

DUMB PLACES KATRINA SCHLUNKE*

I would like to begin by acknowledging that this paper was given on Eora and Gundungurra land. I would also hope that this paper lives out the hopes within that fact.

This paper is concerned with a very violent incident that was carried out by the perpetrators of the Myall Creek Massacre after that massacre in 1838 and when the party was still on their killing spree. I apologise for the particular distress writing about such things may cause for the Wirrayaraay peoples, for other Indigenous peoples and for women in particular, but also for others who may have experienced direct violence. It is very understandable that you would not want to read again the detail of such events. I do not see my decision to write about such things as at all straightforward and I remain anxious about my ability to tread a path between ideas of testimony, wanting to write it differently and wanting to expand what writing can do for a hopeful post-colonialism.

I tell the story with the desire to make language, time and place stutter¹ through it and I turn to the senses to try and keep us there within that moment where a body thought agonises.² I hope that such stories change our worlds.³

DUMB PLACES

Our feelings grow mute in shy perplexity. Everything in us withdraws, a stillness comes and the new, which no-one knows, stands in the midst of it and is silent

Rilke

* Dr Katrina Schlunke, Senior Lecturer in Cultural Studies, University of Technology, Sydney.

¹ Deleuze in a lovely essay in *Philosophy and Theatre* writes about making language stutter meaning.

² 'A moment where body thought agonises' - This is a utopic schema in which our imagined constructions of time, place, body, thought are both acknowledged and transformed. This is a part of the new compromise, perhaps a new romantic synthesis. It acknowledges the efforts of deconstruction to prevent the closure of these systems, where body does not simply call up mind to complete itself we will attempt a difference. But an Australia ambivalently colonial lives with those dichotomies violently lived out in the national space. Agonises – contest and contend - the idea of wrestling, idea of shaping as one unshapes, shapes through the wrestle.

³ This note of hope is not using change necessarily within an idea of the new but of a re-articulation of self where things that last are able to breathe again. Stories or rather mythologies may be a part of that.



Somewhere along this river, within ten or so kilometres in either direction of this very place or perhaps right at this very place,⁴ thirty to forty Aboriginal people, probably members of the Wirrayaraay peoples, were murdered and their bodies cast into a triangular log fire. The account of this event is not one told in terms of numbers, for no official record was made and no-one was tried for these particular crimes. It is told instead through two particular incidents that occurred within the more general slaughter. The first is that after killing the majority of the Aboriginal bark gathering party, the men, to quote the missionary Threlkeld, reserved two little girls who were 'dreadfully injured'.⁵ Elsewhere he describes what was done to them as 'inhumanly cut for lascivious purposes'⁶ and elsewhere again 'because they were too small for them they cut them with knives'.⁷ These two girls, 'about seven years old'⁸ were then given as wives to two young Aboriginal men who were with the party,⁹ Davey and Billy. The two girls stayed with Davey and Billy, for months later Threlkeld's son sees with his own eyes the 'miserable plight' of the girls.¹⁰ It is from Davey that we learn of the second incident, although there had been other rumours. This was the final murder carried out by the group in this place. Threlkeld again: 'The last that was murdered, was an elderly woman whose throat they cut as she stood, and then let her run away, that the Blood spurted out, and when she fell they took her up while yet alive and cast her into the triangular log fire, and her infant child they threw alive without any previous injury into the flames'.¹¹

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Rilke

⁴ See image. Thanks to Linnell Secomb for recording the spot so well.

⁵ Gunson, N. (ed.) *Australian Reminiscences and Papers of L.E Threlkeld; Missionary to the Aborigines, 1824-1859*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, 1974, p.273.

