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# Difficult Conversations



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Published by British Council Northern Ireland  
in collaboration with the British Council  
Research & Insight team

<https://nireland.britishcouncil.org/>

<https://www.britishcouncil.org/research-policy-insight>

<http://adifficultconversation.com>

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## DOI

<https://doi.org/10.57884/HED6-JY91>

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The British Council is the United Kingdom's international organisation for cultural relations and educational opportunities. A registered charity: 209131 (England and Wales) SC037733 (Scotland).

## Acknowledgements

The Editors wish to thank the British Council and the British Council UK/Australia 2021–2022 Season for their generous support for the difficult conversations project and in doing so fostering a global partnership between the University of Canberra and Ulster University. In particular we acknowledge the work of Camilla Rous, Jonathan Stewart, Helen Salmon and James Perkins. We also wish to thank Cian Smyth for his significant contribution to the design and development of the difficult conversations 2022 symposium and website, Ben Ennis Butler for design of the project website and all those who participated in these important forerunners to this edited volume. We are grateful to the anonymous reviewers in the United Kingdom and Australia who offered their expertise and comments to authors and editors on this manuscript, and to Pablo Rossello, Rosanna Lewis, Jenny Daly, and Nikki Locke of the British Council for their helpful feedback and support.

# Complex Care: Storying Country and Place with Creativity and Respect

Ashley Harrison, Bethaney Turner,  
Wendy Somerville and Steve Brown

Australia was and continues to be an invaded continent. Story by story, its history is being reframed to respect the truths of First Nations people on whose Country (or territory) the nation is built.

In this chapter, we suggest that this transition requires attentiveness to the connectedness of humans and place. Humans are place-makers and places make humans. A place is imbued with meaning, produced in a space that is moved through, resided or built on, extracted from, mapped, named, thought about and remembered (Madden, 2010, p. 37). Though such processes are varied, and sometimes contested, relationships to Country and place are formed. In this chapter, our interest in the complexity of care is enlivened through stories of relationships between First Nations Australians and their Country and stories of connections between non-Indigenous Australians and place.

Storying is an act of creativity that can be a mode of thinking, means of shaping the world, and a way of forging collective action (Bawaka Country, 2015; Chao & Enari, 2021; de Santolo, 2019; Haraway, 2018; Van Dooren & Rose, 2016). The joint composition provided below allows us to attend to how care underpins creative endeavours that blur temporal boundaries, thus enabling experiences of active remembering (the past in the present) and active imagining (the present in the future). Through a storying approach, it is possible to bring diverse perspectives, materials, histories and values into respectful dialogue (Van Dooren & Rose, 2016; Walter, 2014). But this requires care-full and respect-full attentiveness to the places and

positionalities from which stories emerge. As researchers at the University of Canberra, we were brought together to participate in the *difficult conversations* symposium in March 2022 (Difficult Conversations, 2022). Each of our stories respond to research projects and personal experiences/interests. In this chapter our stories are woven into a narrative framework to draw out complex and multi-layered connections to Country and place.

The thread that weaves together our stories is the central theme of 'care'. Enacting care requires time, patience, trust and respect. We use care to mean the provision of what is necessary for the welfare, maintenance and protection of someone or something; and to look after and provide for the needs of that someone or something. While this meaning may be read as straightforward, the act of caring is, as we allude to in the chapter title, complex. Caring requires attentiveness to cultural, environmental and political contexts. It necessitates vigilance in the ways care is performed in relation to and by other humans, non-humans and places. As Puig de la Bellacasa notes, 'humans are not the only ones caring for the Earth and its beings – we are *in* relations of mutual care' (2010, p. 164). The stories we tell in this chapter speak to the contemporary complexities of care in ways that respond to the dispossession and marginalisation of First Nations Australians and 'caring for Country' (a complex notion related both to personal and group belonging and to maintaining and looking after the ecological and spiritual wellbeing of the land and of oneself).



