Signatures of Resistance:
Graffiti as Dialectical Collaboration at Thunderbolt’s Rock, Uralla (NSW)

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Abstract

Thunderbolt’s Rock is a tangible marker of colonial memory celebrating the life of legendary nineteenth century bushranger, Captain Thunderbolt (Frederick Ward). A vantage point for Ward’s renowned coach robberies, the rock evokes the drama of Australia’s pioneering history, consolidating the mythic position of the bushranger in the nation’s foundational narrative. This secular, yet sacralised, settler memorial has, over the past fifty years, been desecrated with vibrantly coloured graffiti.

In this paper, I investigate the interaction between the historical mediation of Thunderbolt’s Rock as a mnemonic site of colonial mythology and the symbols and letters that now saturate the rock’s surface. Applying a Foucauldian conception of resistance, the graffiti is analysed as a playful, anarchic protest against hegemonic orderings of history and of place.

The writings and symbols scrawled across the granite rock face are a form of dialectical collaboration with a colonial myth positioning the boulder as a significant site for the reworking of Australia’s postcolonial identity. Through processes of desecration and defacement, the legend of the ‘noble outlaw’ has been re-animted, awakening multiple versions of history immanent in the rock, and enriching the mythic tales of ‘Thunderbolt Country’.
**A Selection of Thunderbolt Balladry**

*Traditional Ballad* (Anon.)
My name is Frederick Ward
I am a native of this Isle
I steal from the rich and give to the poor
And make all the children smile.

*Thunderbolt’s Song* (Eve Hobbs)
I stand in the saddle and stretch my hand
To a little niche in the stone
And I pull myself to the top of the rock
To make sure that I am alone.

*The Saga of Thunderbolt* (R.K. Cummins)
The thunderous wash of crashing water,
Down the wide Wollomombi,
The fearful fall of tree and terrain
Against granite-pitted gorges.
The last outpost of dingoes and highwaymen
The haunt of the hounded man.

*Captain Thunderbolt* (Slim Dusty)
When sunrise breaks like a wound that is bleeding
The hills of New England lie misty and dim
By the highway where modern day vehicles are speeding
Thunderbolt’s lookout rears rugged and grim.

Film still from Cecil Holmes’ 1953 film *Captain Thunderbolt.*

Historical image of Frederick Ward.

Re-enactment of Thunderbolt's death in 1870, Uralla, NSW.
Rock connects us to the deep time of the earth, to the subterranean force of our terrestrial existence. Rock is both temporal and spatial, storing within its mineral belly the fossilised traces of the beginnings of our species and our world. Rock is engraved, metaphysically and literally, with centuries of human life.

This paper reviews ‘Thunderbolt’s Rock’ as a significant site of place marking in the New England tableland region of New South Wales. Thunderbolt’s Rock is claimed to be one of the vantage points used by legendary nineteenth century bushranger Captain Thunderbolt for a series of coach hold-ups and robberies (Visitors Information Centre, n.d: 1). Since the late twentieth century, the rock has been coated in colourful graffiti. In this paper I investigate the interaction between the mythical engraving of Thunderbolt’s legend and the aerosol collage on the boulder’s surface.

This analysis is predicated on the notion that “place markings of all forms… are territorial endeavours, inscribing the land with an identity that identifies the marker with the place irrespective of the written message” (Wilson & David, 2002a: 45). This process of identification involves an inscription of the self into place. As a form of self-inscription, the graffiti on Thunderbolt’s Rock represents a visible symbolic resistance to the discursive boundaries of colonial history and the transgression of hegemonic orderings of place and time. While this resistance is not necessarily explicit or intentional, the apparent willingness of contemporary individuals to engage with mnemonic sites of postcolonial memory opens up a vibrant dialogue between the present and the past. This elicits a temporal collapse as brilliant colour re-inscribes the face of the rock with an evolving cultural dialectic that stresses an active and egalitarian participation in myth and history.

In this paper I have adopted the Foucauldian conception of resistance as an inherent component of any power relationship. Through this discursive lens graffiti at a site of colonial memory can be understood as a point of resistant struggle that highlights Australia’s historical landscape as contested terrain. The bushranger is a central figure in Australia’s foundational narrative and so an important focal point for the reshaping of colonial memory.

