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Memoryⁱ

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Contested histories produce contested memories and memorialisations. This is sharply apparent in colonial/postcolonial states like Australia, which has traumatic histories of colonial violence that jostle against narratives of settler progress. While this is a national story, it plays out in very local, colloquial ways, that push alongside public accounts of a place. And so, it's by going to the local that we can best see this at work.

Let's drive north out of Melbourne, veer west, and head straight up the Calder Highway. Very soon the dense suburbs give way to plains, long cleared of trees and native grasses, and the Calder moves us through the chain of small towns that lead towards the Murray River at the state's northern border.

We are in the Mallee, headed for Mildura. We continue to pass by open vistas, now wheat-filled and golden, and the sentinel trees that mark the border of these fields are mostly nobbly-limbed Mallee trees. Once, these trees crowded closely in the now-golden plains forming impenetrable thickets. Their roots, strong and spreading, held together the fine earth and allowed dense bushland to thrive. Colonisers spent years ripping them out of the ground, "grubbing" the massive roots (seen as an impediment to progress) from the soil with massive rollers, as they worked to re-make this environment. It would be an agricultural utopia, they said, turbo-charged with glowing super phosphate.



Figure 1. Mallee farmland, Sea Lake

Remember the red dirt-rain that fell in Melbourne last week, coating our pavements and cars? Our poor plants were covered in a sheen of orange. Sediment lay everywhere, dusting crevices, corners and dips in the road. That was the Mallee, moving through the air. The fine long-loosened soil, dried out by consecutive years of drought - despite the turn to "no-till" farming practices in the region - was carried those four hundred kilometers on the wind: "a

present from the Mallee,” *The Age* wryly reported.¹ Paola Bella observes that Latji Latji country is “so traumatised that the ‘top soil,’ beaten down into dust by generations of farming, has been keeping locals inside their homes, unable to breathe clearly nor see.”²

It’s easy to slip between versions of the Mallee – to feel, as we drive below a radiant blue sky, the solidity of the agricultural project, and the forward movement of time, marking irrevocable change in this environment. But other histories remain latent, unsettling this picture. Stare long enough at a Mallee horizon and the sky begins to waver.

The colonial project in Australia relied upon erasure and repression. It needed material and imaginative practices that would clear away what Paul Carter has called “the lie of the land”³– the Indigenous ecology and human communities whose Country this remains. The Mallee is, of course, a post-colonial creation, made on the lands of the Latji Latji, Paakantji (Barkindji), Ngiyampaa, Mutthi Mutthi, Wemba Wemba, Tati Tati and Barapa Barapa people. Like elsewhere in Australia, these groups were dispossessed of their land, and forcibly relocated to the Lake Tyers and Ebenezer missions.

The wavering sky, over cleared horizons, speaks to this absence, and the violence that made it; but it also speaks to the violability of the colonisers’s vision. Flexmore Hudson describes the “death-still plain” in his poem “Mallee Scene,”⁴ obliquely referring to the violence which preceded the golden dream of agricultural abundance. This was always a story: while it reshaped the land, and materialised in place, it could never close out what it sought to overwrite. The intense light of the Mallee has always been dappled with the shadows of resistant histories and ecologies.



Figure 2. Mildura vineyards at the end of Calder

When we reach the limits of the Calder, the golden plains have given way to rich red dirt and rows of arabesque vineyards. Mildura is the end of the line: our T-junction is the Murray River. Here, colonial dreams still shape the urban landscape. Palm trees from the other side of the world flank Deakin Avenue (named after Australia’s second prime minister), waving their fronds over grand Victorian-era foundations that spout water in a constant performance of abundance, of a never-ending source. Alfred Deakin was tasked with bringing irrigation to Mildura in the 1880s, and did this via the Canadian Chaffey brothers,

¹ Hope and Eddie, “A present from the Mallee.”

² Bella, “Tyrrem.”

³ Carter, *Lie of the Land*.

⁴ Hudson, “Mallee Scene,” 21.

who came from a successful stint in California to bring their knowledge of water-intensive fruit cropping to the Mallee.

Alice Lapthorne's strange history *Mildura Calling* (1965), tells a story of Mildura's founding and growth, steeped in the language of an origin story, with a celebratory, almost biblical, account (full of dawning sunlight and promised land) of the Chaffey brothers and their work of place-making.

