

THE CULTURE OF NATURE

EARTHLINES

Issue 8 March 2014

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Special feature: Men and Nature

The psychology of the ecological self — Ecopornography
versus the slow, deep art of place — poetry by Sean O'Brien,
Moya Cannon and Roddy Gorman



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IMAGES Above – Screenprint: *Two Dogs*; top right – Screenprint: *Scientists and Fish*. See p 79 for credits

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Mandy Martin, painting at Paruku (photo by Tom Lynch, 2012)

BAREFOOT INTO REALITY AT PARUKU TOM LYNCH

I'm startled out of an irretrievable dream by the raucous cry of a corella in the coolibah that branches over my tent. Soon, abrasive cackles ricochet from tree to tree as the neighboring corellas join in. A lovely bird, the corella, but, like its cousin the cockatoo, with a shriek to waken the dead. I roll over, try to get back to sleep, but hear someone snapping branches to stoke the campfire, the metallic clank of the billy being put on to boil for the morning's first cup of tea. A waft of smoke seeps into my tent. Might as well get up. I slip out of my swag, unzip the tent, duck out and instantly rezip to keep the ants, the ants, the ever-persistent ants, from scurrying in.

The morning sky I emerge into is mauve and gray and a pale teal rimmed by vivid pink. In such light the white limbs of the coolibah shimmer as though electric. In such light this is the most beautiful spot on Earth.

These white-limbed trees are the western coolibah, a regional version of this widely distributed species that typically has darker, rougher bark, and which might be best known outside Australia as the tree by the billabong in whose shade the jolly swagman camped in 'Waltzing Matilda'. Found only near water, they are abundant here at the Handover campsite at Paruku, formerly known as Lake Gregory. Paruku lies on the ecotone of the Tanami and Great Sandy Deserts, ten kilometers south of the small Walmajarri community of Mulan, along the north-eastern fringe of Western Australia.

Several days ago I was part of a caravan of nine people, distributed among four vehicles, who had driven 800-some kilometres along the mostly unsealed, sandy, and heavily corrugated Tanami Track from Alice Springs. We'd rumbled across the desert, camping at an unexpectedly lovely spot while lightning flickered on the horizon, then turned off the next day at Balgo and bounced down an increasingly rutted track before pulling up late in the morning, tired and a bit disoriented, at the Mulan General Store. After cold drinks, ice cream, and greetings with local community members, we drove a final few kilometers south to this campsite near the waters of Paruku, our home for the week.

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I look over toward the campfire to see who is stirring so early and spot Mandy and Guy stoking the fire, checking to see if the water in the billy has begun to boil. I am here at the invitation of these two. Mandy Martin is one of Australia's most important contemporary artists, and her husband, Guy Fitzhardinge, is a pastoralist, conservationist, and world-class raconteur. Among our group are Kim Mahood, an artist and writer who grew up at nearby Mongrel Downs cattle station and who often spends several months a year at Mulan. She is the author of *Craft for a Dry Lake*, one of the best accounts of life in the Outback, both celebrating and critiquing the mystique that pervades this landscape and its people. Also

along is Steve Morton, one of Australia's pre-eminent arid zone ecologists and someone whose expertise in all-things desert I hope to take full advantage of.

Really, I could hardly have entered this country with a better group of people. My sense of vulnerability at being in such a remote and at times harsh landscape is allayed, if not entirely assuaged, by having such knowledgeable and competent companions, seasoned bushies all. I'm mostly just along for the ride, hoping to avoid being the proverbial dumb Yank, trying to help where I can, but otherwise attempting to stay out of the way and absorb the experience by osmosis. My companions are major players in the Paruku Project, an interdisciplinary and cross-cultural collaboration, spearheaded by Mandy, Kim, and Steve. Its goal is to produce an array of outcomes, most notably from my perspective a multi-voiced, cross cultural, and interdisciplinary book: *Desert Lake. Art, Science, and Stories from Paruku*, which contains photographs, text, and artwork by both whitefellas as well as Walmajarri artists associated with the Warruyanta Art and Culture Centre in Mulan.

