

Portrait of a Settler: How to Make a Grand Entrance

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There are about 4,000 barriers to fish passages dotting the Murray River. Native fish species are estimated to have fallen to ten per cent of their pre-European settlement levels. Introduced alien species make about eighty to ninety per cent of the biomass of fish and seventy per cent of the numbers.

I sleep and dream:

of being

smothered

the voice of the waters becomes a succession of fence posts jolting by my sight as the boat speeds away from its jetty, and its engine overpowers the rest – the voice of the waters disappears under the surface; buried here, it will remain smothered.

I read and compile:

the Murray River's water level near its mouth in metres

0.584	0.668	0.457
0.64	0.614	0.398
0.662	0.65	0.398
0.637	0.583	0.439
0.649	0.55	0.405
0.711	0.545	0.246
0.686	0.612	0.267
0.582	0.619	0.345
0.619	0.619	0.348
0.677	0.617	0.336
0.714	0.637	0.336
0.739	0.624	0.323
0.725	0.622	0.299
0.699	0.583	0.315

	0.567	0.325
	0.587	0.272
0.751	0.588	0.206
0.654	0.553	0.268
	0.47	0.263
0.69	0.557	0.286
0.752	0.56	0.288
0.764	0.53	0.283
0.769	0.505	0.296
0.814	0.52	0.268
0.829	0.578	0.2
0.81	0.539	0.236
0.771	0.528	0.238
0.755	0.564	0.238
0.768	0.404	0.242
0.746	0.485	0.261
0.781	0.026	0.261
0.79	0.011	0.239
0.801		0.175
0.863		0.202
0.785		0.226
0.82	0.064	0.208
0.833	0.05	0.175
0.845	0.019	0.167
0.845	0.009	0.174
0.869	0.04	0.16
0.885	0.066	0.17
0.785	0.186	0.174
	0.272	0.159
	0.131	0.142
0.601	0.042	0.144
0.742	0.152	0.155
0.782	0.218	0.259

0.786 0.148 0.147
0.786 0.068 0.132
0.809 0.211 0.196
0.776 0.262 0.074
0.732 0.19 0.029
0.741 0.17 0.092
0.721 0.157 0.099
0.698 0.212 0.104
0.702 0.285
0.716 0.327
0.698 0.357
0.712 0.262 0.068
0.717 0.246 0.052
0.737 0.248 0.047
0.735 0.247 0.047
0.7 0.266 0.046
0.741 0.302 0.048
0.713 0.29 0.041
0.664 0.282 0.04
0.688 0.055
0.709 0.053
0.682 0.048
0.706 0.034
0.697 0.019
0.71
0.729

These are randomised: time is
irrelevant
absent.
lacking.lagging.laughing.

How did I get here?

Setting the scene

The waters are here, shimmering intensely under the explorer's gaze. At last! The waters are here.

So long had he imagined them: running, carrying him to his fortune and fate; his own source of mobility, development and commerce. He had cursed in frustration and disappointment as previous encounters with these waters had proved treacherous. They had been so difficult to locate and, once located, so deceptive. They never conformed to his expectations. He had cursed as he witnessed them lacking consistence and disappearing prematurely. The musicality of the retreating waters – the danced performance of backward-forward movements pregnant with hopes – had left him cold. They had failed to deliver and rise up to their assumed role; they had been lacking and lagging: America was assuredly better. These encounters had been missed encounters. Australian waters had betrayed him. He had stood stunned in the silence left by their absence; stunned, a taste of dissatisfaction in the mouth, each breath he took rasping his throat, gulping ahead as they gulped away and took their promise of riches with them. And yet, his enterprise could not succeed without them. So, he kept looking.

