THIS IS WATER

BY DAN SCHULZ

Life on the Darling-Baaka

The beach shacks look out at a grey dish of cracked silt. These houses are made of dust and are slumped on the sand, many for sale and some abandoned; a bed half-made from when its occupant rolled out from under the doona for the last time many years ago. If you walk onto the lake bed and look back at the village, the houses look like moviegoers, all facing forward and eager for the film to start. But someone has stolen the screen. This is Sunset Strip, a village overlooking a waterless Menindee Lake. If the name Menindee is familiar to you, it is probably because this is where recent kills of up to a million fish made global news. Grown men crying and cradling dead Murray cod like lost children put into the national consciousness the harrowing images of one of Australia's longest rivers toxic with blue-green algae and awash with the white bodies of native fish. The dying Darling opened a discussion around the systemic problems facing the Murray-Darling Basin and the future of its management.

At Sunset Strip you will find mostly retirees. Some have moved from urban areas because the property is cheap and the solitude abundant. Others have deep childhood connections to the place. Memories are everywhere at Sunset Strip. They rear up at you in images of play and laughter. There are houses with names like Macka's Shack, Ant's Nest and Leddy's Lakehouse. A speedboat, collapsed on someone's front lawn, dreams of glassy water and breeze-less days. The way home should be noisy with drunks staggering to their beds, but the street is without traffic tonight and the sandy back roads have had no travellers. Residents recall childhood memories of stealing yabbies from their neighbor's nets and playing mean fun with the lives of caught carp at the water's edge. Now there are no children and no water's edge. It is a place haunted by a lost context.

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Sunset Strip was established in 1962, at a time when the lakes never went dry, and the environment for a vast majority of Australians was a recalcitrant servant in need of an eager master. The Central Darling Shire leased allotments for the construction of holiday cottages by Broken Hill residents on the north side of Menindee Lake. The founders of The Strip were mostly in the mining sector. Through their connections with Broken Hill Mining, which later became BHP, they gained access to machinery and materials, working weekends and collectively to construct the pipeline and fence at The Strip, as well as to improve general conditions in the community. In those good few decades, when certainty was the dominant paradigm and progress a much simpler narrative, the working class, through the strength of the Broken Hill union movement and the wealth generated by the mine, had a lot of agency to construct the kind of community they wanted to live in.

I have seen old maps on which the town of Broken Hill is written all upper case and in equivalent size to Australia's capital cities, having been so important to the national economy. It is Australia's longest-running mining town and gave birth to the world's biggest mining company. Today, Broken Hill is no longer the economic strong arm it once was, and it is politically underrepresented. The seat of Barwon is the largest electoral district in New South Wales, encompassing 44 per cent of the state's land mass. This huge tract of territory is only a recent invention. In 2015 the NSW Electoral Commission redrew the boundaries of the far west and doubled the size of the electorate, now containing parts of the former electoral districts of Barwon, Dubbo, Murray-Darling, Murrumbidgee, Orange, Tamworth and Upper Hunter, creating an area of land bigger than Victoria and Tasmania combined. With the dash of a pen, the voters of Broken Hill, Menindee and Wilcannia, a former Labor stronghold, have been compelled to compete for representation in the most diverse electorate in the state. With a rapidly declining population, they battle to be heard in a highly contested debate about the management of Australia's water resources—resources that they depend on for survival.

It has been called a drought, but the reality is more complicated: a huge and sudden shift in Australia's hydrological cycles due to human interference—depressurised aquifers, flood-plain harvesting, unsustainable extraction of river flows, entire river diversions and water hoarding—has produced ecological, economic and social collapse in western New South Wales. In mid-March, as the coronavirus disaster began to unfold, flows came down the Darling-Baaka and wet the river bed for the first time in years. The land and its people breathed a sigh of relief.

At the main weir that regulates water from Lake Wetherell back into the Darling-Baaka River, people gathered in awe of the water swelling the banks. There was collective excitement between strangers drawn into communion by the transformation of the land. People are incredulous about the lack of flows over the years. They are distrustful. They speculate and reminisce in the same breath. Will the native fish populations ever return? Do you think they will ever fill Menindee Lake? If Menindee Lake is filled, will they just drain it again?

