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Bone Poems: Listening and Speaking from the Ground

Cali Prince

Western Sydney University
(AU)

Abstract

As a practice-led researcher traversing the multiple worlds that exist between artists, communities and institutions, I turned to poetry to begin to speak the unspeakable; to retrieve the metaphorical bones of a story that were taken out. The bones of this story came through the voices of four women who lived and worked at a site located in Western Sydney. Their stories opened a crack in the findings of the research. Unexpectedly their stories interconnected. In an emergent process rather than a predetermined one, the poetic became a way to bring some of the fragmented 'bones' of this story to light. A multilayered participatory process of hand making relationship maps and poetry as the final layer of this experimental approach to ethnographic inquiry, resulted in the creation of what I call 'bone maps' and 'bone poems'. They have created 'ethnographic places' which allow for deeper inquiry into the human side of the story, interwoven with the complexity of official and often perceived more factual accounts as presented across multiple institutional narratives. I found that ethnographically based poetry, informed by earlier sensory mapping processes could reveal what more linear approaches did not. This paper introduces 'Bone Poems', to reveal how this experimental approach reaches ways of knowing, through metaphor, in ways that other methods do not.

Keywords

Experimental Ethnography, Ethnographically Based Poetry, Sensory Maps, Ethnographic Places, Metaphor

Dedication

To the bone keepers, makers, weavers, and carriers. The women who dared to speak truth to silence. Who spoke in poetry (including my mother). May we reclaim all the shattered pieces and sing our stories whole.

Acknowledgement

I acknowledge the traditional owners, elders past, present, and future generations of the places these stories occurred in and have been told from. I especially acknowledge the women who carried these stories, and shared them with me.



Introduction

In the dual role of cultural development worker in local government and as a practice-led researcher, I encountered an unexpected finding. Undertaking qualitative research focusing on the moments of transformation in the creative collaboration between artists, people and their communities and institutions, instead, I came face to face with a buried and suppressed story. It was not the moment of ‘transformation’ but rather the ‘resistances’ to it that became my point of focus. The spaces of disconnection within the relationships on projects that became as interesting as the spaces of connection. A question that was asked by people in the community and remained unanswered by the institution became a riddle that would ‘not lay down and go to sleep’. The silence of no reply was the fissure, a crack¹ that led to my most non-linear and significant findings: an explosive hidden story that lay at the periphery of where I once worked and where the projects had taken place.

This story was a fragmented one ‘with no bones’². The human experiences appeared to have been removed from the official narrative, which was now dominated by reports, assessments, historical archives, and a small scattering of press articles. Unexpectedly a very different narrative was revealed in the questions to the institution from residents, interconnected to the stories recounted by artists in the community followed by recorded conversations, sensory relationship mapping and poetry.

The primary purpose of this article is to speak the unspeakable³ through poetry. Yet, it goes further. One woman, “Ella”⁴ who lives in the nearby mountains, says, “It’s an alternative way of documenting for the community.” It is a way of remembering what has been censored and edited out in the dominant narrative about this place and the people who live there. This action is also a way of opening new possibilities and imaginations towards the future.

Background

An ethnographically based poetic approach became central to the methodology of my research. It was born not through inspiration, but through meeting great difficulty and struggle in the process. These challenges included encountering gatekeepers to the communities I had worked in. Early in the research, my employer at that time asked me not to speak to the community in my research. Consequently, I had to find another way, a process that would enable me to listen and speak from the ground⁵. ‘Bone Maps’ forms the precursor to the thirteen ‘Bone Poems’ that appear later in this article. It shares how the unearthing of this story came from a tiny crack, in the process of using creative and experiential ethnographic approaches:

¹ The metaphor ‘fissures and cracks’ has been transmitted to me in workshops with Professor Bob Hodge, documented in my personal ethnographic journal.

² The concept of a story with no bones is a direct oral teaching/transmission from Clarissa Pinkola Estes in the Original Voice Training USA 2016, documented in my personal ethnographic journal.

³ I acknowledge a conversation with Katrina Schlunke who encouraged me to keep an ‘unspeakable file’ as part of my research.

⁴ Real names of research participants have been removed to protect confidentiality - see Technical Note.

⁵ “*Listening and speaking from the ground up*” is a line that came to me and developed during a workshop exercises at the Sensory Ethnography workshop led by D. Soyini Madison at CEAD 2016, Cape Town, South Africa.

Bone Maps

The poetic
like water
can carry the bone
through tiny cracks
into this world
It is a map
of metaphor
and story
that can touch
the marrow
in the bone.