In evoking the graffiti as a collaborative process, I seek to demonstrate that through creative desecration new mysteries are awoken in Thunderbolt’s rock. Michael Taussig’s musings on defacement are applied, alongside Gaston Bachelard and Marc Auge’s philosophies of place, to explore the spatiality of Australia’s shifting colonial history.

This area of research is a personal one as Thunderbolt’s Rock is a nostalgically remembered feature of my own New England childhood. Rather than attempting to deny this sentimentality, I have embedded myself openly in the research and writing process. In adopting a phenomenological methodology, expressed through short sections of ficto-critical writing, I have approached the research from a dimension of “livedness” (Garner, 1994: 50) reflecting on my own interactions with the materiality of the rock. I have explored intimate inter-subjective connections with the myth to challenge the Cartesian separation of mind and world and to enact my own personal form of resistance to the rigidity of this memorial as a historical text.

This enquiry colludes with Seamon’s (1984: online) assertion that phenomenological exploration is a creative effort “to reunite person and world through the existential structure of place grounded spatially and environmentally” in the belief that “[p]eople are not separate from their worlds; rather, they are immersed through an invisible net of bodily, emotional,
and environmental ties”. My own childhood binds me to this region and its stories, so I seek to inscribe myself into the evolving dialectic of Thunderbolt’s Rock.

Thunderbolt’s Legend
Captain Thunderbolt began his life as Frederick Wordsworth Ward in Wilberforce, NSW in the early 19th century. The son of a convict, Ward had his first encounter with the law at the age of twenty when he was convicted of stealing 75 horses and sentenced to ten years hard labour at Cockatoo Island prison in Sydney Harbour. Following his release, he continued his life of crime, committing over 200 offences across the northern section of NSW before being gunned down by Constable Alexander Walker during a highway robbery on the 25 May 1870 (Visitors Information Centre, n.d.: 1 – 2).

The life of Thunderbolt has inspired a prolific myth-making process “as lines blur between historicity and the imaginative mass of further fictions” (Ryan, 2006: 299). John S. Ryan emphasises that Thunderbolt “has long since moved from a figure of history to one of folkloric stature, a victim of informers and magisterial injustice. Forced into ‘cross’ ways, he became something of a Robin Hood, righting the wrongs done to the poor” (2006: 299). Popular beliefs that nourish and vivify the legend focus on Thunderbolt’s compassion. A “noble robber” (Hobsbawm, 1969: 15), he is held to have “never shot anyone, including the police” because his Aboriginal wife Mary Ann Bugg “had a total hatred of guns due to the way so many of her people had been murdered by the white population” (Tenterfield Tourism, 2008: 21). These analogues to truth raise Thunderbolt to the stature of a “gentleman outlaw” and reach fantastical heights with claims that Thunderbolt “was arguably the first known Australian male to take paternity leave” due to the fact “he took up to nine months off from his Bush ranging career to look after his wife and family” (Tenterfield Tourism, 2008: 21, my emphasis) and that Thunderbolt did not die at the hands of police but instead escaped to California with his mother (Sinclair, n.d: 7- 8).

While the Thunderbolt legend stretches across New South Wales, its home is clearly the Uralla region that is self-proclaimed “Thunderbolt Country”. The myth is a strong tourist draw-card for the small farming community where Thunderbolt’s Inn, Thunderbolt’s Way, Thunderbolt’s Statue, Thunderbolt’s Grave and Thunderbolt’s Rock all flaunt the bushranger’s name as part of the heritage theme adopted to attract visitors to the district. It would be remiss, however, to focus solely on the commercial aspects of Thunderbolt’s “Legendarium” (Ryan, 2006: 299) given the pronounced cultural significance of the bushranger to the texture of the town.