Looking out the window of my Sunset Strip beach shack at barren and dusty country, a lake still waiting for water, I can't help but imagine that, even if this community were to win the war for water and these flows filled Menindee Lake, the long emergency of our relationship to the land would remain misdiagnosed. It is an unending war for resources between communities, between those that profit from scarcity and those that don't, between the water thieves upstream and the squanderers downstream, between the states and the feds, First Nations and their invaders, between a corrupt government and its people, nature and culture, environmental conservation and economic progress.

Unable to perceive the Basin as a living entity, with complexity and nuance, we have committed slow murder, severing its tributaries and plugging its veins with hard infrastructure. Pitting town against town, farmer against farmer, crop against crop. We neglect the timing and rhythms of the Basin, the boom-and-bust nature of its water cycles, and even with all this control we have failed to manufacture the consistency and predictability required by investment-driven economic demands. In this sense, the issue of water is not an issue of resource scarcity but of perception, with deep misunderstandings and rivalries inevitably leading to irrevocable mismanagement. Even the naming of one of the world's most unique and complex hydrological systems, as Margaret Simons notes, is utilitarian: 'the Murray-Darling Basin' conjures images of kitchen implements and dishwater, and has no relationship to the ecological significance of

the system or the rich narratives of its traditional custodians. She writes, 'The water engineers call it one of the largest drainage areas in the world, which again makes one think of sinks and plugholes'. As for the two largest rivers in the system, the Darling was named in honour of Sir Ralph Darling, governor of New South Wales, and a tyrant accused of torturing prisoners; the Murray in honour of the secretary of state for war and colonies, Sir George Murray, a British politician who had never set foot on the Australian continent. Neither man ever saw the river that bears his name.

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The Indigenous people of the Darling-Baaka, predominately the Barkindji and Ngiyampaa in the lower Darling, have had and still have a very different perception of how the river system should work. For thousands of years they modified the flows of water with weirs and fish traps, infrastructure that was leaky and rocky and that was cared for like a member of the family. Living infrastructure. This infrastructure only served to add to the natural debris that slowed the flow of water, holding moisture in the land for the plant and animal communities that sustained the local people. In some parts of the river there are enormous piles of debris, ancient river red gums that have tumbled down the banks or travelled across floodplains and become entangled at river bends, slowing the flows, stopping soil erosion and providing habitat for Murray cod and golden perch. Deep pools, riffles, snags, aquatic vegetation and riparian vegetation make up the hydrological diversity that sustains this ecosystem. When Europeans arrived, the natural debris and weirs, the filters and fish traps of the river people were destroyed to make way for the paddle steamers that moved livestock upstream, causing massive erosion and turning the Darling-Baaka into a drainage channel. The banks collapsed, the deep holes filled with silt and the glacial flows of the river were dammed with concrete. There is not enough water to break the river's banks and create perpendicular flows, so the floodplains along the Darling-Baaka—a critical part of the ecology—have been alienated from the river. The stillness of white-controlled water has led to the proliferation of a blue-green algae sickness and a river system disconnected and drained of life.

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'This Baaka is an entity; it is not a commercial commodity to make money', Brendon Adams says in an interview for a web series I've been making about life on the Darling-Baaka River. Brendon is a community leader and is involved with men's health groups. He educates the wider public about the connection between the welfare of the town and the health of the river. According to an article published by the *Guardian*, the life expectancy of men in Wilcannia is only thirty-seven—abominably low in a country that boasts the world's most liveable city nine hours' drive from this outback town. But this is a dissonant country, one that the Black Lives Matter movement has been trying to draw mainstream attention to. I can't imagine what it's like to exist in a community where the grieving process never finishes. There always seem to be funerals. Cold calling people to chat to them about the river reveals the privilege of being white and an outsider—now is rarely a good time. According to Adams, mental health, addiction and violence are all connected to the health and vitality of the land: 'We wouldn't need it [alcohol] if the river was up, if the kangaroos were jumping around, the emus were feeding, fish were flowing. Our life is just'—he collides his two open palms together in a gesture of destruction—'gone. Impact'. Disempowered, overcrowded and underserviced, the town of Wilcannia relies on the river—'their mother'—as a life-support system. 'It is the blood that runs through our veins', says one young man attending his father's funeral in Menindee. From what I can gather, his father was only in his forties.