It patiently waits
for the time
when those who
have forgotten
and for those
who want
to remember

the threads of
the story
that were buried
and removed.

Connection
between heart
and sinew,
call back
the bones
and reveal
where more
bones may
still lie

especially
the ones

that were
taken out.⁶

This first crack was a question that two women (who I will call 'Eliza' and 'Rhonda') living next to the site, asked me. They turned up to a 'community engagement' event and angrily asked more than one question about what lay in the soil beneath their homes, questions they said had been left repeatedly unanswered by various institutions. This was a key moment that led to the finding of more cracks, from which came forth more stories, primarily through the voices of two artists (who I will call 'Rose' and 'Marie'). Both artists had worked on different arts-based and community engagement projects in Western Sydney with me. Their stories (women's stories) lay, in the silences, in the gaps, in the narrative that lays in between the official narratives and reports.

Ethnographically based poetry became a powerful means through which to explore this ravine; what lay hidden in the heart of a deep silence, revealing stories of explosives buried in contaminated land, adjoining seven suburbs in the outer periphery of Western Sydney. In poetry, a narrative emerged that brought humanity and bones back into the stories that were omitted in the official documents and maps. 'Bone Poems' and the hand-made bone maps tell stories and experiences in this place, that the official documents and maps do not.

I worked with an experimental methodological approach I call Sensory and Poetic Relationship Mapping (SPRM). While beyond the scope of this article (see Technical Note), it involves ethnographically based poetry and hand-made sensory relationship maps layered together. I drew on official accounts, reports and documents as part of this research 'puzzle'⁷. These official accounts were then combined with the oral narratives of the people. The poems reveal a radically different and even disturbing narrative, from which the conclusion can be drawn, that these stories were deliberately ignored and even silenced.

Told through the lens of my encounter with this story, combining autoethnographic and found poetry, Bone Poems relates not only to one community but also to many communities and sites of other contaminated lands in Australia. It offers a vital piece of the puzzle and reveals other ways of knowing that can be pieced together with the official narratives to reveal a more holistic picture, for people and communities in general, for artists working on community-engaged projects and also for those doing work on contaminated lands.⁸

This article is structured in three parts; the first is the introduction and background, the second comprises the heart of this work, the full length 'Bone Poems', the third provides a short discussion on learnings and conclusions. The approach of this article is to reveal how the 'bones' of this inquiry have been found, reclaimed, witnessed, and rewoven through poetry, and secondly, to let the poetry speak for itself. It is less about fact-finding and more about gathering metaphor to reveal the counter-narratives that exist on and below the ground, waiting for a vehicle through which to be told.

This story represents more than one story. It is, in fact, many stories. It is a multitude of stories as spilt from the mouths of the people and their experiences set within a place I previously thought I knew. A place I had worked in for more than seven years that consisted of a number of neighbourhoods in the older parts of the city identified as relatively disadvantaged⁹. These areas were part of a dedicated

⁶ Author's ethnographic journal dated 25.2.18 revised 15.6.18

⁷ Approaching the research as a 'puzzle' is derived from a Narrative Inquiry approach by D. Jean Clandinin (2016).

⁸ I acknowledge a conversation with Paul Brown who highlighted the relevance of this story to other contaminated land sites across Australia.

⁹ As identified in the Australian Bureau of Statistics: Index of Relative Socio-economic Advantage and Disadvantage, (ABS 2013) this type of data was referenced and provided the reasoning for these areas to receive additional resources.

program for ‘renewal’ and capacity building to redress this identified disadvantage. My role existed within a team dedicated to a strengths based approach to renewal in these neighbourhoods. Out of the stories, some gathered ethnographically through my experiences in the field and others told through recorded open-ended conversations, explored through metaphor, sensory maps and in poetic writings, I came to discover our stories were interconnected and building across time into a chorus. A chorus of counter story came from some of the people who worked and lived in this place, in contrast to the dominant narrative by the institutions and the official reports. These voices emerged with such a power I could not avert my eyes to this story which appeared to have existed under the surface for a long time.

These stories revealed dynamics between narrative and power, disconnections between the voiced and the voiceless, the forgotten and the dead. The larger story is not singular but is a web of interconnected stories, and across them a universal story about power. Simultaneously it is a local story with real people who have suffered. An unresolved story that lays in parts suppressed, forgotten, simply overlooked or unknown, and was often whispered to me in hushed tones off-the-record in spaces where people felt safe to talk. The research covers this tapestry of interconnected stories that tell of unanswered questions, explosives buried in unmapped labyrinths under the earth, contaminated land, radioactive storage and waste in a place near residential areas. Through the research process, I learned to see through the lives and stories of others, and this place through new eyes. I came to witness myself and my own role in their story/our stories, in a way that I cannot un-see.