⁶ *ibid.*, p.275

⁷ *ibid.*, p.274

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ *ibid.*, p.275

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ *ibid.*

Dumb Places

SOUND

The place where these events took place, this quite beautiful place, is on the upper reaches of the Gwydir River in central, northern NSW. It is a landscape that has two very gentle sounds. The first is that of the shallow running river over smooth river rocks. It is less than a gurgle. It is something like a resonance of your own circulatory system. Although there is no beat of the heart there is a deep, pitched murmur that is already within you. The second sound is that of the breeze through the casuarinas, the she-oaks. These flowering plants with their conifer like needles catch the smallest breeze and give it muted voice. One of their common names is 'whispering pine'. And the quality of the sound belongs to the realm of the touch. Casuarina, from the Malay for cassowary, to remind us of the cassowary feather like needles that make up this tree. And the sound of the wind through those same needles is also something like that of a feather touching your skin.

TASTE

But the wood of the *casuarina cunninghamiana* is very hard. In other places there are records of the ways in which different Indigenous groups manufactured their shields and clubs and other weaponry from these river oaks, these ironwoods. It is also an excellent source of fuel. The killers were able to make their glowing pyres from this same wood, burning bodies with such efficiency that one guesses that there was some sense of evidence and covering up. This wood burns very well and very quietly.

Within the Canberra region, the Indigenous peoples would take a handful of casuarina needles to quench their thirst on long journeys.

TOUCH

This gentle river, being a plains river, goes mad in flood. You can see the mini flood plains it creates. The seasonal rise and fall of water creates natural highways. We can see with our eyes how easy movement would have been along these banks and how long journeys of exchange and language innovation grew up along these natural paths. These paths within a complex system of appropriateness and seasonal awareness enabled different Indigenous cultures to touch. And we might think of the way in which the water would have attracted game and how the deeper water holes could be fished.

When horses came they could thunder along these paths. They could gallop, overcome, round up, for here was a creature of transportation that only needed water and grass. A weapon of mass destruction, that we could stroke and brush and feel their warm snorts. Here the horse was a terrifying weapon. And with the horses came the sheep and the cattle. And now when times are tough and the saltier river flows a little slower with its super-phosphated greenery, the graziers will cut down brachlets of the she-oaks, to feed their hungry stock.

DUMB PLACES

This paper came from going there. This paper comes from being dumbstruck. I had set myself the task of tracking the movements of the massacre party for a project I was going to do about postcolonial memorials, but I was also mooching around the local town and area for a week, trying to get a feel for the place that had produced what I think is one of Australia's few postcolonial memorials - The Myall Creek Massacre Memorial. It is a proper memorial. It is a generous memorial and you have some glimpse of a proper grown up country when you are there. This other place, this dumb place was excessive to the memorial. It couldn't be accounted for; its story is untellable. A brief account of what happened here is included in the guide to the massacre memorial, and that memorial - in the way that it constantly gestures to what cannot be said - makes a space for this place. But to insist on the particular placement of the story, that that story belonged particularly in a specific space, produced an unaccountability that I would like to explore.

I should explain how I got there. A friend had kindly come with me and we were driving a university four-wheel drive. This was the way in which the university research grants worked. You were tacitly encouraged to go everywhere in a big university four wheel for it meant the vast majority of your research funds went back to another part of the university in the form of the exorbitant internal cost of these four wheel drives. The university seemed to frown on the idea of you taking your own car and made difficulties with insurance and 'on road costs'. So one inevitably took the weird easy path of always being oversupplied with expensive up to the minute four wheel drives and a comparatively miniscule budget for accommodation although they frowned on camping because you couldn't produce a receipt - but that is another story. I am spending so much of your time talking about the four-wheel drive because it assisted in the shaping of how I came to feel this place. This four-wheel drive was big and red.

You can recognise university four-wheel drives as university four-wheel drives because they have the corporate, I mean university logo emblazoned across the door. They are properly branded.

In the small community of Bingara I immediately imagined I was under suspicion. What would a university be doing out here? What wasn't I telling them? Was I really on holidays and pretending to be doing something, somewhere? This feeling was tied in with some of the received gossip about the new gold mine out of town that people were hush hush about. Could my friend and I possibly look like geologists who might scuttle the small town's chances for renewal and revival? I doubt it now. But this kind of logoed announcement of presence turned the vehicle into a carapace of university tradition. I was moving within a mechanical mask of Kantian reason and soul lay somewhere beyond. And being interested in massacre does itself give rise to an instant defensiveness- long before anyone has said anything. I was working all this out and that was partly why I was there, to see what did and didn't work in that space. Actually in terms of the other four-wheel drives in the caravan park, ours

Dumb Places

was pretty ordinary, even small. In fact probably the most memorable mark that we left on the place was our freakish double win of two vast meat trays at the tiny RSL.