Many river people are calling the environmental destruction genocide. If the population declines any further in towns like Menindee and Wilcannia, the government may cut services, which means that people will be pushed elsewhere. It's a convenient solution for those who want the issue to go away. It's the physical presence of people living on the river system that makes it difficult for authorities to seamlessly manage its collapse. For Aboriginal people this kind of forced migration, caused by the redistribution of resources, is only an extension of the frontier wars and the not-so-distant past of the mission system, forced labour and massacres. David Clarke, a Ngiyampaa man from Wilcannia, says that his father remembers when they were still shooting Aboriginal people in the 1920s. 'They killed us with their bullets and now they're killing us with their policies.' There is immense grief for the loss of a precolonial world, even in the white folk out here. It is what is called solastalgia—existential distress caused by environmental change, 'the homesickness you have when you are still at home'. But it would be impossible to return the river system to what it once was. This is the reality of the Anthropocene. 'Environmental watering sounds pretty, but it can be surprisingly crude', writes Simons. 'I was shown photos of a piece of PVC pipe sticking up out of the sand in a dry billabong bed. After the environmental watering, there was a full billabong. It was a reminder that even "environmental flows" must come through a plumbed landscape—that the natural is far out of reach.'

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Because efficiency has become the primary tool for achieving the water savings needed to return water to the environment, natural processes like evaporation have been considered wastage by the Murray-Darling Basin Authority. Modifications to the system aim to avoid this kind of wastage. In one of the recent proposals for the Menindee Lakes, the Murray-Darling Basin Authority aims to save water by increasing the size of the outlet regulator at Menindee Lake, so that when it is filled it can be drained more efficiently. 'You are literally channelising a river; that's literally what it is', says Alan Whyte, a former citrus-grower on the lower Darling River north of Wentworth, 'which is the exact opposite of what people are trying to do everywhere else in the system where they're trying to get water out onto the floodplain... The Menindee Lakes project is about building physical regulators at those outflow points to stop the water running into the [Darling] Anabranch [a river that diverts water from the Darling and returns it to the system further downstream] or stop the water going into the creeks and the billabongs'.

According to the Basin Authority, there is more evaporation with Menindee Lake than other water storages because it is shallow. In 2014 and again in 2017 it ordered the lakes to be drained to meet water needs downstream and to create efficiency savings by avoiding evaporation. The decision outraged locals, and three years on they are still incensed by the memory of the senseless destruction of the lake. According to Richard Kingsford from the Centre for Ecosystem Science at UNSW, much of the ecosystem relies on the flooding and drying cycles that are part of the natural rhythm of the system. The ephemeral nature of wetlands is critical to their biodiversity. When full, Menindee Lake is deep and turbid with only a small margin around the edges suitable for wading birds, such as the critically endangered curlew sandpiper, but when it starts to dry up, the area suitable for waders becomes extensive. When it's full, Menindee Lake has up to 10,000 birds, mainly pelicans and cormorants—fishing birds—but as the lake naturally dries over multiple breeding cycles it can teem with 80,000 birds: ducks, geese, swans, teals and wader birds that prefer a shallower habitat and use the lake's edges. The ebb and flow of the drying cycle, like the various movements of a symphony, provide seasonal differences that benefit different birdlife. Kingsford has been mapping an alarming decline of avian diversity in systems affected by human engineering.

