

Place Remembered: Unearthing Hidden Histories in Armidale Aboriginal Community Garden

Kate Wright



Figure 1. Tin humpy¹ at the Armidale dump (unpublished photograph courtesy of *The Armidale Express*)

Dark Town

DARK TOWN WAS THE NAME NON-ABORIGINAL PEOPLE LIVING IN THE REGIONAL TOWN of Armidale (New South Wales, Australia) gave to a fringe camp where dispossessed Aboriginal people had gathered on the town rubbish dump. Following the extremely violent pastoral expansion of the 1830s², Aboriginal

¹ The word humpy comes from the Jagera language, and refers to a small temporary shelter traditionally made out of branches and bark, but following invasion and colonisation it may refer to any temporary building made from available material, including corrugated iron, canvas, metal drums etc.

² Ambēyan language revivalist Callum Clayton-Dixon observes 'Colonial invasion and occupation of the New England Tableland region of New South Wales was especially rapid and intense, the first few decades of upheaval (1830s-1860s) having absolutely catastrophic ramifications for the autochthonous population, thoroughly devastating all aspects of Aboriginal society' (Clayton-

people in the newly named 'New England' region were forced to travel like fugitives throughout their sovereign lands. Across Australia, Aboriginal people were relentlessly 'moved on' by authorities from places of settlement and were left with little choice but to camp on the outskirts of town. These people became known as 'fringe-dwellers', communities confined to the geographic, social and economic fringes of white colonial life. In Armidale, settling at the town dump was a way of avoiding immediate dispossession—bulldozing of tin humpies, for example—as well as a means of survival, because the dump contained material that could be gleaned to create shelter from Armidale's bitterly cold winters.³

Dixon 10). Margaret-Ann Franklin notes that by 1840 the non-Aboriginal population of the New England tablelands was almost double that of the Aboriginal population, and there were over five hundred thousand sheep in the area (Franklin 6).

³ Two of the earliest Aboriginal people to settle on the town dump were Frank Archibald and Sara Archibald (nee Morris). Frank Archibald was descended from the Gumbaynggirr nation and was also initiated as a Dunghutti man. He was born in a shack on the outskirts of Armidale in approximately 1885 to a Scottish father and a Gumbaynggirr mother—Emily. Frank and Sara moved to the fringe-dwelling camp on the dump in Armidale after the local council bulldozed their home (just after Christmas, 1954) at Yarra Bay, near La Perouse in Sydney. They were followed by many relations. A few families had already settled at the camp, and by 1956 about one hundred dispossessed Aboriginal people were 'living in poverty in hessian and corrugated iron humpies on the old superseded municipal dump' (Franklin 17). A survey undertaken in 1961 by the Armidale Association for the Assimilation of Aborigines showed that of a total population of one hundred and fifteen, eighty-two were directly related to the Archibalds (Franklin 16).

NEUCLEUS — JULY, 1960

PAGE 5

AN AUSTRALIAN PROBLEM:

a nucleus
glossy
supplement

"the fringe dwellers"

Armidale has a floating population of about one hundred aborigines, who live on a reserve, condescendingly termed by the local inhabitants as "The Dump", just outside the city boundary.



An Aboriginal child photographed at the Dump.

Some Pertinent Facts

Findings of a survey conducted by the Association of Apex Clubs in 1955.

HOUSING

"Housing conditions are generally poor. Some endeavours are being made to improve them, and there is evidence that successful housing of dark people is possible of attainment. There is a reluctance on the part of the landlords, both private and Governmental, to accept dark people as tenants, and some opposition to residence among white families by the white residents concerned."

PREJUDICE

Hostility certainly exists to a certain (and alarmingly high) extent. It is, however, largely brought about by ignorance and misinterpretation of the actions of the dark people, e.g. their drunkenness and the dirtiness of their living quarters.

EDUCATION

Dark children have no ambition to further their education beyond the point reached when they are officially old enough to leave school. All expected only unskilled jobs and none had any desire to take up the jobs which his or her parents had had—most of which were unspecialised anyway. This all seems to have sprung from the lack of

The accompanying photographs may serve to illustrate what I mean, for those who have thus far been successfully segregated.

How did this state of affairs come about?

Reassimilate

The rather trite fact that "our nation" was systematically taken from its original owners, in exchange for a few worthless trinkets and many gory skirmishes, is necessarily ignored, even by the idealists, at this stage.

The country was their's: Our ancestors took it and relegated the native inhabitants to the position of inferior outcasts — our job is to re-assimilate them.

There are approximately 13,000 people of aboriginal extraction in N.S.W. — of whom about 240 are full-bloods. The birth-rate is increasing slowly but certainly.

In this advanced age, where we flatter ourselves as being "humanitarian" it would be fatuous to suggest that any white human-being is so degenerate as to object to the different colour of a fellow human-being's skin.

Objection

It seems that this objection, where it exists, is due to standards of health and hygiene and the generally low standard of living maintained by the aborigines. Thus the problem is reduced to raising their standard of living so that we can happily accept them into the community and they can be more capable of adapting themselves to a "civilised" way of life.

The Aborigines' Welfare Board in New South Wales sums up its policy as "assimilation". Mr. H. J. Green, the Superintendent of Aborigines' Welfare in New South Wales, says: "By assimilation, the Board means the bringing of aborigines into the general community so that they are part and parcel of that community, yet do not lose their racial identity."

The Board does this principally through its Welfare Officers who each operate within a definite area of the State and are mainly concerned with aborigines who do not live on reserves or stations.

These Welfare Officers endeavour to "bring about the

assimilation of these people by improving their standards of education, housing, health and hygiene, and to foster better social relations with the whole community." The Board has been heartily criticised by many people, closely associated with the problems.

However, in some cases, it has thwarted in its efforts by other bodies.

For instance, in Lismore, there are two hundred aborigines living just out of the town in a low-lying, unhealthy area. The Board approached the local Town Council about buying ground on which to build decent homes and the Council refused unequivocally.

Forbidden

In Moree, where there are eight hundred aborigines out of a population of five thousand, the Council issued its notorious edict, forbidding aborigines to swim in the town baths. They are also accommodated in a separate part of the hospital.

The Board's policy is not to interfere with local Councils — even when such barbarous revocation of human rights as this are being perpetrated. No doubt, all of us were (and are), highly shocked at the principles so flagrantly abused in South Africa and Little Rock etc. I suggest we right our own ailing wrongs before we moralise in high-pitched voices about the wrongs of others.

Section Nine

The main criticism levelled at the Aborigines Protection Act, concerns Section 9 which constituted it an offence to serve liquor to an aboriginal who is not a holder of an exemption certificate.

An exemption certificate is issued to those aborigines who have satisfied the authorities that they are capable of making a living for themselves in the general community. This means that they enjoy all the rights of the ordinary white citizen, which differ from the aborigines' only in the matter of alcohol (apart from one other Section, which confers on Welfare Officers the right to govern the conduct of people living on Reserves).

Citizenship

Albert Namatjira, the most famous "Australian" to have lived, having been exempted and made a "citizen" about a

year before he died, was sentenced to six months imprisonment for supplying his friends and relatives with alcohol — as any aborigine can be supplied with alcohol any day, despite the law. If ever the mighty bureaucratic hand was out to prove its tyrannical powers at the expense of a great man, this was it.

Many authorities are sure that since this is the only tangible difference between white and dark, both parties have translated it into the symbol of citizenship. This, apart from being bad in principle, means that many aborigines drink to excess in mere defiance — and alcoholism is probably the main over-all problem.

Employment

Another very serious problem is that of obtaining suitable employment for not only the adults, but also those of school-leaving age.

Mr. Green says, "for too long it has been accepted that aboriginal girls can only enter domestic service, while men and boys are fit for nothing apart from labouring on farms or on railways."

It is not until the general community can be made to understand that there are those who are capable of higher things, that any encouragement will ever exist for aborigines to attempt to better the prospects and look to other fields for their employment. The much too prevalent negative attitude of the general community to the aborigines does not encourage them to seek independence and as a result many of the aborigines seem to have no desire to be assimilated."

Emeritus Professor A. P. Elkin, Vice-Chairman of the Aborigines Welfare Board, and the greatest authority on the subject, says:

"We could make all persons of aboriginal descent in Australia full citizens, with the right to obtain alcohol, with the franchise, with freedom from all special legislation and with the right to all Social Service benefits with no restrictions whatever."

"I would not object, provided the Welfare Boards and Aboriginal Departments still had the power to help the aborigines over and above the assistance they would get from (Continued Next Page)

A corrugated iron "house" on the Dump. This "house" is a mansion compared to the other dwellings on the Dump.



Figure 2. Scan of newspaper article in *Neucleus* (Journal of the Student Representative Council, University of New England, Armidale), July 1960

Journal of the
S. R. C.
University of
New England
Armidale
N. S. W.

neucleus

VOL. 15, No. 3

APRIL, 1961



ARMIDALE'S FRINGE WELLERS

The deaths of four Aboriginal children and the hospitalization of many others towards the end of last year made many residents of Armidale aware for the first time that there were people living in the most deplorable conditions on the edge of their town.