But inside the four-wheel drive I was in a six cylinder powered, air conditioned, stereo CD playing, cup holder laden thing that was a world unto itself. Thanks to the friend's much more groovy CD selection we were funky adventurers hitting the road. We churned up highways and down dirt roads with equal ease. We nicknamed her blue because she was red. The feeling of protection or isolation from the outside world was extraordinary. One understood how easily birds and roos might slip under the tyres and why people drive across sensitive ecosystems when they become just another scene, just another beautiful panorama in your virtual and yet mechanical travelogue. When it came to the task of trying to follow the course of massacre the physical task was easy. Although we could not drive along the riverbanks as they had done we could move along the dirt roads and find reasonable approximations with a good topographic map.

So we came easily to this dumb place. Nothing happened when we arrived. Nothing happened at all. We climbed out and jumped down to the road and walked quietly about. Perhaps jumped is too exuberant of a metaphor for coming out of that micro world. But it always felt like a jump to leave the cool musicked inside for an outside with atmosphere, dust, heat and unlimited sky. It was always a shock and returning equally so like shifting between two realities, one untranslatable to the next.

In this quite open space we lost one another for a while. Which makes me wonder now about how this happens and just who is at the heart of those stories about disappearing white kids, Picnic at Hanging Rock and Little Boy Lost. Perhaps if we can lose the story of those two little girls and that old woman and that tiny baby then we have lost all story and we can only disappear. This place can't return us to ourselves.

I waded across to the other side, walked among the casuarinas and sat. I don't know what my friend did.

Returning to the four-wheel drive, we did what academics or is that women or is that friends or is that two people accounting for the unaccountable do. We did what dumbstruck people do. We talked and talked in an unceasing, strangulated way.

COUNTRY WOMEN

Just around the bend from this river, back some fifteen kilometres or so is the station of Keera. It was the home of Grace Munro when she founded the Country Women's Association of NSW in 1922. Perhaps it denies the collective imperative of the desire to have such a group to say that she founded it but she was a key organiser of the initial conference and was immediately elected foundational president. She was known as a forceful personality and she spoke of her drive to found such a group in simple terms. One of her own children, a little boy, had died at Keera. She thought that that child could have

Katrina Schlunke

been saved if there had been a doctor close enough or a hospital to phone. 'I decided to devote myself to improving health care for country women and children'. The CWA became an emblem of a certain kind of femininity and it has always struggled with getting itself taken seriously as a political force because it seems to represent so clearly the country part vote. Even now when I list the first names of some of the current key office bearers you might hear a certain era, a certain seeming promise of feminine goodness. Gwen, Joy, Betty, Pam, Audrey, Vivien, Joyce, Beryl and Beverley. But the CWA is too large a group although it is shrinking now to be ever one thing. It introduces itself on its home page in the following way:

Most Australians picture the country woman as the wife of a grazier or a wheat farmer. But country women also include the wives of shearers and farm labourers, women on small farms, women in tiny villages, women in large towns, wives of shopkeepers or professional men, wives of railway workers, Aboriginal women living on reserves or properties and many others. Religion, beliefs, and standards of living vary tremendously. Lives are as varied and different as women in the city but the need for community is as strong and must cut across the boundaries of class and religion for a community to come into being. In the country there usually isn't the luxury of numbers to allow social groupings to form around a single class of people.¹²

This seems like a wild socialist dream for I think in some places the CWA was probably the quintessential class group and ordered itself about the Queen. But this assumes that all those women were at home with the cups of tea and the queen. When I think of my mother and her friends in the 1970s it seemed like it was a kind of play with respectability. They went to the CWA and had tea and perfect scones in proper cups and saucers and the Queen was something like a movie star who was a source of incomparable comparison. But on long trips to places like Bingara and Gravesend, these women would not hesitate to stop the car and leap into the bushes for a pee, laughing about snakes. And after their night meetings they would be laughing so loudly in the car outside my window that they would wake me up. There was always something more than respectability driving the CWA. The first CWA restrooms were set up in Bingara in the late 1920s after much agitation from Grace Munro. The restrooms were places where white mothers with white babies could be fed in a clean environment and where older white women could go safely to the toilet.

