

Over Head

NOTES ON THE RIVER

**PAUL MAGEE,
PAUL COLLIS,
AND JEN
CRAWFORD**

ABSTRACT: This is the first chapter of *A Book That Opens*, a volume containing story-based knowledge about river management by Barkindji people in outback New South Wales, Australia. Passing on vital understandings of how better to live in such environs, the book is also intended to provide a different sort of reading experience, and indeed time, by generating a form of writing that brings orality to the fore. Specifically, the book's 13 chapters are each improvised on the spot, taped, and then transcribed. But nothing is really made up on the spot. The rivers of story and pre-given phrasing from which everyday speech arises, in European and indigenous cultures alike, contour this chapter, a university seminar dialogue serving as prelude to our conversations some months later in Bourke and Brewarrina. What is more, those rivers bring us to speak of reading, the kind of reading one does when open to Country.

KEYWORDS: reading country, dialogic knowledge production, fiction, rivers, time

reception

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The Pennsylvania State

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Location:

Room 6c21, at the University of Canberra, in the suburb of Bruce.

Time:

12.30–13.30, Monday 29 August 2022

Speakers:

Paul Collis, Jen Crawford, Paul Magee and an Overhead Projector; with Subhash Jaireth, Vahri McKenzie, and Russell Smith.

JEN:

I come from Aotearoa New Zealand and my background is Pakeha. So I'm a white New Zealander with I suppose mostly Irish ancestry. I arrived here in Ngūnawal country about seven years ago.

I give a little bit of background like that because it's part of how we begin in the place that I'm from in Aotearoa New Zealand. And I'm acknowledging that background as a preface to acknowledging Country, the Country that we're on now, Ngūnawal Country.

I'm also acknowledging the ancestors that have held the work of maintaining a relationship with Country, a reciprocal relationship of responsibilities, care, and communication, that has been happening for millennia. Through my connection with Paul Collis, I've had experience of seeing it in action up in northern New South Wales, on Barkindji Country, and on Nyempe Country. So, my acknowledgment is to those Countries as well.

I would also like to acknowledge Paul, and any other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who may be with us today.

PAUL C.:

Well said.

[To PAUL M., *whisper*]

You go next, I'll be the conductor.

OVERHEAD PROJECTOR:

What is fiction?

PAUL M.:

I'm Paul Magee and I work here with Jen and Paul, teaching poetry, and teaching research methods I hope in such a way as to bring out the poetics of investigation. The three of us are doing a project and the details of it will slowly tumble out over the course of this conversation. But we might start by saying that one of the ways we're trying to get the book you are in to cohere—given it basically involves talking off the top of our heads—is by having a set of driving

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questions. One of these is on the overhead. The way these questions are meant to inform the research is not quite clear to us. They're our driving questions: that might mean they are the questions that drive us. But it could also be that they are the sort of questions you ponder while driving. Or even just a kind of radio track in the background.

PAUL C.:

I thought about the question, "What is fiction?" on a long road-trip to Newcastle on the weekend, and I must say,

[*singing*]

Words . . . don't come easy

Having said that, I'll give you an example of fiction: a poem by a young Barkindji person, who's not as young as he once was, who is trying to connect with traditional culture, and found part of a letter from his great-grandfather, who he never met. The letter described how the Darling River, down near Menindee, was formed by one of two snakes. The two snakes were one snake—the Rainbow Serpent—and they separated. One went towards Weenaring, the other towards Menindee. He found that letter in a book, took those words and wrote this poem, co-authored by a grandfather he'd never met, now dead. This is fiction—sort of.

Hero Black, Remembered

Biammii changed shapes at night.

One became two. Two snakes—the Rainbow
one snake, Guldabira, danced North.

The other, Wartanuring, danced South—down
Menindee way.

Rainbow Snakes made the rivers. Made them join, in
love.

Guldabira danced again, towards Wanaaring,
leaving water stones and ochre.

After the rivers joined, the Rainbow Snakes became
one again.

Biammii left the skins' remnants on Earth, and then
He returned to the sky.