Some people were concerned about this because it seemed to smudge the image of Armidale as the haven of the south coast (as it Cammergah), owners were concerned mainly with the hazard to public health created by more than a hundred people living with the aid of only one water tap; some had troubled consciences, owners were concerned with the people themselves—"something must be done," they said, "to relieve these painful circumstances." But whatever the motive a week after the first news of this fatal outbreak of gastro-enteritis, over 2,000 residents of Armidale had petitioned the Government to act immediately to improve not only the living conditions on the Armidale reserve, but in all similar areas of the State.

The Sydney press also played its part well, particularly the Sydney Morning Herald, whose cartoonist said more in a few skilful lines than most of the words that were written about these events. The New South Wales Government, which long before had stated emphatically that if any more money were to be spent on Aboriginal welfare in New South Wales then it must be found by Canberra, responded to this pressure. It decided to appropriate an additional £25,000 for the housing of New South Wales Aborigines—all of it to be spent in "cleaning up" the Armidale dump.

As the contract for fourteen houses has already been let and as this money has to be spent by June 30th, it seems likely that within the next few months many of Armidale's coloured people will have their first experience of living in houses with wooden floors, glass windows and running water.

GLARING DEFECTS

However, the present proposals have some glaring defects. One particularly objectionable feature is the proposed use of galvanised ripple iron as an exterior covering. As there is no provision for insulation this will make the houses unbearably hot in mid-summer and extremely cold in winter, and

J. W. WARBURTON,
President Assimilation of
Aborigines Association.

forcefully to Mr. Keith Newman who, in his tour with Mr. Russell Drysdale through western New South Wales, gathered material for a series of illustrated articles which appeared recently in the Sunday Mirror, met a group of twenty to thirty Aborigines on the Armidale reserve.

In some parts of New South Wales, particularly in the Richmond-Tweed area where Aboriginal communities have retained a cultural identity to a much greater extent than elsewhere, there has been a clearly expressed desire for integration in groups rather than assimilation as individual families. This desire should obviously be respected by those responsible for official policy or by volunteers who wish to help them.

One must get used to the idea that there is no one Aboriginal problem in New South Wales. The problem often presents different aspects according to the place and the observer and consequently, simple generalizations must be avoided. It is safe to say, however, that wherever the problem of depressed Aboriginal community exists it is not going to be changed overnight.

HANDOUTS

Some people approach the task thinking that it needs only a few handouts and perhaps the offer of a helping hand for a month or two. When the Aborigines do not respond with eternal gratitude, when they do not immediately venture where the helping hand would lead them, enthusiasm quickly fades. Anyone who is to render effective help must be prepared to stay with the problem for many years.

Changing the way of life of a minority group which is living under stress must necessarily be a slow process, but we must believe that progress is possible even though there will inevitably be disappointment and setbacks. No one can provide a scientific formula for this kind of work.

The Dump Now.
Corrugated Iron Instead?



ASPIRATIONS

The Association has no high aspirations for the Aboriginal boys and girls whom we are endeavouring to help; we do not expect them to shine at University some day, though we will be delighted if they do. We try to persuade them to stay at school until their Intermediate and then go into trades or offices. Perhaps our most significant work in this field has been the placing of four boys and two girls in the Church of England hostels. They have more than satisfied our expectations and one boy who is in his fifth year at High school, is a school prefect and

kind of problem saying, "This is the aim, this is the problem, this is the method." There are many complex problems and many possible methods of procedure.

Our Association has endeavoured to tackle the local situation on many fronts including of course, housing. Kylie Tennant in her book "Speak You So Gently" describes an early meeting of interested local people and the Aborigines. To the query from University staff wives, "What can we do to help?" she sensibly replied, "Come and we will ask them."

The consequence was a meeting at the Armidale reserve where white and coloured women sat in a circle and talked things over.

One of the first activities of the Association was the organization of a club where white and coloured could continue meeting together. The club still continues to function, but would welcome the assistance and interest of new white members. Two direct results of these meetings have been the establishment of a baby clinic and a kindergarten which have been described by a prominent local Aborigine as the finest thing the Association has done. This year the kindergarten has been without a teacher, so the Association would welcome offers of help from any person interested in and capable of doing this kind of work.

It is a trifle to say that education is important for without it young Aborigines will follow the pattern of their parents—they will slip into poorly paid seasonal work where they are out of work as much as in, and they will experience all that flows from a poor income and a rootless existence.

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One girl who was in hostel is now training as a typist with the Public Service in Sydney. What research has been done on the intelligence of mixed-blood Aborigines indicates that their educational backwardness is a consequence of environment rather than a low I.Q. This anyway is the view on which we work.

It is significant that the boy who is now moving towards his Leaving Certificate had a younger brother whom we could not place in the hostel and who in his first term of High school was absent for twenty-seven days. The result was that he soon drifted away from school and into seasonal work, and there is little reason to suppose that the same would not have happened to his older brother had he not been placed in the hostel.

We have also been active in the field of employment, but it has been difficult to secure permanent jobs for people who have been deprived of a reasonable educational background. Nevertheless there are at present more Aborigines in permanent work than at any other time during the past four years.

It is the belief of the members of the Assimilation Association that even if the Aborigines Welfare Board had all the money it ought to have, and would have, if politicians were really concerned about this problem, there would still be work in the immediate future for the voluntary society. The process of assimilation is a local problem, finally. It rests on white and coloured being willing to live together as Australian citizens. Past experience indicates that professional workers will need the help of volunteers to achieve this objective.

on other pages . .

- Sex in College — Trad. P. 2.
- Divorce in College—Anon. P. 3.
- Abortion in Other Universities — by a qualified Physician, P. 4.
- How to Wash Your Sins Away — P. 5.
- How to Start Anew by D.C. — P. 6.
- Births, Deaths and Marriages — P. 15, and bottom P. 20.
- Handy Hints (incl. Many Household Uses for Newspaper) Pp. 1 to 14.

Figure 3. Scan of newspaper article in *Neucleus*, April 1961

Conditions at Dark Town were rough. From 1956 until the end of 1961 the area had no sewerage and no electric light. In November 1957, when Armidale was in the midst of a severe drought, the Council turned off the only tap that serviced over 80 people living at the fringe camp because they were 'frightened they would leave

it on and waste water'⁴ (Franklin 57). The tap was still not functioning in February 1958, with an article in the *Armidale Express* reporting that 'All shacks... still lack water which has to be carted from a considerable distance as the City Council has not yet restored the supply which was cut off last year' (*Armidale Express*, 'Population Changes at the Dump', 10 February 1958).

In November 1958, with over 100 people living in tents and shacks on top of the contaminated soils of the town dump, with one unreliable tap to service everyone, no electricity, and no sewerage, the area was declared an Aboriginal Reserve. This conversion was aimed at transforming 'the old garbage dump at present occupied by aborigine half-castes in appalling living conditions into a disciplined community with a limited population' (*Armidale Express*, 'Plan for More Orderly Living at the Dump', 27 November 1957) H. J. Green, Superintendent of Aboriginal Welfare, stated:

The fact that the aborigines will be residing on an aborigines reserve will give the Board and the police officers greater control, particularly in the respect of health, hygiene and behaviour and should do much towards raising the living standards from the present state. (Letter from H. J. Green to Alderman E. M. Wilson, 1958)

Despite now coming under the disciplinary arm of the Aboriginal Welfare Board, the Reserve remained a neglected fringe camp and the much needed and promised basic services—sewerage, water, electricity—were not provided, leaving the segregated Reserve residents to endure a deadly paradox of state neglect and state control. Anaiwan Elder Aunty Pat Cohen, a member of Australia's infamous Stolen Generations, moved onto the area when she was 16 years old.

Aunty Pat remembers:

we came back to the reserve—my mother lived on East Armidale Reserve. There were about thirty of forty little shacks all around. It wasn't a reserve in those days, it was just a rubbish dump where the rubbish was laying around, and the blackfellers, well they made their camp, their huts out of the bits and pieces that were laying around. My mother and her three other children she had... Cliff, Linda and Ollie, were living there. We came back from the Styx River and were living with my mother for a little while until we got a tent and we just pitched a tent behind her... and I had a young baby too... There were a terrible lot of deaths out that way. A lot of young kids were dying of diarrhoea

⁴ Earlier that year, in January 1957, a letter from respected Gumbaynggirr Elder Frank Archibald to the *Sydney Morning Herald* states 'We had only one water tap all the year, and now that doesn't work' indicating that the tap was turned off prior to the November 1957 drought (Archibald).

... My mother's husband was Nick White—he died of gastroenteritis—and at one stage I remember there were five young children that died within a week from gastroenteritis out there. (Cohen and Somerville 98)

Dark town.

