(Re)considering Australian Geography with First Nations Literature: Jeanine Leane's *Walk Back Over*

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In their introduction to *Human Geography*,, Derek Gregory and Noel Castree remind the reader that "if . . . theories and methods establish spaces of constructed visibility, these are also always spaces of constructed *in*visibility. The price of seeing *this* is not to see *that*" (xliv; italics in original). Such spaces of constructed invisibility are constitutive of Australian geography, where marginalised or discredited systems of knowledge offer alternative ways of perceiving the Australian territory. Hence, in human geography terms, "positionality" plays a central role, inasmuch as "[I]ndigenous or subaltern knowledges are often discounted in order to promote particular versions of 'Science' or 'Development'" (Gregory and Castree, xxix). Without doubt, in the context of Australia, the colonial accumulation of geographical knowledge coincides with the dissimulation of Aboriginal geography. In this regard, Australian First Nations literature activates other spaces of visibility, those that have been rendered invisible through colonisation and succeeding settlement. As such, Australian First Nations literature responds and adds to postcolonial criticism by confronting different geographies of the same territory.[1] The aim of this paper is therefore to reconsider the place of colonial-settler geography and to make visible another geography of Australia. To do so, our study of selected poems from the collection *Walk Back Over* by Wiradjuri poet, academic, and activist Jeanine Leane seeks to bring into the light another geography and, therefore, another history of the land. Through her fiction and essays, Jeanine Leane deconstructs the manner in which Aboriginal people are represented in non-Aboriginal narratives, while defending and promoting the place given to Aboriginal people's voices and representations, by and for Aboriginal people.[2] Jeanine Leane's highly acclaimed fiction and non-fiction work gives presence to those made absent and a voice to those who have been silenced by past and present forms of colonisation.[3] Concentrating most particularly on the section called *Country*, this essay aims to show how Leane's poems bring together the explicit and the implicit of colonial and Aboriginal history, thereby provoking different readings and responses from both First Nations and non-First Nations readers. In this regard, the poems in *Walk Back Over* become the opportunity to consider a Wiradjuri geography perturbed by colonial discourse and action, but still positively and proudly acknowledged and admired by the poet.

Seeing Through Other Eyes, Looking beyond the Text

In her article "Scarcely Any Water on Its Surface," Kirsty Douglas demonstrates the relationship between culture and landscape in the Australian context, stating that "colonial cartographers and surveyors created places first by 'reading' the land and then filling in the spaces on maps of the unknown country," and that in a similar fashion, "scientific knowledge about a region, about the mechanics of landscape, places that landscape into the corpus of the already known" (69–70). Focusing on the Murray-Darling Basin, part of which includes the Murrumbidgee River, Douglas shows the correlation between the early explorers' teleological explanations and their biblical references in their attempts to comprehend and describe the region's geomorphology and cyclic aridity (71). An example of this type of cultural interpretation can be seen in the poem "Tracks Wind Back," where Leane measures the weight of cultural influence in the perception of the land:

> Settlers awestruck by your beauty—a Garden
> of Eden—so their stories go
> almost undiscovered where
> Wiradjuri know no wants (Leane, *Walk Back Over* 23)

In this stanza, the reference to "a Garden of Eden" implies both its cultural determination and its supposed geographical location. Consequently, those stunned and amazed settlers, who "wrote their own histories" (Leane, *Walk Back Over* 23), also perceived the Australian landscape in their own particular manner. Therefore, the supposed "Garden of Eden," "where Wiradjuri know no wants" is, as the speaker suggests, only one possible story. Indeed, any seemingly bountiful "Garden of Eden" depends not only on the cyclic nature of the environment—which is perhaps one of the reasons why it went, according to the speaker, "almost undiscovered," but also on the settlers' naive and culturally influenced vision of the unknown landscape. However, preferring to maintain the myth of an unaltered nature in correspondence with their biblical readings, the settlers' stories ignore First Nations people's understanding of the environment and the stories, or songlines, told to pass on this knowledge. As Kirsty Douglas reminds the reader, "the uniqueness, the emptiness and the eccentricity of the landscapes lie in the way they are decoded, more than in any intrinsic irregularity of the scenery" (74). Pursuing her analysis, Douglas highlights the fact that "sacred narrative was difficult to interpret, but to many explorers of south-eastern Australia in the 1820s and 1830s, the landscape was a biblical exegesis, page after page revealed before their eyes" (72).[4] Similarly, Rhys Jones refers to other supposedly newly discovered territories, explaining that "in the absence of detailed ethnographic descriptions, recourse was made to the notion of an Eden of mankind, child-like and innocent before the Fall," which, according to Jones, reinforces the false claims of a *terra nullius* with regard to the Australian context. (182). Reading, decoding or interpreting the characteristics of the land, describing its qualities and defaults, its value and worth, its pecuniary potential, is therefore influenced by one's culture, where an *imagined* "Garden of Eden" for one corresponds to an environmental *reality* for those who have occupied and exploited the land for millennia.

