

Dust, ashes and the cultivation of meaning

Returning to my hometown in October 2019 was a tipping point for me. East coast dwellers often, when venturing west, are moved by the huge blue skies and by the open country, stretching out to a distant horizon. It's the sort of landscape that has been co-opted into the myth of *terra nullius*—that these are big, wide, open, *empty* spaces.

Driving west in October 2019, however, I couldn't see the horizon; there was no clear meeting place between sky and earth. Just dust—the fragile topsoil of New South Wales drifting, up-up-and-away; some of it no doubt coming to rest on lucky New Zealand, where many a billionaire is hastily constructing a private bunker to while away the coming apocalypse.

As I hurtled along the long, straight roads in my little Hyundai Excel, I felt like I was flying through the orange sky in a tin can. The car was on the way out and the passenger-side window was jammed all the way down. By the time I got back to Canberra, the entire inside was covered in a generous coat of dust.

I was headed for my best friend's farm on the Grawlin Plains, between Forbes and Grenfell. It was her little brother's 21st birthday and they were having a pig party in the shed. Their farm is called Driftwater—you have to laugh or you might cry forever.

It wasn't just the dust. There wasn't really a harvest that year and driving in and out of town, you passed one bare paddock after another. The river was as low as I had ever seen it, the banks rising high on either side of its small trickle. I have spent most of my life on the edge of this river, first on a farm 20 kilometres out of Lake Cargelligo and then on a much smaller property outside Forbes. My high school was surrounded on three sides by the river, taking its name from one of its turns: Red Bend.

As a whole, the river has two names: "Kalare", which is the Wiradjuri name, and "the Lachlan", which is the settler-colonial name paying homage to Governor Lachlan Macquarie. Names carry weight; they are heavy with the multiple histories that constitute their meanings. Meanings can change even if the names stay the same. Names can change too and that can change the meanings. Overall though, meaning is created through your body and mind in action and conversation with other bodies and minds, including non-human bodies and minds.

Take *terra nullius*, for instance. When the British declared the Australian continent *terra nullius*—Latin for "nobody's land"—they seemingly legitimised their taking of this land. It didn't matter to settlers that the name was a complete misrepresentation of reality. Taking the name and the land for granted, they (we) proceeded in bringing the post-industrial desecration of the planet down around our heads. Calling the land *terra nullius* didn't make it

so—just as calling your farm “Driftwater” won’t make it rain—but it did change other things about the land.

There are, of course, people there, in and around my hometown: the Wiradjuri people who have been living on that country for tens of thousands of years; and everyone else who has settled in those lands in the last two hundred years. Altogether, some of the most generous, hard-working, hilarious people I know. They, like so many other people around the planet, are already suffering the effects of catastrophic climate change on their health, their income, and their way of life.

I moved from Forbes to Sydney in 2013 to study medicine. In our anatomy labs, the tutors would place little coloured flags, each with its own letter, along the splice of body we were examining that day. The flags marked the different arteries, muscles, joints etc. that we were expected to have memorised the names of. At the end of each lesson there was a quiz and beside each letter, we would write the name of the body part. Like the flags puckering a golf course, or candles perched in an otherwise ordinary cake, these little, lettered flags in the anatomy lab made each slab of flesh into something more and something else.

Naming is a way of pinning values and meanings on things. Australian doctor and anthropologist Michael Taussig calls it “the magical power of the name and of naming”, drawing within its ambit everything from the power of nicknaming “as a way of asserting hierarchy and control”, to naming cyclones as “a mode of subordinating the fierce powers of nature.”¹ It is a power Prime Minister Scott Morrison attempted to harness in waving that lump of coal around in Parliament: look, it is just *coal*. Morrison still has not grasped that the meaning of “coal” has changed for a majority of people worldwide.

But in my reckoning, the potential of naming exceeds this simple squabbling for power and control over the meaning of certain words. That is the sort of naming that is eating away at our society, starting in playgrounds; rife on social media; and now echoing down the halls of Parliament. It is not just a new vocabulary that we need or a new set of meanings for the old vocabulary; we need new processes for creating meaning.

I like the name “tipping points” because it brings a definite timeframe into climate change contemplation. The climate disaster has unfolded relatively slowly, compared with, for example, catastrophe catalysed by volcanic eruptions, bombing or pandemics. That is part of the reason why we have been so slow to react. “Tipping point” is one of the few phrases left in the climate lexicon still able to convey the urgency of the situation, without veering into hopeless hyperbole. Just the cold, hard reality of the consequences of our (in)actions. “Tipping point” recalls the image of an iceberg, the epitome of silent, inhuman power and the

¹ Michael Taussig, *Mastery of Non-Mastery in the Age of Meltdown*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020, p. 68.

nadir of human destruction, flipping over in the ambivalent ocean. It implies an event from which there will be no bouncing back and is oriented to the environment: the event could be the ice sheets melting above a certain level or species that are necessary for human survival disappearing. However, I think there are tipping points for individuals and communities, too: a point at which you decide to change.

Two months after my friend's 21st, Canberra was choked with smoke. You couldn't crack a window. You couldn't go out for a walk or hang your clothes on the line. Nobody celebrated New Year's Eve. Smoke settled in our homes, our clothes, and our hair. The east coast was on fire and we all stunk of smoke. By the time the pandemic hit, we were already quite used to wearing masks.

My Mum had gone to Omeo in early 2020 to work for a few weeks as a GP locum. She's semi-retired and likes to give other rural GPs a break when she can. As the fires closed in around the town and helicopters airlifted people off the local sports oval, my sisters and I anxiously called to see if she was going to get out. She refused, arguing that she had a responsibility to stay and (wo)man the local hospital. (Meanwhile, Prime Minister Scott Morrison took some time out for a family holiday in Hawaii). She and the hospital cook went around wet towelling all the entrances. I sat in the National Library, which was about the cleanest air I could find, refreshing the CFA map every three minutes and reciting Dylan Thomas' famous lines in my head, like a prayer:

Do not go gentle into that goodnight.

Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Many people worldwide place their hope in technological change, driven by the markets. President Xi Jinping recently stated: 綠水青山就是金山銀山 ("green mountains are gold mountains"). The idea is that developing renewable power can simultaneously drive economic growth and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. You can have your cake and—how convenient—eat it too.

Many other people, including myself, believe that we need cultural change as much as and more than we need technological change. But what is the tipping point for cultural change? At what point do you stop taking your family on holiday to Hawaii? When do you stop burning coal because it is no longer politically quicker and easier than transitioning a workforce to a better paid, more sustainable industry? How would you bring about cultural change?

Naming has a part to play in this. Cultural change is carried on the back of new words and new meanings, but it is the way the meanings are created that is important. This is a type of naming that is about action as much as it is about words. It's a type of meaning-making that involves your body as much as your mind. A literal cultivation of meaning as you tend your garden, ride your bike, raise your children, lock-on to a gate, and have difficult conversations.