Anaiwan Elder Uncle Steve Widders told me that the mayor had tried to convince him that the area was known as 'Dark Town' because it had no electricity: 'electricity was on the next street, but not out here', Widders said (11 September 2015), evoking an image of two worlds existing at the same time and place—one bathed in light, the other in the shadows.⁵ But Widders' thought the mayor's suggestion that the name had anything to do with electricity was ridiculous. It was called 'Dark Town' to refer to the people, he said—it was racism through and through.

'Dark Town', it seems to me, could refer to a lot of things, including the haunting that emanates from this space of colonial violence and neglect. This place of slow death⁶ is shrouded in darkness, as colonial histories and the fabrications of Australian nationhood continue to erase the ongoing presence of Indigenous peoples and their stories.

I went to primary school about 800 metres down the road from old East Armidale Aboriginal Reserve site, and yet I was never taught any of this history. I lived in Armidale from the time I was born until the time I was eighteen years old, from 1985 to 2003, and learned nothing about the environmental and social violence that had occurred at the fringes of town. It wasn't until I was halfway through my PhD research on decolonisation and connection to place, when I was 25 years old, that I heard anything about the East Armidale Aboriginal Reserve.⁷ As I listened to Elders describe appalling experiences of racism and dispossession in the place I grew to understand myself and the world I was forced to confront the fact that my most intimate places of habitation are scarred by ecocidal and genocidal histories. When the Elders shared their memories of violence and resistance, community strength and dispossession, my physical response, my profoundly affected body,

⁵ Ghassan Hage argues that 'all colonial settler societies produce apartheid-like tendencies, creating divisions between two different worlds within a single national space' (Hage 22).

⁶ Lauren Berlant uses the phrase 'slow death' to refer to the physical wearing out of a population with emphasis on 'mass physical attenuation under global/national regimes of capitalist structural subordination and governmentality' (Berlant 754).

⁷ This research is published in revised form as *Transdisciplinary Journeys in the Anthropocene: More than Human Encounters* Routledge, Environmental Humanities Series: London (2017). <<https://www.routledge.com/Transdisciplinary-Journeys-in-the-Anthropocene-More-than-human-encounters/Wright/p/book/9781138911147>>.

drew me into a new relationship of responsibility. I felt for the first time I had lived my life on stolen land. I had known that for a long time, but now *I felt it*.

It was in the midst of this unsettling encounter with the violent histories of my homeland that Anaiwan Elder Uncle Steve Widders mentioned to me that he would like to start a community garden at the site of the old Reserve. Inspired to do something with my restless mind and hands, I asked if I could help. In 2014 Uncle Steve and I formed the seeding committee for the Armidale Aboriginal Community Garden, composed of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community leaders and organisational representatives. The community garden opened in May 2015, and since this time has been running as a platform for Aboriginal cultural revival and anticolonial resistance, as well as a field site for deeply engaged social and environmental outreach research, where the research team, comprising academics, community members and nonhuman inhabitants of the community garden collectively work toward decolonising communities and environments.



*Figure 4. Anaiwan Elder Uncle Steve Widders, with Gomeri poet Rob Waters and Kate Wright working in the garden bed behind, at Armidale Aboriginal Community Garden, 2015. Unpublished photograph courtesy of the *The Daily Telegraph*.*

One of the primary goals of the research taking place through the Armidale Aboriginal Community Garden is to unearth histories that have been silenced by the settler colonial state, and, through a deeply collaborative research process committed to decolonising methodologies, foreground the voices and testimony of Anaiwan, Dunghutti, Gamilaroi and Gumbaynggirr people.

In 1983, under the Aboriginal Land Rights Act, Reserves across Australia were handed back to Aboriginal communities. Since this time the land of the East Armidale Aboriginal Reserve has been owned and managed by the Armidale Local Aboriginal Land Council (ALALC). The site we chose for the community garden is a small block of land owned by a local private school that is directly adjacent to the ALALC owned land. This land was ostensibly ‘owned’ by the Catholic Church during the time of the East Armidale Aboriginal Reserve but because the Catholic Church built a house on the land for Gumbaynggirr Elder Frank Archibald in 1957 (*Armidale Express*, ‘House for Aborigines Seen as Successful Community Project’, 23 January 1957) many of Archibald’s relations moved in, and it effectively became an extension of the Reserve. This part of town is now known either as ‘the mish’ in reference to the old Reserve⁸, or as ‘Narwan Village’ in reference to the local Rugby League team—the Narwan Eels, and most of the people who live near our community garden either spent their childhoods on the East Armidale Aboriginal Reserve, or are direct relations of people who did.

This paper traces encounters and interactions between bodies and places in situations of racialised environmental violence and injustice. I have been inspired to write it by my experiences at the community garden—experiences that have changed my understanding of my personal complicity in Australia’s violent colonial history, and enhanced my feelings of responsibility to help stop ongoing violence against Aboriginal people. I am interested in encounters that have an affective and transformative force, as well as material entanglements, and the way these relational events and networks can activate histories that have been suppressed by dominant colonial narratives. In other words, I think that the body-in-place, and the place-in-body, can operate as an ethnographic site to illuminate the dark fringes of Australia’s whitewashed history, and allow settlers to feel, think and respond ethically to the presence of ‘the past that is not past’ (Sharpe 13).

Bodies and places are intimately entangled, and, in many senses, inseparable. Places nourish bodies, providing material conditions for survival and reproduction. And bodies emerge from place, as we are born ‘not only from out of our mother’s womb, but also the wombs, both human and more-than-human, both viviparous and oviparous, of our forebears’ (Hatley, 180-1). Aboriginal ontology is

⁸ Missions, Reserves and Stations were established throughout Australia from the late 1700s. Missions were in the control of churches and missionaries, with little to no government involvement, while Reserves and Stations were usually controlled by government. The Catholic Church had a strong influence at the East Armidale Aboriginal Reserve, but the Reserve itself was controlled and managed by the Aboriginal Welfare Board—a government organisation with wide ranging control over Aboriginal peoples’ lives, including the ability to remove Aboriginal children from their families. The old Reserve is now called ‘the mish’ in a colloquial conflation of Missions and Reserves.

grounded in an intricate understanding of the maternity of the Earth. Uncle Steve Widders explained to me, ‘That’s the earth, the land, my mother—gives you everything. Just as your mother gives birth, the land gives life—to everything’ (2011). In response to the centrality of place in Aboriginal philosophies and cultures, Kombumerri philosopher Mary Graham has proposed that Place should be included as a category in any Indigenous method of enquiry, alongside a ‘custodial ethic’ that stresses ‘the moral nature of physicality (especially land) and the need for relationality and interconnectedness with all life forces’ (71). She writes:

For Aboriginal people, place is epistemologically and ontologically central to notions of action or intent. Not only history but meaning arises out of Place. (75)

What does it mean to tell decolonial histories that foreground place as epistemologically and ontologically central? What would history look like if non-Indigenous researchers always assumed Indigenous presence⁹ and the ancestral power of the places we live in and write about? How would stressing the relationality and interconnectedness of earthly life change the way we respond to environmental violence and ongoing colonial occupation and dispossession?

In this paper I focus on the way the past collects in places and bodies in order to foreground alternative archives of violent colonial history and Aboriginal resistance and survival. My hope is to provide a grounded contribution to discussions of environmental injustice that draws attention to iterative violence—violence against Indigenous peoples that repeats and recurs in different forms, and its connection to particular ways of thinking (and failing to think) about history. Prompted by encounters with the ongoing presence of history in the community garden we cultivated at ‘Dark Town’, I offer a vision of place remembered, arguing that engaging with more-than-human memories embodied in environments can be a profound source of healing, resistance and resurgence. Central to this analysis is the premise that while histories of colonisation are held enduring in place, the material archives of places and the people that inhabit them tell many more stories that exceed 231 years of oppression and resistance. White Australia’s failure to attend to deep Indigenous time leaves the settler colonial state mired in temporal narcissism, believing the last couple of centuries to be the only significant history. But beyond the ‘homogeneous, empty time’ (Benjamin) of national history, lands and bodies are imbued with ancestral traces that stretch into deep time.

⁹ Māori scholar Alice Te Pungu Somerville (Te Āti Awa, Taranaki) asks ‘How differently might histories—might academia—look if we always assumed Indigenous presence?’ (Somerville 124)

To be fully present in body and place is to be wrapped in the past. Claw-like fingernails dig into the soils of a community garden, soils that are themselves a polyrhythmic patchwork composed of the living and the dead coalescing with ancient mineral fragments. Overhead, a black cockatoo is in flight. Nearby, a lizard disappears against a stone. Through the rhythmic motions of digging, the visceral discernment of hands in soil, we are called into an attentive now that embodies the deep past, and with it, the seeds of the future.

