

## **Bubbles on the surface: a methodology of water**

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### **Abstract**

This paper is about a methodology for researching place that evolved in an ARC project *Bubbles on the Surface: a place pedagogy of the Narran Lake*. The methodology was collaboratively designed by U'Alayi researcher Chrissiejoy Marshall and Monash researcher Author. It was developed from conversations linking Marshall's methodology of 'thinking through country' (Marshall, 2004) and Author's 'postmodern emergence' (Author, 2007; 2008). The project developed a life of its own when other Indigenous artist/researchers were employed to work on the research. The artist/researchers have generated artworks and stories about water in their different locations in the Murray-Darling Basin which have been expressed in a series of iterative exhibitions of artworks and text. In this paper I will examine the evolving methodologies and the resulting artworks and stories to explore how the methodology has been enacted and developed throughout this project.

### **Introduction**

The proposal for this project was centred on the Narran Lakes, or *Terewah*, in the drylands of western NSW, located in a triangle bounded by the towns of Walgett, Brewarrina and Goodooga. The Narran Lake is an 'icon site' (MDBN Forum, 2004) of the northern Murray-Darling Basin, home to large flocks of migratory birds, including the endangered straw necked ibis. The lake is fed by the waters of the Condamine-Balonne catchment that flow into the Narran River to the north and is linked to the Darling River in the south. It is an ideal location for learning about alternative storylines of water in the Murray-Darling Basin. *Terewah* continues to be the site of creation for this project.

While the environmental degradation of the Murray River is well known, only limited attention has been given to the health of the system as a whole. In the last five years new stories of connection have been emerging from community concerns: 'The way water is managed in Qld controls how much water eventually flows into NSW with obvious ecological and financial implications. There are great concerns particularly about the Ramsar listed Narran Lakes above Brewarrina which locals say is being destroyed' (ABC Radio, 2003). While the Ramsar listing recognises the international significance of the Narran Lakes as a wetlands for migratory birds, the water flow to the lakes has greatly diminished, the Lake is cropped and grazed, and the main lake area is wholly contained on private property where it is not accessible to its Aboriginal custodians.

For local Aboriginal people the Narran Lakes are part of a songline that physically links the Brewarrina Fish traps, a waterhole at Byrock, and Mt Gundabooka, hundreds of kilometres apart. The footprints of the creator, Biamee, mark the events at each of these places on the connecting storylines. Ngemba researcher Brad Steadman said '*The footprint at the Narran Lakes is a sentence in the Aboriginal story*'. Because of its geographic location, its importance in Aboriginal stories, and its ecological significance,

the Narran Lakes is a signature site in these stories of connection. It is also a contact zone of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal stories, of agricultural and environmental discourses, and a physical pulse of environmental well-being.

In 1990 the Murray-Darling Basin (MDB) Ministerial Council launched a strategy of 'integrated catchment management', in response to the declining health of the system of water. Ten years later, they reported that water quality and ecosystem health were continuing to decline (MDB, 2001, 2). In their report they emphasised 'the importance of people in the process of developing a shared vision and acting together to manage the natural resources of their catchment' (MDB, 2001, 1). A scoping study on Aboriginal involvement in the MDB initiatives found a 'chasm between the perception of the available opportunities for involvement and the reality experienced by Aboriginal people' (Ward et al, 2003). The study found 'Aboriginal people are concerned and angry about the decline in health of the Murray-Darling Basin' (Ward et al, 2003, 21) and that there was a strong case for involving Aboriginal people because of the 'collective and holistic nature of Aboriginal people's concerns about the natural environment and their Country' (Ward et al, 2003, 29). The most significant barrier to Aboriginal involvement was identified as a 'lack of respect and understanding of Aboriginal culture and its relevance to natural resource management' (Ward et al, 2003, 8).

Changing attitudes to water in the Murray-Darling Basin, and to Aboriginal cultural place knowledge, requires major educational initiatives. A fundamental beginning point for such education is to understand how our relationship to water is constructed in the stories we tell and how we can change those stories. Despite assertions about the necessity of local involvement, especially of Indigenous people, in a recent forum of researchers discussing ecological sustainability in the northern Murray-Darling Basin (MDBN, 2004), not one of the papers represented the social sciences or humanities. The linking of the natural sciences and humanities as a legitimate response to ecological problems, is in its infancy in Australia. The Ecological Humanities section of *The Australian Humanities Review* was established by Debra Bird Rose in 2004. Place, as a theoretical framework, has great potential for addressing research questions that link the social and the ecological.