This was a slow process of irrevocable change, and indeed transformation, for me as a practitioner. However, the possibility of this work extends beyond the personal, to multiple communities including both artists who do community engaged practice, as well as the people who live in, and near, this place. It carries deeper resonances for other communities with stories of contaminated land. Bone Poems connects and makes visible a direct relationship through radioactive waste that was transported from the site (this place) to another site (being Australia’s primary nuclear waste disposal and storage site).

Bone Poems is the crack that forms a door or gateway to potential inquiry between the stories and relationships between these two places and other contaminated lands across Australia. Put another way, Bone Poems is one piece of the puzzle, in the greater story of contaminated land and its impact on people and their communities across Australia. This piece of the puzzle has not been revealed in this way before and it is only the beginning. It reveals a deeply disturbing story that now visible, with key information validated and in some cases further revealed by the official reports, opens further questions. It is important to keep in mind that these questions have been raised by people in this place for a long time, yet have been ignored, or worse still fragmented — erased and relegated to the periphery. Bone Poems places these questions front and centre, it invites the reader to remember and in doing so, to open to new possibilities for the future.

Bones and Maps as Metaphors

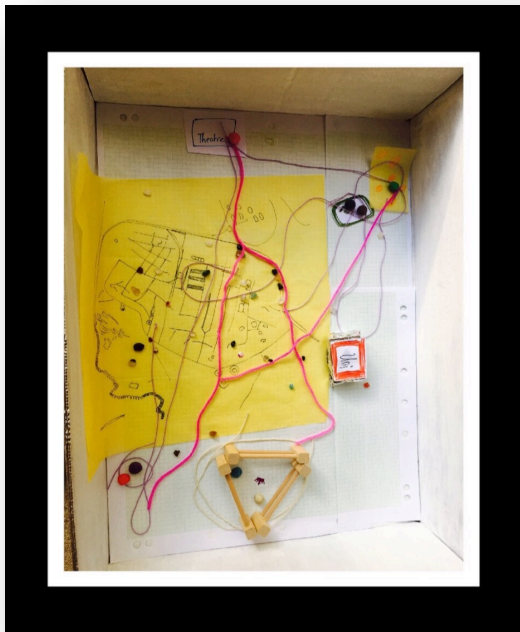
The research findings culminate in the form of a series of thirteen ethnographically-based poems that speak the unspeakable. Thirteen being chosen, inspired by Elder Martin Prechtel (2015) who says “..twelve is supposed to be everything that we can see, thirteen is something uncalculated, unknown, unmeasurable, un-buyable, un-sellable and it can’t be killed”, (Prechtel, 1997, 4.39). I work with thirteen poems to represent that which is essential yet unseen, the essence that cannot be destroyed. Bone Poems seek to remember, spoken by the people who live and work in these places.

Consequently, it does not seek to be beautiful or filled with poetic imagery. Rather, it’s deeply disturbing, haunting and substantial sections of poetry has been formed from the words of the people as they recounted their experiences. In contrast, the excerpts from the official reports, archives and publicly-available documents woven into the poems present a rationalised linear narrative. The two different accounts do not sit neatly together. Rather it’s a messy text, often with rough not smooth edges that do not neatly fit together. As in verbatim theatre where the people’s words are re-presented ‘in their own words’ unembellished, so too are the words of the people in Bone Poems as they spoke them to me. This way of knowing includes processes that evoke inquiry embodied through the senses,

knowledge through stories, maps and poetry, to reveal people's lived experiences, equal to the formal accounts, the official reports and parliamentary papers. Out of this process what remains are thirteen interlinked poems that form an invitation into a deeper inquiry, and bone retrieval for the future.

Both 'bones' and 'maps' are metaphors, bones being a metaphor for the human stories that have been fragmented and left out, and maps referring literally to the hand-made relationship maps generated in the participatory sensory mapping process. I draw a connection between my experience in this process and the central metaphor of the bones, the poems' title. As Clarissa Pinkola Estes (1992, 17) writes, "...all that we might ever need, is still whispering from the bones of the story." The research participants and I began to speak through metaphor, handmade maps of our individual experiences, which I began to layer with poetry. In this process, we have begun to 'whisper' and now speak some of the bones of these stories back together.

Figure 1. The Beginning of a Sensory Relationship Map Sequence Identifies the Relationships between Key People. The Fence (lower right) Represents the Barrier that Impacted my Ability to Speak to People in the Local Communities and Revealed in the Centre, is the 'site' of the Bone Poems (*Image: Copyright of the author*).