The Dump

The Aboriginal people who lived on the fringes of the Armidale township in the 1950s and 1960s didn't refer to the area as 'Dark Town'. They knew it by a much less ambiguous name: 'The Dump'. One of the founding members of the Armidale Aboriginal Community Garden committee, Uncle Colin Ahoy, known by his friends and family as Uncle Coke, told me:

It used to be called The Dump then, because we lived on an old rubbish dump, rubbish tip, this area was an old rubbish dump. And straight up the back from where we are today, they moved the rubbish dump from here straight up the hill, which didn't make it any safer for us because when it rained, the seepage from the rubbish came down the hill, through the mission. So it didn't make too much difference. (28 May 2018, Armidale)



Figure 5. Anaiwan Elder Uncle Colin Ahoy at his house in Narwan Village ('the mish'). Armidale, 2018. Photograph by Beth O'Loughlin. Reproduced with permission.

Sitting in the winter sun at Uncle Coke's house where the old Dump used to be, and talking with Coke about what it was like growing up there, a familiar scene from my childhood began to replay in my mind. It is of my Dad and me loading rubbish into the boot of our dark green Subaru sedan before heading off on our journey to what Dad called 'the tip'—the municipal garbage depot. Because we lived on a block of land outside of town the garbage collectors didn't come out to collect our trash. Dad burned most of it in an incinerator, but some of it wouldn't burn, and we had to take it to the edge of town. I remember the stench of the rubbish filling the car and pinching my nose shut. I remember the gaping chasm in the ground, and Dad pouring piles of trash from hessian bags into the big open wound in the land. It was the early 1990s and a different dump site from the one Uncle Coke remembers, but as I sat shivering by the outdoor fire Coke had lit on that freezing winter morning I kept thinking of that journey I used to take with my Dad, and the smell of the trash.

The environmental philosopher Val Plumwood used the term 'shadow places' to refer to the sacrificial zones of capitalist and consumerist societies:

all those places that produce or are affected by the commodities you consume, places consumers don't know about, don't want to know about, and in a commodity regime don't ever need to know about or take responsibility for. (Plumwood)

Shadow places are undeniably connected to environmental racism and the territorialisation of power. Black people, Indigenous people, and people of colour are disproportionately exposed to environmental hazards. At the Armidale dump, ongoing dispossession and the spatial management of colonisation—the bulldozing of humpies, the banning of Aboriginal people from 'white' areas, extreme economic disadvantage that made the purchase or rental of houses impossible—meant that many families had no option but to settle on the dump. The 'fringe-dwellers' then became discursively associated with rubbish and degradation, feeding white racism and myths of progressive colonisers and primitive Indigenes. An Armidale General Medical Practitioner, Ellen Kent-Hughes, wrote a letter to the *Sydney Morning Herald* published 10 January 1957, using conditions at the dump to present a racist depiction of Aboriginal people as dirty and irresponsible:

They camp on the outskirts of town and move continually. They are not capable of doing steady work, neither have they the slightest desire to exert themselves. They live on casual work (very casual), charity and the dole... The children run wild, rarely attend school, and are infected with most diseases connected with lack of sanitation. (Recently I had a child in hospital with scabies, head lice, and four types of intestinal

worms)... You cannot assimilate these coloured people until they are educated, disciplined, and trained; even the adults have the mentality of a neglected slum child.

Respected Gumbaynggirr Elder Frank Archibald, who resided on the dump with many extended family members at this time, wrote a retaliatory response outlining the structural conditions that caused the living conditions Kent-Hughes presented as racialised character flaws.

I am an Aboriginal living on the outskirts of Armidale with some of my children and grandchildren, and I am very annoyed at the letter of Ellen Kent Hughes which you printed on January 10... This is wild talk and cannot be said of us. We do move around following work but we want to settle down in a house. We want work but all we can get is casual work... This is all the work we can get. When there is no work we take the dole and charity or starve... If Ellen Kent Hughes lived on the dump she would have scabies, head-lice and worms too. We had only one water tap all the year, and now that does not work. (Archibald)

In her analysis of Uranium mining in Navajo country, Traci Brynne Voyles (2015) develops the concept of the wasteland—‘a racial and spatial signifier that renders an environment and the bodies that inhabit it pollutable’ (9). Voyles looks to processes of sedimentation to understand the way pollution collects and settles around wasteland discourses, giving ‘shape to power relations between peoples and geographies’ and ‘creating a highly spatialised set of power relations that invoke place as well as race’ (23).



Figure 6. Woman and child in front of tin humpy at the Dump. Source: Uncle Richard Vale. Reproduced with permission.

The appalling conditions that Aboriginal people were forced to endure on the fringes of town were not unique to Armidale. In October 1960 the president of the Armidale Association for the Assimilation of Aborigines, J. W. Warburton, stated:

At Moree there are about 200 Aborigines living in deplorable conditions. There is no water and they have to draw water from a well by bucket. There is another small camp just outside of Coffs Harbour. Three or four families live in dilapidated huts and their only water supply is a single tap down on the beach... In the reserve at Cabowee... there are about 12 families living in atrocious conditions but the Lismore Council has refused the Aborigines Welfare Board permission to buy land to build a new reserve'. ('Appalling Conditions')

Marco Armeiro has coined the term 'Wasteocene' to refer to violent inequalities that have produced our current environmental crisis. He writes:

Precisely as in the Anthropocene discourse, as also with waste, history is mixed with the earth in a material sense, becoming legible through the stratification upon which our world is built. Waste also represents the ironic conundrum of humans' relationships with the environment: the wealthier the society becomes, the more waste it produces, jeopardising its very existence. That garbage is a luxury for rich

societies has been said many times. This does not mean that the poor do not have waste; rather, it says something about who produces garbage and who gets it. (Armeiro and de Angelis 353)

I used to really enjoy going to the Armidale tip with my Dad, and I probably remember it because it seemed so unlike any other place I visited. There were no recycling facilities at that time, so all the trash produced by the town went into this massive ditch that had been dug out of the ground. We used to drive over a dirt track to an ominous cliff-edge and I'd watch Coca-Cola cans and empty wine bottles descend into the rubbish-filled cavity below. Then we'd get back in the car and drive across town until we reached the end of the bitumen, following winding dirt roads through native bush before eventually settling at our idyllic tree-change block filled with the calming scent of eucalypts and a dazzling sunburst of yellow wattle trees.

The dark fringes of town produce the illuminated centre. The beautiful 35-acre block of uncleared bushland where I lived for the first eighteen years of my life was not only stolen from Anaiwan custodians, but co-produced with and by the degradation of the dump where many of their descendants found refuge after colonial invasion and dispossession. My position of environmental privilege was enabled by a toxicity I helped to emit yet never had to live inside.

Environmental and economic injustice is not an accident, but rather a requirement, of Western market economies. The infinite growth needed to sustain the capitalist system depends on racial and colonial subjugation and inequality and the production of sacrificial environmental zones: shadow places and Dark Towns. As Tracy Brynne Voyles observes, 'To ask for a "just" distribution of industrial pollution, waste sites, mines, unsustainable and toxic labour... is not to ask for redistribution but rather to ask for modernity to throw up its hands and dismantle itself' (Voyles 25).

In his ninth thesis on the philosophy of history Walter Benjamin conjures an image of the Angel of History, a figure who 'sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage' at his feet. The Angel is caught in a violent storm which 'irresistibly propels him into the future... while the pile of debris before him grows skyward'. The storm, Benjamin tells us, 'is what we call progress.' As images of my beloved Dad pouring waste into the belly of the earth float through my mind it becomes clear to me that Benjamin's trash of progress is no metaphor. There are life and death stakes in the mixing of 'progress' and power with the earth.

In early 1960, following two deaths on the Reserve, and the occurrence of serious Gastric illness in four or more children, a Health Officer—Mr Esdaile—was requested to assess the conditions of the site. On the 21 February 1960 Mr Esdaile

reported that the Reserve had the 'most appalling sanitary conditions one could imagine' with 'cesspits... full almost to the point of overflowing' and infestations of maggots and flies throughout the humpies. 'The only water for all camps comes from a single tap at the extreme southern end of the ground. Many of the inhabitants need to carry all water for domestic needs up to 500 yards', the Health Report states. In a damning indictment of settler-colonial neglect, Esdaile wrote:

it is quite apparent that the Aborigines Welfare Board is not managing or regulating the use of the Reserve, as they are [statutorily] bound to do, vide Aborigines Protection Act, 1909. Absolutely no facilities are provided on the area by the Board, or any body other than the solitary water tap apparently supplied by The City Council... I have no doubt that any infectious disease occurring on the reserve would be transmitted rapidly by the ubiquitous flies and would thrive readily in the conditions prevalent throughout the area. This also constitutes a threat to the health of persons in neighbouring houses and in the City area a few hundred yards away.