Water stones bring water, ochre paint bring spirits into
the body.

My river, Barka, she's empty now.

But I know where the water stones are. . .

I'll paint-up in ochre, and crush mica to add,
to make my black skin shine.
I'll dance and Biammii will see me.

That's fiction. But there are a lot of people—Barkindji people—who could believe that that is how the world was formed. Old Hero would have believed it.

So “fiction” is a dodgy term. It's supposed to mean non-truth. But there's elements of truth in the stories we allow ourselves to believe in.

PAUL M.:

You were just talking, in the poem, about using stone as paint. That is part of the poem's story, but it also conveys a knowledge about how things are done.

OVERHEAD PROJECTOR:

What is a river?

PAUL C.:

I'd love to know who was the first to do it, and what they were thinking.

I remember talking to an Italian bloke, about some of this traditional stuff. He's very interested in Aboriginal stuff. Calls himself Aboriginal.

I said, “You can say that to me, brother. But don't say that out in Bourke. They'll kill you.”

He believes strongly in JC, the Bible. He said, “But Paul, you don't really believe that those rainbows made the rivers, do you? Surely you know that's not true.”

“Maybe not.”

He was adamant that Christ walked on the earth, and on water, that he did miracles, moved the stone, ascended into heaven with his full body. No other bodies there, just him.

Well, we don't know if God's got a body. We don't know that.

PAUL M.:

What excites me about this project is the possibility that things might have powers that we don't yet realize. A stone could actually be a thing for writing with.

You know, people have now started making paper out of stone?

The paper in this notebook I got on the weekend [*holds it up*], is made of calcium carbonate—the stuff you find in chalk and marble and limestone—and some resin. It's not tree. You can write on it and it's waterproof.

Paper can actually be stone.

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JEN:

This is really going to complicate scissors, paper, rock.

PAUL C.:

Take that with you when you go up to Mars and write a poem.

PAUL M.:

We've come to "What is a river?" on the overhead—the questions are just going to keep moving on a loop. They are our four driving questions. But we don't have to be driven by the immediacy of them. I'm wanting to stick with the first for a bit longer: "What is fiction?"

Maybe we could approach it from our perspective as teachers of fiction?

JEN:

"What is fiction?" and "What is non-fiction?" are questions university students have to get their heads around. We can say something teacherly about truthiness at that point. But the questions don't go away. As Paul Collis often asks me, which is the one that's made up? Which is the one that isn't made up? At a fundamental level, it's a deeply unstable division.

What I've been thinking of, in relation to all of these questions, concerns improvisation, and figures.

That'll seem like a side-track.

But there's a loop back to the question, to do with memory, experience, and the ways that we put figures—remembered figures—together, and they become something new.

That, to me, is the kind of river that is both fiction and nonfiction.

PAUL C.:

Fiction has to operate with certain parameters, doesn't it? Otherwise it becomes nonsense.

OVERHEAD PROJECTOR:

How are you Paul Collis?

JEN:

We come to fiction out of things that we know, or enact, in some way.

PAUL C.:

Story is fundamental to people's development. If no-one speaks to a child for the first two years, that child won't develop speech. They won't develop their vocal cords.

PAUL M.:

The United Nations defines the unavailability of fantasy material as a human rights abuse. It's in their guidelines for the treatment of prisoners in warfare. You have to ensure prisoners access to a library. Not to have stories is deeply wounding.

OVERHEAD PROJECTOR:

How do we know where we are going?

PAUL C.:

In the segregation in Australian jails, there's no books, no pens, no nothing. They're locked up 23 hours a day, with one hour out for exercise and then back in single cells.

There's lots of rules being broken. I remember when Philip Ruddock was minister, he said, "Don't you tell us what to do with our Aborigines. We'll leave your United Nations."

PAUL M.:

Let me ask you something, Paul. Story is tied to Country in Indigenous cultures, and Country includes river, like along the Barka. So if the river is in some way damaged or wounded, is that a kind of assault on the capacity to tell story?

