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## THE STORIES OF A TREE

*Angela Kyriacou Petrou*

### ABSTRACT

Following the trajectory of a single element — the eucalyptus tree — I seek to bring into being the storyline of a material and personal journey. Tracing the path of its historic migration from Australia to Cyprus, the story of the eucalyptus tree will track its place of origin and record the paths of its migration and the labouring practices that brought it into being.

Alongside this, another story will unfold; intersecting with the journey of the tree, the personal travels and interactions of the author will be narrated. Interposing an additional layer to its material identity, the tree will become contingent to both place and person, immersing it in a newly situated materiality.

The intersecting storylines act to recover the tree as an inert specimen of an invisible landscape, repositioning it in relation to human activity, place, and matter. This article re-embodies the invisible European seer through the personal narrative of the author.

21 OCTOBER 2023

My dear friend,

On your first visit to the island you were amazed by the trees — how can a place so far removed from Australia evoke such a strong connection to your childhood? Those delicate silvery pendulums that hung from the branches; the cooling restful protective canopy that defended the space over your body; the smooth, patterned, huggable trunk. Even just the reassuring distant view of the swaying giants. As you uttered its colloquial appellation, *the gum* — your face disclosed a wistful recollection that engulfed you — a taste in your mouth, a stickiness on your hands, and a hypnotic scent that sent you to another place. I am pleased for your delight my friend I hear your joy — but this feeling does not enter my body.

\* \* \*

As actors in the stories (of a tree) we are conceptually immobilised by the collectors and curators of the narrative. In the historic journey of the transportation and plantation of the eucalyptus trees in Cyprus (as with many other parts of the world), the plants are the active subjects in the plot, present through a compelling materiality. The human actors form constellations around them.

Through travel writing and colonial reports describing the island of Cyprus, its material landscape slips between a romanticised narrative and physical matter, the palpable and the objectified, between the detailed materiality of leaves and soil to the colonial narrative

of a broken land. Matter is at once material and immaterial; it is both empty useless wasteland but at the same time a miasma of rotting roots and active cleansing stomata, draining the soil and purifying the marshlands — laden with ‘malarious exhalations’.<sup>1</sup>

\* \* \*

OCTOBER 1881

Soon after bringing the first eucalyptus trees to Cyprus, *The Cyprus Times* allocated a weekly column to publishing excerpts of scientific papers about the benefits of the Eucalyptus tree. Mr. H. N. Draper writes on ‘the value of this genus of plants, as drainers of the soil and purifiers of the atmosphere’.<sup>2</sup>

Draper refers to the ‘sanitary changes’ that the eucalyptus brings is a result of the ‘enormous quantity of water which the tree can absorb from the soil, with “over three hundred and fifty stomata per leaf [...] any given weight of eucalyptus leaves can transfer from the soil to the atmosphere nearly twice that weight of water”’.<sup>3</sup>

\* \* \*

<sup>1</sup> H. N. Draper, ‘The Eucalyptus’, *The Cyprus Times*, 4 June 1881, p. 5.

Image 1 and 2, Cyprus State Archive TΔ1\_1583

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

I. N. R. A.  
CENTRE NATIONAL  
DE RECHERCHES FORESTIÈRES  
STATION D'AMÉLIORATION  
DES ARBRES FORESTIERS

## Bordereau d'envoi de Graines

N° 66-12

Destinataire: Monsieur POLYCARPOU - Directeur of The Department  
of Forests - NICOSIA CYPRUS

Expédition par: AVION

Espèce	Origine	N°	N° du lot	Poids g	Faculté germinative	Nombre de germes vivants par Kg.
Eucalyptus camaldulensis	Todd River, Alice Springs N.T.	25/66	6788	10		887
	Tennant Creek N.T.	30/66	7116	10		1 253
	Newcastle Waters N.T.	26/66	7080	10		358
	Katherine N.T.	21/66	6869	10		438
	Mundivindi W.A.	29/66	7037	10		1 276
	Wiluna W.A.	28/66	7046	10		1 093
	Murchison River W.A.	27/66	7029	3		780
	Port Lincoln S.A.	16/66	6975	4		388
	"	15/66	6978	4		316
	Woolpoor V.	20/66	6844	10		1 283
	Lake Albacutya V.	23/66	6845	10		540
	Shepparton V.	23/66	6845	10		1 402
	Darlington Point N.S.W.	31/66	6990	10		599
	Bourke N.S.W.	17/66	6958	5		1 418
	Silverton N.S.W.	14/66	6980	3		964
	"	13/66	6981	3		1 300
	"	12/66	6982	3		508
	"	11/66	6983	4		1 072
	"	10/66	6984	3		1 044
	"	9/66	6985	3		1 604
"	8/66	6986	3		1 780	
"	7/66	6987	2		1 824	
"	6/66	6988	2		1 240	
"	5/66	6989	3		1 584	