Bone Poems is a resistance poem. It allows a 'counter-factual space' (Hodge 1993, 49) to emerge. It forms a counter-narrative to the factual spaces and dominant narratives in government authored and commissioned reports, as well as other documents. Reports and documents are difficult to locate and often do not seem to connect or link to one another. As the reader I invite you to view it as a current work in development. As a living inquiry they are not approached as 'data' but rather as an 'interim field text', informed by the participatory and relational approaches in narrative inquiry. As Clandinin (2016, 47) points out, interim field texts are not finished or fixed but rather are fluid and responsive, "often partial texts

that are open to allow participants and researchers opportunities to further co-compose storied interpretations and to negotiate the multiplicity of possible meanings" (Ibid). This is an unfolding process in the research past, present and future, continuing in this point in time. It is still in a process that is dialogic with participants and next steps include formation of a final 'research text'.

Figure 2. The Sensory Relationship Map is Layered with Poetry, to Reveal what Ordinarily is not Visible, and Generates an Ethnographic Place. (Image: Copyright of the author).



As the weaver of all of these narratives that bump up against one another and other times, as pieces of the puzzle that fall into place to reveal a picture that wasn't revealed before – I invite you to let these stories, primarily women's stories, touch you and to see how they are interwoven with the official reports, public documents and press articles to form a more holistic or gestalt approach, to begin to retrieve what was not only silenced but also fragmented and denied.

Reader's note

In Bone Poems the reports, archives and press clipping are identified with italicised text. In contrast, the oral stories and my ethnographic notes are not italicised. This is to assist the reader to move between the different sources in the reading of the poem.

'Bone Poems' (13 interconnected poems)

Poem 1: Prologue

"Beware the story with
no bones"
one of my teachers said.

We pass on the bones
in riddles
beyond the reach

Of those
who would
have us not speak.

Poem 2: Listening & Speaking from the Ground

Paint it lightly
and you can tell it
an Elder said

I am trying to learn
how to write this story

and how it
wants to be written.

Most of all
I am learning
how to remember,
through the visions
of those
who do remember.

I am learning
how to weave
the pieces
of each
of their stories
together

Weaving
sinew over bone,
listening and speaking
from the ground
can be a dangerous thing.

A story that lays
in pieces
on the periphery
of places
and consciousness
with few surface remnants

The rest lies buried
in the red heat

Deep in earth
deep in heart

In the unfinished

and silent voices
of the dead.

The old site
at the centre

Seven suburbs
stitched
and joined
at the centre

Interconnected by
“explosive ordinance
chemical contamination”

TNT, asbestos, lead,
low and intermediate-level
radioactive materials and
radioactive waste

They lay scattered
and in wait
they lay forgotten
as few remember
“they kept no maps,” they said.

Yet who can afford to forget?

And who can dare to remember?

Who will be called to look?

And who will overturn the stone
to see what lays beneath?

Poem 3: Remembering

How to remember this story
that lays in fragments

in the broken earth
in unanswered questions

45kms west
in communities
where “*1 in 5 households*”
“*earn less than*
\$500 per week”

Beneath their homes
and the flowerbeds
hear them whisper
in their sleep

“What is it
that lays
underneath”?

Between
the lip
of the mountain
and the sea?

Between
the woodland plains
and the saltbush
at the desert edge?

What could
connect them
in-between?

Where seeps
truth
under ground
or in the water

Or upon the lips of
a woman
who lives
over the street?

Beneath the
straw hats
of those who toil
in the food bowl
to the north?

What bone
remains in the
endangered woodlands
to the west?

A place
known as
the “*mother place*”
the traditional owners said.

Ground of Swift Parrot,
endangered Green
and Golden Bell Frogs
“*ironbark*”
“*stringybark*”
and “*ti-tri scrub*”

What is the clue
in deformed Emus
and Eastern Grey Kangaroos?

Behind high fences
and surveillance cameras
beneath
industrial rubbish

The legends on the street

carried from voice to voice
some, who ask questions,
demanding answers

Some,
who whisper
and some,
who watch in silence.

“There is more to this story
that they are not telling us “
she said.

The truth is that
you will not find this bone
in the official story
no, you will not.

For it is buried and broken
in the unanswered questions

That leave a trail
that leads to nothing
visible.

It is buried
in the story of dead fish
in the creek

The dead end shelf
with the people’s questions
and their demands
for answers;

“Why are there men
in protective white suits
from head to toe

testing the soil - our soil, “
she said.