An example of cultural influence can be seen in "The River Runs Backwards," where Heather Goodall studies the different perceptions of value with regard to the Darling floodplain, stating that "all the diverse groups on the floodplain have concerns with its productivity and fertility, although the *things it produces* for each of them may be very different" (35; italics in the original), going on to say that "floods and rivers have created the land on the floodplain, and water is the continuing, shaping force. Language fulfils a similar active and creative linking between the land, the waters and all the people involved" (37). For the different First Nations people of Australia, the geomorphological and geographical history of the land is the result of the Dreamings which acted directly upon the land, "performing rituals, distributing the plants, making the landforms and water, establishing things in their own places, making the relationships between one place and another" (Rose 44). However, it must also be remembered that "discussions of country readily slide into abstractions, and it becomes easy to forget that we are talking about specific places, homes for specific life" (Rose 38). Moreover, in her book *The White Possessive* Aileen Moreton-Robinson explains the very concrete consequences of the Dreamings, stating that "Indigenous people's sense of belonging is derived from the Dreaming, which provides the precedents for what is believed to have occurred in the beginning in the original form of social living created by ancestral beings," explaining how the Dreamings established "the Aboriginal ways of life: a moral code for its social institutions and patterns of activity" (45–46).

In this regard, rather than seeing a seemingly empty space to conquer and exploit, the poem "Tracks Wind Back" activates another possible vision of the town of Gundagai and the surrounding environment, where to see implies *seeing the memories* inscribed into the land and hearing the stories of Country:

> They couldn't see our memories,
> or hear the stories, our
> Dreamings. They wrote their own histories—
> songs of lovers, larrikins, sheep, profits,
> droughts, floods, fires, self-made men—
> stuff of colonial phantasm (Leane, *Walk Back Over*, 23)

In this stanza, the speaker captures the significance of time *in* space, time that is part of Country, taking the form of memories passed down from generation to generation through stories. For the speaker, as the settlers "couldn't see our memories," they could not, in fact, *see* Country nor the history it contains.[5] Consequently, to *see* Country is also to "hear the stories, our Dreamings"; it becomes the possibility of discovering another geography of the land, one that considers Country as both a temporal and spatial entity, continuously inhabited and cared for by First Nations peoples, both before and after colonisation.[6] The droughts, floods and fires that make up the "stuff of colonial phantasm" are, in reality, necessary and integral parts of Wiradjuri Country. As such, rather than being elements to battle, dominate and control, these environmental realities enter into the temporal and spatial identity of this particular Country. This is why the cyclic aridity specific to the area, the floods that punctually irrigate the land surrounding the Murrumbidgee River, the fires that rejuvenate local food sources and that are an essential part of land management, or in other words "caring for Country," characterise the geographical memory and identity of Wiradjuri Country.[7]

It is not suprising then that the speaker in "Tracks Wind Back" regrets the fact that the settlers "couldn't read the history they built over," since another geography of any land, be its physical or human aspects, is only made *visible* through the acceptance of a different cultural perception (Leane, *Walk Back Over* 23). However, what is made visible or invisible has very concrete implications and consequences, and it is through the place given to Wiradjuri vision that the poem addresses "the question of an imposed and displaced Aboriginal sovereignty" (Watson 43). Leane's poem distinguishes and confronts two distinct relationships to the land, a fundamental difference which finds its source, as Irene Watson writes, in "ways of knowing": "the white way of knowing country is forged by ownership, possession and control" whereas, "the Aboriginal way of knowing comes through spirituality, identity and traditions of historical connectedness" (46). Moreover, as Renee Pualani Louis explains, "Indigenous knowledge systems are poly-rhetorical, contextually based, and rooted in a specific place and time" (134). Consequently, rather than seeing the Gundagai of colonial Australia, another Gundagai is made visible, one that is characterised by Wiradjuri vision and whose geographical location is indeed "a long way east of Eden" (Leane, *Walk Back Over* 23).