**Figure 1.** On Cullunghutti looking across to the Cambewarra Range. Image: I. Somerville (2017).

The following accounts are grounded in our reflections on and feelings concerning care, Country and place. In each of the four stories, drawing on our disparate, eastern Australian research projects, non-human species are intimately entangled. Some are plants (lantana, blackberries, tussock grass and lavender), while others are animals (rabbit, fish, cattle, snakes, kangaroos and cockatoos). While it may not be immediately evident in our stories, we see an equity between the human, non-human and more-than-human (including spirits, creation ancestors, divinities) in the way that Country and places are made and experienced. Relationality also plays a key role in the place stories we tell. Relationality underpins First Nations ways of being, knowing and doing (Tynan, 2021). As with any stories, ours are layered. The layers themselves are not static but composed and recomposed through varied entangled multispecies relations that emerge across time and place.

## Entangled care: Wendy's story

I am a Koori, a First Nations Australian woman from the South Coast of New South Wales. I am of Jerrinja Country, and my story comes from there. Bethaney, who you will meet in the next story, and I were co-investigators in a project experimenting with ways we might 'meet a mountain'. The mountain is on Jerrinja Country, a place of my ancestors and where my mother's family has always lived. The mountain is Cullunghutti (Figure 1), called Coolangatta by the coloniser who took the mountain.

Cullunghutti is sacred to South Coast people. It is the place where people were buried and is the jumping off point for the spirits of people to ascend into the skies to become ancestors. Kooris believe that everything in Country is related to everything else in Country; that there is connection of spirits and waters, people and rocks, skies, and ancestors, in fact all the entities in Country. In the research we met the mountain through walking on it, talking about it, being driven on it, listening, photographing and storying with it. Walking on

the mountain, I felt a connection to the deep past and all the things to be met there including the hated, pretty lantana entangled in native grasses and bushes.

We met many entanglements on the mountain; some are multi-layered and multi-metaphored. Entanglements that have always been, and some newer that are more nebulous. The enwrapping by lantana of other growing entities is growled at by local Koori people, Parks and Wildlife Rangers and owners of plots of Cullunghutti. They point to the nuisance of this introduced species; it should be treated harshly, pulled out, burnt, poisoned and controlled (Somerville, 2022). Unmentioned is that the lantana flower is made to attract flying things through which life is spread, calling to mind Ingold's concept of 'beings which, in their activity, participate in weaving the textures of the land' (2008, p. 1797).

The lantana travelled from Central and South America (Head & Muir, 2004) and was planted because colonial gardeners were attracted to the coloured flowers they produced. It is now classified as an invasive species. Lesley Head and Pat Muir (2004) describe conceptualisations of plant species' nativeness as belonging, and invasiveness as the way plant species interact with other species. Kate Wright argues that 'colonisation was a multispecies invasion' in which introduced entities altered First Nations Australian people's lands (2018, p. 83). Cronk and Fuller (cited in Head & Muir, 2004, p. 211) explain that lantana is not an invader of natural places, but of habitats that have been disrupted.

The entanglement of colonial and colonised is evident across, around and from the mountain. Division and separation are clearly visible in the way the mountain is known and acted on. Cullunghutti supports activities of wealth accumulation and extraction from the land which speaks to the imperatives of the colonising project. Each area is bounded by fence lines as if the mountain is many different entities exclusive of the whole. The delicate lantana is fierce as he pushes through barriers to claim an invader's space.



Figure 2. Recomposing Care. Image: B. Turner (2022).

## Contested care: Bethaney's story

I ground my short story in the dairy farm of my maternal grandparents. This is the Country of Wendy's mother and, therefore, Wendy's Country and it too was disturbed; cleared of people and vegetation to make way for my ancestors to farm here.

At the edge of the farm runs Jaspers Creek, meandering its way out to Broughton Creek before flowing into the Shoalhaven River and onward to the Tasman Sea. These waterways move under the watch of Cullunghutti, the mountain that enlivens Wendy's story. I follow her lead here in turning to the issues of boundaries, biota and belonging and the possibilities that emerge from imagining better futures with, not in spite of, tense entanglements.

The Creek may mark the property's boundary, but this liminal space dominates my connection to this place (Figure 2). Cattle trampling on its moist edges cause enough disturbance to invite blackberries and lantana to take root. Lantana can be toxic to stock and blackberries restrict access to pasture. While the sites' former rainforest vegetation has been mostly eradicated, these invasive weeds make a mockery of persistent efforts to eradicate them. Two soaring cabbage tree palms on the creek flats remind us of what was here before; standing sentinel over a forever changed landscape.