Thunderbolt offers Uralla continuity with Australia’s frontier heritage. The songs that surround the legend attest to the powerful connection between Thunderbolt, the local landscape and the temper of this little Tableland community. In Eve Hobbs’ ballad “Thunderbolt’s Song” the bushranger declares that he’ll share his spoils “with the needy folk/ Who live in Uralla town” (Hobbs, 1969: 109),
and after his death he will find a continuing metaphysical existence through his granite monument and will “thank the folk of Uralla town,/ For giving [him] Thunderbolt’s Rock” (Hobbs, 1969: 110). In Pannifex and Cummings’ ballad “Thunderbolt” (1969: 111) the outlaw appears as a spectre on the tableland horizon, bound, even in spirit, to Uralla’s plateau horizons:

There’s a legend in New England,  
Thunderbolt has never died;  
Still he haunts the Moonbi Ranges  
And the lonely countryside.

Folk declare that they have seen him  
When the moon is on the wane  
Riding like a flash of lightening  
To Uralla once again!”

In these songs, the Uralla region is evoked as a mother figure, hailing this 19th century gentleman outlaw back to her arms. Thunderbolt’s Rock tenderly cradles the bushranger’s spirit, keeping it safe in the embrace of a curve.

Despite the intimacy that exists between Uralla and the Thunderbolt myth, the tale of the noble robber is by no means unique to the Tablelands. Eric J. Hobsbawn (1969) has demonstrated that the “noble robber” is a universal phenomenon common to all agriculturally-based societies. In fact, there is reliable evidence that suggests there was even another Captain Thunderbolt - a robber who operated in Ireland before crossing to the United States in 1818. Barry McDonald explains that this Irish Thunderbolt myth “was probably influenced by an earlier legend, then in turn it influences its own folklore, which in its turn hearkens back to the antecedent legend – all while nourishing the Australian one, which sets the cycle going all over again” (1993: 47).

While Thunderbolt’s heart lies in the Uralla highlands, alleged sites of the bushranger’s escapades are scattered throughout the entire New England tableland. On a recent visit to Tenterfield I was surprised to find Thunderbolt’s Hideout; an enormous granite cave conveniently located a 300 metre walk from a bitumen road. In this far outpost of the Tablelands, the Thunderbolt legend felt like a centring force, resonating with Michel de Certeau’s observation “[w]hat the map cuts up, the story cuts across” (1984: 129).

**Self-Inscription**

Thunderbolt mythology emanates from such mnemonic landscape features. The Uralla rock can be considered a white colonial version of a sacred place in that it writes tales of morality into the land. While none of the markings at Thunderbolt’s rock refer directly to the Thunderbolt myth, I believe the graffiti can be considered both a desecration of, and a dialogue with, the Thunderbolt legend. This complex relationship between the graffiti and the myth is not diminished but rather enhanced by the banality of the writing – an aerosol collage of prosaic statements and signings that one could expect to find at a bus stop:
Meredith Wilson and Bruno David emphasise that graffiti “confronts and contradicts the ordered and ordering of space” as a “form of inscription usually practised outside the censoring arm of the power elite” (2002b: 43). Its power derives not from specific words or images, but from a general “polluting and vandalistic quality” that “threatens the status quo” simply by “the fact that [graffiti’s] execution in public spaces lies outside the control of existing social forces” (Wilson and David, 2002b: 43).

Geographer Don Mitchell has argued that actions within public space carry strength due to their high visibility. In a time where public space is increasingly “produced for us rather than by us” (2003: 33) graffiti represents the reclamation of common areas as sites of public action and discourse. The graffiti at Thunderbolt’s Rock can be understood as a type of symbolic “locational conflict”, which Mitchell defines as “conflict over the legitimacy of various uses of space” (2003: 81). This discursive interruption draws attention to the ways “the organisation of public space functions as ideology, even if this ideology hums quietly at the most imperceptible social octave known as normality” (Boykoff and Sand, 2008: 113).

The graffiti at Thunderbolt’s Rock highlights the constructed nature of a culturally sanctioned colonial Australian symbol. In disrupting the touristic consumption of the bushranger legend, the writing on the rock attests to Jeff Ferrell’s (1996: 197) view of graffiti as “a creative, playful response to a prefabricated culture… a public art outside the control of public officials, an alternative style outside the circle of corporate style and consumption”. As an illicit interaction with the colonial memorial, the graffiti enacts visible resistance against hegemonic orderings of Australian history and place. Self-inscriptions like “Benji was here 2009” reserve a space for the name of the individual in the epic tales of history.

