are occurring on the ground at this time. Many of these experiences remain unknown to wider

20 Carlson 2011: 12.

21 Carlson 2011.

22 Department of Aboriginal Affairs 1981, cited in Gardiner-Garden 2000: 2.

23 Carlson 2011: 18.

audiences, and thus perhaps strange and individual. Storytellers sometimes knowingly conveyed to me sensitive information during their oral history interview, criticising their friends, family and community organisation, and their own ideas and imaginings of belonging. The storytellers forged degrees of guarded trust and intimacy with me to confide, complain, explain and justify their ways of 'being' against others around them, comparing themselves and their knowledge of place, history, community and 'connection' against those people. Pausing mid-sentence, they would often reflect upon a thoughtless throw-away line that nevertheless was extremely valuable to my process of history making and place making because these unguarded comments consciously, or not, informed a wider network of relationships and connections across place, and provided a glimpse into the social fabric of the community I was working with. Directed by the storyteller, I was warned not to share these illuminating comments publicly in our final videos, our 'makings of history', with anyone else: 'edit that out!'; 'don't say I said that!'; 'that bit's confidential!'; 'no one else knows!' These comments and moments of self-reflection ironically framed the storyteller with a point of valuable cultural difference – perhaps even notoriety – in which they revealed to me the foundations of their 'making', yet refused to allow me to share this with anyone else. During the process of making history in our private oral history interviews, information was at first shared openly, only to be reworked as the storytellers censored their own representations of themselves and their history for public consumption. To tell with a fear of repercussion from the community or not at all, to make public or to keep secret an experience, a belief, a way of doing or being. These decisions maintained a balance of power within the Aboriginal communities I was working with during our process of history making by managing and denying access to knowledge to myself and a wider audience.

The places we have visited in the Blue Mountains and Western Sydney are therefore representative of living histories; a diverse 'social-scape' crossing country that could conventionally be described as urban, but includes world heritage, national park, private property and mining lands. My journey has taken me to wastelands of discarded memory and second-hand goods, to family homes of 50 years, and to places in between: where a 'place's past speaks into our present',<sup>24</sup> revealing itself as a ghostly presence, dreamtime event or supernatural occurrence to the Aboriginal people I have talked with, those 'who see, listen and feel history'.<sup>25</sup>

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24 Thrush 2011: 58.

25 Hokari 2000: 2.

The strange and the familiar have manifested themselves in the landscape we have chosen to visit together. Perhaps validating our identity and connection to place as Aboriginal people of Sydney, unsettled histories and memories are experienced by some as non-conventional understanding or communication with country that is signalling to us as we walk – a knowing, emotional landscape that recognises the history of the people who are visiting; providing them with an access point to deep time as they carry with them their contemporary Aboriginal identity and worldview.

‘This is why we are here, I was told to bring you here,’<sup>26</sup> she said.

It became clear to me that over the past 30 years, the Darug people have been experimenting, discussing and living various ideas about how to ‘be’ Aboriginal.<sup>27</sup> They have begun to talk about who they are, to educate the public about their history and they are actively choosing how they are *being*. For example, Aboriginal people who identify with the Darug community have formed two separate groups. Both groups practise a different form of identity making. To cement (support) their claim of Aboriginality, the Darug Tribal Aboriginal Corporation seeks information and support by engaging with scholarly practices. Conversely, the Darug Custodian Aboriginal Corporation has developed a more cultural form of expression and behaviour to inform their identity.<sup>28</sup> These claims of an Aboriginal identity are, however, often ‘black-washed’ from the historical landscape<sup>29</sup> by land councils and other Aboriginal people who belong to different language groups. As Leanne Tobin has commented, ‘we have *real* dealings with the Land Councils here, they don’t recognise us as Darug people, they *refuse* to recognise us’.<sup>30</sup>

Video available online: [press.anu.edu.au/titles/aboriginal-history-monographs/long-history-deep-time/](http://press.anu.edu.au/titles/aboriginal-history-monographs/long-history-deep-time/).

### **Leanne Tobin, ‘Don’t Deny Me My Heritage’**

Source: Oral history interview by Julie Torpey.

