Louise Crisp's Yuiquimbiang reviewed by Gregory Day, Weekend Australian, 22-23 June 2019

Louise Crisp's new collection is also bound together by a single word: Yuiquimbiang.

In this case the glue that binds is decidedly ethnolinguistic — not to put too dry a term on it — as the deliciously sinuous Ngarigu word for the river now known as the Eucumbene becomes an emblem of Crisp's chief concern: the damage done in the ancient cultural landscapes of the Monaro, the Snowy River and East Gippsland.

Under colonial rule "yuiquimbiang" — the first written misrepresentation or mishearing of the word — goes on to gather its own micro-lexicon of glitched versions: Ucumbene, Eucombene, and ultimately the Eucumbene.

Simultaneous with these phonetic simplifications the Snowy became iconicised as the epic river due to a mix of the grand hydro scheme and the mythic power of Banjo Paterson's poem whereas, as Crisp points out, the Yuiquimbiang was all along the main stream of an inevitably networked, tentacular system.

Gippsland-based Crisp shows, through her properly poetic engagement with the idea of word as world, how language is symbiotic with habitat, and specifically in this case, how tin-eared colonial language often reflected the de-teeming of landscapes that took hold after pastoral invasion.

Like Maling, Crisp also enacts a flat ontology, an equality of species, a level interest in all living things, not just humans. In her work the ingredients that make up the organic recipe for the survival of bodies, spirits and therefore society itself are animated and valued beyond culturally specific, and therefore potentially redeemable, levels of consumption.

Crisp's art in *Yuiquimbiang* is as accumulative as spinifex, her botanical knowledge so deep and vast precisely because she never allows herself to be isolated in that one discipline.

In its archival textures of Gippsland this collection has a precursor of sorts in Laurie Duggan's 1988 volume, *The Ash Range*, but more tragically than book Crisp's work operates as a catalogue of the land's demise.

At times her litany of degradation becomes repetitive in an unmusical way, but even this serves to reflect the truth of which she, as a writer in English, is part: "A hundred languages / of heath reduced to / monocultural bracken". The aesthetic question flowing from this is whether these "bracken barrens" can be rendered effectively in a verse that avoids the pitfalls of its own obsessive dirge.

Ultimately, though, in this undoubtedly grief-stricken but nevertheless inspiring volume Crisp does prove herself a singer, especially in the frankly lyrical end to the collection where she dreams of riding a flying carpet of endemic grassland flowers.

In this she allows her imagination to lament and to resuscitate, depicting colonial and industrial impacts on the landscape as having created "isolated fragments of remnant grassland / rare sites like exquisite stars".

Indeed, *Yuiquimbiang* shows us how the failure of settlement was as much a failure of the imagination as anything else.

The land was a living text all along, a vade mecum of the stars, a bible with its own annunciations and assumptions, a grand alchemical manual, a delicious cookbook, a compendium of medicine and humour, and a poetic collection, too, of images, sounds, scents and stories bound together by the inescapable union of nature and culture. If nothing else colonialism has shown us how the richness of that text always depends on the vision of its readers. And this is ultimately what Crisp's art so passionately reinforces. The fact is that there are things to read other than "books", and other ways to read them as well.

The ability to be able to listen to the kinship between word and river, between tongue and heath, song and mountain, is a crucial first step.

Yuiquimbiang demands this process of its reader and rewards the effort with a truly intricate and prodigious sense of place. It is another wonderful addition to our literature's re-engagement with the mosaic-continent nowadays known as Australia.

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