Richard Bradley (1997) has termed the metaphysical marking of the land “signing the land”. In anthropological discourse human landscape traces left behind by previous inhabitants are labelled “archaeological signatures” (Beck, 2006: 92). Inscription – our desire to literally engrave the earth with language and symbols – is described by James Wiener as a fundamental “aspect of the human existentielle” (2002: 282). This terminology indicates that
“inscriptions are not simply writings in place, but the actions of people who write themselves into the landscape” and thus are “an assertion of a right to be in-place… a resistance to sociogeographical exclusion” (Wilson & David, 2002b: 42 – 43).

The act of “moving traces of [self] from subaltern to public spaces” (Boykoff and Sand, 2008: 109) is inherently political. As a “strategy of visibility” (McDonald, 1999: 151) graffiti writing is not only an inscription in public space, but a “mode of self creation” (McDonald, 1999: 149) as the writers become “entrepreneurs of the self” (Ehrenberg, 1991, cited in McDonald, 1999: 121). This conception of graffiti aligns with Michel Foucault’s (1982: 781) discussion of resistance to subjectification. Foucault argues that such resistance “questions the status of the individual” as a subject. By ‘subject’ he refers to someone being “subject to someone else by control and dependence”, and/or being “tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge”; that which “subjugates and makes subject to”. The graffiti at Thunderbolt’s Rock can be read as a process of self creation that resists forms of power that categorise the individual and make that individual a subject in dominant social discourses. The vibrant graffiti across Thunderbolt’s Rock thereby challenges the official authored narrative of the Thunderbolt legend through a process of resistant self-authoring.

This intriguing parallel action questions the relationship between contemporary Australian identity and colonial national mythology. This question is further complicated by Thunderbolt’s mythic position as a ‘noble robber’ - the icon of resistance against colonial authority. How do the gaudy pink love hearts and capital-lettered cuss words scrawled over the rock face converse with this legendary figure?

On the one hand, the graffitist mirrors the colonial outlaw. Graffiti is an act that often conflicts with traditional community values. “[T]he mere presence of graffiti… denotes a transfer of power from neighbourhood residents to graffiti vandals, and thus a failure on the part of residents to maintain control over their lives and property” (Ferrell, 1996: 144). Similarly, “[b]ush-ranging… was an expression of severe disorder among people and government” and Frederick Ward was regarded as “a talented but dangerous person” (Cummins, 1988: viii). The bushranger is defined by his criminality, and graffiti also occurs “in a context which challenges, defies, and even celebrates the illegality of the act” (Ferrell, 1996: 148). It seems odd then, that a graffitist could be scorned for defacing a monument to a man whose actions pose a similar challenge to normative social rules. Why does this small tableland town choose to celebrate such a criminal as a hero?

Contested Histories.
The resistance embodied in the Thunderbolt legend is fitting for a colony with a convict heritage. John S. Ryan has demonstrated the “noble bushranger” and the “noble convict” are twin legends in colonial discourse, both “good badmen” whose outlawry represents an idealised resistance against oppressive authority (1967: 102 – 103). The bushranger myth aligns with the tale of the underdog and the originary ideal of an “authentic Australian… oppressed and victimized by British imperialism or by authority generally” (Bennett, 1990: 118)

The bushranger legend provides a “safe” history for the New England region, a nostalgic representation of the founding of the nation (Edelheim, 2007: 139). Jonah Edelheim, in his analysis of Thunderbolt’s role in tourism, notes that “Thunderbolt is strongly connected to a larger national appeal to romanticise non-Aboriginal history in rural areas” (2007: 128). He argues that through the manipulation of colonial memory, focus on figures such as
Thunderbolt create a “touristic terra nullius” (2007: 175) by recording the region’s history “from the first signs of non-Aboriginal influence in an area, and [relegating] Indigenous history to [the status of] nature” (2007: 160).

In this way the bushranger narrative of man battling against nature and imperial oppression acts as an exclusionary national myth that obscures the uncomfortable violence of colonial invasion. But while this narrative is cemented in the Australian psyche, the rocky enclaves of the New England tableland are not always so solid and certain. In a landscape studded with granite outcrops where boulders poke out of the soil like ancient autochthonous beings there are many other, subaltern stories lurking in the rocks.