Despite the health report recommending urgent action, no changes were made, and seven months later, in September and October 1960, an outbreak of disease spread through the Reserve killing at least four children and hospitalising thirteen in under three weeks. The children ranged from six months to three years of age (*Sydney Morning Herald*: '4 Children Die', 13 October 1960; 'Appalling Conditions', 14 October, 1960; 'Poisoning Theory', 14 October 1960). Harold Royle (cited in Franklin 31), an Armidale doctor who was working at the hospital at the time of the deaths on the Reserve remembers:

The children all became very sick with gastroenteritis. They'd all be dehydrated by the time they were brought to hospital. It didn't matter how quickly I put them on an intravenous drip they still died. We didn't have the same instruments as they have now. It was much more difficult. We used to blunt the end of ordinary needles and cut down on the vein with local anaesthetic and then push this thing into the vein and stitch it. We had a high mortality rate. I can't remember too many of them getting better. We didn't know why this epidemic occurred. We presumed it was caused by their poor hygiene. All they had was a basin of water out there to wash themselves.

Following the deaths, Mr Esdaile stated that it was possible that the children had eaten contaminated food from the dump. This theory was corroborated by Newcastle Health Officer, Dr. T. I. Dunn, who claimed that

children from the aboriginal reserve regularly raided the city dump in search of food. Older children could have taken the scraps back and given them to younger brothers and sisters. (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 'Poisoning Theory', 14 October 1960)

While the cause of the deaths on the dump in September and October of 1960 were never definitively determined it is clear that wilful state neglect and the slow violence (Nixon) of environmental and social degradation at the Reserve became murderous.

This appalling tragedy, and the many other violence's that occurred at the old dump site, leave biomineral and geosocial records. This past becomes an ongoing present as bodies carry material legacies of the body politic they have endured. Environmental justice scholars have noted that because bodies and places are interdependent and co-constituted, environmental violence is embodied in marginalised communities for generations. Stefania Barca observes that analysis of historical patterns of pollution exposure, toxic contamination, and environmental destruction reveal that environmental hazards

tend to concentrate in the places where the most disenfranchised live and work, accumulating in their bodies, their homes, and in everything alive, sickening their children and threatening to make appearance in their unborn offspring for generations to come. Unaccounted for in mainstream history writing, and yet with a life of their own, these forgotten ecological 'things' are the dust under the rug of 'development'. (540-1)

Environmental toxicity can be carried in human bodies as liver or kidney damage, or cancers caused by carcinogenic pollution. While all humans have what we are coming to call the Anthropocene inscribed into the materiality of their bodies—'we all have endocrine disruptors, microplastics, and other toxic things chugging through our metabolisms' (Hecht)—there are important differences in the way biospheric damage manifests in particular bodies, particular communities, and particular environments. Race, class and gender all play a role in determining how we inhabit, and are inhabited by, our planetary histories.¹⁰

¹⁰ Marco Armeiro observes that traces of exploitative and extractive capitalism can be found 'not only in geological strata but also in the biological and genetic strata of human bodies; exploitation, subordination, and inequalities... have sedimented into the human body, to the point of being inscribed into the genetic memory of humans' (347).



Figure 7. Site for prospective community garden at Narwan Village ('the mish'), 5 May 2014. Photograph by Kate Wright.

In 2014, when I first visited the block of land that was to become the Armidale Aboriginal Community Garden, I stood before the most tangible research problem I have ever faced—enormous mounds of dumped soil filled with rubbish and refuse: broken glass, cans, bits of hose and tire, loose cement materials. Despite the fact that the old Reserve land stopped being used as Armidale's municipal garbage depot in 1958, illegal dumping on the area had continued for decades. The degraded soil I found at the community garden site was right next to Aboriginal people's houses, dumped against their fences, and no local organisation—not the town council, nor the private school who owned the land—had taken responsibility for cleaning it up. These mounds of trash mixed with earth can be read as the 'sedimentation of racial inequality' (Oliver and Shapiro 5), part of an ongoing process of degradation that did not cease when the municipal dump land was redesignated.

The surface soil and trash I encountered at the prospective community garden site was an index of what potentially lay beneath—lead, asbestos, copper, arsenic, mercury—a whole litany of pollutants that could make the community garden's development unfeasible, as we did not have the funds to rehabilitate toxic soil. In 2014 environmental engineering firm *Ferber Environment & Waste* analysed the soils of the community garden site and determined that they did not pose a risk to environmental or human health, but that the soil was of very poor quality, with

'poor soil structure and low organic matter content' (16). The soil of the community garden is of extremely poor quality because of dispossession and ecocide—because the soils of Anaiwan land were cleared of the living beings that would transform it into nourishing terrain (Rose 1996), including human custodians who are part of soil communities, and because the toxicity of industrial capitalism has seeped into the earth, poisoning the symbiotic relational systems that create living worlds. While we were safe to continue with developing the community garden, we had to begin to rehabilitate the degraded soil, and the distressed soil has remained an ongoing material reminder that our decolonising project is immersed in the mineralogical ground of violent colonial power relations.

Rachel Buchanen observes that conventional academic history understands the past as a series of events that have taken place and been completed, and are different and distant from the present (46). In contrast, material historical research that centres places and bodies as ethnographic field-sites engages with what Astrida Neimanis and Stephanie Walker have called 'thick time' where 'matter has a memory of the past, and this memory swells as it creates and unmakes possible futures' (571).

The Archival Imagination

In early January 2018, in the middle of a hot Australian summer, I visited the New England Heritage Centre to do some archival research. The Heritage Centre can be found in the old Teacher's college of Armidale, a neo-colonial building with expansive gardens of introduced flora. Inside, classical music played by the Conservatorium students the building also houses echoes down the long corridors.

After going down a couple of staircases and up a long hallway, I came to a cluttered room. I told the archivist at the counter that I wanted to see some stuff about the East Armidale Aboriginal Reserve in the twentieth century, and he brought me cardboard boxes of material gathered from a backroom.

The boxes were filled with surveillance documents produced by the Aboriginal Welfare Board. Who lives in what house, how many children they have. I recognised almost all of the family names from people I had met through the community garden project. There were letters back and forth from advocacy groups to government trying to get Aboriginal people housing off the dump—mostly the advocates were unsuccessful. There were newspaper clippings, court records, and there were photographs. Many, many powerful photographs. One photograph I knew I'd seen before, when Uncle Richard Vale, a Gumbaynggirr Elder, showed it to me out at the community garden.



Figure 8. Ethel De Silva and family pictured in front of a tin humpy at the dump. Source: Uncle Richard Vale. Reproduced with permission.

It's a photograph of what looks like a family standing in front of one of the tin humpies constructed at the Dump. There were no names or descriptions, no date was given. It's a compelling image, but it felt far away. Contextualised within newspaper articles about deaths at the Reserve, the governmentality of surveillance documents, and other official machinations of settler colonial violence, I looked upon the image as though it was documentary evidence of a historical crime scene. The black and white colour grading, the dilapidated tin humpy and the weathered bodies in front of it, fixed the photograph firmly in the past.

A few weeks later I brought an A4 sized copy of this photograph, and similar photographs I had found at the archive, with me on an Elders tour of the old Reserve site. A group of Aboriginal Elders, now in their 70s and 80s, had agreed to show some young researchers and students around the place that was once known as Dark Town. Before we started the walking tour, I shared the photographs with the Elders and the other participants. I was taken back when Aunty Barbara Ahoy, an Elder, said 'That's me in that photograph there'. Aunty Barb believed she was the babe in arms. Barbara Ahoy is also the mother of Colin Ahoy—Uncle Coke.¹¹

¹¹ Uncle Coke has recently said to me that despite his mother's self-recognition, he thinks the photograph may not be of his mother, because he remembers growing up in the tin house that is photographed, and so that period would have been a lot later than when his mother was a baby. Coke is unsure about who the child is, but is certain that it is his grandmother, Ethel De Silva,

Standing at the precipice of town and the old Reserve site, as if hovering between the present and the past, I spoke with Aunty Barb about her memories of her Mum and Dad in the photograph, growing up in a humpy, and of raising her kids, including Coke, on the Reserve. It was a dizzying temporal readjustment, as this photograph of the past was brought into the present, and my shaky researcher's stance was undone by the proximity of what had, until now, been a distant historical subject.

Aunty Barb told me that her youngest child had been hospitalised as a baby from gastroenteritis he contracted while living at the Reserve. 'We nearly lost him', she said. My composure faltered, I became emotional, I didn't know where to place my hands, where to stand. I gave the photograph to Aunty Barb and said 'please keep it', and the gesture felt small and insufficient. I felt called up, and somehow called out, by this spontaneous moment of reclamation, as the child I had looked upon as a figure of the past materialised before me now an aged and respected Elder, to take her image, and the image of her parents, back.