PAUL C.:

When the drought was on and the river started to empty, crime rates in those river towns went through the roof. Brewarrina, Walgett, Menindee, Wilcannia—it's 35 to 40% Aboriginal people in those towns. The crime was mainly from young kids: breaking lights, breaking windows. It's in direct relation to the river being dry.

OVERHEAD PROJECTOR:

What is fiction?

PAUL C.:

There was another drought that started about 1957 and went to about 1970. It was worse than this last one. But there were fewer people in the country, so there wasn't as much water being taken out of the river. And more water was getting into it. All the rain from Queensland, these cyclones, that would all drain back to the Darling, through the Bogan and Gwydir Rivers and all those places. When you drive from Bourke to Brewarrina now, it's all a floodplain. None of that water gets back in anymore. There's tons and tons of it. But back in that period, in the '60s, the river hardly changed levels at all. It was wide and

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it was really fast—quite a dangerous river to swim. But it didn't empty. This last drought it did.

Some kids were hanging themselves by the river, a direct response to the drying of it, and to other things in their life: poverty, police, stuff like that. No hope.

PAUL M.:

You think they chose the river as a definite location?

PAUL C.:

When the river was empty, I seen three boys, 11, 12, and 13-year-olds, smashing bottles in the riverbed.

I said, "What are you doing, you boys? You know that's wrong."

One of them said, "Yeah, where am I?" And he pointed at the broken glass.

That boy took his life.

The youngest fella too.

Once you get things like "suicide" in your lexicon, it's impossible to get rid of it. They know that there's a way out. We think suicides probably didn't happen in Australia, before white people arrived. It's really modern, and it's probably to do with trauma.

There's nothing in any of the languages that approaches taking your own life: all life was sacred. I remember when Teo was small, when he first came to Bourke with us, I told Jen, "Sometimes Aboriginal people will come up and touch him." That's because he was brand new: a spirit baby. We're all connected to a newborn. That doesn't happen as much as it used to, but it's still there.

When those streetlights were being smashed and the street windows were being broken, one girl jumped off the Dubbo Bridge with a rope around her neck. She hanged herself from the bridge, in plain view. No one had seen her. They seen her when she was swinging though. She was an Aboriginal girl from Bourke. She had other issues, sexual assaults and things like that in her life. No-one was listening.

PAUL M.:

I think that's often the case with suicide, that it's a staging point for a communication—a horrific one, but nonetheless. . . .

PAUL C.:

Suicide itself in Australia is kind of like a fiction: you can ask the police not to record it as suicide, but as a "misadventure."

That sounds like fiction to me.

I don't know.

Yeah.

I seen a twin, an identical twin, one Saturday in Newcastle. I last seen him at his brother's funeral when he was 17.

His brother had hung himself in the hallway in their mother's house. It was after he came home one night, about midnight.

"That you, Jay?"

"Yeah, Mum, just having something to eat."

Somewhere between then, probably between 2 o'clock and 4 o'clock, he hung himself in the hallway—so she wouldn't have to find him somewhere. He left a note, saying things like, "I'll never be anything cause I'm Aboriginal. I'll never have anything. I'll just be nothing."

OVERHEAD PROJECTOR:

What is a river?

PAUL C.:

And I looked at Jay's brother when I saw him again the other week and I said, "How are you going?"

He said, "Oh I spend a lot of time out in the bush. I'm out in the bush at least three or four nights a week."

He's got another brother and sister. But they're older than him. He's the lone one—because he hasn't got his twin with him.

Now that death was registered as a suicide. Uncle John spoke about that at the funeral, warning other kids: "You must speak."

It's hard to do. Hard to do.

I wondered if I should take Blackie's life from him. In my novel, *Dancing Home*. It'd be the most violent thing I could do to him. I thought a long time. I struggled with whether I'd do it or not. But in the end . . . Barkindji always has a way out.

When the body dies what happens to the spirit?

Goes into another body. I think Blackie's coming back—

PAUL M.:

It's a river.

PAUL C.:

It could be a river.

I think Blackie could do more things as a ghost than he could as a human. John Howard¹ wouldn't see him. But the audience might see and hear him.