Place has long been noted as an organising principle in Aboriginal ontologies and epistemologies (Behrendt & Thompson, 2003; Muecke, 1984; Rose, 2000; Author, 1991). 'Aboriginal Australians regard the land as a totality, connection to country being the very essence of their belief structure and subsequent social organisation' (Ward et al, 2003). This remains true despite dispossession, displacement, and genocide of Australian Aboriginal cultures since colonisation (Langton in Behrendt & Thompson, 2003) and has profound implications for an Australian understanding of relationship to place (Author, 1999). 'For Aboriginal people, issues of community health, economic development, care for Country and culture are all intertwined' (Rose in Ward et al, 2003). This relationship to country is both local, based on daily life in a particular place (eg. Author et al?, 1999), and extends beyond the local in storylines, ceremonial practices, movement, and exchange (McBryde, 1994; Blair, 2001). It relates to waterscapes as much as to land: 'Aboriginal waterscapes are construed not only as physical domains but also as spiritual,

social and rural spaces, according the same fundamental principles as our affiliations to places in the landscape' (Langton in Behrendt and Thompson, 2003, 1).

According to Gruenewald place is also *profoundly pedagogical*: 'as centers of experience, places teach us about how the world works, and how our lives fit into the spaces we occupy. Further places make us: As occupants of particular places with particular attributes, our identity and our possibilities are shaped' (Gruenewald, 2003, 647). McKenna (2002) articulates the pedagogical power of place as the necessity to learn 'the history and culture of Aboriginal people' in relation to any specific place. Rose (2000) describes responding to the land with deep care and attentiveness and learning from her Aboriginal teachers (Rose, 2004). Ngemba man Brad Steadman talks about Aboriginal community place learning from the Byrock rock holes in the Narran Lakes storyline: 'It's a teaching place that tells us part of the whole journey of where we came from. It's part of our ancestors. It's a place of respect and worship' (Goulding, 2005).

In *Bubbles on the Surface: a place pedagogy of the Narran Lake* we designed a methodology to ask: How can places teach us about water? and How can we incorporate their pedagogical possibilities into educational processes to ensure the protection of people and ecosystems?

### **Methodology**

The methodology for this project was developed by Aboriginal artist/researcher, Chrissiejoy Marshall, and non-Aboriginal place researcher, Author. Marshall is a Yuwalarraay speaker who grew up on the Narran Lakes with a deep knowledge of Noongahburrah (water people) culture. She developed an innovative arts-based methodology for her doctoral research based on her relationship to country. This paralleled Author's development of emergent arts-based methodologies for place research (Author, 2007). The combination of these approaches produced an open and evolving methodology that enabled participants to represent their place stories in a variety of creative forms. These representations are then analysed according to the place pedagogies framework of story, body and contestation developed from Author's previous research with Aboriginal communities (Author, 2007; 2008).

Chrissiejoy Marshall learned U'Alayi culture from her Noongahburrah grandfather and uncles. Her grandmother was Erinbinjori from far north Queensland and her father was a white station owner. She claims all of these knowledge traditions. Although she was researching the development of a training package in conflict resolution, in order to make any knowledge claims at all, she had to think through Country. The necessity to engage with the development of an alternative methodology that sits between Western knowledge traditions and her Aboriginal knowledge of country meant that she was particularly reflexively aware of this process.

The methodology, evolved directly from her relationship to her birth country, was developed in visual, oral and written forms. She produced a painting and an accompanying oral story that structured and informed each cluster of meanings, or chapters, based on her knowledge frameworks of Country. She produced a DVD of visual

images and oral stories but insisted on keeping it separate from the written document, although each informed the other. By moving between the paintings, the oral storytelling, and the writing, consciously reflecting on the development of a radical alternative methodology, Marshall was able to express what otherwise would have been unsayable in her writing. One of her paintings, for example, reflexively stories her alternative ontology described in the following quote recorded from her oral performance on DVD:

*The swans* (Byahmul) - One swan is the Mulgury (Mingin) of my mother, Karrowanna, who died within a couple of hours of my birth. The second swan is for Noongahburrah, my grandfather's mob who lived around the Narran Lake, *Terewah*, is where this Mulgury belongs – to that land and those people.  
*Erinbinjori* is the largest and most powerful of the crocodiles. He was in the *Belin* of my people and very important to our land and people. Crocodile is the Mulgury to that land and people.  
*The dots* are all linked to show the continuous connection of everything – depending on the closeness of the dots as to how connected the object or person is to my being. *Wardook/Bohrah* (kangaroo) and *Jindi/Dinawan* (emu) are both Mulgury to us of the Erinbinjori mob. The *Wwardook* is of the men (note the closeness of the dots) and the *Jindi* is of the women. These two are also very important to our *Belin*.  
*Bandabee* (The Kookaburra) is the Mulgury of my grandmother, (Yoon-garlin) Ticalarawillaring - Erinbingori mob.  
The Albatross is the Mulgury of my son (Marshall, 2002).