“In the very place
where our homes stand
what are they not telling us?”
her neighbour said.

But who can prove
that their questions existed?

And the document
where it was recorded,
where did it go?

Where are the ruins
in the compiled data
or the final report
presented at the
public meetings?

Storytellers know
that the narrative
can be re-woven
at the edges
like water
over stone

for who is
the storyteller’s master?

In a labyrinth of institutions
amidst the forgotten people
over the bridge
on the outskirts
who are

“left to eat dirt”¹⁰?

Poem 4: Master Threads

Just as stories
can reveal
so too they
can conceal
the master’s thread

One of three
powers reported
to the public
on their engagement
with residents

*“A strengths focus leads
to planning which builds on
the positive aspects
of a neighbourhood
as well as addressing issues
raised by local residents”*

But it is woven
and you will not find
the bones
in the master story
no, you will not.

But you may find
their trail
buried beneath
the verbal directive
from an employer
that this research
not speak to the bone.

¹⁰ Phrase spoken by Michael Meade transmitted in direct teachings, The Pathless Path, Seattle, USA, 2016.

“Do not speak
to the community”
who live
on the ground
management said.

There was one
further instruction,
“Do not dig.”

In the places up the road
where children play
“Do not disturb the soil
it is sure
to uncover asbestos”
he said.

Amidst no-go zones
within corridors
of power
audible from the line
of command
pieces came
in fragments

“Have you cleaned it up?”
the Master said.
“Not yet,” the officer said
flustered in reply,
“clean up that site”
agitated, the Master said.

What secret lay close
to the Master’s chest?

And who is the Master’s
Master?

her heart said,

For asbestos is only
playing at the edges.

Pursued
by the weight
of immobility
on the cusp
of memory
and forgetting¹¹
“In the community people
kept talking about
the toxic waste,
it was the silence
that would surround it
that was making my ears go
what is this?”
she said.

So she turned her question
to the artists,
for this was a riddle
that would not go to sleep.

Poem 5: Seeping Through the Cracks

There by the ‘living floor’
it appeared
in the flicker
of her eyes,

A woman
who bought
her first home

¹¹ Alludes to “The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting” by Milan Kundera (1978) from *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*.

on that soil
“my land rights”
she said.

“Y’know I used to look
through the fence
at the kangaroos and emu’s
some had deformities,
or dis-coloured
or their fur was really thin.”

“I mentioned it to the guy
at the newsagency shop
”mate I’m from the bush
there’s something wrong
with those animals?”

“He said, ‘Love,
don’t you know
about the site?’”

“It was the ammunition dump
for the government,
that’s where we washed
the trucks from Maralinga
and it seeped into the soil,
every single bloke
that I’ve worked with,
I’m the last one to die,
and we’ve all had some kind of cancer.”

“He ended up dying of cancer”
she said.

“That old fella was giving me
local knowledge of that land
and what it was used for”

“Explosives,
TNT, asbestos
even uranium”
she said.

They drove around
in their cars protesting,
she said.

“They buried
ammunition there,
y’know that young bloke
that went exploring over there
and put a trunk under his bed,
and his mother found it
and it was full
of friggin grenades ” she said.

Stories passed
down the street
“It was kids
who found
them in the bush
“missiles” an Elder
from the mountain said.

“Oh yes,
there was a Century Gate
they made munitions
and missiles”
a man
at the cafe said.

The filling of
“*phosphorous bombs*”
and production
of “*over 31 different types*

of munitions”
made by the
hands of women
and men

“It was mostly women
who worked there”
the train driver said.

“60,934” employees
who worked
“6 days a week”

“42 per cent”
were “women”

once “an area of 1,260 acres”
“with a total of 850 buildings”

a place reborn
and transformed
to produce
“in response
to the Cold War”
the “*rising tensions*
in South East Asia”
and then the “*Vietnam War*”
the archives said.

The earth made
a cup
for the “*manufacture*
of detonators
and caps,
empty shell treatment
and bomb fillings”

The burial

of waste
wrapped and layered
in the earth
not to be seen
nor heard

Repackaged and coded
as “UXO” in the
Contamination Management Plan

three letters
are the approved remains of
“Unexploded ordinances”

“Unexpected finds may occur”
another Report said

And they did.

Poem 6: Buried & Rising

Buried
in the trauma
that has begun to rise
through the bones
of the living
and the dead

“It’s benevolent censorship”
she said,
“No, it’s not benevolent,
it’s in the water”
he said.