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JEN:

Paul and I went to Bourke right at the peak of that drought, just before the 2019 fires. The river was empty and it was striking how much grief was in the community: how ready people were to talk about it, how live the conversation was between everybody we met.

There was supposed to be a river festival on.

Can I read something?

OVERHEAD PROJECTOR:

How are you Jen Crawford?

JEN:

There was supposed to be a festival on by the river. But the river was absolutely dry.

PAUL C.:

Is it still a river when there's no water in it?

PAUL M.:

It's still the 7.52 train when it comes at 7.54.

JEN:

There was a handful of people. Or rather there was a train of people, but only a handful were there at any given time. A couple of people had set up stalls, just one or two, for this festival, that was really more a festival of shared grieving, over what was supposed to be there and wasn't.

Vigil

Not sure if you're looking for the festival
but it's over on the riverbank
under the third tarpaulin.

Charlie's found some crab claws
and some wedgetail feathers
and she's making a set of earrings.

If you can't face the smell or the dry stone bed
you're welcome to come back inside the gates,
we're making badges while we wait.

Ian's gone back to work but here's one
he did of an eye crying over the stones.

I've never forgotten how much speaking there was, in a place where I expected the silence of trauma. Everybody in the community was there.

OVERHEAD PROJECTOR:

How do we know where we are going?

PAUL C.:

It has a certain logic to it. We put stories in the Country to make it come alive. We talk of it in lively speech.

More toward traditional times, you'd find your way to a quiet place, a thinking place. Might be somewhere near the river. Or it could be at Mt. Oxley, where the men's site is. There you'd quietly ask yourself what the wind is saying to you.

How hot is it?

Which way is it blowing?

How does that place me?

You're in a conversation then, a silent one, with nature.

My grandfather would have lived completely by those rules, when he was young. He probably saw the last corroboree at Gundabooka, somewhere around the early 1900s. It might have been 1910.

But I don't know if all those seven or eight language groups would have joined in. It was just before the First World War, and there would have been restrictions on people's movements—on blackfellas anyway. They would have got there under cover of darkness, having travelled about 60 miles from Queensland on foot. Others would come in from Brewarrina, about 40 miles from there, doing most of that walking by night. There would have been remnants of five or six of those language groups.

It would have been the last time—too many police by that stage.

Mum was saying, when they were young, they'd get together with their cousins from those other language groups and hold a claypan dance. They weren't allowed to leave the missions—they were supposed to be under mission control. But some were droving by that stage. So they turned their wagons toward the designated place. It was just a flat plain to most of us. But they would know where it was, meet there and turn the wagons into a circle. Lot of those old blokes could play button and piano accordion, fiddle, guitars. They'd dance all night, 'til just before the sun came up. Then they'd take off out of sight.

In traditional times, everything around Aboriginality would have been done at night anyway.

But it then became an illegal thing, and carried the stigma of law-breaking. Kids are still suffering greatly from the generational trauma of that fear. There were no smoke ceremonies, or celebrations of Aboriginality, when I was a kid in Bourke.

PAUL M.:

It sounds like that would have forced Barkindji people into an encounter with the kind of question we've got on the overhead.

PAUL C.:

When Jen and I went to Bourke on that first trip we had a question too, but it's not one that you can get an answer to. The question was, "What weight does a story carry?"

It had me thinking a lot about a conversation I had with Grandfather when I was 11.

I said, "Will you teach me Barkindji?"

He said, "Who will you talk to, boy, when I'm gone?"

He believed he was one of the last speakers. He knew the other languages as well. Nan knew those languages too, and another language besides that. But he wasn't seeing any Barkindji interaction in town. Even though there were Barkindji people in Bourke, they were sleeping with the wrong cousins, doing all that kind of stuff. All those rules were broken. People were living outside of any kind of order.

But that disorder was due to the town setup, with the police and all that. Who'd have any way of fitting into that?

You know, when land rights came in, or started to come in, in the '70s, the Shire in Bourke refused to go down to the reserve and pick up the rubbish bins from the houses.