Marshall describes the painting in which she represents her contemporary translation and incorporation of the two Aboriginal knowledge traditions of her Indigenous heritage. Through the painting and her words she communicates her sense of herself in the world as derived from her grandfather's people and places, the Noongahburrah people of the Narran Lake, and her grandmother's people and places, the Erinbinjori people of far north Queensland. This act places her in an ontological relationship to the natural world and all of its creatures, to her relatives by blood and kinship, and to Country. While these ideas are drawn from Aboriginal knowledge traditions, they do not exist in Aboriginal cultures in this form. Bringing them into articulation in this way is already to enter the liminal, to create a conversation between specific Aboriginal traditions, contemporary Aboriginal cultures, and Western forms of English language and painting. This act of multiple translations brings these traditions into play in her doctoral research about the development of a conflict resolution training package for contemporary Aboriginal communities. It also offered Author as a non-Aboriginal person the possibility of collaboratively developing a research methodology through which we could research questions of place.

In an attempt to characterise a range of alternative methodologies that were fundamental to the generation of new knowledge, Author had been working on the idea of 'emergence' in research. She argued that emergence is a necessary condition for the generation of any new knowledge, that is, we cannot know what it is that we will find prior to the research process. There was, however, a spectrum of emergent methodologies and in order to characterise the most radical alternatives she developed an ontology and epistemology of postmodern emergence located at one end of the spectrum. This

methodology was distinguished from the deconstructive thrust of postmodern and poststructural research paradigms (Lather (1991), because it focuses on the creative potential of postmodern emergence to generate new knowledges.

The notion of the becoming-self is well developed in feminist poststructural theory (Davies, 2000). The subject is reconceived from the fixed liberal humanist self to one that is in process, coming into being each time he or she is spoken into existence (Davies, 2004). In postmodern emergence, Author proposed to take up this self that is in a process of becoming, and extend it into an ontology of emergence as becoming-other, an ontology that is far more radical. Such an ontology needs to incorporate elements of our past self history (ontogeny), who we imagine ourselves to be, and our embodied relationship with others. It also includes our participation as bodies in the 'flesh of the world' (Merleau Ponty, 1962), a reciprocal relationship with objects and landscapes, weather, rocks and trees, sand, mud and water, animals and plants, an ontology founded in the bodies of things.

In this ontology, bodies of things are dynamic, existing in relation to each other, and it is in the dynamic of this relationship that subjectivities are formed and transformed. And within this, there is the relationship with inanimate objects and technologies, that we, in the process of becoming-other, can intentionally manipulate – stone, wood, and clay, pencils, crayons, brushes and paints, computers, words and paper, cloth, thread and scissors - among the myriad other things that we humans have chosen to use to create. In this way, the use of arts based methods are integral to this alternative ontology.

In order to think about an epistemology of postmodern emergence, Author traced the development of Marshall's knowledge claims through the performance of her research methodology. In her performance she presented a series of computer generated digital images of her paintings and explained how the stories of the paintings articulate elements of her research. She began by defining the meaning of Art in her research process:

There is no one word in any Aboriginal language that I can find for the term 'art', which is lucky for me, who, not for one moment considers myself an artist. That these paintings may be seen as *unremarkable art* by Anglicised standards, is of no consequence, it is far more important that the paintings actually describe to the viewer the information that I am telling.

For Marshall the paintings do not exist as Art, but as a medium through which she can express and communicate information, as much for herself as for her viewers.

Aboriginal Art has only become Art in the last 200 plus years. What anthropologists and others have described as crude and unsophisticated art, was actually Aboriginal pictorial reflections simply for the passing on of knowledge, so that the listener or learner could visually grasp the concept or subject matter being given. Similarly, that which is now described as dance, song and ceremony was (simplistically put) much more a way of passing on information including history, lore and laws, than the recreational pursuits that are presently ascribed. The symbols and drawings described by those anthropologists and historians actually constitute a complex code of interaction that continually reflect on Aboriginal cosmology, philosophies,

spirituality, history and laws that have been used for thousands and thousands of years (Marshall, 2002).

