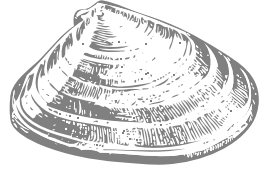


CHAPTER 3



Making home in No Mans Land

*Them times
you find a lot of camps
along the back of the beaches
or headland
along the edge
of a creek or lake
'cause they all jumped over
the other side of the fence.
No Mans Land
that's what they call it.*

The story of our research in No Mans Land began in a circular clearing on a small tongue of dry ground shaped by a mangrove-lined estuary. Hidden from the beach by the dune, a single dark-green Moreton Bay fig tree gives even further protection. On the ground, tucked against spindly casuarinas and paperbarks in small bundles or caches, are the objects that have been uncovered in this place they called the Flanders Camp. Pieces of metal and old glass, a smoky lilac bottle, some old china shards flecked blue on cream like the china of old electric jugs, and a coil of soft metal inserted into the tin lid of a jar. By the fig tree, scattered across one of these bundles,

are the brilliant red, blue, green and gold feathers of a newly killed rosella. I do not know what all this means but just sit in the stillness on the edge of the estuary listening to the hum of the sea and taking in this scene.

To come to Flanders Camp, also known as the Fig Tree site, I have walked along the desire lines of the boardwalk suspended above the swamp to enter this place where landscapes, people, archaeological practices, place and organisation are all foreign. The bush tucker walk is a different way of mapping a place. It invites us into the hidden places of No Mans Land where the material remains reveal traces of its story. The boardwalk was constructed for Yarrowarra's ecotourism enterprise to open up the story of this place. The beginning of the track is soft grey sand winding through native grasses and the wide spreading branches of swamp mahoganies. As the trees change the sandy track becomes a boardwalk sculpted between close-growing paperbarks whose raggedy white trunks catch the early morning sun. Trees, bushes and landscape tell their stories. Toe holes carved into a tree mark the place where Jimmy Runner collected wild honey; scars on others show where the people collected bark for shelters. Bush tucker is plentiful. We eat geebungs and chew the aniseed taste of new red tips of the sarsaparilla bush that people used to ward off a cold.

It was along this track that the old men first brought me to tell me about Corindi Lake. At the sight of the Lake they all began talking at once, a collective story of fishing, catching prawns and mud crabs, digging for fresh water and building their shacks by the sea. No Mans Land provided an immediate source of food, water and materials for shelter. When people of today tell stories about No Mans Land, it is the camps of the Old People they remember scattered around the Lake.

There was a lot of families stretched from right around the Lake system, on this side of it and on the sea side of it, because they were on both sides. When you look at who lived down there, back to well before the fifties, you had the Lauries there, and they had their hut there, that's where Bing was born, there. Then you had, there was lots of camps all

the way along. There was Doug and Jack Long – they lived there. Then you had Elsie Cowan lived there too. They were – I would've been only about seven or eight or something like that and they were Old People then. They were the Old People. And you had Fred Laurie, 'Pa' Laurie they called him. You know he probably was a man in his sixties or more at that time when I was about eight, nine, probably round that age and I can remember all these Old People. The Flanders were there, that was old Tommy Flanders. He actually built all of the huts that they lived in. Then you had, you know going around further, you had Taylors, they lived there. (Tony Perkins)

The Elders of today who were born in No Mans Land are the grandchildren of the Old People and they remember the camps around the Lake and the Old People who lived there. The massacre and creation story told in the previous chapter is symbolic of the space between the time before and the time after white settlement. The time before is told in the stories of the Old People and written on their bodies in the scars of initiation. The time in-between is the liminal space with no narrative. The time after can be read in the material translations of No Mans Land.



The Old People

*There was Jimmy, Aunt Lil, Uncle Herbie and Ted
Old Granny, Teddy McCrystal and Clara
Uncle Mac and Sadie, we used to call 'im Mac
never called 'im Jimmy Runner
and Herbie McDougall, used to call 'im Kooiya
Old Granny Skinner, we used to call her Armi.
We always didn't know their first name
when we was kids
'cause that's what we knew them as.
Bennelong, I think it might have been,*

*yeah, Grace Bennelong, Clara's mother's name
she was the queen of the tribe
many years ago
but she never spoke [of it].*

By the time the Old People settled in No Mans Land at Corindi Lake they had acquired the new white names that overwrote the landscape along with the fences. The Elders of today recite the mixed-up names of the Old People, as if in this naming they are calling up these complex stories of the in-between. Remembering the names of the Old People is a collective song but speaking, like naming, was a risky and complicated business. The process of inheriting names was about much more than taking on the names of white property owners. These same property owners often fathered children with Aboriginal women who were then outcast in white society, a shame that could not be spoken. More than this genealogical silencing, however, they were forbidden to speak the Gumbaynggirr language. 'If you were caught speaking the language in those days there'd be problems for you with the white man.' Speaking in language even carried the threat of death. 'The whitefellas around here said we weren't to talk lingo outside the fence or they'd shoot us.' Whether this meant physical death or a symbolic cultural death, the intent and the impact was much the same: to wipe out Aboriginal cultural identity and practices. The speaking of language was the key to cultural survival. On the other side of the fence in the in-between space of No Mans Land, however, the Old People continued to speak their language of place.

I still remember all the Old People. I still remember seeing them down on the Lake area, of a morning they'd all be sittin alongside the old huts, and they'd never sit flat on the ground, they'd always sit, you know, and their knees'd be up in the air, sort of like a squat. And you never heard anyone talking in English. I still remember it, all the time they were talking, talkin to one another, but never used English. It was just amazing some of the things that, you know, when I think back, to what it was like. (Tony Perkins)

The surprise for Tony of this detailed embodied memory of the sounds of the Old People speaking in Gumbaynggirr is in both the trace of language and its loss over the next generation. All of the Elders of today remember the sounds of the Old People speaking language, but few learned to speak it themselves because of the severity of the prohibition. The oral stories of the Old People are the only way to transmit the collective story of the extraordinary material translations of everyday life. We can only know the stories of the Old People through these translations into, and of, the English language. Their stories, like the bending of the English language, belong in the in-between place of No Mans Land. They are often mysterious with elements that are incomprehensible. They participate in a spirit world that is unfamiliar to me and that we will explore in Chapter 5. They are also embodied, material, individualistic, funny, funky and uniquely of the place and time.

There are a few key individuals whose stories stand out: Clarrie Skinner, Jimmy Runner, Old Tom Flanders, Arthur Taylor, and the brothers Herbie and Abraham McDougall of McDougalls' Run. They represent each of the five main family groups who came to live in No Mans Land. The stories of the women are more shadowy; it is of the characters of these men that I have the clearest sense. I have a strong sense of Clarrie Skinner, for example, and I feel like I know him through the many stories from Aunty Marie and Tony. I imagine him as a very strong man, powerful in his cultural knowledge and a leader in sculpting the ways that traditional cultural knowledge could be passed on in this new context. I know him through the stories of the previous chapter – as a musician and partygoer, much loved by the holiday-makers of Red Rock for his music and singing. Sometime in the late 1920s the extended family group moved to No Mans Land. There I learn about him through the stories of Corindi Lake.

He [Clarrie Skinner] used to be sittin in that house what he was livin in, what grandfather built, the slab house. An' it had a big, this fireplace was nearly as wide as this, eh? And it had a big open fireplace an' he had sort of seats around the side. And he'd be sittin there and he'd be tellin us stories, and he'd go outside and he'd come back in, 'I hear 'em choppin down