So long had he yearned for them. He had been obsessed, tortured. He had heard them whispering in his restless, choppy sleep, laughing at him, taunting him – leaving him panting, heat-stricken, dizzy and disoriented. But his quest was finally over. He had found them. The explorer took stock of what lay in front of his eyes. It was not perfect, but he had nonetheless stumbled upon something that represented an acceptable materialisation of his long-held dream. It was early 1830, and he had just “discovered” and named the Murray River. At this point in the story, his name was Captain Charles Sturt. The abundant physicality of waters empirically substantiated his wildest hopes. Their presence here, no longer hypothetical, was such a good omen! It was easy to notice the pastoral and agricultural potential of their surrounding land. After the Great Bend onwards to Lake Alexandrina, he deemed the space so exquisitely suitable for the projection of his expectations that he immediately recorded it in his journal on 19 March 1838:

We now appear done with the loose sandy country, entering one consisting of open plains thinly sprinkled over with bushes, and producing more grass than I

had seen on the journey, except at Swan Hill; but it is a very thin coat, though in the valley of the river there is a good portion of alluvial land for cultivation.

He was crossing through the north-west of Lower Murray Country while driving livestock down from New South Wales to Adelaide on a business venture. It was speculative, but it worked out for the best: he made a profit of £6,700 for the sale of his 335 head of cattle. At this point in the story, his name was Joseph Hawdon. Others could and would follow. And so, for their stake, he was prompt to underline this change in the nature of Country again in his report to John Hindmarsh, South Australia's governor at the time:

Leaving the river about the latitude of Adelaide, we were compelled by the ranges to go more to the south, and thus passed near to Mount Barker. In that district, we passed over a beautiful and extensive tract of grazing country, especially that lying between Mount Barker and Lake Alexandrina, which equals in richness of soil and pasturage any that I have seen in New Holland. The valley through which the Murray flows from the junction of the Murrumbidgee varies from one to upwards of five miles in breadth, and is in many places well adapted for the cultivation of grain.

Because of the suitability of this fertile region for pastoral and agricultural expansion, it was swiftly settled. It was surveyed. Country was not listened to, or "felt", but appraised and divided. Plots started to dot its fabric. Monetary values supplanted (creation) stories: a different rhythm progressively unfolded over the land. Numbers replaced words; fences overwrote tracks.

The waters are here, shimmering shyly under the explorer's gaze. At last! He has found his set.

Stepping on stage

This is how I got here.

The voice of the settler is generic and unnamed. It is in turn the voice of the explorer, of the botanist, of the historian, of the judge, of the boat captain, of the politician, of the scholar. The voice of the settler is the overlapping of many colonial voices and, as one succeeds to the other, nuances appear and disappear: each has a different approach to (and relationship with) waters. And yet, despite these differences, they share a common mythology which binds them together. The voice of the settler is an analytical dissecting andromorphic third-person-of-the-singular singular-alone-lonely voice; a shell of a presence. It is clouded judgment. It is monologue.

The voice of the settler explains that the settler is a visionary: he strolls next to the waters along a chronological timeline, with its implications of logical progression. His story is one of surveyed wandering. He analyses, he annotates, he classifies – he boils sceneries down to measures and dry recordings, he writes narratives of undisputable facts: he sets the stage for each scene of colonial conquest and development to be played. He is not so much an individual as a discipline (a project).

Flows,

 floods,

 swamps,

 bends,

 spate seasons,

 broad ephemeral fringes,

 retreating and galloping waters,

no longer

exist;
waters

are

sealed in-between levee banks,
flatten under coverslips,
channelled,
dammed,
piped,
drained,
diverted,
extracted,
conquered,
graphed,
civilised.

It happens. Again and again. History repeats itself like a scratched vinyl. Blankets of dead fish shroud the waters. From Menindee to the Mississippi.

Acknowledgements

Ngai tampinhi Kurna miyurna yarta mathanya Wama Tarntanyaku.

I recognise that Kurna people are the custodians of the Adelaide Plains.

Ngai tampinhi ngai Kurna yartangka tikanthi.

I acknowledge I live on Kurna Country.

I live and write on lands which were never ceded. I acknowledge the Kurna people's ongoing relationships with these lands and their connected bodies of water. I pay my respects to Kurna Elders, past, present and emerging.

Dr Camille Roulière is an award-winning early career researcher and creative writer whose work explores how humans engage and interact with their environments through art. Most notably, her writing has been published in *Cordite Scholarly*, *Art + Australia*, *Meanjin* and Routledge's Environmental Humanities series.