Warruyanta, which local artist Jacinta Lulu explains to us means something like 'black and white working together', is a newer art centre, not as well established as the one in nearby Balgo, let alone the world famous desert art centres such as those at Utopia, Yuendumu, or Papunya, communities that lie much closer to Alice Springs and whose most celebrated artists can command six-figure prices for their work. It's not likely any of the paintings produced for this project will be valued at such a rate. But then measuring the worth of such art in terms of commodity value feels crass. While Aboriginal art has become an important source of income in many remote and impoverished communities, and while I certainly don't begrudge the artists whatever income they can generate, these paintings serve a more important function as well. They both embody and help to perpetuate an ancient, enduring, and surprisingly resilient and adaptive relationship between a colonized and much abused people and their traditional country. This relationship is conceived in mythological and ecological terms and is re-imagined in this new but culturally coherent fashion with what strikes me as a remarkable degree of integrity.

Most of the art produced for this project focuses on Paruku and its confluence of creeks, one of Australia's – indeed, one of the world's – most important arid zone wetlands. Paruku is a more-or-less reliably permanent body of water in a vast desert region where little if any surface water can normally be found. It is part of a complex system of fresh and brackish lakes whose salinity and depth vary from year to year depending on the vicissitudes of regional rainfall. Though not nearly as saline, it resembles North America's Great Salt Lake, and in fact both are relicts of much larger Pleistocene lakes that 10,000 years ago flowed through river channels to the sea but have now, due to declining water levels, been confined within their own catchment basins. Home to at least 73 species of waterbirds and 16 species of shorebirds that visit it during their migrations, Paruku is an internationally significant birding area. The lake environs also serve as a habitat for increasingly rare and declining marsupials such as the bilby, mulgara, and nail-tailed wallaby, as well as feral animals such as horses and camels.

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After tying up my shoes, I walk over to admire the nearby coolibah trees. They seem not simply to reflect the dawn light but to absorb it, drawing it into their very essence. I touch their smooth white skin and half expect my fingers to come away stained with yellow and pink.

Because of its ecological and cultural value, Paruku has been declared an 'Indigenous Protected Area'. This is a relatively new land management category in Australia, and one that does not exist in North America or Europe. IPAs establish a land protection and management system that combines Indigenous knowledge and cultural values with scientifically informed conservation efforts, roughly akin to an Indigenous national park. It is a strategy that attempts to decolonize the sometimes contentious legacy of national parks and wilderness areas. The postcolonial critique of wilderness is much more potent in Australia than it is in the U.S., so there are very few designated wilderness areas in Australia, although much land that might meet the official criteria. IPAs represent an effort to overcome the colonial legacy of parks and wilderness areas without abandoning the important role such areas play in conservation, sustainability, and the production of resilient natural and human communities.

As implemented at Mulan, this involves the training of local blackfellas as rangers who work under the supervision of a whitefella director hired from outside the community. Admittedly this seems a bit paternalistic, but a blackfella would be assumed, whether fairly or not, to favor his own family group to the detriment of others, so this model is designed to insulate the IPA management from the dynamics of local family politics. A steering committee composed of local elders representing all of the community's families sets general policy guidelines based on the ethic of 'caring for country'. The success of this sort of scheme is still to be determined, but it seems like a worthwhile effort at balancing Indigenous rights and local knowledge with broader national and international conservation goals.

Paruku is a site of not only great ecological but also great spiritual significance. (Indeed, that is a distinction reflecting whitefella categories that the Walmajarri would probably not make.) The Walmajarri trace their origins to Kiki, a 'falling star' that landed in the lake and was transformed into a person who emerged from the waters to become the first traditional owner. It's also the confluence of several dreaming tracks, mythological creation songlines that travel vast distances across country and converge at the lake. The best known story is the 'Two Dingoes and the Emu Dreaming'. One dingo was white, the other black, and among its many levels of meaning the story accounts for the variations between the dark brackish water and the milky fresh water regions of the lake. For this Paruku Project a painting of this dreaming was produced by the IPA Rangers under the supervision of artist and elder Hanson Pye. The painting includes the tracks of two dingoes ascending Pangkupirti Creek. When the artists were first creating the painting, they attempted to enlist one of the many town dogs to make the imprints, dabbing paint on his paws and then trying to affix them to the canvas. The squirming dog proved a reluctant artist's assistant, however, and so the paw prints were painted on in the more conventional if less colorful manner. During my stay at Mulan, this first painting



Painting (2012), Mandy Martin: *Falling Star 3*

is being duplicated, and I spend an afternoon on the shady verandah of the ranger station as Hansen and several younger rangers engage in the meticulous application of thousands of dots of acrylic paint to canvas. The original version will remain on display in the ranger office, and this newer rendition will join the other artwork produced for the project.