Despite our failures in managing complex natural systems so far, there is a good argument for the Basin needing more control, not less, given present attitudes towards it. Improved data sets, better modelling, and surveillance technology—namely, satellite imagery—to record the elusive movement and transformation of water, and to monitor illegal pumping and shady infrastructure, such as levy banks built on floodplains and disguised as roads, may help. Important incremental changes are being enacted and pushed for: open-tender buybacks that are recovering a small fraction of water from a vastly overallocated system; embargoes on pumping the low to mid-flows that keep the river bed moist in dryer years; and campaigns that question the legitimacy of floodplain harvesting, where flood water destined for the river systems is hoarded in large dams by terraforming the land. These reforms, while unable to reverse the hungry expansion of irrigation projects in the Murray-Darling Basin, can protect what is left of the ecosystem. Discussing the incremental decline of the now critically endangered Murray cod, once abundant throughout the system, Paul Sinclair, from the Australian Conservation Foundation points out that 'People get used to degradation. Which means you have only a certain window of opportunity to make change because, after a period of time, people say of a completely clapped-out environment, "that's what I grew up with, that's what I know; that's the environment, right?"' While much of the environment is not recoverable, he hopes we will take action to protect what is left: 'We have to be honest about what we've done to our country and what we've lost, but we also have to be honest about what we still have and take action to care for it'.

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The great hope for systemic change is a Royal Commission. It represents a distant hope of cutting through the contradictory policy that manipulates facts to achieve economic outcomes, while ignoring the ecological, historical and social truths of the river, and of reassessing the system from the ground up—minus what locals consider 'the bullshit'. But there are countless examples of Royal Commissions that, while useful in their reporting of the truth, are powerless to effect change.

When I came out to Menindee in December 2019, I felt a sense of doom knot my stomach like food poisoning. The land looked as though it was about to give up its spirit. For now, with the first flush of water having filled both Lake Wetherell and Lake Pamamaroo, the town of Menindee is taking a breath from the desperation, the outrage and the obsession over a human-made drought, and you can begin to appreciate the smallest of connections: a fishing line cast into a deep river, children playing with strangers of their own kind, swarms of dragonflies breeding in the Box Hollow wetland. At dawn on Lake Pamamaroo you can hear the chorus of black swans that have returned to

find a mate and make a family. In Wilcannia, the kids are jumping off the old bridge and making mudslides down the river bank. Even the manky coats on the big, dusty roos seem to shimmer gold.

I don't pretend to know what the solutions are or whether any of them are possible, but I do know this: water is the stuff of life, and the future vitality of all Australian communities will depend on how we choose to relate to it. Water connects things in ways that no financial system can measure, but our financial systems are what are in control. If we continue to value water as a commodity, places like this will one day cease to exist for humans, which, according to Sinclair, would be a profoundly unnatural condition. Speaking about salination in his hometown of Kerang, he recalls, 'If environmental degradation could eradicate people from a landscape, that [would be] the most unusual thing to happen to that landscape for as long as time has mattered. Whether it's been people from settler culture like myself or Indigenous people...these parallel histories have always had these relationships with the landscape. There is not a landscape in Australia that you can go into that hasn't had some sort of human relationship with it'.

Sometimes I get up at 3am and walk the edge of the lake by starlight. The constellations are so clear I swear you can see them move as the earth rotates. It is the quiet out here that is most striking. You can almost hear the buzz of atoms flying into form. In an ancient place like the Menindee Lakes it's not difficult to listen, but it is difficult to hear. And now with our attention tethered to screens and the looming objects of catastrophe that threaten our livelihoods, we are prone to wanting reactive management rather than deep change, which includes our basic orientations to water, and the natural world. We are entering an age of crisis, and crises tend to increase our already overbearing proclivity to think in utilitarian and disconnected ways. At such times we might blame a particular group or individual for what are really cultural and structural failures, or slice the world into component parts and react to each component in isolation from its wider, more granular context.

If I were to point towards any kind of real relief from the cycles of human-made catastrophe that loom large, I would point to something out here, in the people. What is left of the land's spirit is alive in them. They are enormously resilient because of their entrenched relationship to the land. They wait patiently for the river to flow again, for the old connections to place and spirit, stories told through the poem of water, and I sit with them and watch the same old atoms flying into form, just as they have for thousands of years.

Dan Schulz and Otis Filley are producing a web series called *This Is Water: Stories from the Darling-Baaka*. It can be streamed at www.homelandings.com.au.

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Photography: Otis Filley