"They want their land rights, they can take their own rubbish to the tip."

[Pause]

OVERHEAD PROJECTOR:

What is fiction?

PAUL M.:

What weight does a story carry?

How do we know where we are going?

Part of the point of this project is to find responses to these questions from a variety of speakers.

For me, it's a question about how I live in a place like this, how I work as a teacher—how do I know where I'm going, as an Australian who teaches in the national capital, 2 kms away from the Department of Immigration, where a whole flood of abuses have been perpetrated in recent decades, here in the shadow of Parliament House?

PAUL C.:

I've got no respect for that place, none at all.

PAUL M.:

Yeah but you and I staged a party there once—it was pretty good, at the UNAUSTRALIA Conference.

I think there are ways we can actually put a spin on these institutions—

PAUL C.:

You can see it happening now, in this movement against right-wing politicians, a movement toward some kind of justice, or discussion. Whether we'll get a Voice in Parliament, I don't know.

PAUL M.:

The current politics raises these questions for a lot of us, I think: how do we know where we are going?

What weight does a story carry?

What is fiction?

Subhash, you'd like to say something.

SUBHASH:

[unclear]

PAUL M.:

Subhash, I'm going to pass you a mike so we can get this in the book.

SUBHASH:

I come here to listen.

But listening and talking go hand-in-hand.

I saw your questions—"What is a river?" and "What is fiction?"—and I thought I might read a poem. I'm writing prose poems about particular rivers. One of those rivers is in New Zealand and it has just received human rights.

PAUL C.:

The Whanganui.

SUBHASH:

The Māori people use a sentence to introduce it: "I am the river, and the river is me."

This is the opening poem of the sequence.

Solani

Like Calvino's Marco Polo every time I speak about a river, he says, I speak something about Solani, my river. The river doesn't belong to you, she teases. A pretence it is to believe that by calling a river my or giving it a name, one can make it acquiesce to be owned, for aren't words just sounds uttered by an anxious mind to make us feel at ease with the world, enchanting and perilous? Of course, he mumbles and agrees that he is the one beholden to the river. To possess and to be possessed is no different. They are the same just like two sides of an open palm, he confesses overawed but content. Perhaps this is the reason he can't stop calling the river his, pleading to not to use the word *it* for his river because the word doesn't befit the river, so alive and ever-present. You are just silly, she groans, kicks off her shoes, and walks into the ankle-deep water. He watches how the river accepts her feet washing them like pebbles the river has lived for thousands of years in consonance with. There is poise in her walk, and although he knows that she knows he is watching her, he can't stop looking, enchanted by the autumn light speckled over leaves, the moist moss, weeds, and the hem of her wet dress. Don't look, she calls without turning her head, but he looks, not at her but at the river playing with her feet.

So fiction and nonfiction are like two sides of a palm. The hand cannot be without them. They go together.

PAUL C.:

Aboriginal people, like all people in the world, have creation stories. I was referring to those stories before, when I talked about Aboriginal people being animated in their speech and enlivening the country. And like all other people in the world, we haven't been able to say who made Biammii. So obviously it came from us. We made these things. But they're spoken as truths, as beliefs that carry law. People put law to Country and then said that that law is sacred, that it didn't come from us.

PAUL M.:

Isn't that like culture itself: nobody makes it, and we all make it?

PAUL C.:

That's right.

And if you don't have those stories, if you've got no relationship with Country, you'll drain your rivers, you'll destroy reefs, you'll put cloved animals on soft ground.

PAUL M.:

When we think about languages like Australian English, we underestimate their need for a relation to place?

OVERHEAD PROJECTOR:

What is a river?

PAUL C.:

Yes.

PAUL M.:

Maybe it calls out of any culture?

PAUL C.:

In the end, where we are—all we've got—are those stories of Country.

You hear a lot of people on conservative radio—members of the Liberal Party—saying, "Australia's the best country on earth."

Well, they haven't been to every other country to find out, so that's another fiction. They say they feel this strong pull to the country. But they don't have a conversation with Country.

You ask them, "Have you had a conversation with Country?"