Family desires to create distance from snakes, cockatoos and tussock grass also permeate my memories of this place. The greatest number of snakes I have ever seen were limp, hung in a row over a barbed-wire boundary fence. While their heads were a bloody pulp, luminous red bellies and black scales glistened in the sun. Growing-up I was told stories of cockatoos being shot from the farmhouse veranda to keep them from raiding the vegetable patch. Battles were constantly waged against the pervasive tussock grass; useless as a food source for cattle, it was laboriously dug out and burnt. Protection of family livelihoods translated into the removal of all that was deemed a threat.

But these contested forms of care – made possible as a result of the 'multispecies invasion' (Wright, 2018, p. 83) of this Country – nourished my family over generations. This care nourished farm animals, not only as commodities, but in loving ways that far exceeded their commercial value. The soil in the kitchen garden was shown ongoing care and attention. 'Plenty of shit', was my grandfather's mantra for growing its fertility. He spent hours collecting dried cow pats from the paddock before chipping and soaking them to produce a nutrient rich slurry that nourished a rich soil microbiome.

Gardens and farms are created through the marking of boundaries and practices of exclusion; that which doesn't belong is removed so that the lives and liveliness of others can be nurtured. How can we remake relations with people, land and our multispecies companions in the wake of such violence? Perhaps when 'plenty of shit' is composted with other ways of doing, being and knowing across time there are opportunities to recompose and reimagine more ethical and just futures.

## Bluey: Ashley's story

Our Country, as I grew up to understand it, is located along the far South Coast of New South Wales. Along the coast are places that our family has strong connections to by past or present occupation. One such place can be found along the Moruya River, down by the aerodrome (or 'airport' as it is called today).

The history of the Moruya aerodrome is a story for another day. My Nan would tell me stories of events that took place pre-colonisation and food that could be gathered there, it was the site of an Aboriginal reserve in the 1800s, once a place where our family had a homestead (now demolished), and now it is an area in which a regional airport operates (my Pop and Great-Grandfather cleared the land for it). The site is not usual for an airport; it is a place of beauty on the mouth of a river-activated by the abundance of nature, blue skies, sandy shores, and greenery.



Figure 3. Bluey takes flight. Image: A. Harrison (2022).

In the 1990s, an Uncle (now gone) was one member of the Aboriginal community who set up camp here and protested the sprawl of development with the airport. Down by the river it is still undeveloped; it remains a campsite. We often went down to the area to watch the sea from the nearby break wall (my Pop and his family before were fishermen), we swam in the rock pool, or we visited the campground.

One memory of this campground, that I believe to be true, centres around the invader – the rabbit; his name was Bluey and he was once my pet. I recall his colour well; he was shiny like a raven – blue-black. Now I understand, we abandoned Bluey. But at four or five that is not how I remember it. Sometime, in the 1990s we took Bluey to live with my Uncle who was camped down by the airport and whose beard was also shiny and black just like Bluey's fur. I am not sure why, or who I went with, but I recall Bluey in a cardboard box as we passed him on. Here is where the story becomes patchy. What happened to Bluey? Did he live in the tent with my Uncle?

At the time, I had a book about Br'er Rabbit who managed to find himself entangled with a 'Tar Baby'. It was illustrated and I loved the story. Br'er Rabbit getting angrier and angrier that he was being ignored by the 'Tar Baby' who kicked, punched and headbutted him and got stuck more and more – the 'Tar Baby' was sticky and wore a hat. Yet, it was 'Br'er Rabbits' way of getting out of this bind that stuck with me; he tricked the 'Br'er' Fox' (who had planned to trap him all along) into throwing him in some 'brambles' (his natural habitat) so that he could escape. This was the story my mind at the time applied to Bluey's fate. As beside the campground and along the banks of the river, blackberry bushes and nettles were growing and he was in his element. I imagined Bluey had found a home here (Figure 3). It seemed he did. And sometime later, we saw the usually brown rabbits that populated the aerodrome with patches of blue-black fur.