In the very heart of Thunderbolt country, just outside Uralla, lies an Aboriginal rock-art site in the traditional territory of the main Aboriginal tribe of the New England region – the Anaiwan people. This site was recorded in the 1960s and is estimated to have been produced between 150 and 500 years ago, perhaps after Thunderbolt’s birth (New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife, n.d., information pamphlet). Before beginning my research on New England, I had no idea this site existed. It is so overshadowed by the Thunderbolt myth that it receives barely any attention from locals or tourists. When I visited the site with my parents last year, there was a sense of palpable frustration in the air as we were confronted with symbols relating to our homelands that we could not understand. A nearby sign explains to visitors: The tracks, circles, short lines and dots may remind you of bird’s feet, people, lizards and even bird’s eggs. You may be right, you may be wrong. Unfortunately we will never know the true meaning of the site.

As a parallel to the graffiti at Thunderbolt’s Rock, the rock art at Yarrowyck is an uncomfortable reminder of unacknowledged and unrecognised local histories. The enduring red ochre seems to testify that the colonial cartographies of New England are by no means incontestable or settled. I left the site thinking that there are more stories in this region than I am aware of, stories that are told in languages and symbols that I do not understand. On the drive home I was pondering a bothersome question: with such a limited and monocultural awareness of the region, can I really claim to know this place at all?
North of Thunderbolt’s Rock, still on the New England highway, there is another looming granite presence - Bluff Rock, the alleged site of an Aboriginal massacre in the 1840s. This tale, contemporary with Thunderbolt’s criminal escapades, layers colonial amnesia alongside colonial remembrance. Katrina Schlunke, in her extensive work on Bluff Rock, argues that the narrative of the massacre at the bluff functions as a “practical” device that sequesters away the violent horror of colonisation, isolating it from the lived, everyday reality of the region. As a touristic, historical site, Schlunke claims that ‘the Bluff’ allows us to ignore “the cars and the roads and the reservations and the barristers and the cities which made the systematic dispossession and dispersal of Aboriginal people possible” (2005: 122).

The horror of Aboriginal slaughter surrounds Thunderbolt in both time and space, and echoes in the touristic narrative through the elusive figure of “Black Mary”, Thunderbolt’s Aboriginal wife. A tourist information pamphlet claims that Mary had a “total hatred of guns due to the way so many of her people had been murdered by the white population of the time”, and that “[d]uring her time with Thunderbolt she instilled in him this same total hatred of guns and shooting at people – this was an important factor in the subsequent pursuit and death of Thunderbolt.” Moreover, “[a]ccording to some Aborigines” Thunderbolt spend much of his time “with one of their communities in the Gunnedah area, where he was protected and regarded as one of them” (Tenterfield Tourism, 2008: 21).

Through this narrative, legendary Thunderbolt is shown to have a relationship with Australian Aboriginal heritage, implying that by celebrating Thunderbolt contemporary Australians can also form symbolic connections to the Indigenous population. Because the atrocities committed against Aboriginal people by early colonial Australian society were so morally reprehensible, and because our bushranger hero was banished from this society, the celebration of Thunderbolt increases the distance between us and the “white population of the time” (Tenterfield Tourism, 2008: 21). In this narrative twist, the white settler Australian is vindicated through the bushranger legend, which can endure indefinitely as long as dispossession remains locked to another time and place. So it is that massacres are sequestered away to “badlands” (Gibson, 2002), confined to the precipice at the top of ‘the Bluff’, and incarcerated in the abrasive surface of granite ancients.