Seeing the land in Leane's work refers, therefore, to looking beyond the text, beyond our own personal cultural experience and world view. In a recent piece, "Our Countries Cannot Heal Until Their Names Are Given Back," Leane makes explicit differences in perception, writing:

> In 1820, colonial governor Lachlan Macquarie renamed a vast body of water spanning Ngunnawal Ngambri Country to the border of Wiradjuri Country called Weereewa. . . . Once brimming with water that lapped against the side of what is

> now the highway, Weereewa is now completely dry, and has according to the short history of place written by invader-settlers "misbehaved" ever since. ("Our Countries Cannot Heal" n. p.)

Leane goes on to clarify, stating:

> But it is not "misbehaving." It is remembering. It is grieving. They cannot understand that its waters may have seeped from one world—the one they have invaded—to another. They cannot understand this because they can only live in one world. They can only exist on one plane. ("Our Countries Cannot Heal" n.p.)

Existing on another plane consists of looking, for example, "beneath this century of concrete circles" through to the "ancient eternal archives [which] hold / Stories, Songs, Dance" (Leane, *Walk Back Over* 28). Leane's "Kamberra a Hundred Years On" describes the loss of "an older meeting place," covered over by colonial occupation, domination, and violence (*Walk Back Over* 28).[8] Indeed, the current geography of Canberra conceals another more ancient geography, "another meeting place," the history of which is to be found "between the Murrumbidgee tides and the Brindabella peaks" (Leane, *Walk Back Over* 28). The Kamberra referred to is no longer the capital of Australia, rather its "ancient and eternal archives" give meaning to the word *guwayu*, its place becoming much vaster and deeper than its officially recognised 814.2 square kilometres (Leane, *Walk Back Over* 28).[9] For the speaker, one must look "beneath this century of concrete circles," beyond what has been built, to see that which has been covered over, the geography of Kamberra revealing another history, one that goes, as Leane says of Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*, "beyond the boundaries of western possibility" ("Historyless People" 155).

Leane is aware of the risks posed by a history that reassures a western audience all the while discrediting the reality of Australia's First People.[10] This is why in the poem "Other Side of History" one reads:

> When some open a history book, they ask,
> *What is inside?*
> I ask
> *What is not?*
> *Who is outside?* (Leane, *Walk Back Over* 29; italics in original)

Enquiring into that which is absent rather than what is present, the speaker criticises an official history which actively excludes and ignores another history. Without doubt, one must consider Australian history, and by extension its geography, critically, since popular Australian history has often been written about "winners," who fought battles with the land before conquering it. Control of the Australian landscape is vital to the settler psyche. The victors' histories falsely parade as the history of Australia. These histories are those of absence: of *terra nullius*. In order to uphold the lie of an "empty land," Europeans have either denied First Nations peoples' presence, or have completely devalued our cultures. These hegemonic histories take possession of others' histories and silence them or manipulate and "deform" them (Birch n. p.).

Once more the reader is asked to look beyond "these black and white pages" in order to see the "other side" of history (Leane, *Walk Back Over* 29). In this poem, the speaker refers to geographical and historical realities, "where nameless, the placeless and the timeless, historyless people dwell" (Leane, *Walk Back Over* 29). Going beyond the text, the reader must observe more closely, more critically the history of Australia. In doing so the reader understands that the "historyless people" are, in fact, "those without deeper connections to the land that they occupy" (Leane, "Historyless People" 161), and "the timeless" are those who, despite what they claim, only have a surface deep history, constantly and actively "unwriting history on the Other" (Leane, *Walk Back Over* 29).

That *Other* Gundagai

Jeanine Leane's poem "River Memory" recounts the speaker's return to the town of Gundagai, her childhood memories, and the much more ancient river memory of the Murrumbidgee. In doing so, the poem instills a sense of place which is inseparable from a sense of belonging, becoming a poetic reminder that "stories often . . . need to be reconstructed in place" (Bonyhady and Griffiths 10). In this sense, "River Memory" intimates a local Wiradjuri geography rendered invisible by colonisation, requiring the reader to search beyond the text, to enquire into the implicit, to see the seemingly absent.[11] References to certain geographical features in the poem "River Memory" push the reader to question the current colonial geography and to consider other possible geographies of Gundagai. This can be achieved by considering two geographical features mentioned in "River Memory," one natural and one man-made, as they constitute examples of different points of entry into another geography, that of the Wiradjuri Nation.