"What's that? What's that mean?"

It's not hard to do: to sit and think about where your thoughts are coming from, there in your conversation with Country.

In the film *High Ground*² the old grandfather asks Gutjuk, "What's the sky saying to you?"

Leaves a couple of seconds.

Then, "What's the wind saying to you? What's Mother Earth speaking to you?"

They're high up on the cliff. It's the same place where Bill Neidjie, Stephen Davis, and Allan Fox wrote *Kakadu Man*.³ The book was recorded there, on that same cliff, looking out over the East Alligator River.

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“What’s the wind saying to you?”

The questions are a way to slow you down. They put you in the rhythm, the breath of Country.

We’d teach kids how to read the wind when they were young: “When it’s blowing like *this*, it means *that*.”

But it can mean four or five other things too, depending on whether the pressure is dropping fast, or slow. When it gets real quiet, generally you’ll be in for a peaceful time. But not if it’s dropping very quickly, then you’ll get a big storm: if you have rivers to cross, get across them. When the rain comes out there it comes in big buckets. It’ll rise four meters in four hours.

That scar tree down there⁴ pointed to another tree, which was pointing to another tree, and it to another tree, till the last one pointed at the Yass River. They’d be almost in a straight line. The final tree would have been pointing to a place on the river where it was right to cross, because it was shallow—the flow was slow.

Everything in Country was coded. If you can’t read the codes. . . . Obviously, Burke and Wills⁵ didn’t read them very well. But they were looking at something else, because they were looking *for* something else. Not seeing what was there. They wouldn’t listen.

PAUL M.:

Paul, it’s really fortunate that you’ve mentioned reading, because we were asked the other day to contribute to a special issue of *Reception: Texts, Readers, Audiences, History*, and the topic is “Reading Time.”

I responded to Ika by saying, “Um, we’re actually writing a book by making it up off the top of our heads, just chatting, and I don’t know if reading will come into it.”

I think we’ve actually been composing a piece for that special issue.

OVERHEAD PROJECTOR:

How are you Paul Magee?

PAUL C.:

Sounds good to me.

PAUL M.:

Would anyone like to become part of the special issue before we finish up?

PAUL C.:

[*To Vahri, in audience*]

Vahri, how do you feel about Swan River still being named the Swan River?

VAHRI:

My feelings about it are developing. I've only known the older name, the truer name, Derbarl Yerrigan, for a short time. I haven't lived with, or by, or close to the river in the time I've known it.

PAUL C.:

Interesting what happens, once you know the name, isn't it? It changes things.

VAHRI:

It does. I feel it's precious to have some access to that knowledge. I was born and grew up close to Derbarl Yerrigan and I've found Noongar, Whadjuk, and Wadandi people have enormous generosity when it comes to sharing names. It's given Wadjula people like me perhaps more confidence, or a greater sense of permission, to use those words than I've found seems appropriate here. There seems to be more trauma on this side of the Country about coming to know names.

PAUL C.:

I think that if you know the language for the Country you are less prone to harm it.

VAHRI:

I think that's true.

OVERHEAD PROJECTOR:

How do we know where we are going?

PAUL C.:

Miners are generally a long way away from the Country. They're in airconditioned rooms, looking at maps, geo-surveying stuff from the air. It's madness. It's no way to manage yourself, or land.

When COVID struck hard and Morrison⁶ was on television every morning, every day, I don't know how long—how long's television been in? 1957 or something? Long, long time. Before that, you wouldn't see the Prime Minister. Might hear him on the radio. But now we had to see this bastard every day, talking crap.

PAUL M.:

You see some politicians more regularly than members of your own family, more regularly than friends. That's kind of disturbing.

PAUL C.:

I just turned the sound down, I couldn't stand it.

But you don't need Parliament to be held in Australia, they could be in the Seychelles and just get on television each day. They could manage the country from anywhere. They don't do anything hands-on. They're a fiction.

There you go: political fiction, alive and kicking, here in the Can.

Any questions? Any comments?

You're a kind and considerate audience.

Have a conversation with your Country.