Marshall claims her art as 'crude and unsophisticated', what I have described elsewhere as 'naïve representation' (Author, 2004). It is created for a purpose other than what we understand as Art in a Western epistemology. Her paintings draw on a tradition where a multiplicity of art forms including dance, song and ceremony, intersect in the ongoing creation of self and country. According to Marshall's reflexive analysis, they draw on ancient cosmology, spirituality, history and laws, while simultaneously being a contemporary form with contemporary meanings, 'Aboriginal art has only become art in the last 200 years'.

Marshall is self reflexively aware that she is generating knowledge in the context of a western academic institution and her paintings and stories are reconceptualized in the contact zone between these two knowledge traditions. They are an example of new knowledge emerging rather than old knowledge being re-told. She creates a carefully orchestrated performance of emergence in conversation with her non-Indigenous audience using her paintings, oral storytelling, Yuwalarayi language, and the self conscious act of translation. Each of these elements creates meaning in relation to each other part of the performance. Meaning is created from an assemblage of representations.

In response to this and other radically alternative forms in her own work and that of her students, Author concluded that an epistemology of postmodern emergence requires a new theory of representation. This new theory of representation embraces multiple modes of expression, such as stories, song, dance, and paintings, as well as interviews, academic prose and so on. The focus is on the creation of meaning from the relationship between the parts. These multiple creations are naïve in the sense that although they may be subject to the erasure of deconstruction, they are produced and valued in and of the moment, a pause in an iterative process of representation, engagement and reflexivity. These naïve forms are the means by which we display and engage with the ongoing products of our research. A tape recorded interview, for example, can be regarded as such a pause, a relational artefact of the interaction between researcher and researched, a recorded oral performance. This recorded oral performance retains its own integrity in the pause, but it can be transcribed and reinterpreted at any time by its inclusion in an assemblage of other representations. Digital technologies have made all this more possible and may even be integral to this new theory of representation.

The ARC proposal for *Bubbles on the surface* was written in the early days of articulating the methodology of postmodern emergence as 'emergent arts based research'. The following place making methods were flagged in the proposal as a basis for the emergent arts based research:

*Oral placestory recording* involves storytelling at the actual site with individuals or groups of people and recording the activity by digital audio recording and photography. The resulting material can then be produced in a variety of ways in an iterative process of self-representation, reflection and analysis. The range of products includes books with photos and text from transcribed audio interviews using iphoto or powerpoint; photo albums of scanned old photos and historical material; CD Roms, posters and so on.

*Deep mapping* is an evolving method combining cultural mapping techniques, in which story sites are marked on a map, with parallel place story interviews which record the depth of people's attachment to place. Alternative maps are created by scanning conventional local road maps, removing roads and towns, and then symbolically representing place stories on the map. Participants will produce their own alternative maps of country, of which Aboriginal paintings are an outstanding example (Turnbull, 2000).

*Body/place journal writing*, is a different version of 'field notes', based on the sensory experience of body-in-place at any particular moment. This approach has evolved from the stance of placing the body at the centre of inquiry (Grosz, 1994). An example of body/place writing is a series of journal reflections on ordinary activities through the rhythms of a day, focusing on body awareness (Author, 2004a) to explore (re)inhabiting place (Gruenewald, 2003).

### **Enactment: an evolving process**

Body/place journal writing is both the literal and metaphysical ground of a research project for me. Underpinned by feminist body theory it is the way I engage reflexively in the research process. It is also the way I open myself to the process of becoming-other through which I can know the world differently (Author, 2007; 2008). As the *Bubbles* project began, I went on a trip to the country around Narran Lakes and recorded images through which I began to orient myself to these places. It was, unexpectedly, a process of undoing the self to open a space for learning. Much of the trip was about undoing habits of logic and taken-for-granted knowings. The first stop was the Dragon and Phoenix Motel in Moree. The undoing is held in the image of washing drying on racks in the square courtyard, white towels fluttering in the breeze; rows of white motel rooms; a herringbone phalanx of white cars parked outside, always on their way to somewhere, nowhere; water and cleanliness; white hands, blotchy white skin with a new black spot; brother dying; the problem of sun and belonging in this land.