## Lavender love: Steve's story

On my property, Gozinta, yearly temperatures range from -8 to 44 degrees Celsius. And, as the property and I settle into a third straight La Niña weather event, it's been wet, wet, wet. Consequently, the ground has been saturated for months on end. These are not the well-drained soil conditions that lavender desires.

I love lavender. It's a tough plant. So tough, even the local kangaroos and wallabies won't eat it unless there are few other options – as was the case during the catastrophically hot summer of 2019–2020 in eastern Australia (El Niño on steroids). Despite the extreme heat, smoke and fires of that summer and, supported by occasional watering, my much-loved drought and heat tolerant Lake Condah Mission lavender survived. I was impressed.

But now (mid-spring 2022) the Lake Condah Mission lavender is, for the most part, dead (Figure 4). The once thriving bushes have turned grey, the foliage has dried, and the stems have become rigid. Minus eight-degree winter nights and sodden soils have done that.

Lake Condah Mission lavender is not the name of a species of lavender (the genus *Lavandula*, in the mint family, comprises about 30 species). Rather, I use the name to refer to the Aboriginal mission from which I collected it. Lake Condah Mission, which operated between 1867 and 1918, is located on Gunditjmarra Country in the southwestern part of the State of Victoria, Australia. Despite government efforts to destroy the mission in the 1950s (an effort to integrate Gunditjmarra survivors into the general community), the place has special meaning to the Gunditjmarra – a place entangled in family histories, meeting place, administrative centre and symbol of political struggle. In 1987, the mission site was 'returned' to Gunditjmarra Traditional Owners.

In 1999, I was involved with the preparation of a Conservation Management Plan for Lake Condah Mission (Context Pty Ltd, 2000).



Figure 4. Lavender. Image: S. Brown (2022).

During one of many visits to this remarkable landscape, and with the agreement of one of the Elder Aunties, I collected three tiny snippets of lavender. The scraggly plant from which I collected the pieces, located near the bluestone ruins of one of the Mission-period houses, was one of few survivors. I placed the cuttings in my pocket, with little expectation they would survive.

But they did! On my return to Melbourne, I potted the stems into separate pots. After some six months, I gave to two colleagues, Chris and Kristal, one potted lavender plant each. Then mine died (neglect), as did Kristal's. Chris's thrived and she took new cuttings from her plant which she later returned to the Gunditjmarra and the mission. In 2016, I obtained cuttings from Chris' plants and grew them on my rural property, Gozinta. Here, they thrived until the winter of 2022.

The Lake Condah lavender on my property has not completely died, and some plants will survive. They're tough. I care deeply about these plants, their story, and the ways they elicit in me powerful emotions, both positive and negative. The ancestors of these plants were there when Australian Aboriginal people were incarcerated and remain in the place where Gunditjmarra now assert their presence, power and custodianship. Lake Condah Mission, a place where government tore down homes and dynamited the church, is now part of a UNESCO World Heritage listed property. I love lavender.

## Storying as Action

Together, our stories express conflicting values and feelings around the theme of care. Each story references care in ways that stretch beyond the time and places described. Our storying has allowed accounts of ongoing invasion – by settler colonists and non-indigenous species – to be brought into view. The stories express a love for and a deep sense of attachment to places – Cullunghutti, Moruya aerodrome, a dairy farm and Gozinta. The stories entangle feelings for Country and place with emotional responses to multispecies

invasion. Lantana and lavender, rabbits and cattle are accommodated in our narratives. Some species are loved, some loathed; sometimes loved and loathed at the same time.

Thus, these stories are generative and tell of a multispecies invasion, through which the theme of care emerges. At times, care can be enacted in complex and unexpected ways. Certain practices of care and belonging have been privileged while others have been displaced, marginalised, excluded or even massacred. Through storying, we layer and reframe to bring into being a more ethical and just future that recognises the privilege, violence and trauma of the places and species we connect to. Drawing on the work of Turner and Somerville (2020), each personal story speaks to a layered, multi-material, temporally stretched process of remaking and reconfiguration that offers a productive metaphor and practice for creative, multi-modal storytelling in and of place.

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