Happy birthday. Happy birthday, Australia.

I wonder what those old people thought, when they heard it—"What's that name, Australia? This Country. What?"

We didn't have a name for the whole country. We called it something more personal. The Darling River is named "Barka" by Barkindji people. "Barka" means "my darling" or "my love." It's a very intimate language. That's because they're speaking to the Rainbow Serpent, who they say made all the waterways.

There's no word in any of our languages that approaches anything like "river."

PAUL M.:

The word "river" is different in other languages, too. In French, you have that division between a *rivière* and a *fleuve*. A *fleuve* is a river that flows into the ocean, a *rivière* is one that doesn't.

PAUL C.:

Is French a real language? It sounds made up to me.

PAUL M.:

Well, what is fiction?

RUSSELL:

The questions talk to each other in interesting ways.

Particularly the one about the river, and this question "How do we know where we are going?"

Does a river know where it's going?

But also, what can we learn about where we're going, by thinking about the river?

PAUL C.:

I learnt a lot, when the Darling was dry.

I saw how Bradley Hardy stood fast on that bank at Brewarrina. Hardy was going nowhere: he was doing what he could to look after the sacredness of the place. He lives over on the other side of the river, on top of the traditional Aboriginal burial ground. Lot of people live there. He said, every now and again kids will buy new motorbikes, and they'll tear through the community.

"Hey come on, no noise here," he tells them.

He's very, very reverent in the way he conducts himself on Country. He is not leaving it for anybody.

PAUL M.:

This is one of the guys we're going to chat with, as part of the book.

RUSSELL:

I went to Menindee Lakes last year.

PAUL C.:

Did you?

RUSSELL:

Yeah.

PAUL C.:

I haven't been down there.

RUSSELL:

It's exactly like you were saying, everybody was talking about the river.

PAUL C.:

If I'd been up there, I would have tried to encourage more voices on radio. I'd take the microphones out to them and record it, put it on 2CUZ FM, really make that station come alive.

JEN:

I know it's nearly time, but can I ask a version of the *how do we know where we are going* question?

Paul, How do you know what the next step is, when you're dancing?

PAUL C.:

I come from a long line of dancers. Those dances are like laws.

reception

When Aboriginal people spoke law, they were speaking in the same pattern, with the same breathing, in exactly the same words, every time they spoke. It's the same with those dances. When you start dancing, you're taught, "It's not that step there, it's that one *there*."

It's important, because it's got to do with that part of the land. You're actually dancing with your Country, when you're dancing.

PAUL M.:

But even with something that's a matter of learning off by heart, there's still your own contribution to it. There's no way that memory can ever saturate the full field of the present.

OVERHEAD PROJECTOR:

What is fiction?

PAUL C.:

That's true. You only need to look at film footage of David Gulpilil or some of those wonderful Yolŋu dancers.

In one of the dual language programmes I seen on television in Alice Springs, this young dance leader steps forward: "Come on, you kids, don't be shy"—He's talking in Arrernte—"Don't be shy, just because there's cameras here, we're here to teach you today."

They'd take Tuesday afternoons out from school and do language and dance all afternoon. These kids were being taught boys' dances, community dances and girls' dances. Later on the initiated men were doing this catfish dance. (You could tell they were initiated, because they were carrying weapons. Only men who have gone through law can do that.)

It was almost like a horse doing dressage. They'd drag their feet right up to the end of the space, and then turn at right angles, and right angles again, and then right angles again, in a square. One bloke was saying, "When you get to the end, you've got to have that spear in front of you, you've got to go there, then there."

This bloke went there, there and then there. The other one said, "Oh no, it's *there*."

It was almost like what Apu and the others were saying, when they were doing prayers while planting rice in Taiwan: "You must do it in the right paddock. Otherwise, you'll bring bad luck." They'd say to those kids, if they'd made a mistake, "Come back, we musn't leave the fields now, 'cause we may not get rain."

So there's a lot of hope in it, as much as anything else.
But those things hadn't changed through all those years.