Le \_\_\_\_\_ (date d'envoi des graines)  
Le Directeur de la Station,

*Handwritten notes:*  
+ = will be planted in Dec. 1967  
✓ = planting will be completed in Dec. 1967  
- = have been planted in March 1967  
\* Identify Nos given on receipt  
18/66

Παρατήρηση: ορισμένοι από τους περιλαμβανόμενους στην παρούσα κατάσταση μπορεί να μην είναι εμπορεύσιμα, και οπότε, τον εκπαιδευμένο Αρμόδιο και ή ομοειδών αρμόδιων αρμοδίων του Σώματος να υποδείξει τυχόν ειδικές απαιτήσεις, όσον αφορά την εμπορεύσιμότητα των προϊόντων.

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			Gross (Gross) lbs. *	Net (Net) lbs. *	
Number (Nombre) 1 Nature (*)	Seeds of Australia Native Plants	No Commercial Value	216 2 08	1 06	

Country of origin or of manufacture of the goods (Pays d'origine ou de fabrication de la marchandise) Australia

TO: (Adresse du destinataire)  
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 (Nom du destinataire)  
 Street and number Ag. Conservator of Forests  
 (Rue et numéro)  
 Place of destination Forest Department  
 (Lieu de destination)  
 Country of destination Nicosia Cyprus  
 (Pays de destination)

Date 3 day of February 19 66

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## THE AKROTIRI MARSHLANDS — AS LIVE(D) SPACE

The Akrotiri Peninsula salt marsh is the largest wetland area in Cyprus and is made up of a salt lake, sand dunes, thorny shrubs, meadows, and reed beds. During the dry months, the soil produces a layer of fine dust over the low grassy vegetation creating a visually homogenous monochromatic brown terrain. Historically such marshy grassland environments acted as a vital resource for the local community where the locals gathered grasses around the marsh and Salt Lake for basket-making.

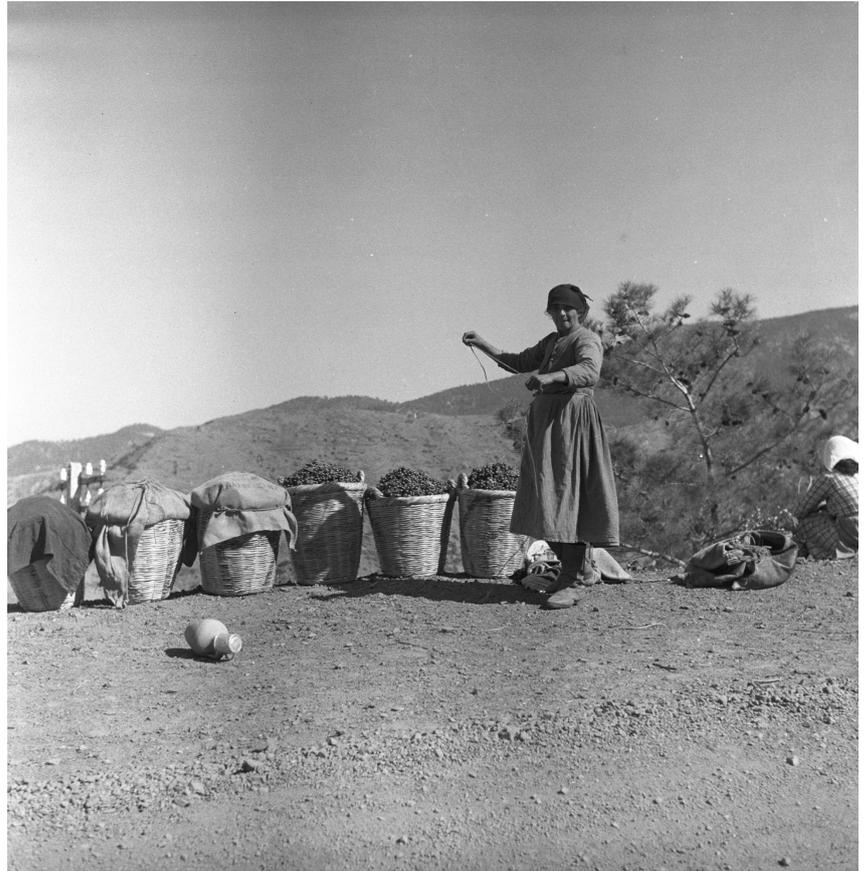
Eleven types of grasses were used including the bulrush and common reeds which grew in abundance. They were harvested in summer, left to dry, then stored and used throughout winter. The reeds were softened by soaking them overnight and often combined with soft branches and shrubs or trees such as the Terebinth, the wild olive, and the Styrax tree.