In its most recent reincarnation, in October 2012, the Darug peoples’ identity was called into question yet again by the Deerubbin Local Aboriginal Land Council and the Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Land Council. Both of these councils are located within the boundaries of Darug land. Local newspapers and Sydney’s *Daily Telegraph* reported accusations of ‘ethnic fraud’ and ‘having no legitimate claim to being the descendants of Blacktown’s Aborigines’.<sup>31</sup>

26 Dianne Ussher, oral history interview by Julia Torpey, 8 August 2012, ‘Billabong’.

27 Everett 2009: 53.

28 Everett 2009: 53.

29 Foley 2007: 172.

30 Leanne Tobin, oral history interview by Julia Torpey, 3 April 2012, Springwood.

31 McClennan 2012.

Consequently, Blacktown City Council suspended its Indigenous policy at the time, excluding specific reference to the Darug people as traditional owners of the land.<sup>32</sup> Peter Read explains this situation further in his chapter, 'Dispossession is a Legitimate Experience'.

Threatening and unknown, the apparent 'newcomers' are routinely questioned about who they are and what constitutes their history. Branded as liars, as not being Aboriginal at all,<sup>33</sup> they have been told that 'the Darug do not exist' by members of the Deerubbin and Metropolitan Land Councils and other Aboriginal people in New South Wales. The Darug are not easily placed, they look Aboriginal, they live in the city where little Aboriginal heritage is visible and their culture is thought to have vanished.

The people I have been speaking with as part of my research, and the Deepening Histories of Place project, have often been walking across the land silently, between the loud voices and larger shadows and, for many, their history and identity has been unspoken, has tried to be forgotten, or does not fit nicely into what is imagined to be Australian Aboriginal history; it is on the periphery and vague. One Darug woman commented to me 'talking about history, caused a lot of drama for the Older Ones, they didn't want to acknowledge it, because of that time'.<sup>34</sup>

Continuing their existence, transforming and surviving via an ongoing dialogue with place, culture and history, there is more to the Darug story than meets the eye. Many claims are experiential and uncanny, and cannot be proven through observable facts.<sup>35</sup> As Kristina Everett has discussed, drawing on anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli, 'it is the non-Aboriginal historical records, ethnographies, reports, and interpretations that dominate ideas of [traditional] and authentic Aboriginal culture'.<sup>36</sup>

My research has explored ways of knowing and connecting with place with some of these people who identify as Darug. Many of the stories we have recorded are yet to be included in public history telling. These stories are being recorded on the landscape now, looking to the past, present and the future, framed as a history in the making.

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32 McClellan 2012.

33 Foley 2007: 172.

34 Jacinta Tobin, oral history interview by Julia Torpey, 17 October 2012, Mount Victoria.

35 Boyd 2011: 186.

36 Everett 2006: 17.

## Arriving on Country

For many of the people I have talked with, connection is everywhere; for those that believe in it, *it* has power, and gives *them* power. This connection is relayed through telling, talking of experience, and being in place, being in *it*. Directed by the storytellers who have accepted my invitation to talk about their history, in places which are connected to their wellbeing, identity and histories, many of the people I have encountered have been waiting for an opportunity to share their experiences of country, and regularly visit these places for respite, leisure, to inform their artistic productions, to care for the landscape, and to connect with family and ancestors. Our recordings, located in a specific place, are a reflection of established relationships and connections to place that have been developing for some time, that is, a reflection of the storytellers' past and their future in sound and video. So we visit diverse landscapes, and we talk about history – and record. These recordings were completed between 2011 and 2013.

Walking the landscape, the country is alive and the Aboriginal people I talk with sense history, the ghosts and spirits are all around us creating as we experience them, places that are of individual significance: the green moss growing under the rock ledge; the magpie elder who keeps a watchful eye on us; the feather presenting itself as Totem along a walking track answering a silent inner call; the whirling wind of the voices high above the valley – we are being noticed by the ancestors.