Rising
in the expression
and voice
of shock

A gaze
that has no words
in a woman
who worked
with this community
to tell their stories
more than 20 years ago

“It’s the black snake”,
she said.

And in the days
that followed
she sent a poem
“I watch quietly
with a tear forming
not quite falling”

“I haven’t spoken of it
but I trust you”
she said
as we crossed over
the middle of night.

No, you will not find
their story online
in the government reports
no, you will not.

You will not
find their story
in the historical archives
no, you will not.

You will not find it
in the community engagement data
or the neighbourhood action plans

no, you will not.

You will not find it
in the annual report
or in the Parliamentary Library
no, you will not.

You will not find it in the
the Contamination Management Plan
or the Legislative Council Questions
and Answer Papers,
no, you will not.

You will not find it in the
the archaeological reports,
no, you will not.

You will not find it
if you stop at the dead end
section
of “removed road”
no, you will not.

But walk south
and you may find
some crumbs
a trail of small clues

In the narrative
the dominant voices
want you to find
want you to hear
want you to believe
is the single story.

If your search runs
lateral and wide

you may find
an official report
that mentions
“local Aboriginal people”
“maintained their connections
to the site”
it said.

That *“they watched,*
along with other local people,
from the outside through
the secure fences
and gates
that marked the boundary.”

Yet what of the “hundreds”
of Aboriginal people
who worked in
that factory
and their omission
from the history
of the site

You will not read
their stories
in the reports,
no, you will not.

Or newly arrived migrants
children bathing in buckets
in a dis-used
Pyrotechnic building,
No, you will not.

Yet in the places
of our interconnections
lie the fragments
shards of

rubble and bone
they could not erase

You will not hear
the voice of injustice
in those cleaned up places
no, you will not.

But you will learn
the gaze
the powers
want you
to hold.

Their final assessment
said
*“..it is unlikely these will present
an unacceptable risk
provided appropriate procedures
for the safe handling
and disposal of such material
are adopted”*

Further that
*“...residual contamination
within the regional park
will then be managed
in accordance with
standard requirements..”*

And unless
you dig deep,
you will not
find the internal report
*“on the arrangements for the transportation
of radioactive material.”*

Poem 7: Trail of Radioactive Bones

In 1995 a report
 addressed to the top
 stated “*between
 the 1950s and 1970s
 radioactive waste material*”
 that included
 “*cobalt-60,
 radium-226,
 americium-241,
 strontium-90,
 and caesium- 137*”
 plus “*a minute amount of
 plutonium-239*”
 had been accepted
 on the old site.

Their report claims that it
 “*represents some 60%
 of the low level and short lived
 intermediate level
 radioactive waste
 in storage in Australia
 at the present time.*”

Further “*The radioactivity
 of the rest of the
 waste is too high
 to meet the criteria
 for near-surface disposal
 and is defined under the
 NHMRC Code
 as Category S*”

Which “*can
 only be disposed of
 in a deep geological facility*”
 the report said.

You will not hear
the manager
of the site
alert the chain of command
that the 1985 audit report
identified
*“some of the material
in storage was potentially
hazardous”*

Radioactive waste
*“ranging from cardboard boxes
and plastic bags
to concrete blocks and
44 gallon drums”*

You will not hear
that it contained
“some high level sources”
*“material from
atomic bomb tests”*

*“consolidated
dried residue”*
from close to desert
no-go zones

and even an item
from near an island
off the coast.

An insider said it was
*“a 30 inch gear wheel
from a naval ship
blown up
in the first*

atomic bomb
test in 1952”

Presented in writing
to the Nuclear Fuel Cycle
Royal Commission

These are the artefacts
it was in the design
not to find

And find them
you will not.

What of
his reference to the
‘understated’ reports
you will not receive the letter
with critical details omitted
reassuring one Mayor
that the materials
“are stored in a reinforced
concrete building
such that the building
poses no threat
to employees
of the factory
or the general public”

You will not hear the Insider’s
testimony that
a letter sent
from the Minister
to the Mayor
“... did not mention that the waste
contained some ‘high level sources’ ”

“there was nothing

*in the letter
to tell the Council
that since 1979,
there had been
a de facto national
radioactive waste
storage site on its doorstep.”*

Or that a Senator one month later
“*provided more information
withheld from the Council,
including about the
presence of plutonium
in the waste.”*

You will not hear of the
approval from the
highest orders
on land
that authorised the
transfer

in convoy
at “5.30am”
on the “18th of May 1995”.

Or that two days prior
“*the published notice ...
gave little time for any response*”
the internal report said.