However, in order to consider Aboriginal people's geography in general and Wiradjuri geography in particular, the reader must first of all see what has been made invisible, where the very absence of names for the topographical features that compose Wiradjuri Country orients the reader towards another possible geography and, therefore, another possible history of place:

> . . . My Grandmother said
> *this place is old.*
> She said my teachers don't know the stories.
> I listened (Leane, *Walk Back Over* 25; italics in original)

That which the teachers ignore emphasises the important role that vision and visuality play. Indeed, the terms vision and visuality are useful in that they consider both the physical and social aspects of seeing, where vision is as much a physical act as it is a social construction and where visuality can move from a social grounding into a bodily or psychic reaction (Foster ix). Effectively, sight is determined by historical and discursive elements which influence "how we see, how we are able, allowed, or made to see, and how we see this seeing or the unseen therein" (Foster ix). Vision and visuality are historically and culturally influenced, so much so that in "River Memory" the teachers' vision responds to a western-colonial perception of the world, one which excludes other possible ways of seeing. Consequently, in "River Memory," vision and visuality determine what the teachers can see which, in turn, influences the stories they can hear. By mentioning the colonial constructions and colonial names, "River Memory" shows that which has been made culturally visible and, consequently, illustrates that the cost of seeing one reality is to render invisible other cultural realities.

Going back to the town of Gundagai, the speaker remembers the claims of those given the responsibility of educational instruction:

> *This continent, Australia,*
> *is a young country*
> They told us (Leane, *Walk Back Over* 24; italics in original)

Indeed, "they'd seen the world—those nuns," the speaker affirms, not without a touch of irony (Leane, *Walk Back Over* 24). According to the geographer, cartographer, and map historian John

Brian Harley, "[m]aps are a cultural text" (159). Such an assertion postulates that maps have the power to reveal more than they show, where the presence of some information supposes the absence of other information. This is because a map represents the features and characteristics which are deemed important to cartographers, since "cartographic facts are only facts within a specific cultural perspective," and thus largely dependent on a particular group's perception and subsequent representation of the world (Harley 153). Without doubt, the "river memory" of the Murrumbidgee to which the speaker refers is part of a much larger Wiradjuri geography, one that goes well beyond the maps that "were pinned on the wall," whose purpose was not only to establish and impose a newly envisioned colonial geography of Australia, but also to replace and suppress First Nations peoples' in-depth knowledge of the land (Leane, *Walk Back Over* 24).

Consequently, acknowledging the implicit or the absent in both maps and history manuals inspires a closer examination of a particular group's perception:

> *The history of this place,*
> *Short—shortest in the world!* (Leane, *Walk Back Over* 24; italics in original)

It is clear that history in "River Memory" has an axiological value, where the superlative "*shortest*" refers to the temporal value ascribed by the Irish nuns to any history that "this place" may possess. Effectively, in colonial history, the short history of Australia has a higher value than does the long history of First Nations peoples who have inhabited and transformed the vast territory for millennia. Gundagai, or more exactly the Wiradjuri Country on which the town was founded, is not only a geographical location, but also, and perhaps more importantly, a geographical memory.

Therefore, beyond the hegemonic history maintained through map making and the education system, the reader can start to perceive another geography of Gundagai. Consequently, Leane's poem becomes an example of how "country speaks to us about its history" (Collard and Palmer 196). The first feature referred to by the speaker that allows the reader to see what has been made invisible is a natural geographical feature, a hill. Indeed, having returned to "the town of my childhood" (Leane, *Walk Back Over* 24), the speaker remembers her Australian history lessons:

> I stand on a solid red-gum bridge—the longest
> wooden bridge in the world. Irish nuns told me
> this on a good day
> under the Gothic arches in the convent
> on the hill where I learnt about Australian history (Leane, *Walk Back Over* 24)