Sometimes, this belief or connection is shown and learnt by being with community, on cultural days and walking with elders. Many times, however, for the people I have talked with, their belief in a spiritual and intangible history is experienced in place, triggering a physical and/or emotional response from, and of, the past. History is sensed, felt, smelt and seen in visions and read on the landscape. It always has been. It is also protected. For many of the women I have talked with, this belief of experiencing history has run through generations of family. Belief is something that has been handed down, so the uncanny is not unusual or out of place or something to be frightened of, rather, it is a signal of belonging. It is a valued and recognised gift of cultural heritage and a trait, they say, of their history, Aboriginality and of being on landscape, in the right place at the right time, or sometimes, even the wrong place. It is a belief of spirit, religion, spiritual ancestors, haunting ghosts, and markers of identity. This is to me, and to the people I have talked with, more than mere genetics. Known heritage places are guarded or, in some cases, gated to keep the experience-seekers out; *knowledge* and *experience* of place on the landscape empowers and separates.

Locals have sought to protect, empower and separate an identified heritage place in the Blue Mountains; to mislead visitors they created a physical barrier to a place they know is of significant cultural value to their local Aboriginal community, and also of value to themselves. Signalling to inquisitive strangers that this place was out of bounds, it was hoped the physical marker (gate) would repel, and this is exactly what happened during my research and is an example of just how much we rely on these markers of 'place' to find welcoming and belonging or otherwise.

During my visit to this place of storytelling and significant cultural heritage, our immediate environment and the features of our expected destination were familiar to me. I had however not expected to see a 'gate' and to become 'locked out' of the destination I sought to visit.

Disoriented, I was unsure of how to proceed *into* this now unwelcoming place. I was concerned about what might be occurring beyond the gate so I waited for our storyteller to arrive. Perhaps we were not meant to be here after all I thought. Perhaps secret business was underway. Perhaps by being there we had upset or disturbed someone. Our storyteller had previously explained to us this place was being protected and managed to ensure past injustices to the site and the people it was connected to (both past and present) were rectified. I understood that not everything in and of this place could be explained to me. I knew in this location, which held secret and sacred heritage, *I* was out of place, and now I was literally locked out. Our storyteller pulled up in his car next to us. 'What are ya doing?' he asked sensing our unease. 'Oh don't worry,' he explained, 'that's just the neighbours, they're trying to protect this place. They know how significant it is to us. We didn't put it up!'<sup>37</sup> He laughed as he ushered us through.

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Video available online: [press.anu.edu.au/titles/aboriginal-history-monographs/long-history-deep-time/](http://press.anu.edu.au/titles/aboriginal-history-monographs/long-history-deep-time/).

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### **Jason Brown, 'Watching Over the Land'**

Source: Oral history interview by Julie Torpey

Nikki Parsons-Gardiner has also relayed her experience travelling across country, 'being led by spirit, wherever they wanted to take me' to find her identity. She commented, 'everything around us gives us messages, whether it's the trees, whether it's the animals, and particularly the birds, they've always got messages for us'.<sup>38</sup> During this research, the intangible was introduced to us when we walked through the land and talked about history. When we visited places of

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37 Nicole Parsons-Gardiner, oral history interview by Julia Torpey, 11 September 2012, Nurragingy Reserve, Blacktown.

38 Jo Clancy, oral history interview by Julia Torpey, 21 August 2012, Wentworth Falls.

refuge, escape, reflection, healing and meditation. On these journeys, the power was with the storyteller; places were brought alive, having the storyteller's needs and life experience placed upon it.

The ghosts of place include the ghosts of the living,<sup>39</sup> the energy and emotion of history that are held within a person's identity. Brought to place unwittingly or often unverballed, ghosts are revealed – in body language and behaviour, positioned in relation to my own identity as a researcher, an unknown Aboriginal person 'wanting something'. So the angle of the camera and what it records, or does not record, matters. It records choice: choosing a landscape, choosing how to perform, choosing to answer questions, choosing what to reveal to me by directing me and telling me what I can and cannot film, choosing to trust and build a relationship with me, or choosing simply to engage with their place, reacting to what their place is showing them, and perhaps choosing not to talk with me at all.