Bain Attwood (253) notes that in conventional history the historian is 'an outsider' who 'strives to represent the past as it happened and to realise the past's alterity—its difference from present times'. This is part of the archival imagination that allows for what Johannes Fabian calls the 'denial of coevalness'. In his sophisticated critique of anthropology's use of time to construct its Other, Fabian argues that a logic of progress uses time politically to objectify cultures while practicing 'allachronism'—the casting of the Other into another time. Allachronism allows for the 'simultaneity of the non-simultaneous', where things can exist at the same time but appear to belong to different worlds (xii). Subaltern historian Dipesh Chakrabarty (29) gives the example of a 'medieval object' which we could hold in our hands yet still see 'a relic of a past world that is no longer there'. He adds that 'one could, in historicism, look at peasants the same way: as survivals from a dead world.'

As I looked at the weathered face of Aunty Barbara Ahoy I struggled to connect her image with the child in the photograph, not only because it is hard to see the child in the adult, but because I had discursively placed this photograph in a dead world. In many senses, this was what had allowed me to look at, and conceptually use, the photographs in the archives to think through analytical problems that my community garden project had raised. While I was physically immersed in colonial legacies—digging into soils that carry violent environmental and social histories—I was inadvertently approaching the past as something temporally,

holding the baby. While the details of the photograph are now uncertain, the emotional and physical proximity of a once temporally and socially removed historical subject nonetheless remains a powerful occurrence for me as a researcher, and I was also deeply moved to hear that my friend Uncle Coke had spent some of his childhood in the tin home that is pictured.

spatially and socially far away. The burdens of the ethics of who might own such images, the discomfort of peering into others intimate and complex family photographs that I might feel if I were looking at photographs that were recognisable to me—like my own family albums from the 1980s or 1990s—were removed by my enclaving of these images to history, thereby placing colonialism, dispossession, neglect and violence also in the past. Although I was priding myself on doing decolonising work, I was burdened by the disjunctive temporality of my culture, unable to think beyond it until the body of Barbara Ahoy demanded a different conception of time, history and responsibility.

Like the soil beneath our feet, the colonial traumas of the past were held in the body of Auntie Barbara Ahoy and her survivor testimony. Yet it was not trauma alone that was so challenging, but the complexity of memory, of family, of community, and of a long life that is still being lived. Taking the image from its confines in the archives and out into the world on this walking Elders tour was a way of grounding truth in the *ground* truths of the old Reserve site (Todd, 'From Classroom' 90).

Archives have been metaphorically described as the 'secretions of an organism' (Galbraith). The archives that document the history of the East Armidale Aboriginal Reserve are records gathered by the Armidale Association for the Assimilation of Aborigines. But this is only one organisation with a controversial and problematic 'mission' in relation to Aboriginal peoples and their histories.¹² What other organisms, human and more-than-human, have been secreting data about life at the old dump? Through encounters with histories woven into bodies and places it is possible to build alternative narratives that reveal 'the agents buried beneath' (Spillers) 'the accumulated erasures, projections, fabulations, and misnamings' of the archive (Sharpe 12).

Understanding iterative and ongoing colonial violence requires a conception of agency that is not tied to intentionality. This is partly because the enrolment of the more-than-human world has been central to the colonial process¹³, but also

¹² The Armidale Association for the Assimilation of Aborigines sought to raise the living conditions of Aboriginal people by helping them to 'assimilate' into white society. The Armidale Assimilation constitution states 'The ultimate aim of the Association shall be the acceptance of all Aboriginal people into the Australian community on the basis of complete equality with the other members of that community, and as immediate steps to this end the Association will seek to investigate housing, occupational and employment problems of Aborigines in and near Armidale, and give assistance where possible so as to help the Aborigines raise their standard of living'. The Association was composed primarily of the wives of academics at the University of New England. It is undeniable that the Armidale Association for Assimilation of Aborigines devoted enormous time and labour and did a lot of good work, but they have also been widely criticised for their patronising mission (Franklin).

¹³ American historian Alfred W. Crosby charts the historical partnership between human European invaders into Indigenous lands and the 'grunting, lowing, neighing, crowing, chirping, snarling, buzzing, self-replicating and world-altering avalanche' of introduced life that they

because focusing on intentionality can blind non-Indigenous people to their own complicity in ongoing oppression and dispossession. Laura Pulido mobilises the notion of white privilege to 'develop a more structural, less conscious, and more deeply historicised understanding of racism' (13). In the context of settler-colonialism, white privilege is made manifest through the occupation and degradation of Indigenous lands.

Occupation Day

There is not occupation of territory, on the one hand, and independence of persons on the other. It is the country as a whole, its history, its daily pulsation, that are contested, disfigured, in the hope of a final destruction. Under these conditions, the individual's breathing is an observed, an occupied breathing. It is a combat breathing. (Fanon 65)

Following nation-wide outcry at the appalling conditions that had led to the preventable death of children on the East Armidale Aboriginal Reserve, an emergency fund of eighteen thousand pounds was dedicated by the Aboriginal Welfare Board to 'clean up' the area, and to build fourteen cottages. Despite the toxicity in the environment caused by living on a rubbish dump that had only stopped being used two years earlier, and the desire of many of the Reserve's residents to move into town, the 'Aboriginal Welfare Board maintained that building acceptable houses for Aboriginal people in town would be a waste of money as all the Aborigines needed "training" in "transitional" housing' (Franklin 32) because the fringe-dwellers 'could not yet act properly in a house in town' (Brereton and Moore, cited in Franklin 26).

On 7 November 1961, referred to by the Aboriginal Welfare Board as 'Occupation Day', the tin humpies were demolished and fourteen new cottages were officially opened at the Reserve.¹⁴ These transitional houses had galvanised iron cladding, no heating except for a small stove, no insulation, inadequate bathroom facilities, no hot water, were small and restricted in space, and had no fences. 'They built

brought with them (194). Crosby argues that the colonisation of Australia and other 'neo-European' countries was necessarily more-than-human.

¹⁴ On 'Occupation Day', the old tin houses were demolished, and residents moved into their new corrugated iron 'Silver City'. Don Yates explained that 'overflow families', that is, those who were unable to secure a cottage on the Reserve, were being offered houses and employment elsewhere. Whether this claim was true or not, the expectation was that the former residents of the Dump would be moved on to Cowra Station, Jervis Bay and Wallaga Lake revealing the lack of agency Aboriginal people had over their own lives ('Aborigine Reserve: Conference Clears up Misunderstandings', *The Armidale Express* 11 September 1961).

new houses but it was still cold', Uncle Steve Widders explained, 'sometimes colder inside than it was out' (11 September 2015). The stark appearance of the corrugated iron earned Dark Town the new name of Silver City, and while Elders testify that the new cottages greatly improved living conditions, the substandard dwellings of Silver City functioned as metonym of progress and assimilation in action enabling the Welfare Board to intensify their level of control over the community.



Figure 9. A tin humpy being bulldozed in front of the new cottages at the East Armidale Aboriginal Reserve. Unpublished photographs, 7 November 1961, courtesy of *The Armidale Express*.

At the time of the building of the cottages, residents were concerned about the surveillance that would now be employed at the Reserve. The District Aboriginal Welfare Officer, Don G. Yates, reassured them that their fears were based on

'nonsensical propaganda'. There would be no restriction on visitors, no restrictions to the movement of residents and no invasion of privacy. Don Yates, speaking of himself said, 'The Welfare Officer will come as a friend' (*Armidale Express*, 'Aboriginal Reserve: Conference Clears up Misunderstandings', 11 September 1961). Yates's promises were empty, and the East Armidale Aboriginal Reserve functioned as a paternalistic prison where the dwellings were subject to fortnightly inspections, and the community lived in fear of the power of the Welfare Board to take their children.



Figure 10. Ethel de Silva receiving keys, from District Aboriginal Welfare Officer Don Yates, to one of the new cottages built on East Armidale Aboriginal Reserve, Unpublished photograph, 1961, courtesy of *The Armidale Express*.

Uncle William (Bim) Widders speaking publicly at a community garden event remembered his own fear at the threat of being stolen from his family while living on the Reserve:

There was a protection board manager, Mr Yates, cause of the Reserve. He always used to come down this road here [Bim points his finger toward what is now a bitumen street that runs beside our community garden]. The parents told us as soon as you see that white station wagon go away and hide. And we used to see the dust coming up here. You'd see all the kids just scatter. My hiding place was underneath the laundry... me and Ollie used to stand up in there and hide. We were terrified. (11 September 2015)



Figure 11. Anaiwan Elder Uncle Bim Widders making clap-sticks at Armidale Aboriginal Community Garden, 2016. Photograph by Kate Wright.