White  
Is not a colour  
I usually write

There are a series of images that hold these experiences. An echidna lying dead on the road with its soft, pink, wrinkled pads, like the inside of my hands, exposed; floating on the Bokhara Plains in the luminous quality of light at dusk; a river alive with patterns of rocks that make the fish traps; the milky lake and the empty lake. Each image gathers up all that went before, but each also remains its own thing, informing what I see, how I structure and interpret the experiences in this project, what I can communicate about this country.

Even before this, however, there was my relationship with Chrissiejoy Marshall through whom I came to know the lake. When I was interviewing her in her house in Sydney, each time I asked her to tell a story, there was a pause. It was as if she withdrew from our present and travelled back to the lake. When I asked her about this she said that she went back to the campfire by the lake as a child listening to stories from her grandfather and

uncles. Chrissiejoy grew up with Terewah's stories. For her to be in the world was to be in the presence of the lake; to know the world was to know through the lake's stories.<sup>1</sup>

I don't remember a time  
without the lake.

There were times  
when it dried back  
but they were quite rare  
it was always full  
and in season  
there'd be thousands and thousands  
of birds  
so you'd wake up  
in the morning  
to birds getting a fright  
and taking off  
making a terrible clatter,  
and then going to sleep  
of a night time  
listening to all the birds  
that lulled chatter  
that you hear  
of an evening.

Chrissiejoy's senses were formed by the lake—its smells, sounds, the feel of the air on skin, its dryness and wetness, its tastes, eating from the lake. Before knowing, in a formative primal sense, to be a subject was to be in the presence of the lake. The comings and goings of migratory birds were part of the seasons of the lake, as were its rhythms of drying and filling. She understood, through these cycles over the years, the balance between wet and dry that could only be observed over a long period of intimate presence.

As a child  
I wished the lake was back  
like any kid  
but you know  
that the land  
had to have time to breathe.  
We understood  
that it had to dry back  
to let the land breathe  
now it's almost turned around  
in a cycle completely  
before it was always  
two thirds of the time full  
and one third of the time empty  
now it's turned around

and I don't even think  
it'd be full  
one third of the time.  
The water never gets there now.

Chrissiejoy's memories create an intense sensual presence of the lake, its cycles and seasons in her life. Her knowledge of the lake from her own experience, and the local and scientific knowledge learned from her father, sit side-by-side with stories from her grandfather and uncles. These stories integrate her direct sensory experiences and intimate knowledge of the cycles and seasons of the lake, with a cosmology or spirituality, that taught Chrissiejoy what it means to know the world in this way.

The first stories  
are almost beyond my memory.  
I grew up knowing the stories  
so I'm guessing  
I was told as a very, very small child.  
They talk about Biaime  
who is the creator.  
He was here on earth  
and he sent his two wives  
to go and dig yams  
while he went to  
gather honey  
and they were to meet  
at this waterhole.  
He got to the waterhole  
and the wives were missing,  
so he figured out what had happened  
and tracked them.  
It was Guria, the giant lizard,  
Guria had swallowed his two wives.  
So he waited in ambush  
and killed Guria  
slit open his belly  
and got his wives out  
put them on an ants' nest  
and brought them back to life.  
But while he was killing Guria,  
Guria swished his tail around  
and knocked the big hole

in the ground  
that then became the lake.

Biaime said in honour of Guria  
it would fill up with water  
and there would always be water  
and many birds and things there.

Chrissiejoy's creation stories of the lake are part of the process of *deep mapping* through which we can understand country differently. The creator also leaves his marks at each of the story places. There are indentations where Biaime sat down and made 'bum prints' in the sand, a footprint and handprint, and the prints of His dog at the lake. These marks in the landscape become code for the special places in a storyline, places of intensity in the flow of creation, highly energised and libidinous sites in the relationships between people and places. They evoke powerful and important connections between people and place and between one story place and another.