It is "on the hill" that one finds St. Patrick's Roman Catholic Church, the foundation stone of which was laid on the 17th of March 1885. The church is neo-Gothic in style and was designed by the architect E. C. Manfred. It succeeded a previous building. It is also where one finds the "Gothic arches in the convent," which was built in 1890 for the Sisters of Mercy, whose teaching endeavours were led by Sister Stanislaus, after whom the church was named during a significant period, before reverting back to Saint Patrick's in 1979.[12] Although the poem does not name this natural geographical feature, the hill in question is Asbestos Hill, a small mount which culminates at 294 metres, situated southwest of Paddys Rocks Hill, altitude 406 metres, and north-west of Flowers Hill, 273 metres. North Gundagai was rebuilt in 1853 on the southern slope of Asbestos Hill after the 1852 floods.[13]

The second geographical feature is Prince Alfred Bridge, the "solid red-gum bridge" on which the returning poet stands. The bridge, built from 1864 to 1867 and named after the visiting Duke of Edinburgh, spans the Murrumbidgee River and river flats. Its construction had as its objective improved access to, and trade possibilities for, the region.[14] While the trusses for the bridge's structure were assembled using iron from England, the iron cylinders for the piers were cast in Mittagong, New South Wales, by the Fitz Roy Iron Works. The iron was mined at Chalybeate Spring, Mittagong, a perennial, carbonated, chalybeate mineral spring, which over thousands of years had created an iron ore deposit.[15] The bridge was, until demolition started in 2021, a 922-metre, wrought iron Warren truss and timber beam road bridge which made up part of the Hume Highway for 110 years. It is difficult, then, to ignore the fact that, for many, the Prince Alfred Bridge is an important geographical and historical feature, being part of the constructed environment in Gundagai and becoming part of both the experiences and memories of those who have travelled through the town.[16]

Although all this information may be of historical and cultural interest, Asbestos Hill, on which the church, convent, and school are located, as well as the Prince Alfred Bridge, whose structure is slowly being demolished, constitute the visible geography of Gundagai. The reason "River Memory" is important to our understanding of Aboriginal geography is that it invites the reader to see that which has been made *invisible*. In effect, various sources of information about the different geographical features of Gundagai's colonial history are readily available, as they constitute what has become Australia's identifiable heritage. However, the Prince Alfred Bridge, as well as the timber rail bridge and the more recent Sheahan road bridge, were built in order to pass over, in other words to avoid, a geographical feature that, for the Wiradjuri, has memory and, therefore, cultural significance. The colonial perception of Wiradjuri Country not only avoids what it considers to be detrimental natural phenomena, it also avoids recognition, it ignores another possible geography rendered invisible by the violence of words and actions: "On a bad day you could be beaten / for asking wrong questions about / the short history and the long bridge" (Leane, *Walk Back Over* 25). Indeed, from a colonial point of view, the bridge increased the economic worth of the region, "as huge wheat and wool trucks thundered / over ancient planks laden with wealth / of the nation," but the bridge also symbolises the potential loss of the geographical memory of the Murrumbidgee River and its flood plains for the Wiradjuri Nation (Leane, *Walk Back Over* 25).[17]

Consequently, the Wiradjuri geography in "River Memory" is one that the reader does not initially see. Asbestos Hill is part of Wiradjuri Country and its colonial name conceals what its Wiradjuri toponym may have been. In fact, colonialism suppressed "names of profound meaning to Aboriginals who had used them for thousands of years" (Seddon 12). This is made evident through the difference of density in place names, since "European names are scattered thin on the map, whereas the Aboriginals had names for every feature" (Seddon 13). Here, the very scarcity of names reveals the settlers' fragile connection to the land, insofar as "from the density and vitality of names on a map, one can read the intensity and quality of a culture's relations with the land. There is often poverty in our naming, which betrays the lack of an intimate relation between man and the landscape in much of Australia" (Seddon 13). In this regard, the supposedly short history of Australia ignored the cultural, geographical, and historical importance of longstanding Wiradjuri place names. Indeed, beyond Asbestos Hill, one could also enquire into the colonially named "Iron Mines Creek" in Mittagong, where a cairn and various information boards now remind the visitors that they are on the site of the former Fitz Roy Iron Works chalybeate mineral spring and iron ore deposit but fails to tell them the name of the creek and spring in Gundungurra language.[18]