The records for the Armidale Association for the Assimilation of Aborigines (AAA) evidence the enormous barriers in place to prevent any transgression of the racialised border between the Reserve and the Armidale township. A letter from the Secretary of the Armidale Association for the Assimilation of Aborigines to the

Housing Commission Committee pleading for funds to help purchase a house for the Lockwood family reveals the desperation of the people trapped in the area:

The Lockwood's were living on the Reserve at the time of the recent outbreak of disease and their baby was one of the four who died... And so moved away from the Reserve to the home of relations who live in a shack, little better than those on the Reserve, over the Railway line from the Teachers' College. This dwelling now houses 14 persons, it has only two bedrooms and no water supply, and water has to be carried from the Reserve daily. It is, however, to be demolished in the very near future. (13 December 1960)

The Lockwood's were denied their loan on the basis that Mr Lockwood had failed to notify the Aboriginal Welfare Board of his change of address, but AAA records reveal that the Welfare Board's claim was fallacious, and that Lockwood had kept the Board up to date, but the family was powerless to contest the decision and received no help from the Housing Commission.

Requests for houses in town emphasise the ability of the potential residents to assimilate. 'Mixed blood aborigines of a good type' (Letter to Housing Commission from J. W. Warburton, President of AAA) were most likely to receive assistance. Yet the colonial logic was inconsistent and Kafkaesque, as one family—the Beales—were denied a loan because they were too white. The superintendent of Aboriginal Welfare wrote 'the Beale family are very light castes and technically not aborigines' so ineligible for financial support (Green, 'Letter' 1960).

These institutional barriers were further consolidated by widespread racism in the general community. At a public event at the Armidale Aboriginal Community Garden, Uncle Steve Widders pointed across the road and said:

There was a petition by white people in those streets over there, some of whom are still alive today, to say no, we don't want Aboriginal people here. And there were 300 people that signed that, and that was back in the 1960s... see the difference between that street and over here, they still didn't want Aboriginal people in the area. (11 September 2015)

Widders' embodied awareness of racialised borders—the closeness of the streets, but the immense divisions between them—is accompanied by a refusal to encyst experiences of racial oppression in the past. At the same community garden event, Aunty Pat Cohen remembered that when she lived on the East Armidale Aboriginal Reserve 'you couldn't get a house in town... If you wanted a house, you'd send one of your white mates in for it. Ask them to get it for you', and Widders added 'That hasn't changed much, that's still happening today' (11 September 2015).

Dispossession is not a singular, historical event, but the ongoing apparatus of settler colonial occupation of Aboriginal country. Tess Lea et al. observe that enclaving Indigenous dispossession as a function of the past is a widespread discursive practice (Lea et al. 141) that hides the fact that in contemporary settler colonial Australia, 'the spatial management necessary for ongoing processes of "accumulation through dispossession" is as pernicious as ever' (Lea et al. 140). For Indigenous people, settler 'occupation day' is every day.

In Armidale, the roads that run through the town are named after colonisers who committed atrocities—Dangar, Macdonald—while nearby landmarks carry the names of massacres: Slaughterhouse Creek, Poison Swamp Creek, Gins Leap. This grid of bitumen seems to testify to the completion of the genocidal settler colonial project. Through the spatialisation of colonial occupation, the ongoing presence and resistance of Aboriginal peoples is disavowed, revealing that only certain memories count, and only certain pasts are visible, while others are undergoing erasure. At a Survival Day Gathering at the Armidale Aboriginal Community Garden on 26 January 2018, Gomeroi poet Rob Waters read a poem he had written about New England's cartographic commemoration of colonial violence and attempted genocide.

Do you know of John Oxley?
 For him they have called, a river, a highway, a park, waterfalls.
 His name marks the pages of the places he sat. But what of the black
 man he had shot for his hat?
 Or the gorge they call Dangar, there are falls there as well. He owned
 Myall Creek where the Gamilaroi fell.
 And instead of assuring that their story was told, he gave money to the
 white ones and said don't tell a soul.
 Or your boy named McDonald, that park has his name. Our old people
 said he liked to murder and maim, and while we're on names listen to
 me when I speak, do you think they killed cattle at Slaughter House
 Creek?
 Or Poison Swamp Creek, or the Burying Ground, you see these are the
 names that we see round your town. They're a constant reminder that
 the white ones once said, that this is the place, where us black ones lie
 dead.

And yet, there Waters' stood, painted in ochre, the ground down sediment of Anaiwan country, his very presence a lived resistance to settler-colonial genocidal replacement.

Stephen Muecke, referring to the highways and freeways that now criss-cross the continent, writes 'Australia is a country where deep Indigenous narrative lines have been confused by the imposition of another grid of lines' (Muecke 192). In this eloquent observation of the intersections between story, time and place, Muecke alerts us to the way that the materiality of the colonial occupation of Indigenous country can obscure ancient stories. As exhaust pipes cough smoke into the atmosphere, the bitumenised coordinates of settler-colonial time and place seem to render the ongoing theft of Indigenous lands, and the reckless exploitation of the forces of those lands, invisible.

In Aboriginal ontology, place holds ancestral stories and ancestral power. Those stories are cared for through care of country, and through rhythmic movement—through dance, and the through the walking and telling of narrative lines that are patterned across the living world. Aboriginal author and Boisbouvier Chair in Australian Literature, Alexis Wright, writes:

In this country there are sacred places holding enormous powers throughout this continent and reaching far out in the seas. But most non-Aboriginal people do not understand the powerful nature of this country and the forces of nature, or how the ancient law stories associated with each of these sacred places contain vital knowledge... for caring for the stories and powers of the ancestors. These narratives of great and old wisdom are the true constitution for this country, and urgently need to be upfront in the national narrative in understanding how to care for it.

The so-called New England tableland, like the rest of the Australian continent, was narrated into being through an Indigenous creation story. The creation ancestors, sometimes referred to as the Dreamings, shaped the contours of the land, are the founders of kin groups, and the creators much of the biotic life on earth. Kin groups are made of human and nonhuman descendents of the ancestors. Deborah Bird Rose explains 'Life flows from ancestors into the present and on into the future, and from the outset it is a multispecies interactive project' ('Shimmer' 52)

Looking at the history of Dark Town and the East Armidale Aboriginal Reserve through the ethnographic and archival lens of the body-in-place, and the place-in-body, reveals two deadly forms of capture: the containment of people, and the harnessing of ancestral planetary forces. The fossil fuel economy is sustained by the petro-capitalist capture of the bodies of our carboniferous kin. These long-gone beings have been weaponised to become the toxic geo-social contaminants and pollutants that reproduce the injustices of our world (Todd, 'Fish, Kin and Hope', 104). By sequestering Aboriginal peoples away on the town dump toxic flows of modernity and industry, sustained by the devastation of Indigenous lands,

were consolidated by the ongoing apparatus of colonial power. In other words, the deep ancestral forces of Country and kin were disturbed and perverted by the occupying powers.

Environmental violence through the degradation of racialised places, like the Armidale dump does not only occur at a time *in* history, then. Rather, it *occupies* history—including deep ancestral history—as it is embodied in place. In this context, decolonising history becomes a distinctly material and multispecies practice that involves the reclamation and recreation of what Keith Basso calls ‘place-worlds’. Basso writes:

Place-making involves multiple acts of remembering and imagining which inform each other in complex ways... What is remembered about a particular place... guides and constrains how it will be imagined by delimiting a field of workable possibilities... Building and sharing place-worlds, in other words, is not only a means of reviving former times but also of *revising* them, a means of exploring not merely how things might have been but also how, just possibly, they might have been different from what others have supposed. (5-6)

The Armidale Aboriginal Community Garden became a site for the sharing of histories to fight the settler colonial state’s ‘violent practices of occupation, erasure and colonial resignification’ (Pugliese 31). This survivor testimony has coincided with a very tangible remaking of place. Digging into fractured soils to plant native trees and shrubs is an embodied act of recuperation that attends to embedded and embodied histories, to layers of custodianship and dispossession.



Figure 12. Hands painted in ochre planting a wild orange tree (*capparis mitchelli*) in the Armidale Aboriginal Community Garden (October 2018). Photograph by Gabi Briggs.

Over 25 species of plants native to the region are now growing in the community garden. Each of these plants embodies cultural knowledge most clearly articulated through their ethnobotanical uses as native foods, medicines, and materials such as lomandra grasses (*lomandra longifolia*) for weaving, or flax lily (*dianella*) for dye.

In contrast to the linear temporality of modernity and ‘progress’ where the past seems to disappear with the tide of history, in Aboriginal cosmologies ‘presence can be held in place, enduring’ (Muecke, *Ancient and Modern*). Taking this proposition seriously means recognising that tending to native plants on Anaiwan country is an everyday practice of resurgence (Corntassel 89) that ‘roots resistance in the spirit, knowledge, and laws... of ancestors’ (Alfred).

Survival Day

On Survival Day, 26 January 2018, the community garden committee hosted a gathering for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, at which we exhibited archival documents from the Frontier Wars on the New England Tablelands, as well as the archival material I had gathered from the Heritage Centre documenting the institutionalised war waged on Aboriginal people at the East Armidale Aboriginal Reserve.