It is clear that corporeal forms of colonial memory are deeply embedded in social politics and power relations. Even the most solid rock is subject to the manipulation of dominant discourses that consolidate hegemonic versions of Australian history. Any defacement of such tangible manifestations of colonial memory can thus be understood as a resistance against forces of domination that silence alternate voices and histories.
**Graffiti as Resistance**

As a mode of resistance, the graffiti at Thunderbolt’s rock can be considered part of an “anarchist struggle” (Foucault, 1982: 780). Ferrell applies an “anarchist criminology” to the practice of graffiti generally, arguing that graffiti, like anarchism, “undercuts the taken-for-grantedness of the world, the reality which systems of authoritarian knowledge construct” (1996: 161). The graffiti is an implicit attack on a normative version of colonial history, and on the ordering of public space, an “attack not so much “such or such” an institution of power, or group, or elite, or class but rather a technique, a form of power.” (Foucault, 1982: 781).

Foucault argues that “resistance is present wherever there is power” and that “resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (1990: 95). Rather without resistance “there would be no power relations. Because it would simply be a matter of obedience… so resistance is the main word, the key word, in this dynamic” (1997: 167). The flow of forces between power and resistance is invoked by Foucault as an “agonism” – “a reciprocal… struggle… a permanent provocation” (1982: 790). And “[a]t the very heart of the power relationship, and constantly provoking it, are the recalcitrance of the will and the intransigence of freedom (1982: 790).

The intimate connection between domination and recalcitrance resonates with Michael Taussig’s exploration of the defacement of the sacred. Taussig asks, “[h]as the sacred ever been free of a transgressive impulse?” (1999: 13). For Taussig, desecration is an act that is immanent in the object itself, “defacement … lies within the phenomenon to be defaced” (Taussig, 1999: 39).

Standing nearby Thunderbolt’s rock, in a dishevelled, overgrown visitors’ area by the screaming trucks of the highway, it is possible to picture the boulders as a kind of decaying granite cathedral. If this is home to a white sacred pioneering myth, is its desecration the plunder of a place of immanent power - a chosen place where the earthly architecture harkens back to some more ancient being or way? With the peace sign memorial to Michael Jackson and the denigration of Kevin Rudd scrawled across the ancient surface, there is a folding of times, an abrasive conflict between paint and granite, a productive agonism between the present and the dense stratified layering of times past.

As I look now at a photo I took of Thunderbolt’s rock the graffiti echoes Foucault’s evocation of “a multiplicity of points of resistance” that are “distributed in an irregular fashion” (1990: 95):

> The points, knots, or focuses of resistance are spread over time and space at varying densities, at times mobilising groups or individuals in a definitive way, inflaming certain points of the body, certain moments in life, certain types of behaviour... (1990: 96)

10
I see the rock as a body with voluptuous curves, the layered hues of the graffiti inflaming its textured granite skin - pink-on-blue-on-white-on-grey. The lettering is like tattoos – love hearts and peace signs and names decipherable only to those who wrote them (or witnessed the act of writing). The words are so temporary, so transitory - the hands that painted them gone from the scene. This intriguing “multiplicity of forces” (Foucault, 1990: 95) decentres the rock, yet gives it more power; a “dislodging of authority” that “allows for the sweet cacophony of alternative discourses” (Ferrell, 1996: 162).

It is noteworthy that there was a proposal in Uralla Shire Council for a mural of Thunderbolt to be painted over the graffiti (Hailey, 2005: 4). I cannot imagine anything more limiting, or unpleasantly kitsch, than this officially sanctioned graffiti dominating the rock-face. Visitor responses to the rock would become significantly more prescriptive, and the voices that resonate from the scribblings on the granite skin would be silenced by a static, primary-coloured, vision of the past.

Ferrell argues graffiti resists not only of authority, “but the aesthetics of authority as well” (1996: 176). He notes that the appreciation of organised, well-regulated places “embodies an affection for authority, a pleasure in the way property looks when it is under the firm control of its individual, corporate, and government owners” (1996: 180). The graffiti at Thunderbolt’s rock challenges the boundaries of regulation, awakening the rock face as a living organism of colour, letter and symbol.

Re-Animation
Thunderbolt’s Rock erupts in glorious hues out of the Uralla plateau like a painted egg that has hatched myth and legend. I can remember, as a child, intensely observing the nebulous granite tors from my car window while driving along the New England highway. I could almost hear galloping horses as local history played out in my mind like a television drama where a stage coach rattles up a winding dirt track, a New England Robin Hood jumps down from his rock to snatch the riches and egalitarianism triumphs through gunshots that echo down the centuries.