The basket-makers of Akrotiri collected ‘raw materials from the area [such] as native rushes, grasses, prickly shrubs, canes or reeds such as *rousouthkia*, *samadji*, *chondros*, *sklinidji* and *floudi*.<sup>4</sup> They produced baskets for: cheese making, *talaria*; storage baskets; brooms, *froukalia*; pack baskets, *syrizes*; hanging trays, *tapatzia*; straw mats; and flat straw baskets, *zembilia*’.<sup>5</sup>

4 UNESCO Cyprus National Commission, *The craft of soft basket-weaving in the Akrotiri community* (2017) [https://www.unesco.org.cy/Programmes-The\\_craft\\_of\\_soft\\_basketweaving\\_in\\_the\\_Akrotiri\\_community,EN-PRO-GRAMMES-04-02-03-07-03,EN#:~:text=Soft%20basket%2Dweaving%20constituted%20the,traditional%20rural%20life%20in%20Cyprus](https://www.unesco.org.cy/Programmes-The_craft_of_soft_basketweaving_in_the_Akrotiri_community,EN-PRO-GRAMMES-04-02-03-07-03,EN#:~:text=Soft%20basket%2Dweaving%20constituted%20the,traditional%20rural%20life%20in%20Cyprus). [Accessed October 2, 2024].

5 Ibid

Images 3 and 4. Press and Information Office, Nicosia



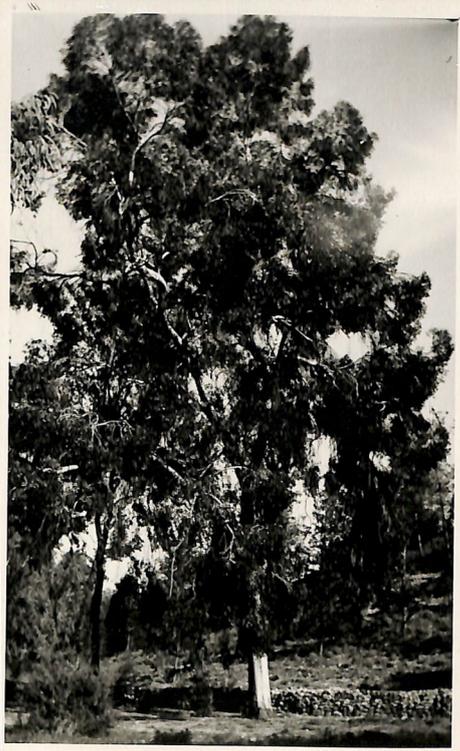
## WEAVING INTO PLACE

*Summer months are for cutting reeds,  
autumn and spring are for gathering the young boughs.  
I know how long the branches need to be and how to pile them.  
Soaking reeds, braiding sewing twining coiling twisting fibrous  
rushes  
with toughened fingers  
to make the baskets for...  
gathering berries, drying fruit and threshing grain.  
For the merchants to carry their goods and the labourers to store  
their food.  
Producing myths and crafting everyday lives, the bas-  
kets weave stories of land and labour into place.*

\* \* \*

Notwithstanding its extended history of migrations, the eucalyptus is immobilised on the very paper it produces, fixed onto the pages of the botanical journals, economic reports, and Linnean directories. The reader is both insider and outsider to this materiality, pulled and pushed by the pathologised landscape. Writing with an awareness of such material dispossession, we can ask the question that has been asked many times before: “how can we become from here?” The rewritten stories of a tree are understood as a state of constant reimagining, remaking a material connection, giving admittance to nature and place anew. Read as a memoir, the botanical archives may go on to trace the future generations of eucalypti, bearing the scars of the migration and objectification, empowering their genetic transition to a *present* material state.