These relationships to place point to a gap in the Aboriginal history of Western Sydney and the Blue Mountains that is only recently starting to be balanced. Going into a place, and choosing a site that is of personal significance, that may not be connected to wider stories of creation or colonial history, is validating because it acknowledges an alternative history that is being played out now. Diverse stories range from recognisable 'traditional' ancestral stories of the past that we have heard in recorded form before to more contemporary stories of spirituality and the uncanny, that is, survival. Steadfast and sure in excited, hushed conversation, a participant claimed 'it was a dreamtime event!'<sup>40</sup> One that was so special that the story could not be relayed on film; to more contemporary tellings of experiential and unbelievable events of family legend, ability and heritage 'the table walked out the door!'<sup>41</sup>

Other stories have expressed the temporal grief of what could have been, as storytellers imagine and romanticise a utopian Aboriginal lifestyle that was taken away from them.

Although widely discussed by many of the Darug people I was working with, Nikki Parsons-Gardiner was one of the first people to verbalise the impact of history making on her identity and those around her. She emphasised the fear of speaking up about her own experience of identity, history and place. She explains it like this:

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39 Avery 1997: 823.

40 David King, oral history interview by Julia Torpey, 22 August 2012, Katoomba.

41 Jacinta Tobin, oral history interview by Julia Torpey, 17 October 2012, Mount Victoria.

I know that I am from here, and this is my rightful place, I'm able to honour, I'm able to speak for, and for the people that aren't able to do that ... We know for a lot of Darug people, because we were hit first in this area, well in Sydney and then out in the Hawkesbury and Parramatta area, and a lot of people moved out, or a lot of people were moved in, and because we were the first to have the white bloodlines run through here and people were white skinned, and there was a lot of stigma in early days ... when culture and all that was taken, that being Aboriginal was wrong. A lot of Darug people, and correct me if I'm wrong anyone out there, [she says] a lot of Darug people weren't able to speak up for themselves and I think still in a way, are unable to do that, or not do that properly ...

Tapping into energy to remember the past, she continues:

A lot of us carry generational stuff of trauma. We may not have been affected by the stolen generation ... didn't happen in my family, but I worked out not long ago that I carried the trauma of that, for the main reason being that what it meant to me, was that they didn't think my culture or my people were good enough. You know, so you carry that ... they tried to extinct us. I believe that a lot of us carry trauma from colonisation because the family bloodline comes down ... through birthing. You're mother held that; that comes through to us in emotion and in energy ... you know, there is a lot of healing that needs to be done for our people ...<sup>42</sup>

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Video available online: [press.anu.edu.au/titles/aboriginal-history-monographs/long-history-deep-time/](http://press.anu.edu.au/titles/aboriginal-history-monographs/long-history-deep-time/).

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### **Nicole Parsons-Gardiner, 'I've Always Been'**

Source: Oral history interview by Julie Torpey.

Indeed, in this project, the power is with the storyteller and the believer. Our experience 'on location', places me in a relationship with the people I meet and work with, interlocking and in tension.<sup>43</sup> Together we begin and experience a conversation that is difficult to explain. We traverse a life story, spirituality, crises, and belonging. As Motz states, believing involves the specific choices and actions of individuals in particular historical, geographical, and social contexts,<sup>44</sup> and following De Certeau, 'the act of saying it and considering it as true'.<sup>45</sup> Even myself, the researcher, is caught unawares wondering, and eager to

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42 Nicole Parsons-Gardiner, oral history interview by Julia Torpey, 11 September 2012, Nurragingy Reserve, Blacktown.

43 Avery 1997: 198.

44 Motz 1998: 349.

45 De Certeau 1984: 178, cited in Motz 1998: 349.

find truth in my experiences. 'I know who you are!', Robyn said as I began to introduce myself before we sat down to film in her home. 'They all followed you from your car to the balcony, through the front door. You have four [invisible] people with you.'<sup>46</sup>

Through our ghosts of belonging, we place ourselves in relation to one another. We place ourselves in relation to a physical place through our desire to belong, feeling a tie of kinship with that place. We experience a social tie to the spiritual and the physical world.

For some people, this is therapy; being together, they haven't talked before. In honouring this process, the experience of something barely visible, shrouded as another being, or seemingly not there at all, infiltrates place and story as defined by the storyteller:

We're here in this place, Narraginy Reserve, across the bridge is Eastern Creek, my grandfather's country ... energetically it just feels good and I will sit here, usually on this rock, and meditate. I'll just sit down here and connect with my ancestors.