The expected comment from my father every time we passed – “Look kids, it’s Thunderbolt’s Rock” - became a family ritual, a habitual chorus that linked us to the history of the place while simultaneously re-affirming our distance from the past. Embraced by
modernity, by the speed of the highway and the mediation of our vehicle with its “screen-like Panavision-shaped lens of [a] windshield” (Atkinson, 1999: 43 – 44), we were never close, geographically or temporally, to Thunderbolt.

Marc Augé observes that “our towns have been turning into museums (restored, exposed and floodlit monuments, listed areas, pedestrian precincts) while at the same time bypasses, motorways, high-speed trains and one-way systems have made it unnecessary for us to linger in them” (1995: 73). Uralla is a transitional place where most frequenters live outside the township on rural farming properties. Being myself from the larger Armidale region, and a 30 minute car drive to Uralla, the town was never more than a stretch of highway with a series of signs, “official graffiti” (Hermer & Hunt, 1996), proclaiming Thunderbolt’s continuing relevance. Even though it is “Thunderbolt Country”, the spirit of the bushranger has been relegated to local sites of significance – circumscribed in dedicated monuments and landmarks. Despite having lived in the region for eighteen years, it was not until I had decided to make Thunderbolt an area of my research that I actually visited and touched the rock.

As I took photos of the granite shapes on my cheap digital camera I kept thinking, *he used his hands to climb this rock – did they get scratched and grazed?*

The immediacy of the experience brought the past into my present/ce. The rock offers a tangible spatial location for the endurance of history. Gaston Bachelard observes that, “[t]he finest specimens of fossilized duration concretized as a result of a long sojourn are to found in and through space” (Bachelard, 1969: 9). Rock holds within its geometric forms the petrified rhythms of human memory and experience. While such solid monuments enable people to “think in terms of continuity through generations” (Augé, 1995: 60), they also separate the present from the past by marking a specific moment in time “to make that moment concrete and visible, which instantly begins to recede into an irretrievable past … to set a clock ticking, and thus to undermine any notion of an all-encompassing present” (Auster, 2006: 141).

It is significant that rock, particularly granite, plays a key role in Western mortuary rituals where “[a] final blanket of granite is placed over graves. Headstones are carved from it and walls of memories are written on it” (Schlunke, 2005: 27). Rock marks an undeniable end to the movement and flow of earthly life, and the transformation to the hard, permanent stillness of history.
As I crawled, camera in hand, into the dark crevices of rock, I imagined a social outcast sheltering himself from the colonial world. I pictured this unshaven Thunderbolt scrambling into rocky enclaves like a hermit crab hiding in the abandoned shells of nature. Running my hand along the rough granular rock I wondered whether the roving, resistant busranging spirit would really want this final resting place, to be confined forever more in the vestiges of an unmoving historical past.

But the graffiti scrawled in every reachable crevice of Thunderbolt’s voluptuous boulder seems to render the Thunderbolt myth contemporary somehow, as though it has been remastered in colour like an early twentieth century sepia film. The rock has become a collage of letters and time where markings of previous decades have faded and now form a ghostly white pattern on the rock face that is barely distinguishable from the grey hues of the granite.

Jules Boykoff and Kaia Sand observe that there is an inherent impermanency about graffiti and that it has a “difficult-to-commodify” lifespan (2008: 105). Its presence on Thunderbolt’s rock resists the rigidity of this cultural text. In transgressing the border of respected, culturally sanctioned, postcolonial legends the graffiti elicits a kind of temporal collapse, refusing to allow the Thunderbolt tale to remain locked in historical discourse, confined to a static, archival box.

Herbert Marcuse wrote that, “[a]ll reification is a process of forgetting”. The desecration of the rock enlivens the Thunderbolt legend as graffiti, like art, “fights reification by making the petrified world speak, sing, perhaps dance” (cited in Dening, 1996: 211). In this new colouring the rock becomes a spatial counterpart to the vibrant stories and ballads that insist on Thunderbolt always hovering at the periphery of the present, open to the creative reworking of colonial memory.