SPACES

De Certeau wrote of the view from above as emblematic of a kind of way of looking that the city demanded.¹³ As the city grew into being even within renaissance times, we needed to be above it, to see it all. As he says 'the desire to see the city preceded the means of satisfying it'. In what now seems

¹² See <http://www.cwaa.org.au>

¹³ De Certeau, M., *The practice of Everyday Life*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1988.

Dumb Places

like a very telling choice de Certeau describes what the view from the top of the World Trade Centre tower in New York did. This view 'continues to construct the fiction that creates readers, makes the complexity of the city readable, and immobilizes its opaque mobility in a transparent text. To be lifted to the summit of the World Trade Centre is to be lifted out of the city's grasp. One is no longer clasped by the streets.'¹⁴

Something similar happens when I tell you a story that I say is from the past. However fleetingly, for a moment we have seen it all. Our scopic imaginations film it for us and we no longer necessarily think in middle distance panoramas. TV shows like Crime Scene Investigation have seen to that. You do know CSI? It has been around for a while. It literally investigates crimes with scenes. The team arrives at the crime scene and begins to collect its minute, incredible, technical forensic evidence. There are special suits and gadgets and laptops all over the place. As each piece of evidence is revealed, a new possible scenario is imagined and we get an instant possible play of it. So, for example, the bullet may have gone through the ear and struck the cortex, shwap, schmooz, we are suddenly following the path of the bullet into someone's ear and entering the cortex. Then back to the team who have just found a spec of cloth on the pool edge. No, the person may have been running and fell, instant cut back to feet pounding path and so the bullet entered a prone body, cut back to different bullet shot entering from different angle. You may see why the often incredible plots and quite un-charismatic cast still produces a show that is a winner. It offers up that strange pleasure to a multi-tasked day that is that it stops you thinking. You simply (on a good night) do not have the time to imagine - it does it for you. It also has a fan base among medical professionals who seem to like to bicker about how realistic the shot of the aorta or path down the trachea was. For we lesser beings who have never been down anyone's aorta the sensation is more akin to being on a roller coaster. The speed and sudden cuts and different colours send us into a reel of unexpected not knowing what to expect sensation. This is just the most fast paced version of cuts and counter cuts to point of view that began with Sergio Eisenstein. And it is important to think how long that tradition is and that our cinematic imagination has spawned its own legacies. Perhaps it represents a final effort to synthesise the overview of the city with the most seemingly direct knowledge of the individual. We can thus transfer the lordly overview to the insides and the intimate. Pornography has been there forever.

What does it mean to know that if I tell you a tale from the past and you see the horses, the fire, the killers, the killed, two little girls, an old woman and a tiny baby that you can see them all for a moment? Do we understand this as the gift of cinema? The intimate incorporation of a tradition of seeing that may have started with a renaissance imagining of the city. We are in that moment if not above than across it all. We are the viewer, the director; we are still gods of a certain sort. The practice of imagining thus lifts us out of the scene's grasp, out of history's grasp, or it could. Even if we turn our ever pornographic eye to

¹⁴ *ibid.*

Katrina Schlunke

the insides of each, to each point of view to see ever closer and ever more personal - still we are controlling the camera, still we haven't made history. We have simply left it to run over its slippery surfaces.

What would other senses produce?