You will not hear the
drivers
change over at “*Broken Hill*”
or arrive
at the final destination
“5.30am 19 May 1995”

no, you will not.

You will not hear
the rumble
of eight prime movers
move “*30 cubic metres*”
a total of
“*9,726 x 205 litre drums*”

The radioactive spears
secretly lit dawn
landing
upon the red earth

You will not trace the
elaborate trail
of changing hands on
changing paper
across the body of
a multi- headed beast

from the plains of the west
having reached
their final resting place
1714kms central north-west
and in another state

Mysterious in their contents
now pretending to sleep
at the “*largest storage site
for low and intermediate – level
radioactive waste.*”

Here down under
radioactive drums
lie silent
with the forgotten,
the omitted

and the dead

You will not hear them leak
No, you will not

And you will not hear
the presence of plutonium
for it cannot speak.

Poem 8: Ask No Questions

As the ‘vanishing’
woodlands
get carved up for dinner
on the plate of
real estate

There is nothing
to see here
they said.

You will not hear
of the ex-engineer
from the old site
who said,
*“chemicals were just
randomly dumped,
explosives were buried”*

*“There were open labyrinths
that were running
directly into creeks,
explosives were running
into creeks”*
he said.

You will not hear
his testimony
no, you will not.

You will not read
of the study
by a female academic
20 years ago
who spoke to the press

Raising the alarm
of deformed animals
documented risks
to pregnant women
and unborn children
no, you will not.

You will not easily locate
the soil and ground water
contamination report
that showed
*“contaminants such as trinitrotoluene (TNT),
lead and organochlorines
at much higher levels
than EPA standards
required for development approval”*
no, you will not.

You will not hear of the
Councillor who stated
on public record
*“It should have been dug
six foot deep
and topped with new soil”*
no, you will not.

You will not hear of
the 58 under 60

who died of
brains seizures, asbestosis,
cancers, TNT poisoning

Left and abandoned
their claims dismissed
as ‘non- specific evidence,’
no, you will not.

You will not see
“*some 2500 residents*”
who “*signed the petition*”
calling government
“*to conduct a health survey*
of ex-workers and local residents”

Nor hear their concerns
“*about unsafe handling*
of a dye
used for army smoke
canisters”
no, you will not.

You will not know the man
who owned the corner store
on the periphery
of the unspoken
that is buried
in that soil,
no, you will not.

You will not notice
his presence
leave slowly
a terminal disease
that took all his fight
to breathe

no compensation they said,
no, you will not.

You will not find it
in the sound of the space
between his breaths
because the breathless
have no voice.

And you will not hear
the voice
of a single mother
who worked herself
to the bone

Un-gloved
un-masked
un-protected

Skin changing colour
peeling and broken
against the newborn
skin of her daughter

Exposed
and re-exposed
to the toxins
within 4 walls

Frightened and told
'ask no questions'
she said,
'all the women said.'

You will not hear
their story,
no, you will not.

You will not hear
the clicking of their
work shoes
disembark
the train
at the railway station
that now lays closed

You will not see
their pathway
to the factory
ever existed,
no, you will not

You will not hear
what flows
in more than one
creek
no, you will not.

You will not be given
access to
the water
under the ground
no, you will not.

The theatre
they created
to tell their stories
was shut down
the last storyteller
said.

It was defunded
they sought legal advice
“we were bullied
and silenced”

she said.

They walked home
in silence
near the old site
and the silence
it grew.

And beneath the
shedding skin
unanswered questions
unmarked locations
of what lays
buried

No access on site to police,
ambulance or
emergency services
without permission granted
no protections
no compensation
no place to be heard

“This is rubbish”
those in power said
their stories were
made ‘crazy’
and ‘unfounded’.

“They are unworthy”
even the art institutions said.

Poem 9: Unanswered Questions

What of the official line
of reply
that the people lack
conclusive evidence
of the effects

of radiation?

Yet why did the
authority decide
*“not to routinely declare
all sites
where the contamination
is significant enough
to warrant regulation”*

Was it only
to protect
land values?

Or is more still
unsung
from the ground?

Poem 10: A Sweet Deal

Was it a “sweet deal”
between government
and commercial interest?

What of it
when he addressed
the public meeting
and said this was
*“...a great example
of how developers
can work very well
with communities.”*

What of it
framed in public relations
as a *“community development”*

in the wheel of time
to comprise of
*"about 4800 homes
and 13,000 residents
upon completion in 2023"*

Is it a sign of post-truth times
when commercial developers
are hailed as champions
of community development?

What of the
denied access
to Freedom of Information
maintained out of the reach
of the "common" people?