Between writing the original proposal and the project funding, Chrissiejoy had an accident that left her chronically ill. I had imagined the emergent arts based methodology to work with Chrissiejoy's research methods of making a painting and telling its story in order to express her meanings. This was now no longer possible. We talked about this when I recorded her stories in Sydney, neither of us knowing exactly how we could proceed. Just a few weeks after that I ran into Daphne Wallace, a Gamaroi artist from Lightning Ridge in the supermarket in Armidale. Daphne was looking for work so I offered her to work on the Bubbles project. We met to negotiate a contract through which Daphne would respond to the Bubbles proposal in artworks and stories and I would record the ongoing process. Daphne has already booked an exhibition at the regional art gallery and offered to make her artworks the focus of the exhibition. This represented a major and unexpected turning point for the project as Daphne was a well known visual artist and saw the exhibition as the means through which we would engage the world in our work. Shortly after this she suggested we invite Paakantji artist Badger Bates to join the project and the exhibition. We produced *More than just a catalogue*, with the poem constructed from Chrissiejoy's interviews, an outline of the project, and colour plates and stories from Daphne and Badger's artworks. In October of 2006 we had our first exhibition.

Even to the time of the first exhibition the amount of knowledge generated in this project has been immense. I am conscious that in selecting any story or artwork for discussion that it is such a small portion of the overall project, so the story I am telling at the moment is only one possible story from thousands I could tell and the other artist/researchers could tell a different thousand. Two works of Daphne's works that were produced for that first exhibition stand out for me in terms of our research process. The first was a painting of the middens at the little lake in the Narran Lake Nature Reserve. On Daphne's return from her research trip to Lightning Ridge she gave me a small watercolour drawing that she had done of the middens and then, as soon as the materials arrived for her oil painting, she began a larger work. We recorded the painting of this work as it was made and when it as complete I was astounded when Daphne presented

the work to me. It was her gift in return for what she saw as mine, an exchange of deep intellectual property. We have been offered tens of thousands for this painting each time it has been exhibited but despite surviving on an artist's income, Daphne has refused to let me sell it for her. It is on the wall of my living room and returns me over and over again to the place of our beginnings in this project.

Daphne's work focussed on memories and stories of Lightning Ridge and the Narran River close to the Narran Lake. Her storylines connected back to our home town of Armidale in northern NSW. Badger Bates, a Paakantji artist and knowledge holder, was born in Wilcannia on the Darling River. In our first interview we mapped two great sweeps of country - the stories of the *ngatyis* or rainbow serpents, as they travelled throughout the region and the map of Badger's movements to 'dodge the Welfare'. As a child born to a white father and an Aboriginal mother, Badger was in danger of being taken from his family by the Aboriginal Protection Board. He was moved vast distances, learning stories from his relatives as he travelled from place to place.

We began our deep mapping work with an extensive road map of western NSW, extending into Queensland, South Australia, and Victoria. As we sat with these road maps between us as Badger traced, with his finger, the length of the Darling River from the Menindee Lakes to Bourke, describing the River as his 'particular sentimental place'.

In all of that from down there where I went to Menindee right up to Bourke, that's where my really sentimental particular place. Also over here on the Paroo, like Walpirri, and back on the Warrego is really sentimental to me, this area, because this is where I lived most of my life, right up to Brindinyabba, but it's sentimental where - more or less the triangle what I done from Wilcannia up to Bourke, across to Cobar, Lake Cargelligo, back to Ivanhoe and back home.

This vast stretch of country is his home, the site of his most intimate attachments. We marked the water places where the brolgas fly to because for Paakantji people the broлга is like a human: *'they depend on the water, and the broлга they mate for life, they'll get out and they'll all get around in a circle and have their dances and if something happened the other one'll come and just put its wings over 'em and cries.'* The brolgas connect his places on the Darling River to Narran Lake through their migrations. We number each of these places where Badger will focus his art-making. The map becomes a tool for my learning. Each story place is numbered on the map so that when Badger returns to Broken Hill to do his art work and record his stories, I can follow where he is from the numbers on the map.

In Badger's Paakantji language, Chrissiejoy's *guriya*, the giant lizard, becomes the *ngatji*, the rainbow serpent. We follow the travels of the *ngatjis* and mark each of water-story places where particular events happened, linking events in the epic journeys to Badger's contemporary experiences in these places. Deep mapping becomes story, translation, communication, physical grounding, and a place to make visual images. We record the stories about the creation of the Darling River that map particular intensities in the flows of travelling water stories:

Gulawarra, another person from the Dreaming came through, caught a giant kangaroo near White Cliff and went to Mount Poole then up into Queensland a bit then he turned and came back to Pirrie Lake where his sister and her husband was. The people fed him a lizard and he thought they tried to poison him. So he took his sister and family, turned the other people into stone, clogged the mound springs up and he came up somewhere towards Bourke and Louth where he met the kingfisher from the Dreaming. He had to pull a tree root out of the ground. When the root was coming out he was singing the tree root and the tree root was all wriggly. When he was pulling it out, he was singing, and making the depression where he was pulling the root out go bigger and sink down, and then he poured the water he got from Mount Poole and Pirrie Lake and the mound spring, so he poured the water from there into where he made the tree root depression, and he made the river, the Darling River. That's why the Darling River got a lot of bends in it, it's like a tree root.

