

CHAPTER 1

## *Narratives and their relations*

*The relations between the old nature and the new nation are tense, at times even violent.*

Libby Robin, environmental historian<sup>1</sup>

### BIG HILL

In the heat of January 2008 I drove through the inland river country, catching up with the traditional owners who had helped me to write this book. From Canberra, I drove west and south alongside the Murrumbidgee and Murray rivers to eventually arrive at the Coorong — the long narrow body of water made famous in Australia by the movie *Storm Boy*. The Coorong is protected from the wild Southern Ocean by a high row of sand dunes hundreds of kilometres long. The Coorong is a mixture of salty seawater and the fresh river water of the Murray River. The Murray flows into lakes Alexandrina and Albert, and the Coorong, as part of its journey out to sea. Scientists tell us that the Coorong is dying; the water is now saltier than the sea itself and not much can live in it. The pelicans made famous in *Storm Boy* are still present but they are no longer breeding.

Here I met up with Matt Rigney and his brother Peter, two Ngarrindjeri men who grew up next to the lakes and the Coorong. Together we drove to the top of Big Hill, the hill behind Raukkan, the former Point Macleay Mission. From the top you can look north and west over Lake Alexandrina to Mount Barker and Point Sturt. You can look south down to the small peninsula that marks the beginning of the Coorong. Matt told me about growing up at the mission and the times he spent going camping and living off the land with his father. Matt pointed out the spot where his father shot and wounded a duck, and how Matt and Peter were sent out after it. They chased that wounded duck across the shallow bed of Lake Alexandrina, way out to the deeper waters of the Murray River, and then they swam for another 40 metres before they caught it and broke its neck. He spoke about the old ladies who used to go out fishing on the peninsula; it was their favourite spot.

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1. (Robin 2007, p.5)

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Just down from where we stood was a cave where the old men used to sit. As a child, Matt would listen to the Elders talking in the Ngarrindjeri language. They told him how they relied on the pelicans to find the body when somebody drowned: when a pelican sees something in the water it circles around and swoops down, but it will rear back up if it is a human body and not a fish.

From on top of Big Hill Matt used to grab sheets of corrugated iron and slide down, splashing into the water. One time he and his friends found a *pondee*, a Murray cod, down there, dying in the shallow water with its gills full of sand. It was so big that they needed two sticks to carry it, one stick on each side threaded through the gills, and with three of them on each stick they carried it back to the camp. Much more recently, five or six years ago, Matt sat here and shot carp. This introduced fish has become present in plague numbers. On this day we all looked at how the water level had dropped, no longer reaching the foot of Big Hill.

The devastation of the Murray River is keenly felt by the many Aboriginal people I met who call the inland rivers their country. A week earlier I visited Mutti Mutti Elder Mary Pappin in the Murray River town of Mildura. She talked to me about the industry in mining the river sand. Mary asked rhetorically, 'Is this what you do when you've killed everything on top: you take out the minerals from underneath and sell them?' Mary can always be counted on for going to the heart of the matter.

A week after the Coorong I was in Echuca visiting Yorta Yorta woman Monica Morgan. Monica told stories about growing up in Echuca, skipping school and hiding under the old riverboat pier made out of large river red gum planks. When the school principal came to get them they would dive into the water and swim across the Murray, out of reach. But Monica also spoke about the present and the need for the different nation groups to come together and strengthen their cultural ties. Monica talked about how the Kulin language group have the Eagle Hawk and Crow Dreaming, whereas the Yorta Yorta have the Rainbow Snake Dreaming which is more similar to the Ngarrindjeri Dreaming. Monica wished the nations (see pp. 103–4) had more time to share and celebrate this diversity with each other, rather than always being caught up with responding to government agendas in water law, policy and management.

I also visited Yorta Yorta man Lee Joachim in Barmah, and he shared with me the land use and occupancy mapping work the Yorta Yorta are doing. As part of this mapping process the Elders have identified all the different animal and plant species they used to hunt and gather. In discussion with scientists it became apparent that the Elders had identified two fish species, previously unrecorded in scientific inventories, the *walka* and the *gilgarja*, that used to be found on the grass plains in times of flood but are now absent.

There are many stories that the traditional owners tell about life and death next to the Murray River. Their stories are an integral part of the Murray River and the Murray–Darling Basin. They describe an ancestral domain and a fertile homeland where the Murray River is a life force that created the life of the inland river country. The Murray–Darling Basin has also been characterised in Australian national identity in stories of progress and nation building, stories in which human skill and ingenuity have created a vast agricultural heartland. In this story flowing rivers of liquid gold have supplied the economic resources for vast amounts of agricultural produce and the country towns that have thrived with this economic growth.

The history books tell us that the spiritual homelands of the Murray River peoples have given way to the contemporary priorities of modern agricultural production, in this, Australia's agricultural heartland. But this portrayal of history is actually what I call 'modern thinking'. In modern thinking, Aboriginal peoples' stories are a narrative that is spiritual or traditional, and the nation-building narrative is one of economic growth or development. From the modern-thinkers' perspective these narratives cannot co-exist: one must be sacrificed for the other.