The flaking sap peels away from the trunk of the *eucalyptus obliqua*, completing another cycle of its story. As the pieces of its becoming are scattered, I find my way to them, for the first time I see the tree that is in front of me — the discarded skin no longer an inert substance but continuous with the landscape and the people that shaped it. Putting together the parts of this obscured matter, I begin carving out an ephemeral map, making a new story.

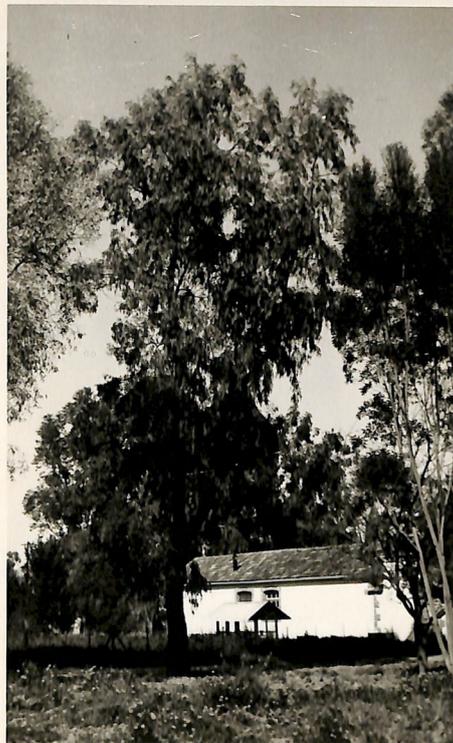


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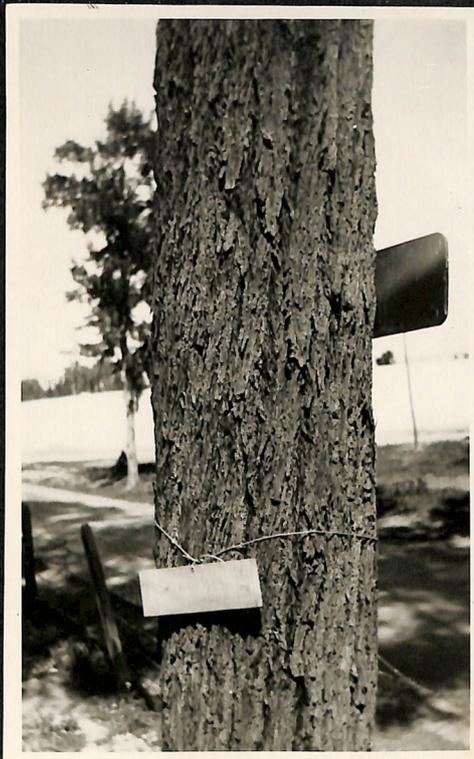


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## RESPONSE TO ANGELA'S TEXT

by Ruth Oldham

*Thank you Angela for this beautiful set of ideas and observations. It really made me think. The theme that connects our work is perhaps naming. That is what I have focused on.*

*As I read this draft, I started to realise the extent to which the naming and classifying of plant species, of the entire natural world, has been an astonishingly powerful enabler of colonial exploitation of natural resources and lands.*

The idea of a scientific language creating distance between the speaker and the subject in contrast to a close and embodied language in which the speaker is connected to the subject.

*I wondered about the name "eucalyptus" and did a little investigating. I want to share what I found out.*

*Eucalyptus seeds travelled from Australia to Cyprus in the 1880s on an apparently useful mission to alter both the soil and the atmosphere. But a plant from the same genus had already made a similar journey a century earlier when the botanist David Nelson, travelling with Captain Cook on his third voyage, collected what would later be understood to be a eucalypt specimen from Tasmania. It was brought back to London to be studied, manipulated, analysed, catalogued, and classified. One part of a vast collection of plants, cuttings, and seeds; the spoils of colonial exploration.*

*On that previous journey the plant didn't go by the name of eucalyptus. Nelson's Tasmanian tree specimen ended up in the hands of the French botanist Charles Louis L'Héritier de Brutelle (note his own name; what clearer indication of belonging to the affluent classes could one imagine?) working*

at Kew Gardens. In 1788 he named the plant *Eu* (well) + *calyptus* (covered) from ancient Greek, having observed the way in which its flowers were covered by the operculum.

But this tree had already been named. It was already known, intimately, by those who lived alongside it. It was not nameless in its homeland. This homeland now goes by the name of Australia. But before that colonial construction it was a territory of around 250 individual nations with an equivalent number of languages. And as we now know that the *Eucalyptus* genus contains over 700 species, we realise that there must have been quite literally tens of thousands of different names for these trees.