Archives themselves are weapons of colonial warfare. Edward Said (1978) observed that imperial powers were able to maintain power by controlling the information that was recorded in the archive, and omitting the ideas and voices of the conquered. Michel Foucault (1969) also suggested that power was derived from the meticulous collection of data about the colonised and that new kinds of power could be attained simply by observing and keeping records about the ‘other’. Exhibiting the archival material portraying waves of colonisation at the old Reserve site was a decolonising tactic to mobilise environmentally embodied memories, family histories and ancestral connections in one situated and particular environment in order to draw the archived colonial past into an ongoing present of resistance and survival.

I interviewed Ambēyaŋ weaver, Gabi Briggs, and Ambēyaŋ language revivalist, Callum Clayton-Dixon, who helped to collate material for the Armidale Aboriginal Community Garden Survival Day Exhibition (2018). Briggs and Clayton-Dixon are both members of the Anaiwan Language Revival Program, and some of the material we exhibited was from the Anaiwan Language Revival Program’s recent publication documenting histories of violent colonisation and Aboriginal resistance on the New England tablelands: *Mūgūŋ & Gun: Resisting New England–Frontier Wars, Edition One* (2018).

Clayton-Dixon spoke of 'repatriating Aboriginal history'. He argued that just as Aboriginal peoples seek the repatriation of artefacts and ancestral remains to their rightful countries, the reclamation of archival material and its exhibition at the old Reserve site is the repatriation of history to the places in which it is embodied: 'there were Aboriginal people who fought in defense of our lands and lives and liberties in this place here'.

Briggs emphasised the importance of foregrounding place-based inheritance in order to foster a sense of ownership and responsibility:

We are still frozen in time when it comes to localised racial relations. It is crucial for us to acknowledge and comprehend our position within the colonial project... as a settler you are a benefactor of the colonial project whereas for me, as a Blakfulla, we are oppressed by the colonial project and are survivors of massacre and genocide. I know I am a survivor of massacre and genocide despite systemic and social attempts to erase it from the Australian memory. From a young girl, my mother let me know that many of the streets in town are named after violent colonists, who are celebrated. A localised understanding of genocide and invasion needs to happen here, it is critical that it does. (Briggs)

As a settler-colonial descendant of English, Scottish and Danish ancestry born and raised on Anaiwan land, my life has been peculiarly framed by the suppression and perversion of the relations between colonial inheritance, ancestry and place. I have grown up understanding myself as a 'white Australian' with minimal connection to my bloodlines or milk-lines, to my own Indigenous past lost in migration, or to the ancestral power of the places I have lived in Australia that have nourished and sustained me.

Rob Garbutt explains that settlers become naturalised to Australian places by 'forgetting [their] arrival' so that national identity consists in 'having always been "from here"' (174). This forgetting is only possible if it is accompanied by the forgetting of Indigenous sovereignty. White privilege is, in part, the privilege of a lack of ancestral responsibility or attention: the power to 'dominate and inhabit Indigenous lands and believe that it is legally and morally acceptable to do so' (Whyte 237).

Both Briggs and Clayton-Dixon are acutely aware of the material and discursive power relations built on white privilege that continue to demarcate the lives of Aboriginal people. Through sharing their research into frontier warfare they seek to enhance understandings of contemporary racialised oppression by connecting

it to the violent history of invasion and massacre on the New England tablelands. They explain:

Callum Clayton-Dixon: All of this archival material provides raw context as to why in New England, and elsewhere in New South Wales, Aboriginal people have so little access to land. This is why everybody else has thousands and thousands of hectares of land, and this is why we've got nothing, virtually nothing. And if we go and try to access that land, what happens is that we get fundamentally the same treatment as we got back then. It's not materially the same, but it's the same in principle. Take this archival excerpt for example: 'A certain major when he settled on a well known station in New England established such a reign of terror over his undefined domains that for twenty-five years no aboriginal would approach his run, although through it ran their favourite and most prolific fishing streams' (*Singleton Argus* December 1883, cited in Anaiwan Language Revival Program 50). So that sounds really, really horrific, and it would have been horrific, but now it is just much more subtle. That station he was on, we still can't access it.

Gabi Briggs: It's the same power structure that still exists, like I said before we are frozen in time... These people were pastoralists, initially on the frontier, who were paving the way for the colonial project and our very existence obstructed it. They want to get rid of us and render us invisible to the project. Despite no recognition, this power play still exists today, with Blakfullas still on the fringes. So if we are frozen in time with race relations, we need to start conversations and give space to how the power imbalance happened in the first place.

When the material from the *Mūgūŋ & Gun* publication was exhibited alongside documentation of the East Armidale Aboriginal Reserve gathered from surveillance records of the Armidale Association for the Assimilation of Aborigines and the Aboriginal Welfare Board, the connections between the ongoing machinations of colonial violence, were made visible. Place was mobilised to anchor seemingly distinct historical periods—a 'grounding' of history that produces embodied attention to emplaced histories of dispossession and genocide.

When an Elder said to me that nothing is growing well in the garden because the land is haunted by past traumas, I thought of Deborah Bird Rose's words:

Memory, place, dead bodies and genealogies hold the stories that tell the stories, that are not erased, that refuse erasure. Painful as they are,

they also constitute relationships of moral responsibility, binding people into the country and the generations of their lives. (*Reports* 57)

That body and place remember is not a metaphor, but the bio-social and eco-mental reality of life on a complex and interconnected planet. Philosophers of memory and philosophers of environment observe that the human capacity for memory is intimately linked with place. Cognitive philosopher John Sutton (230) argues that 'the biological brain is itself incomplete' and requires ambient environmental information in order to remember, and phenomenological philosopher Edward S. Casey notes that 'As much as body or brain, mind or language, place is a keeper of memories' (213).

Country also remembers without humans. Recent research into plant microbe and plant microbiome associations in the rhizosphere have postulated the concept of *soil memory*, arguing that soil carries microbial memories of environmental conditions that are passed from one generation of plants to the next 'which explains how a plant could promote their fecundity and protect their offspring through tightly associated relationships with soil' (Lapsanky et al. 137). Epigenetic inheritance across microbial networks is a form of non-cognitive nonhuman memory. Information about a harsh winter transmitted from plant to soil and back to plant is a biochemical marker registered from a set of external environmental inputs—just like a human memory, reminding us that the past circulates in multispecies ecologies of the present.

The fractured Country of the old East Armidale Aboriginal Reserve, traumatised by social and ecological colonial violence, is a teeming hive of memories. The soils very morphology has been shaped by human cultures and social systems. This emotionally charged land also triggers human memories as the people who lived on the dump make affective contact with the places that hold their past and share their survivor testimony with community. The bodies, both human and nonhuman, that have once inhabited or continue to live in this part of town also carry the lands' memory beneath the level of consciousness—a chemical and biological reservoir of the body politic each of those bodies has endured. In epigenetic relation, Elders and land are both knowledge-holders, and stories come alive or are activated by the connections between selves and place in the embedded materiality of time.

Through engaging with the past as it is embedded in the living world it becomes possible to change what that past means and how it affects the present and the future. Because the past never truly disappears, but collects, material engagements with history can become sites of profound healing.

At the Survival Day gathering we held in the community garden, Elders held a smoking ceremony and the scent of burning gum leaves rose up around the black and white photographs. There was traditional dancing, and the children's bare feet stamped the earth into a whirlwind of dust. Magpies flew overhead. Place wrapped itself around the historical documents, no longer able to recede into archival boxes in a shadowy back room, but a shared part of an ongoing story of subjugation and resistance. To move beyond the ongoing violence of colonial history-making we must position the relatively short, but utterly devastating, story of colonisation and resistance within the depths of Indigenous time. This is a story that has never been and can never be separated from the immutable presence of the Aboriginal ancestral past, held enduring in Country, since the first sunrise.



Figure 13. Layata Vale holding a photograph of her great grandfather, Frank Archibald, who is in turn holding a photograph of his great great grandfather 'King Malawangi' (King Bobby / King Robert) at Armidale Aboriginal Community Garden (Survival Day, January 26, 2019). Photograph by Kate Wright. Reproduced with permission.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge and thank Uncle Colin Ahoy, Aunty Pat Cohen, Uncle Richard Vale, Uncle Steve Widders, Gabi Briggs, Callum Clayton-Dixon, and Rob Waters—each of whom made significant contributions to this research. I would also like to honour and pay my respects to the late Aunty Barbara Ahoy and the late Uncle Bim (Wombarty) Widders who so generously shared their memories and thoughts with me.

Thank you to the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society (LMU, Munich), particularly Christof Mauch and Arielle Helmick, for giving me the opportunity to work on this essay in the RCC's warm, collegial and thought-provoking atmosphere. Thanks too to Louis Warren, Monique Rooney and the anonymous referees who each provided a great deal of helpful feedback on the essay at various stages of its development. I am also grateful for the support of Katrina Schlunke, Hannah Stark and Penny Edmonds, the organisers of the Uncanny Objects in the Anthropocene Symposium at the University of Tasmania (2017) where an early version of this work was presented.

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