Water places at Mount Poole, Pirrie Lake and an unnamed mound spring, are linked in this songline of the creation of the Darling River. The material terrain and waterways come into being as intricately connected parts in a dynamic story of events and movement. Deep mapping opens us to a vision of how a map of the story places in these songlines is also a map for understanding our relationship to country and water in the inland Australia. It is a way of thinking through place. For our first exhibition Badger made a series of lino prints about these story places on the Darling River using mark making learned from his grandmother to carve emu eggs. He carved broilgas from dead wood to mark the broilga places on the map.

The third big turning point, or point of emergence in the Bubbles project, came when I moved to Victoria to take up a position with Monash University. Phoenix de Carteret, Research Fellow working on the project also moved providing invaluable continuity. In 2007 we decided to produce a second exhibition at the Switchback Gallery at the Gippsland campus where we were located. Badger produced new lino prints based on listening to Chrissiejoy's poem about the Narran Lake from the catalogue of the first exhibition. He created a new series of waterbirds that created a new vision for me of the space of the gallery as an installation space. The exhibition also featured Chrissiejoy's original paintings, which we had not exhibited before, as well as a selection of Daphne's earlier work. The *Bubbles on the Surface II* exhibition developed the rhythm of an iterative pattern, reaffirming its creation origins in the Narran Lake but travelling down the Darling River with the flow of the water.

Although I had planned to continue with the Bubbles project in the northern Murray-Darling Basin in western NSW, the pull of the water was too strong. Through a series of connections the project moved down to the Murray River when I became involved with Yorta Yorta artist/researcher Treahna Hamm. I was approached by Treahna and two other Victorian artists to become part of a project about their work with possum skin cloaks and we exchanged ideas about the Bubbles project. Treahna was excited by the possibilities of being involved in an academic project that would allow her to

live in country and explore the meanings of the river. She sent me a catalogue for the Culture Warriors exhibition held at the National Gallery at the end of 2007 with an image of the possum skin cloak she had made about the River. We began to imagine the third exhibition as not only an iterative representation of the whole project but as a touring exhibition that would travel the waterways just as the project had done.

I imagined the installation space of *Bubbles III* as fundamental to the creation as the artworks themselves. In imagining the final travelling exhibition I become aware that I am drawing on the images from my earliest trip, and my sense of representing the movements down the waterways that have happened since, to develop the rationale for the touring exhibition:

*Bubbles on the surface: travelling the water ways* is the culminating exhibition of a three year partnership between Indigenous artists and university researchers about water in the Murray Darling Basin. We will invite viewers to journey through water story places from the Narran Lake in western NSW down the Darling to the Murray River in Victoria and South Australia.

We begin with *Terewah* (Narran Lake), the home of the black swan, where U'Alayi artist Chrissiejoy Marshall was lulled to sleep by the chattering of migratory birds, or woken by frogs calling the return of the waters in dry times. On the Darling, lino prints by Paakantji artist Badger Bates translate the marks of his grandmother's stories of the *ngatjyis* as they travelled across the land making the waterways. The spirit re-enters his carved wood sculptures to invite viewers to move through the ancient poles that mark the stories of the river and its creatures. Along the Murray River Yorta Yorta artist Treahna Hamm re-makes possum skin cloaks incised with the symbols that reveal the connections between people and country.

Like bubbles on the surface these artworks and stories offer a contemporary response emanating from a deep connection with this ancient land.

The exhibition will invite people who live in the remote and regional places affected by questions of water in the Murray Darling Basin, and the nearby metropolitan areas, to experience a different way of thinking about water and country. It is designed to invite viewers into a sensory interactive experience where they will move through the waterways and experience their stories and connections. It will appeal to a wide range of learning styles with visual, auditory and kinaesthetic experiences, stories, artworks and text. The variety and texture of the art works will contribute to the experiential quality. A floor map in cloth will symbolise the experiential journey through the waterways and link the parts of the exhibition.