... Here we go, all the crows have turned up, in big numbers, they're a messenger, Wargan the crow. So even they think it's right to be down here. So any Aboriginal stuff I guess, is when crow come[s] along for me, and any angelic or spirit stuff that's not connected to Aboriginal, that when the white cockatoos come ...

When I visited a billabong with Dianne Ussher behind Katoomba in the Blue Mountains, she expressed her belief in the Holy Ghost, surrounding her and guiding her decisions, this is her Aboriginality, her spirit and self:

When Karen asked me for a place, I said on the telephone, I'll wait to be shown ... quite literally just in my third eye, this [place] ... was shown to me on Monday night ... Don't question, don't waste time trying to think about things, because ... there is something higher ... if you just give time, you will be shown exactly the right time, in exactly the right place ... and that is what I did and this is where I'm shown! ... It feels very mystical, like its filled with good, holy sacred blood ... and that there has been really happy times around this water ... and when I've come down here in recent times, it maintains that place of joy ... and that's the essence for me ...<sup>47</sup>

46 Robyn Caughlan, oral history interview by Julia Torpey, 28 November 2012, Colyton.

47 Dianne Ussher, oral history interview by Julia Torpey, 8 August 2012, 'Billabong'.

Artist and playwright Leanne Tobin explains that upon moving to her home in the Blue Mountains:

It's almost like the spirits are supporting my quest to put forward their story, you know ... everything I've done has been given like a big tick!

I had my cousin who is a spirit woman. She sees spirits ... especially the old spirits ... she stepped out the back verandah and saw a young fella. She came to me afterwards and said, 'There's a young fella down the back there, he's pointing up to the gully here, he's saying Nullaway! Nullaway!' I finally went and looked it up and researched and found out it means 'camp', 'camp', 'to camp here' and it's just so apt because it's just the most perfect place to camp ...<sup>48</sup>

Her sister Jacinta continues: 'We were brought up with the spirit stuff'; familiar smells of people passing, of older women's rose perfume lingering in the air and the always identifiable smell of (smelly) 'rotten' feet of a much loved aunty; visionary dreams, hands hold the shoulders and a warning feeling inside that tells you you're in the wrong place.<sup>49</sup>

Nikki explains her experience:

When I was younger, sitting on the side of the creek, and the fog would be coming up, and next minute you'd start to hear ... like ... a battle happening ... it was really bizarre. We'd all get up and run ...

Next time we'd go down, the same things would happen. And of course latter on in life you'd find that that was where the battles or massacres had happened. Even back then, that energy, we were still picking up on it ...<sup>50</sup>

These sensations, as Motz explains, allow for individual interpretation and use.<sup>51</sup> These sensations however, are recognised within the community of people I have worked with, as a way of knowing. These lingering experiences give many of them something to hold onto that is their own experience, as well as perhaps presenting a history that is beyond a western view of what Aboriginal history might be.

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48 Leanne Tobin, oral history interview by Julia Torpey, 3 April 2012, Springwood.

49 Jacinta Tobin, oral history interview by Julia Torpey, 17 October 2012, Mount Victoria.

50 Nicole Parsons-Gardiner, oral history interview by Julia Torpey, 11 September 2012, Nurragingy Reserve, Blacktown.

51 Motz 1998: 350.

The experiences and intuitions outlined above point to a gap in Aboriginal history of Western Sydney and the Blue Mountains that is only recently starting to be balanced. Going into a place, it has been reported back to me by the people I have worked with, and choosing a site that is of personal significance that may not be connected to wider stories of creation or colonial history, is validating because it acknowledges an alternative history that is being played out now.

As American author Toni Morrison in *Avery* encourages, 'that which appears absent can indeed be a seething presence'.<sup>52</sup> Through sight, sound, scent and movement, these experiences are reinforced by verbal storytelling, emotion, and the validation of identity. The stories that are coming to the surface are part of an energetic culture eager to share alternate ways of knowing.

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<sup>52</sup> Avery 1997: 17.

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