What is the secret
signed agreement
between commercial interest and
the powers elected
to represent the people?

What
silenced
those who spoke?

And what
of those
who got
too close
to the bone?

And exactly who
stood to gain?

Her heart
could no longer sleep.

Poem 11: The Dead Weep

At the tip of
the mountain
you can hear

the dirge
of the departed
as they weep

“Don't sell your soul to the devil”
she said.

Stories are
like water
they can flow
through tiny cracks

Like tears
seep from a body
that cannot
forget.

Poem 12: Bone Carriers and Keepers

Who could
have predicted
the artists
would be
a key
keeper of the bones?

Collecting
tracing and carrying
buried stories from
underground?

While ‘they’ shall remain
faceless and nameless

for the powers
they hold over us

'They' are not singular
'they' form a thread
all three tiers
and commercial interest.

The answers lay
in between
the government reports
the private reports
by consultants
contractors commissioned
and the historical archives

In between
all the pages
and the bones
in this story
that were taken
out.

Poem 13: Epilogue - Bones in the Water

If you are on these streets
south of the creek
where the waters ran red
here the overland water
still flows.

But you will not find
the beginning
and you will not find
the end
of this story.

But you may feel it
or you may touch it

or be touched by it
 somewhere
 in the overland flow.

And if you gather
 enough drops
 to form a cup
 there are
 still bones
 in that water

Can you taste it?¹²

Learnings and Conclusions

One of the unexpected findings that came out of writing Bone Poems is that specific details in the official reports and documents, in many cases, validated rather than invalidated the artists and people's stories. Stories that sounded concerning yet often missing details unexpectedly became validated by the so-called facts (or bone fragments) retrieved from a labyrinth of disconnected official documents. The deboning and omission of the people's stories, lived experiences and concerns in these official documents became starkly evident. Through an intuitive rather than pre-planned process, ethnographically-based poetry became the vessel that could bridge, and hold this great divide between the people's stories, and the official accounts where I suggest 'the bones have been taken out' in the dominant narrative by key institutional players. Ethnographically-based poetry began to bring the bones of these fractured human stories into connection with the formal and publicly reported narratives within a single document.

The 'making' of Bone Poems has generated an 'ethnographic place' as Pink (2015, 48) explains, one "...that we as ethnographers make when communicating about our research to others". It involves "...combining, connecting and interweaving of theory, experience, reflection, discourse, memory and imagination" (Ibid.). This complex layering that contributes to the creation of ethnographic place is not fixed, nor does it represent a singular truth or reality. Rather it offers a lens into a world of multiple truths as revealed throughout the research process. It has enabled me to see myself, the place that I worked, the roles the institutions played in these interconnected stories, through new eyes.

It is a living inquiry. The completed poems, rather than an ending, are the beginning. The greater vision is for these poems to live with, and continue in, conversation with local people, artists and communities. How that is embodied is yet to be revealed. It could be as Ella suggests walking with people and their communities in the places of these stories and to begin to speak and sing these stories and poetry into the land. I learn from Ella who says, "...you can sing knowledge...that heals the land."¹³

As more fragments are joined, a more holistic picture is forming. May the seeds of these stories be sown, witnessed and may they take root. And in their telling may more stories flow, interconnect and bloom. This is the purpose, dedicated action and response, in poetic and creative form, ongoing

¹² See Technical Note.

¹³ Recorded in Author's ethnographic journal 2018.

listening and dialogue so that we speak the unspeakable, from the ground up. It is an invitation. A declaration.

Technical Note

It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the details of this methodological approach, except to summarise that it is experimental and intersects aspects of Narrative Inquiry and Sensory Ethnography. I draw upon Heron and Reason's (1997) different ways of knowing, with metaphor and the poetic as an aspect of presentational knowing, central to this work.

Bone Poems is generated from multiple sources, including: qualitative open-ended recorded conversations, autoethnographic field notes, ethnographic journals, relationship and sensory relationship mapping, chosen objects as metaphor, creative installations, poetry by participants, autoethnographic poetry, Royal Commission papers and testimony, Parliamentary Papers, historical archives, press clippings and articles, local, state and federal government commissioned reports, archaeological reports, memo's, speeches and other publicly available documents. The footnotes (that originally identified sources) have been intentionally removed, primarily due to the sensitivity of the material i.e. documents have been de-identified, so they do not identify the places, people or communities. I have adopted the approach used in verbatim theatre, i.e. being precise to represent exactly what each person said, and that it is not necessary to identify each source in the final creative work. Bone Poems is based on a larger project and preliminary exploration for the development of a performance-based work.

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