The entry point will be the recorded story of growing up on the Narran Lake portrayed in a series of 6 text panels and 6 small paintings with a DVD in which the voice of the artist/researcher demonstrates thinking through country and the art works as an expression of this thinking. In the main exhibition space floor sculptures of wood will

line the river and the adjacent wall will display lino prints with short story text. At the connection to the Murray River the possum skin cloak and prints will tell the Yorta Yorta stories of the Murray. Each of the artists has high levels of Indigenous cultural knowledge and their artworks will be experienced in the context of the depth of the overall concept of the Murray Darling Basin as an interconnected body of water. (Author in Visions application, Author and de Carteret, 2008)

These imaginings are not my own but arise from the interactions between all of the researchers who have become involved in the project and the landscapes and waterways which are calling us to respond. I communicated these ideas to Trehna and Badger and in May 2008 we met at Swan Hill on the Murray River to open up a conversation about our plans. The 12 hour day of our meeting was the most exciting I have experienced in 20 years of research. We recorded our conversations during this day as our ideas intermeshed, formed and transformed. We organised the meeting according to the ideas embedded in the research – recording Trehna’s story, then the exchange of our ideas about the research, followed by lunch by the river and time out to wander, a visit to the regional art gallery, and then another recorded session planning the processes of research and art making that would lead to the exhibition. Vigorous conversations continued over dinner and breakfast the next morning when we re-visited the issue of intellectual property, an ongoing subject of careful discussion. All followed up with enthusiastic text messages and emails after our meeting. I recorded my experiences of the meeting and the place in my body/place journal during the trip and immediately after at home:

*The most intersecting exchange between Badger and Trehna happened after I asked Trehna to talk to Badger about her possum skin cloaks. She showed us the picture of an aunty in her Murray River cloak – the one with the spirit trees in red ochre and then the last one that she did of the woman who made the Murray with the tendrils of river and snake skin extending from her organs into country. Trehna says it is all about interpretation, making country anew. She is very strong on wearing country, being wrapped in country. We talked about the rainbow serpent making the shapes of the river. Then the line drawing of the old Echuca cloak, Badger talks about how the gap, the tear in the cloak, is itself a map. We compare the line drawing with Badger’s torn road map worn from years of travelling between his country of the Darling and the Murray Rivers. The explorer Mitchell, Sarah tells us, recorded the journeys made by Paakantji people to Cummeragunga in Trehna’s country. We talk about Badger’s kangaroo skin rug that he travels with, made from the pelts of the great red kangaroo of the once fertile flood plains of the rivers. He could also use his cloak as a map as a map of country, beginning with the camp on the river he shared with his granny embroidered around the bullet hole where he shot the kangaroo. Wearing country, different mapping, different relationships to country and to water.*

These ideas recorded in process will inform the next iteration of representation in this project, the next way to represent all of our learnings to the people of the Murray Darling Basin and its adjoining cities who depend on its water for food and survival.

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*For me, Swan Hill on the Murray is a new place for the project, a place to learn, to experience, and a place that belongs in the research. However, my learning and engagement with these new places is so superficial that I am not sure that it has any meaning, compared to Badger and Treahna's depth of engagement with their places on the Darling and the Murray. But I am like lots of people in this country, a migrant, a refugee, and a learner. How can I learn about country, and water, in this place? And how I learn is a possible process for all learners like me who are also migrants and refugees but want to learn to be attached to this land and to live in this place with deep care and respect.*

### **Conclusion**

In this paper I have tracked the processes of a research project about the pedagogical possibilities for learning to think about water differently. My analysis in this paper is a reflection on the iterative processes of representation and reflection that have informed the evolution of the project and its methods. I have begun with the methodological approaches that evolved from my initial conversations with U'layi partner researcher Chrissiejoy Marshall. We each brought our related but different methodologies which became intertwined in the emergent arts based approaches that were hesitantly outlined in the research proposal. The focus on emergence allowed the project to evolve in ways that were essential to the nature of the place-based topic, the Indigenous partnerships in the research, and the integration of artistic representations into the methodology. The development of a series of art exhibitions has not only been an intrinsic part of the research process but has enabled us to represent the project to a public audience as the project evolves. The production of images and text in the exhibition catalogue serves as a way to track the development of the process after the exhibitions are over and to allow wider conversations to evolve about the project's findings.

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<sup>i</sup> The scanned lines about the lake are constructed from three interviews that I recorded with Chrissiejoy Marshall and which have been reproduced in full in the catalogue of the first exhibition from the project, *Bubbles on the Surface: more than a catalogue*.