Jarrah, moich, wandoo, aper, dwutta, mug-  
gago, mottlecah, yarran, bibil, yinay, buubaya,  
guburuu, gulabaa, dhani, gundhi, intwara, thii-  
naay, girranba, kiranpa, gaabiin, gawuwildhaa,  
bulamin, tunpa, karri, tuart, carcoola, waralya

are just some of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait  
Islander names for different *Eucalyptus* species that  
emerge from a very quick search on the internet.

I come across an article in which Professor Jakelin Troy, a  
Ngarigu woman from the Snowy Mountains in southeast  
Australia and Director of Aboriginal and Torres Strait  
Islander Research at the University of Sydney, describes  
the different approach to naming things between Aboriginal  
peoples and Westerners: 'In English, we give things very static  
names and then that's what something is known as, always.  
But from an Aboriginal point of view, trees and plants get  
different names at different times of year'.<sup>1</sup> The article goes  
on to explain how the name might change whether the tree  
is in flower or fruiting or how its appearance changes as the

seasons shift. This approach understands a tree, or plant or  
other element, as a dynamic being in constant interaction  
with its surroundings, whose identity shifts and changes.

I close my eyes and try to imagine a world without the system  
of classification that we are so familiar with. What would it be  
like to live in a world where plants and trees changed name  
with the seasons and the weather? I try to write a (comprehen-  
sive) list of situations which might change the name of a tree:

<sup>1</sup> Georgina Reid, 'Say My Name: On Speaking the  
Indigenous Names of Plants', *Wonderground*, 11 June  
2019, <[https://web.archive.org/web/20220526114133/  
https://wonderground.press/culture/say-name-speaking-  
indigenous-names-plants/](https://web.archive.org/web/20220526114133/https://wonderground.press/culture/say-name-speaking-indigenous-names-plants/)> [accessed 24 October 2023].

*Spring / Summer / Winter / Autumn / Autumn heatwaves*  
*In leaf / bare / coming into leaf / leaves changing colour / leaves falling off*  
*Flowering (buds, opening, blooming, going over, falling off...)*  
*Fruiting (growing, ripening, getting picked by birds or humans, falling off...)*  
*Whether it is night or day / dark or light*  
*Whether birds are nesting in it or not*  
*Whether people or animals are climbing in it or not*  
*If it stood alone or in a group*  
*If it was young or old or in between*  
*If it was planted by humans or self-seeded*  
*If it was coppiced or not*  
*If it was damaged, missing branches...*  
*If it was pollarded*  
*South / West / North / East orientation*  
*On a slope / on the flat*  
*In the shade / in the sun*  
*In a garden / in a public space*

*It is strange how the plant classification system often names plants according to the person who “discovered” them, as if the plant did not really exist before this notable and educated person found it (how many women are plants named after?), as if no other person, or living creature, had ever come into contact with it before. Do plants ever get named after people in indigenous naming systems? It strikes me as unlikely, more likely that people get named after plants.*

*‘First Peoples worldwide have fundamentally and always understood trees to be community members for us — they are not entities that exist in some biological separateness, given a Linnaean taxonomy and classed with other non-sentient beings. Trees are part of our mob, part of our human world and active members of our communities, with lives, loves and feelings.’<sup>2</sup> For Jakelin Troy, naming is not about classification but acknowledging connection.*

*The Linnean system of naming and classifying allowed plants to become goods, commodities, defined objects to be traded and exchanged like other goods. Could colonial exploitation of lands and plants and rocks and minerals and creatures really have taken place without a system of naming and classifying?*

<sup>2</sup> Jakelin Troy, ‘Trees are at the Heart of Our Country — We Should Learn Their Indigenous Names’, *The Guardian*, 1 April 2019 <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/apr/01/trees-are-at-the-heart-of-our-country-we-should-learn-their-indigenous-names>> [accessed 24 October 2023].

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

*Angela Kyriacou Petrou*

Angela is an Associate Professor in the Architecture Department at the University of Nicosia, Cyprus. She completed her architecture degree, post graduate diploma and RIBA Part III in London, where she was born and lived until 2001. She has recently completed a master's in English Literature and Cultural Context. Her research interests explore how colonial history has defined places and landscapes as passive sites and inert matter which are disconnected from labour and material practices. Through the examination of historical and literary texts her research examines how ground-truthing and mapping of entangled landscapes attempts to explore connections between territories, land practices, matter and stories of lived space.