Viscerally attached to Country, Jeanine Leane captures the central place of the river in the first stanza of "Tracks Wind Back," where the Murrumbidgee River is the constantly moving but always remembering "Mother of Wiradjuri children" (Leane, *Walk Back Over* 23). In "River Memory," Leane asks the reader to question both local and Australian history by looking beyond the colonial geographical features of Gundagai:

> Prince Alfred Bridge they called it—built last century
> by pioneers as they opened
> up our lands for progress.
> Our teachers *said so*. . . . (Leane, *Walk Back Over* 24; italics in original)

For the speaker, this *opening up* for progress of Wiradjuri Country inevitably caused emotional wounds that are yet to heal. The lands the pioneers "opened up" were in fact already *open*, home to different Wiradjuri clans. As Aileen Moreton-Robinson writes, "in the Australian context, the sense of belonging, home, and place enjoyed by the non-Indigenous subject—colonizer/migrant—is based on the dispossession of the original owners of the land and the denial of our rights under international customary law," insofar as settler-invader "ownership [is] understood within the logic of capital, and it mobilizes the legend of the pioneer, the 'battler,' in its self-legitimization" (32–33). Similarly, Leane invites the reader to first of all see the land as an unexploited territory waiting for the industrious and heroic achievements of "pioneers," the exploits of which are taught to succeeding generations of children, before bringing this representation into question and turning our regard to both the ecological and cultural damage the "pioneers" caused:

> . . . How many river gums
> were felled?
> What were their names
> before they were rearranged
> across the river—once their blood?
> What was their history? . . . (Leane, *Walk Back Over* 24–25)

For if it is easy enough to trace the origins of the iron back to the Fitz Roy Iron Works in Mittagong and in particular the chalybeate mineral spring iron ore deposit, finding the exact location of the numerous river gums felled and cut into the timber beams that were subsequently placed along the bridge's length is much more difficult to assertain. Indeed, the information pertaining to the provenance of the timber seems to be lacking. Perhaps they were removed from *another* Gundagai, the Wiradjuri *gundagai*, which, as the speaker explains in "Tracks Wind Back," "means bend curve / turn in the Murrumbidgee River" (Leane, *Walk Back Over* 23). Yet, their "place" in Wiradjuri Country cannot be underestimated, as their history is part of the Murrumbidgee River's memory. As Gladys Milroy explains, "[t]rees have always been our spiritual reservoirs, but many trees are invisible now. In the invisible forest, the ghosts of gums wander aimlessly, for there is no resting place. The tree spirits still cling to country, protecting the spirit of the land, for the land is never empty" (Milroy and Milroy 38).[19] These culturally significant river gums enter into a much larger spatio-temporal reality, where "the spiritual nature of the world is incorporated into one's connections to place, home and country" (Moreton-Robinson 50). This is why, in asking "what were their names," the speaker actively calls upon her ancestors, since these trees may constitute the link between the present and past generations, thereby maintaining the spiritual connection to this particular place. In comparable circumstances, Len Collard and Dave Palmer describe the importance of *boodjar* (Country) to the Noongar, insomuch that "their *moort* and *katitjin* is intricately tied up with *boodjar*" (191). Collard and Palmer further explain this intimate relationship between *Moort* (family), *katitjin* (knowledge) and *boodjar*:

> As well as sharing a place in these groups with other humans, Noongar "skin" includes flora, fauna, rocks, rivers and places. In this way, different parts of

> *boodjar* are *moort* related in the same way as brothers and sisters, uncles and aunties. For many Noongar their "old people" (those who have passed away) have symbolically and literally moved back to dwelling amongst the rocks, the trees and animals. For many Noongar this means that to visit and care for *boodjar* is to visit and care for *moort* (the old people). (191)

Whereas the bridge lasted less than two centuries, the average lifespan of a river gum is five hundred to one thousand years. This the speaker is aware of, as she remembers "how long it took [her] to cross on little / legs clinging tight to the side / as huge wheat and wool trucks thundered / over ancient planks laden with wealth / of the nation." Here, the banality of what have become planks of wood cannot replace the time and memory they still possess, the adjective "ancient" characterising the dignity and grandeur not only of the trees of the *gundagai*, but also of the spirit and memory of the Wiradjuri ancestors (Leane, *Walk Back Over* 25).[20]

Therefore, one only needs to acknowledge the possibility that the river gums situated along the Murrumbidgee River, perhaps at the *gundagai*—that particular bend, curve, turn in the river—were part of the physical location of the various social interactions between the individual members of the Wiradjuri Nation and those of other nations travelling through Wiradjuri Country. Subsequently, any attempt to answer the speaker's questions in "River Memory" would need to firstly consider Wiradjuri geography, one that considers the "bend of the Murrumbidgee" not as an ideal crossing place for colonial expansion and settlement, but rather as "a deep archive" of Wiradjuri memory and history (Leane, *Walk Back Over* 25).