In addition to the 'Two Dingoes' painting, a number of works have been created by women at the art centre, some of which include depictions of historical events, a recent innovation in the art tradition. Most notable are references to the Sturt Creek Massacre that occurred nearby in 1922 during which, in revenge for the deaths of two white men, a significant but disputed number of Aboriginal people were indiscriminately murdered during a 'punitive expedition' mounted by the white settlers, a common form of frontier 'justice'. A more recent and less painful theme illustrates the collaboration between scientists and community members in studying the lake and its fish population, especially a program designed to battle a parasite infesting the spangled perch, a popular species of bush tucker for area residents.

Parallel with this artistic production, Kim has been working with local people to produce a series of large scale canvases as part of a 'cultural mapping' project. She first reproduced a number of conventional western style topographic maps of the Paruku environs on several large canvas sheets. Community members then painted on information of cultural significance such as water holes, dreaming sites, bush tucker gathering spots, burning zones, and locations of relevance to pastoral and mission history, creating a hybrid map that blends Indigenous myth, history, biology, and personal memory with whitefella ideas about geography and ecology into a complex cartography of deep place. These maps are a remarkable gesture of cultural reconciliation, a rendering of Indigenous presence and knowledge back into visible history, ecology, and geography.

As I stroll towards the campfire, I pass an informational kiosk that explains that this campsite is called 'Handover' because it was at this location, in 2001, that the Premier of Western Australia, Geoff Gallop, returned title for the land to the traditional owners, the Walmajarri and other Tjurabalan peoples, by symbolically pouring sand through the hands of the elders. This is a reconciliation process that has been occurring in many places in Australia, especially since the historic 1992 Mabo Decision in which the Australian High Court ruled that Australia's Indigenous people did in fact, contrary to previous practice, have a right

to claim legal ownership of traditional lands, setting into motion a widespread and continuing land claims movement.

Just how long the Walmajarri people have been living in this country is hard to know, but it might be a very long time indeed. In 2006, geomorphologist Jim Bowler, while excavating along Pangkupirti Creek, discovered what would seem to be the oldest human remnants on the Australian continent: flaked stone artifacts dated at roughly 50,000 years old. In that context it seems more than a bit silly that Indigenous title to the land was ever in dispute.



I grab my mug from the camp kitchen and stroll over to the fire where Guy fills it with steaming hot tea as we exchange nodded g'mornings. Mandy has wandered off to set up her painting area for the day. She paints on a re-purposed ironing board, which makes a lightweight and easily portable easel. I'm disturbed, though, to see some of Mandy's paintings spread out on the ground or leaning against a tree. Shouldn't such works, I wonder, be protected from the elements, stored safely away in a tent or vehicle? My impulse is to scold: 'Mandy, you can't just leave these paintings lying on the ground all day!' But I don't, and she does. Throughout the day the sun beats down, russet dust scatters over the freshly painted canvas, flies land and sometimes stick, ants scurry across leaving faint traces, coolibah leaves jostle over their surface, pollen grains adhere. What I come to realize is that these paintings don't just represent the landscape visually, but embody it. Many of Mandy's paints are made from locally sourced materials such as ochre, ash, sand, and ground stone. Each painting is not just a visual reproduction of the landscape but also a framing of its visceral presence. The very vulnerability that I fear puts them at risk is in fact a source of their richness and power. Contrary to my concern, these paintings don't need to be protected from the elements; transformed through an artist's imagination, they are the elements.

Some of Mandy's paintings include images of the many termite mounds that abound in the Tanami and are scattered around our campsite. These knee-high pillars of hardened red clay provide the termites with a home that rises above the unpredictable flood waters that periodically wash across this terrain. The termites themselves remain out of sight, buried in a complex system of tunnels and towers from which they emerge at various ecologically triggered times to gather plant material from the many trees and forbs, the spinifex and other grasses. Though tiny, by their astounding numbers



Sturt Creek map with Evelyn Clancy (photo by Kim Mahood, 2006)

these termites constitute the bulk of the faunal biomass in arid Australia. Along with the ants, they function as the most important animals in such ecosystems. In terms of processing plant matter, they are the functional equivalent of bison on the American prairies.