Michael Taussig argues that desecration produces a “strange surplus of negative energy… within the defaced thing itself” (1999: 3):

It brings insides outside, unearthing knowledge, and revealing mystery. As it does this, however, as it spoliates and tears at tegument, it may also animate the thing defaced and the mystery revealed may become more mysterious.
While rock can be conceptualised in a modernist, concrete mode as hard and incontestable, it is not always so closed and “rational”. Rocks can also be curvy, round, open and imaginative. Val Plumwood emphasises that the use of stone to mark the transcendence of earthly life “forgets that stone is the earth’s body (or rather, skeleton)” (2007: 67). In the belly of this mineral monster, rock blocks light and creates an nonhuman but earthly geography that evokes Bachelard’s vision of “a form that guides and encloses our earliest dreams” (1969: 239). This “primitive hut of prehistoric man” (Bachelard, 1969: 31) is at once compelling and menacing, the enclosed space of the rocky enclave offering safety and warmth beneath the threat of a massive granite unknowable Other.

Positioned somewhere between an earthly underworld and clear Tableland horizons, Thunderbolt’s Rock is a liminal place. Blake has observed that much graffiti occurs in places with a high degree of liminality (e.g. bus back seats, elevators, toilets) “where social boundaries are blurred and normal rules of conduct and role expectations are held in abeyance or even in opposition” (1981: 95). This corporeal manifestation of the Thunderbolt myth is corrupted with the integrity of the outside perverted by openings that allow entry into the “irrationality of the depths” (Bachelard, 1969:18). The graffiti scrawled in the crevices are markings in the limen, that imaginative place of contemplation – a place of becoming and unbecoming. This transgressive potential expands the Rock’s mythic discourse and prompts awareness of other realities. Rocks can be vantage points and hideouts for local legends. They can be petrified Story Beings of an Aboriginal Dreaming. They can be 80 million year old scars of plate tectonic shifts.

Conclusion
This paper has explored the graffiti at Thunderbolt’s Rock as a multifaceted and complex act of cultural agency at a significant site of colonial memory. As a form of self-inscription, this ‘signing of the land’ can be read as an interaction with the mythic legend of Thunderbolt, as a political strategy of visibility and resistance, and as the engraving of self into the deep time of the earth.

In applying a Foucauldian framework of resistance, I have highlighted innovative space in the materiality of Australia’s colonial history created through a resistant act of desecration. Boykoff and Sand observe that “destruction can be a form of collaboration” and in graffiti one engages in “a conversation through defacement” (2008: 103). As a form of dialectical collaboration with colonial memory, the graffiti at Thunderbolt’s Rock represents an unsanctioned, public reworking of early Australian mythology and its hegemonic orderings of time and place. Due to its subaltern status and criminality graffiti subverts the official narrative and aesthetic of Thunderbolt. Through a Foucauldian lens, each aerosol marking is a “point of insubordination” that constitutes the frontier of a power relationship. These multiple resistances illuminate processes of power at work and serve to remind us that corporeal manifestations of colonial memory are still very much contested terrain.

In this analysis, I have argued for a more creative and enlivened interpretation of Thunderbolt’s Rock that removes it from the stale archives of colonial history. The graffiti awakens the Rock as a living organism, highlighting the convergence of the earthly environment with colonial mythology and contemporary identity. While the density and size of the Rock alone speaks of permanency and stasis, its multi-coloured skin and open inner
depths speak of transience and movement. Through desecration this white sacred place has become more inclusive and open to the shifting tectonics of social change.

In exploring the inter-subjective connections between myself and the rocky enclaves of this New England myth, I have demonstrated the multiple signings and interactions that texture the Tablelands and its legendary tales. The vibrant inscriptions that deface, and simultaneously animate the face of, Thunderbolt’s Rock remind me that this part of the world has many voices and many stories. Even the massive granite creatures frozen solid in New England backcountry can be moved by perception, are coloured with myth and belief, and are in a constant state of ontological becoming.

References


Dusty, S. 1982, ‘Captain Thunderbolt’ on *Who’s Riding Old Harlequin Now?* (EMI Music)


Unknown, 1870, Photographic re-enactment of Thunderbolts death, photographic copy taken from Uralla Visitor Information Centre, February 2010.


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