In the text that follows I shall show how this way of thinking is false, and, critically, disables our responses to the ecological devastation we now face in the Murray–Darling Basin. The far-reaching relationships that are sustained by water enmesh water as a resource for production *and* water as an ancestral life force. To understand these close relationships we must examine how modern thinking develops such narratives as both separate and oppositional, in sharp contrast to Aboriginal peoples' knowledge traditions. However, simply establishing Aboriginal peoples' perspectives as being oppositional to modern thinking is not my intention. I shall reveal how intertwined all our knowledge traditions are, so that we can keep that which is useful from modern knowledge, whilst also acknowledging the limitations of modern thinking. To do this we must first take some time to understand exactly what 'modern thinking' is. With that understanding, we can then analyse how modern thinking determines the intellectual space available to Indigenous people in their engagements with governments.

## MODERN THINKING AND WATER MANAGEMENT

Modern thinking about nature and society was part of the inheritance that the predominantly European colonialists brought to Australia in the eighteenth century, and was mobilised in the relationships they created with Australia's freshwater rivers, lakes, creeks, swamps, ponds and wetlands. The new settlers used modern thinking to translate the country they encountered into resources for development.

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For most of these settlers, Australia was an empty space available for the agricultural industry necessary to develop their young nation (Robin 2007).

Such ideas about nature and society have a relatively recent history. 'Modern' knowledge and theories were argued for by people during a period in western history called 'modernity'. Modernity is often described as beginning with the Enlightenment, a period when intellectuals in eighteenth-century Europe and North America argued in favour of reason as the basis for authority (Mitchell 2000). These 'moderns', as I call them, argued that knowledge based on science, reason and rationality had more authority than knowledge based on religion, intuition and emotion. Moderns sought, and continue to seek, to establish science and reason as the foundation of knowledge, and thus free the world from superstition and religious beliefs. The moderns argue that comprehending the world through science and reason is the only route to discover truth, and that this truth must be founded on objectivity.

The philosopher René Descartes, considered to be the first influential thinker of this period, envisioned that science and philosophy would empower men to be the masters and possessors of nature. René Descartes held a mechanistic view of the world, one in which reductive analysis could explain the whole. From his perspective, nature (including the human body) could be reduced to matter, without agency (Mathews 1994, pp. 17, 31). He argued that only humans have agency, and this is in the mind, which he reasoned was separate from the material body. Further, that animals do not have minds and thus do not reason; indeed, they do not even feel pain. Thus, humans are positioned as the only creatures capable of thought, reason, and agency.

What René Descartes did was to amplify the western knowledge tradition of dualism. In Cartesian dualism two fundamental concepts exist in opposition to each other, forming binary pairs. These binary pairs are very familiar; for example, male/female, mind/body, rationality/emotion, spirit/matter, subject/object, nature/culture or ecology/economy. In a dualistic approach, nature is objectified, posited as external to and used by the human subject.

Much has been built upon this dualistic thinking. Contemporary French philosopher Bruno Latour has argued that the separation of the world into binaries allowed the moderns to mobilise the earth's resources on an immense scale. He concluded that these modern arguments made it possible for people to 'liberate productive forces' without accounting for the 'delicate web of relations between things and people' (Latour 2001, pp. 32, 39). According to the moderns, the people who came before them are the 'premoderns', people who inhabited a world constrained by their conceptual mixing of divine, human and natural elements. It

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was the impossibility of changing the natural order without modifying the social order — and vice versa — that obliged the premoderns to exercise great prudence in their relationships with nature. In furthering the conceptualisation of the world into binaries, particularly the separation of nature and society, the moderns created a new view of the world, one in which they could change the natural order without consequences for the social order (Latour 2001, pp. 41–3).

The enormous growth in the technological capacity of humans since the Industrial Revolution has made it possible for the proponents of modern thinking to extend their world view of binaries on a grand scale. One example of the triumph of modern thinking is the increase in large dam construction from the early twentieth century onwards. Political scientist Timothy Mitchell has described how dam builders employed Cartesian dualism in the reorganisation of relationships with the Nile River when they built the Aswan Dam in Egypt. Timothy Mitchell argued that this project was conceived and implemented in a way that involved the separation of human expertise on the one side and nature, as the river, on the other (Mitchell 2002, p. 35). The oppositional binaries mobilised by the dam builders included science/nature, material reality/human ingenuity, stonework/blueprints and objects/ideas. With all the engineering gathered in one location — the dam site — an observation point was provided for people to comprehend ‘the river as a force of nature tamed by man’ (Mitchell 2002, p. 36). It was possible to undertake such extensive projects because the river was viewed as matter, hence there would be no consequences that could not be managed through engineering.

The moderns were aided in their harnessing of the productive forces of nature by their perception of nature as being all the same, as defined by a universal science. Moderns argue that through scientific process it is possible to show that nature adheres to the same rules across the world (Latour 2002, p. 105). This is achieved through the observation of controlled experiments in a laboratory to ‘make facts’. This ‘fact-making’ was first demonstrated in England by seventeenth-century natural philosopher Robert Boyle, who created an experiment with an air pump to measure the weight of air (Latour 2001, pp. 17–8, 24). By replicating the results of such scientific experiments, the moderns were able to reveal that nature is universally the same, and to simultaneously reveal that science is universal knowledge (Smith 2007, pp.78–9). Anthropologist Paul Sillitoe discusses this powerful combination (Sillitoe 2007, p.13):

Regardless of the discoverers, whatever they uncover will be the same because nature is a constant beyond those who investigate her, such that they will all reveal the same mysteries.