Ecologically important, no doubt, but the ants can be real pests for campers. They are everywhere and get into everything. Steve, who's spent much of his life camping in such environments while engaged in research projects, places the legs of all of the tables in the camp kitchen into improvised containers he has rummaged from the rubbish bins and then topped off with water. It is a remarkably effective, low-tech, non-toxic solution. At night, we all sleep in 'moszie domes' or other netted enclosures, such as my tiny one-person tent. Otherwise the ants would scurry over our faces, rendering sleep impossible. In the accounts I've been reading by the desert explorer Ernest Giles, I note that of all his dreadful experiences, the worst was not the extreme heat, not the ever-present possibility of death from dehydration, not the disappearance into the void of his companion Alfred Gibson, not even, when on the brink of starvation, his devouring of a raw and still living infant wallaby, no, his most wretched times were the many sleepless nights caused by the 'rampant' and 'wicked' ants. Looking around at the innumerable ant mounds and trails, I can appreciate his sentiment. Though at night I'm well protected within the netting of my tent, some ants do slip in through tiny flaws in the fabric or gaps

in the zipper, and the smell of their bodies when I crush them lends a faint but piercing formic aroma to the air. Compared to poor Giles, though, I have little to gripe about.



I plop myself into one of the folding camp chairs that encircle the fire. Before I can take my first sip of tea, however, I squint and cough as my face fills with smoke. I lurch back up and drag the chair to the other side of the fire. Now there's a dumb Yank thing to do, I think. If anybody has noticed, they are too polite to comment. Finally, I take a sip, stretch my legs, stare into the fire, and recall last night's conversation.

Each evening, after a shockingly sumptuous multi-course dinner, we sit around this campfire as Venus and the crescent moon glimmer in the distant lake waters and the

stars of the Southern Cross, Centaurus, and the astonishing outback Milky Way glitter overhead. People share the successes and setbacks of their day's work. Last night Kim explained the complex web of kinship rights, 'skin' and family ties, cultural authority, responsibility, and feuds in Mulan and nearby Billiluna. This prompted Steve and Guy to discuss the many overlapping governmental agencies, the IPA, the Kimberley Land Council, the pastoral board, the Halls Creek Shire, the state government of Western Australia, and the federal agencies based in Canberra, all of which have sometimes contradictory claims to control and responsibility for what happens at Paruku. It strikes me that these whitefella and blackfella systems of governance have a lot in common. They are both systems of byzantine complexity designed to distribute responsibility, authority, power, wealth, credit, and blame across a wide range of community stakeholders in a tangled network of checks and balances. Each is cumbersome in its own context, and trying to mesh the two is, to say the least, a challenge. This results in the biggest obstacle to the successful functioning of the IPA model: a ponderous bureaucracy incapable of quick action. On complex matters, such as the control of feral horses, it presents a recipe for solid gridlock.

The presence of these feral herds, composed of roughly 5,000 Arabian-style horses left over from the pastoral station era, is Paruku's most pressing environmental problem. I have to admit, these animals look magnificent, and you don't need to be much of a romantic to feel your blood stir when a

galloping herd races across the track in front of your vehicle. In the middle of the night I sometimes hear them neighing in the distance, then hoof beats approaching, louder and louder as they gather speed and gallop through the campsite. I lie there feeling terribly vulnerable in my suddenly all-too-flimsy tent and hope the horses catch a glimpse of its outline in the dim light as they plunge past. My companions interpret this aggressive gesture as a willful expression of territorial rights by the herd's stallion, his way of letting us know who's really boss here.

Impressive, yes, but these horses are not native animals, and they degrade the ecosystem. It's easy to tell which areas they favor by the overgrazed condition of the land. They especially seem to harm the population of bilbies, a rare and declining marsupial. The obvious ecological response is to cull the herds. But wild horses inspire great passion among many people, and past decisions to shoot them have generated a very vocal and obstinate opposition from horse lovers and animal rights activists that has stifled such plans. Even with smoothly functioning and clear cut lines of governmental authority, this would be a difficult problem to solve; with the many overlapping agencies, interest groups, and power structures, both Indigenous and settler, it is well nigh intractable.