Mildura, Chaffeyes, Irrigation! These words flung a challenge to Australia, and captured the imagination of people all over the world. Here was adventure as colourful as the lure of the goldfields, with equal opportunities for all. The brothers George and William Benjamin Chaffey of California proposed to reclaim the drought-bound Mildura sheep-run from the rabbits and establish a garden of luscious fruits on land which they would open for selection, cleared, graded and ready for irrigation.⁵



Figure 3. To the Murray River, Mildura Wharf

For Lapthorne, the triumph of technology and western ingenuity built the foundations of a modern city, rich in resources and certain of its destiny. This may have failed to protect the city from disasters, yet a strong sense of Mildura's exceptionalism has remained.

The daughter of the local newspaper editor and children's librarian, Lapthorne offers an account that is heavily inflected by her autobiography. Mildura-born and bred, her memories – subjective and partial as they inevitably would be – are solidified by her narrative of Mildura's past. This version of the past was transmitted to generations of school students who have studied the text as the only official history of their place. Yet even here, there are eruptions. While the founding place-myth she offers makes no room for Indigenous claim, there are moments when Lapthorne pauses her account to reflect on what has past:

When, above the sleeping city, the clock in the tower of the Carnegie Library strikes the hour, does the ghost of some homeless aborigine seeking by night his lost camping ground, turn in affright and flee the brilliantly lighted streets, which were once a wilderness of Mallee scrub?⁶

What meanings might this dream-like reflection have at this distance in time? Lapthorne's text suggests a desire to discipline memory, to tell us the history of what is, effacing what

⁵ Lapthorne, *Mildura Calling*, 5.

⁶ *Ibid*, 40.

was. The pathos that erupts in *Mildura Calling* encourages regret for the irrevocably displaced, however fleeting. Turned into ghosts, and unhomed ones at that, the Traditional Owners of this land are depicted as confused and disempowered, no threat to the narrative of Mildura's modern destiny.

Can the dream shrug off its shadows, though, and put them to rest? Laphorne's vision of a utopian city is entirely vulnerable to the instability of memory that is characteristic of a living, breathing place, whose narrative re-making is ongoing and contested.

On the banks of the Murray, Lisa Gorton's "Murray River Poem" springs to mind:

Some rivers travel as the subconscious of light
but our own big river is dirt coloured and
deliberate. And where it goes
in straight canals through the Mallee plains,
it is as we imagine forbearance to be.⁷

Forbearance is a necessary trait for Mallee people, given the vicissitudes of life here.

Nearby public art works remind us of the continuous Indigenous history of this place: including a story mosaic ('Memories') by Barkindji artist Badger Bates celebrating Indigenous and Italian migrant histories, a traditional smoking pit, and a Longwe (canoe) tree sculpture that references the many scar trees that populate the banks of the Murray. Also here, but not marked, are what Lyndall Ryan terms the "battle sites" of frontier wars, tracked in her project *Colonial Frontier Massacres in Eastern Australia 1788-1872*. "That's where the majority of Aboriginal people were, that was where the good pastoral land was and that's where the settlers wanted to be," Ryan writes. We need to acknowledge these sites, she argues, with tangible markers. "I think it would be possible along the Murray River to have some well-identified signs [saying]: 'This was a battle site'".⁸ Markers such as these would encourage excruciating but necessary remembering.



Figure 4. Badger Bates, 'Memories,' Mildura

⁷ Gorton, "Murray River Poem," 70.

⁸ Brennan, "New map records."

Having reached the end of our drive, at this cool green spot, with New South Wales across the wide brown water, we sit for a while and watch the lowering sun scatter its shimmer across the surface. The stories of this place do not reconcile into a coherent narrative of beginnings and endings. Instead, things jostle together in a dynamic that we have come to know well. Memory is an active force in our place-making, even in our shadow places. These stay close, they assail us in the orange-coloured air of our lives back in the city, and they press against the golden myths of origin and their own willed-for forgetting.

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ⁱ Potter, Emily and Brigid Magner. "Memory." *An A to Z of Shadow Places Concepts* (2020). <https://www.shadowplaces.net/concepts>

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