PAUL MAGEE is author of *From Here to Tierra del Fuego* (University of Illinois Press, 2000), *Cube Root of Book* (John Leonard Press, 2006), *Stone Postcard* (John Leonard Press, 2014), and *Suddenness and the Composition of Poetic Thought* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2022).

PAUL COLLIS is a Barkindji man. His early life was informed by Barkindji and Kunya and Murawarri, and Wongamara and Nyempa story tellers and artists, who taught him Aboriginal Culture and Law. He is author of *Dancing Home* (University of Queensland Press, 2017) and *Nightmares Run Like Mercury* (Recent Works Press, 2021).

JEN CRAWFORD is author of *Admissions* (Five Islands Press, 2000), *bad appendix* (Auckland: Titus Books, 2009), *Napoleon Swings* (Auckland: Soapbox Press, 2009), *Pop Riveter* (Auckland: Pania Press, 2011), *Koel* (Cordite Books, 2016) and *Lichen Loves Stone* (Tinfish Press, 2016). With Rina Kikuchi, Jen co-edited and part-translated *Poet to Poet: Contemporary Women Poets from Japan* (2017).

NOTES

1. Former Australian politician.
2. A 2020 film directed by Stephen Johnson and starring Guruwuk Mununggurr as Gutjuk. Gutjuk is a young man compelled by the Northern Territory authorities to track down his fugitive uncle, Baywara (Sean Mununggurr), in the period just after World War I. Paul is referring to the character, Grandfather Darrpa, who is played by Witiyana Marika. In addition to his acting role, Marika was co-producer and senior cultural advisor on the film.
3. B. Neidji, S. Davis, and Allan Fox, *Kakadu Man* (Queanbeyan [NSW]: Mybrood, 1985). The book features traditional Gagudju owner, Bill Neidje's narratives of the Kakadu National Park/Alligator Rivers region, and includes discussions of myth, law, environment, and death, along with accompanying notes, poems, and photos.
4. The exposed sapwood of trees that have had bark removed for practical or ceremonial processes dries out and dies, forming a distinctive type of elongated scarring. Such scar trees provide rich evidence of Aboriginal habitation and culture and are found in rural and urban settings alike throughout Australia. Paul is referring to a scar tree on the University of Canberra campus, just south of the library.
5. Nineteenth century explorers, both d. 1861 in Southern Queensland, while searching for a possible inland route for a telegraph cable intended to run from the southern part of Australia to Java.
6. Former Australian politician.

BOOK
REVIEWS

Philip Goldstein. *The Theory and Practice of Reception Study: Reading Race and Gender in Twain, Faulkner, Ellison, and Morrison*. New York: Routledge, 2022. 218 pages. \$128.00 (cloth).

Philip Goldstein, a founder of the Reception Study Society, provides a comprehensive statement on the field today in his new book, *The Theory and Practice of Reception Study: Reading Race and Gender in Twain, Faulkner, Ellison, and Morrison*. He makes a convincing argument for the value of acknowledging readers' institutional contexts, which he shows are often overlooked by scholars of the history and sociology of reading as well as in canonical reader-response criticism of the 1970s and 1980s. But Goldstein's practice of the theory in the book—the recognition of established critical practices and their influence—lacks the strength of his thesis. This is not the consequence of his smart choice to explore the reception of novels with subversive depictions of race and gender but rather of his abbreviated investigation of audiences' cultural knowledge, indeed shaped by institutions.

In the first two chapters, which deserve to be cited by articles in this journal for years to come, Goldstein justifies what he calls his Foucauldian genealogical approach to reception theory. He takes as his starting point scholars' movement away from poststructuralist literary theory in the 1990s and toward a renewed interest in form and aesthetics. Goldstein concentrates on scholars who looked to Theodor Adorno's aesthetics to restore the literary work as the central critical focus while maintaining an emphasis on its insights into social life, because for Adorno the opposition between true and mass art reveals an authentic struggle against the status quo. The problem Goldstein thoughtfully teases out is that Adorno wants to have his cake and eat it too: for Adorno, "a concrete particular work of art opposes social or rational norms and theoretical constructs and