Finished with my tea, I wander over to the camp kitchen, pour water from a jerry can into the billy, rinse out the tea, refill it with fresh water, and return to the fire to ease the billy onto some hot coals. There's no water available at our campsite – a cistern designed to capture and store rainwater is dry – so it all needs to be hauled in.

Yesterday afternoon, Guy, Steve and I drove out to a bore at an abandoned outstation to replenish our supply. Just above the spigot at the base of the water tank where we slowly filled our 25-liter canisters loomed a large official-looking sign: 'Do not drink the water!' I was mildly alarmed, but my companions assured me—no worries, mate—that the cause for the sign was no doubt minute traces of arsenic in the water, which could be harmful over the long term but should prove harmless after only a few days' consumption. OK, I think, if you'll drink it, I'll drink it. At least, like true mates, we'll all die together. I implicitly trust the bush sense of these two, although joking references I overhear in camp to the time on a similar outing when everyone got sick, referred to as the 'spew camp', suggests their judgment is not infallible. As our canisters ever-so slowly filled, we watched the perky zebra finches who nest in the structure supporting the water tank and subsist on leakage from the pipes. Steve has authored many scientific papers on these birds, indeed



*Veronica Lulu and Shirley Yoomarie painting the fire map
(photo by Kim Mahood, 2011)*

is one of the world's leading authorities on them, but he charitably refrains from overwhelming us with the details of their behavior.

On our drive back we stopped to look at feral camel tracks in the sandy road. More than one million feral camels roam the Australian deserts, causing considerable damage, but they are not too common here and we only saw one set of tracks. Gazing to the south across the landscape, Steve remarked with a hint of reverence in his voice that 'this is the real Australia.' By this he doesn't mean the dubious notion that the culture of the Outback is more authentic than the culture of urban Australia, but rather the simple and indisputable fact that this and adjacent bioregions, with their various communities of spinifex, acacia, and mallee scrub, constitute the largest percentage of the landmass of the nation and are therefore most representative of the overall ecology of Australia.



I finish up my breakfast of oatmeal with yogurt and honey, toast that's been grilled over the fire and topped with fig jam, and a final cup of tea. I'm well fortified and hydrated for a birding adventure to the lake. I gather binoculars, camera, notebook, and my well worn Field Guide to the Birds of Australia and start off alone down the track. Typically more than 100,000 waterbirds, and sometimes as many as 600,000, reside at the lake, not to mention innumerable songbirds, raptors, and other varieties in the surrounding woodlands and desert. One night we had driven along a sandy track on our way to spotlight for nail-tailed wallabies at the Mulan airstrip. We topped a rise in the track to see a flash of something dart up in the headlights' glare. I didn't hear a thud, but we stopped and looked around. Soon Steve held up a limp, lovely, and still warm body. 'Boobook owl. Poor bugger didn't have a chance,' he remarked sadly.

As I head towards the lake, a pair of galahs heckle me as I pass. Their pink and gray feathers look handsome on

the white coolibah branch against the azure sky. I approach directly beneath them. They resent my presence but are too cheeky to abandon their perch. They just squawk and bob and spread their wings in defiance, and so I manage to get a few good photos.

In the growing heat of day, a light wind cools my skin and also keeps the flies down, an unmerited mercy. As my senses slowly tune in, I begin to notice birds everywhere: a masked woodswallow, two ravens, a yellow-throated miner, a pied butcherbird, with its distinctive black and white markings, feeding a small mammal, probably a spinifex hopping mouse, to a fledgling. A willie wagtail lands on the track ahead, flicking its tail from side to side. A flight of budgerigars chirp and bustle past in small, tight, and seemingly cheerful flocks, undulating streaks of yellow and bright lime. A flock of a dozen little crows drifts high on the wind. A pair of brolgas, Australia's major crane species, soars past, then a whistling kite, a magpie lark, a brown falcon, ponderous pelicans, plus plenty of other birds I can't identify. An intimidating abundance indeed.