The moment we turn to touch, taste and smell we are called to a bodily specificity that demands a particular encounter, but these struggle against the visual imperative. In some cases the sense vocabulary has already been colonised by sight. I am thinking of the touch of fire. Many of us still live with open fires of some sort at some time of the year. We know the pain of burns and the smell of singeing. Some of us may know the heat of a very big fire, the big fire rituals of folk festivals and maybe the smell of bushfire. But to put those together with a story from the past seems wrong. It seems the wrong emotional landscape to connect a final night at a folk festival with the tale of slaughter. For that we have perhaps images from movies again.

But the touch of fire is surely what counts in this tale. The feeling of fire burning flesh connects us to the feel and colour of our skin, It makes possible a different order of connection where we protect ourselves from a kind of knowing as we recognise that our own skin scars and puckers and smells.

EMOTIONAL PLACES

Two visiting Quakers (who I suspect were rather weighty friends) reported that there was in Threlkeld's correspondence 'a keenness of expression apparently originating in excited feelings that would have been better avoided'. So it is Threlkeld, an emotional man, who reports the way in which Davey told of the deaths:

The black Davey told it all with high glee and mimicked the struggles of the dying victims in the fire, there were betwixt 30 or 40 by his account butchered as described.

Davey's 'glee' reminds me of the moment when this event was the very first of such events. When never having seen such a thing before we might invest ourselves in the telling of a tale so weird and wild that it would spill out of our mouths as this extraordinary thing. High glee. If I could write a monument to those two little girls, that old woman, that tiny baby in this dumb place, would that it could be like that. But I am not Davey. I am white academic.

Dumb Places

MY BROTHER

Dear Mr Windschuttle,

I am writing to you as a fellow academic. We do after all share the institutional setting, the strange complicities of teaching reason while refuting it and where our style is still to think and write about things.

And we might sometimes share codes of argument and counter argument, of making good points and bad ones. You know we hardly ever say 'fuck you' at our conferences because academic style includes a kind of exhausted knowingness where you don't have to live your arguments, you just get to make them. And although our departmental meetings might show otherwise, our projects are essentially modest. Someone will always know something we don't, thought must always change. Ideally we wait quietly upon illumination as we read and listen and speak. But you know otherwise Mr Windschuttle. You make me mad. You literally make me incomprehensible to others. You know that a simple bunfight of right and wrong and proven numbers is a kind of scholarship made to be reported and circulated. Right and wrong here is given the face of this academic and that. You have a hook and a political climate that means your ideas can roll like a tide into places like the new museum in Canberra and threaten one place that to me is one tiny sign that we can recognise how we make the past. I had hoped you would go away Mr Windschuttle. I thought silence for someone who knows so much about the media was the way to go. I thought in silence you might feel a kind of shame, have a sense of what your Pygmalion scholarship could do here and now. But I don't think you felt my quiet disciplining of you brother. You showed me no heed. I will have to be more obvious. I might have to say fuck off. But in the academy we are concerned with rudeness even when we later embrace the 'radical intervention' or the eruption of the 'voice of the other'. Not that we get much of that, those voices have set up camp elsewhere. We get our just desserts. We get folk like you Mr Windschuttle. So in that spirit of being similar, of you being my brother, I am writing to thank you for reminding me of the importance of numbers and that academics and historians in particular can get it wrong.

For as I am writing to you, I am thinking about two little girls who were 'inhumanly cut for lascivious purposes', to quote Threlkeld, who being white and having witnesses counts as a primary source. He is the kind of man that native title hearings will still hear above the living voices of living people. And of course he was 'educated' and he 'wrote'. I am only thinking of two little girls who didn't die Mr Windschuttle. I am not trying to add them to your numbers game, those pure numbers of the proven dead. I am just thinking about two, only two little girls who lived although they were 'inhumanly cut for lascivious purposes'. You

Katrina Schlunke

do understand what that phrase means, Mr Windschuttle? You do see what Threlkeld's restrained record is speaking? One interhistorical translation would be that two small girls, who were too small for this man, were cut apart so they could be raped. Only two little girls, you understand. I don't know what else I can say about this thing. You make me nervous about getting it wrong. I only say to you, Mr Windschuttle, that two little girls lived, Mr Windschuttle, two little girls lived.

Yours collegially,

*Dr Katrina Schlunke
Cultural Studies*