Jeanine Leane's poetry reminds the reader that sites of geographical importance have been lost, ignored, and passed over by colonial discourse and action, where the concept of progress sought not to build bridges between cultures, but rather to pass over and avoid difficult situations, whether they be the periodic floods of the Murrumbidgee or the history and culture of Australia's First Nations people. Unfortunately, this is because "when the primacy of one binary is viewed as competing with the privileging of another, the prospects for flexible and co-operative alliance and empathy are likely to be dim" (Soja and Hooper 186). "River Memory" influences how the reader sees the land and its geographical features. For the speaker, as well as for the reader who has become conscious of the difference, what has become the "short history" of colonial Australia is in fact part of a much more ancient history, one that incorporates the cyclic nature of Wiradjuri Country, where "sometimes the river rose and swallowed the bridge and town" (Leane, *Walk Back Over* 25). Despite colonialism and its ravages, the Murrumbidgee River, with its "higher, older tides," is still the geographical, cultural, and historical memory of the Wiradjuri, a river that continues to "flow / steady and slow" (Leane, *Walk Back Over* 25).

Referring to Deborah Bird Rose's description of Country, Len Collard highlights the fact that "the process of moving on country not only involves the young and their living elders 'going along together,' it also demands we go along together with elders and ancestors long passed away" (Collard and Palmer 195). Perhaps this is why the speaker, who has "come back after seeing the world" (Leane, *Walk Back Over* 25), hears the voices of the past:

> I hear my Grandmother again.
> The bridge is shorter now.
> This history of place—still
> long and deep (Leane, *Walk Back Over* 25)

The "history of place" that the speaker refers to goes beyond simply identifying the colonial constructions: it goes beyond the colonial names which supplant much more ancient ones. It also goes beyond settler history and its stories of hardship. It goes beyond seeing the landscape as a comforting biblical exegesis, offering the explorers interpretations of the unknown. In fact, the "history of place" includes the *gundagai* of the river, the Murrumbidgee flood plain, the river gums and the meeting places of the various Wiradjuri clans. It is a history of place that is "still long and deep."

The poems in the section *Country* are not merely memories of the past with no implication for the present. In the preface to her collection, Jeanine Leane reflects upon the act of walking back over "spans in Australia," bridges, both real and symbolic, "that must be walked: not just once, walked back over" (Leane, *Walk Back Over* xi). To *walk back over* suggests a movement through space, one that goes beyond colonial geography and through into Wiradjuri geography. Perhaps not everyone has access to the river memory, but everyone can learn to appreciate another geography of Australia.

NOTES

[1] In using the term "postcolonial," this paper considers this word in the Australian context where, according to Aileen Moreton-Robinson, "it may be more useful . . . to conceptualize the current condition not as postcolonial but as postcolonizing, with the associations of ongoing process, which that implies" (44).

[2] See, for example, Jeanine Leane. *The Whiteman's Aborigine*. 2010. University of Technology, Sydney, PhD dissertation. https://opus.lib.uts.edu.au/bitstream/10453/20379/2/02Whole.pdf; Jeanine Leane. Foreword. *Guwayu—For All Times: A Collection of First Nations Poems*, edited by Jeanine Leane, Magabala Books, 2020, pp. xi–xix.

[3] Leane has been the recipient of a number of literary prizes, including Scanlon Prize for Indigenous Poetry, the David Unaipon Award for an unpublished Indigenous writer, the University of Canberra Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Poetry Prize and has twice won the Oodgeroo Noonucal Prize for Poetry. Leane is also the recipient of an Australian Research Council Fellowship to research Aboriginal writing since 1988.

[4] Kirsty Douglas refers to the influence of the 17th scientist and philosopher Francis Bacon on early explorers such as Captain Charles Sturt and their interpretation of the landscape.