Many of the waterbirds drift well off shore and are barely discernable. I wish I had a canoe or kayak to get a better view. From afar, the most readily recognizable are the many black swans. When I look at these swans through my binoculars, a mirage effect elongates their trembling necks, stretching and distorting them, so they resemble nothing so much as the Loch Ness monster. I recall the dreamtime serpent that is said to reside in this lake. Several of us first-timers to Paruku underwent a 'welcome to country' ritual to protect us from this serpent. Walmajarri elders rubbed our arms, legs, faces, and hair with lake mud while chanting and imploring the serpent to kindly leave us alone. It was a simple but moving ceremony revealing their concern for our welfare. I'm not sure we whitefellas have earned such consideration. A ceremony imploring the serpent to devour the whitefellas might be equally justified.

Lacking a boat, I decide to take off my shoes and wade out as far as I can. I grab a broken branch to help with balance. Striding through ankle-deep, slippery mud, with water to my knees, a branch in one hand, a bird book in the other, and trying to lift binoculars to my eyes, it's a wonder I don't fall. Several times I nearly drop the bird book. I'm glad no one is around to witness the absurd figure I cut. But I do get a bit closer. A flight of hardhead ducks, flashing white wings, zips away over the water. A raft of grey teal bobs in the distance while two Caspian terns dive among them. When the teal take off, I catch a glimpse of their green speculums flashing in the sun.

Mud squishes through my toes. I slip but maintain my balance. The water feels cool and comforting around my ankles. I recall lines from a poem by Wallace Stevens, 'Large Red Man Reading', in which he remarks upon the unhappy spirits of the dead: 'They were those that would have wept to step barefoot into reality.' Removed from this sensuous world, his disembodied spirits long for the textures of the Earth, not just its sights and sounds, but especially for its sensuous and visceral contact. They crave the caress of a cool breeze on their sweaty skin. They would weep to once again feel the brush of coolibah leaves across an arm, inhale the cooling scent. And yes, they yearn also for the annoying

tickle of flies on the face, the bothersome bite of ants on the ankles, and the pricks of spinifex in the shins.

Standing here, barefoot, vulnerable, and a bit off balance, I reflect on the fact that roughly half of the people I see living in Mulan walk barefoot around the community. Perhaps, I think, this represents their closer connection to nature. After a moment's reflection, though, I reject this idea as just another whitefella romantic notion about Indigenous people. Several weeks later, however, when I'm visiting Uluru / Kata Tjuta National Park, I notice that the Visitor Guide features a 'Working Together' painting, illustrative of the joint management of the park. In the painting, the Anangu park rangers are symbolized by a pair of bare feet, representing, the text says 'their close connection with the land and knowledge derived from many generations of looking after the land.' On the other hand, the text continues, a pair of shod feet stand for the whitefella rangers, 'representing their land management training and knowledge derived from western scientific tradition.' Shoes, like scientific knowledge, provide good traction and protection, but at the price of a loss of intimacy, at the price of a loss of the vulnerability that sharpens awareness. The point of the painting is that both approaches are required.

It's getting to be lunch time, and I'm getting hungry. When I slosh back to my shoes on shore, I find it impossible to wash the mud off my feet. The only way to rinse them is to stand in the very mud I'm attempting to remove. I decide that on the sandy track I can easily make it back the few kilometres to camp barefoot. This goes well for a while, and I congratulate myself on my hardiness. But as I approach camp the sand gets darker, and, by the immutable laws of physics, hotter. I begin to dash from shady spot to shady spot, darting quickly over the now scorching sand. Racing into camp, I plop in a chair and raise my mud-encrusted feet into the cool breeze. Mandy looks up from her painting to give me a puzzled look, wondering, no doubt, what the crazy Yank is up to now.

'You OK?' she asks.

'Yes, very.'



For more information on the Paruku Project, see Desert Lake: Art, Science and Stories from Paruku, published by CSIRO, Canberra, Australia. More images associated with this article are on the inside front cover and page 1 of this issue.

TOM LYNCH is an English professor at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, USA, where he teaches ecocriticism and place-conscious literatures. He is currently at work on a book comparing literature of the American West with literature of the Australian Outback. His trip to Paruku was part of his research for that project. He is the author of *Xerophilia: Ecocritical Explorations in Southwestern Literature* and he has co-edited two recent books, *The Bioregional Imagination: Literature, Ecology, Place* (with Cheryll Glotfelty and Karla Armbruster), and *Artifacts and Illuminations: Critical Essays on Loren Eiseley* (with Susan N. Maher). He also serves as the editor of the scholarly journal *Western American Literature*.