[5] In "De-colonising the Space: Dreaming back to Country" Tanganekald and Meintangk academic Irene Watson recounts the consequences of colonisation on the Nunga Nation: "Our access to our traditional lands—*ruwi*—was restricted at the same time as pastoralists and farmers were invading them." These invading pastoralists and farmers seem to be the same "self-made men" to which Leane's poem refers. (Irene Watson. "De-colonising the Space: Dreaming back to Country." *Heartsick for Country, Stories of Love, Spirit and Creation*, edited by Sally Morgan, Tjalaminu Mia and Blaze Kwaymullina, Fremantle Press, 2008, p. 84.)

[6] Deborah Bird Rose explains in *Nourishing Terrains* that "country is a living entity with a yesterday, today and tomorrow, with a consciousness, and a will toward life" (7).

[7] See the chapter, "Caring for Country" (Rose 63–72).

[8] Such a poem reflects the experience and thoughts of Gidgingali man, Frank Gurrmanamana, when he visited Canberra, as related by Rhys Jones in his chapter, "Ordering the Landscape" (Jones 181–209).

[9] *Guwayu* in Wiradjuri means "still and yet for all times." See Jeanine Leane. Foreword. *Guwayu—For All Times*, Magabala Books, 2020.

[10] In her paper "Historyless People," Jeanine Leane reminds the reader that despite western terms such as magic, superstition, myth and the supernatural, First Nations people's knowledge is anchored in a reality that is true for them, if not for western critics and scholars (155).

[11] See, for example: Jay T. Johnson and Brian Murton. "Re/placing Native Science: Indigenous Voices in Contemporary Constructions of Nature." *Geographical Research*, vol 45, no 2, 2007, pp. 121–29. *Wiley Online Library*, 10.1111/j.1745-5871.2007.00442.x

[12] Saint Patrick's Primary School. "Our School." *Saint Patrick's Primary School Gundagai*, 2022, https://spg.nsw.edu.au/our-school; Churches Australia. "Australia's Christian Heritage St. Patrick's Catholic Church, Gundagai, N.S.W. 2722." 2022, https://www.churchesaustralia.org/list-of-churches/locations/new-south-wales/all-towns/directory/3241-st-patrickand%2339%3Bs-catholic-church.

[13] Floodlist. "Gundagai Floods 1852." 2022, https://floodlist.com/australia/gundagai-floods-1852

[14] Heritage N.S.W. "Prince Alfred Bridge—Iron Road Bridge." 2016, https://apps.environment.nsw.gov.au/dpcheritageapp/ViewHeritageItemDetails.aspx?ID=5063195

[15] McLeod, I. R. "A Summary of Thermal and Mineral Waters in Australia." 1967, https://d28rz98at9flks.cloudfront.net/12112/Rec1967_167.pdf ; NIHA Inc. "The Fitz Roy Iron Works." 2009,

http://www.niha.org.au/staticpages/index.php?page=20070824213020469

[16] The traditional owners of the Country on which Mittagong is now found are the Gundungurra.

[17] Kate Rigby highlights that the "nation" being referred to is one "from which Australia's First Nations were long excluded and of which the unevenly distributed "wealth" has been won at great cost, both to Aboriginal people and their lands," in "'Deeper Tracks Wind Back': Decolonial Ecopoetics." *Reclaiming Romanticism: Towards an Ecopoetics of Decolonization*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2020, p. 188.
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[18] On this topic, see: Jim, Smith. "New insights into Gundungurra Place Naming." *Aboriginal Placenames: Naming and Re-Naming the Australian Landscape*, edited by Harold Koch, Luise Hercus, ANU Press, 2009, pp. 87–114.
https://press.anu.edu.au/publications/series/aboriginal-history/aboriginal-placenames

[19] See also: Howard Morphy, Frances Morphy. "The Spirit of the Plains Kangaroo." *Words for Country, Landscape & Language in Australia*, edited by Tim Bonyhady, Tom Griffiths, U of New South Wales P, 2002, pp. 102–23.

[20] Jeanine Leane's poem highlights what Len Collard describes when he writes: "Our 'old people,' or those who have passed away, go back to *nyinniny* (sit down) in country. Part of the job of these *boordier* (bosses of country) is to watch over their *moort* and keep us safe" (Collard and Palmer 194).

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