Chapter Seven

Unstitching Fear's Caul

telling life stories

All this wanting creates a black hole
where ghosts and totems whirl and join
passing through into antimatter of art,
the alternate universe in which such certain
deaths as theirs and mine throb with light.

They Inhabit Me
by Marge Piercy
from *My Mother's Body*, 1985

I approached this thesis embodying the dilemmas given story in Toni Morrison's fable. Like the children at the beginning of the fable I held an idea in my hands. It was an ill-defined responsibility and there were questions whose implications I barely understood. Like the old woman, I was groping with my own blindness, taking tentative steps because I know there's danger in detouring away from well-worn paths. Urged on by the fable, I wanted to face fears that were difficult to name rather than hide in my respectability, and I was mindful of the children's passionate plea to the old woman:

> For our sake and yours forget your name in the street; tell us what the world has been to you in the dark places and in the light. Don't tell us what to believe, what to fear. Show us belief's wide skirt and the stitch that unravels fear's caul. (Morrison 1994:28)

Today when I came to write I already had words licking my fingertips before I turned the computer on, 'It has been one of the hardest times of my life, trying to insert my own lived experiences and the stories of the women who participated in my research into an academic arena ...'. That was the beginning of the paragraph I wrote, and later deleted. It was too defensive, trying too hard to justify my research, my approach, perhaps my self. I have been trying too hard to insert myself in a narrow slit of opportunity in academic discourse.

I have been trying to insert my self in the s/lash. The s/lash, wherever it occurs, signifies a break or a rupture. The s/lash is a fissure. It represents a place perilously between one way of being and another. The s/lash cuts through a whole web of experiences, ambivalences and ambiguous knowledge. Entering the s/lash is to open Pandora's Box, it is to undo the stitch that maintains the veil of coherence, fear's caul, and to remove woman's *hood.*

My desire to claim the s/lash for the speaking/writing woman is the focus of this chapter as I think back over the questions I posed at the end of Chapter One. Claiming the s/lash as a legitimate speaking position provides women the opportunity to reflect on the resilience of practices fabricated in the emotions. This chapter considers the challenge of undoing fears that inhibit women from speaking/writing self. I look back at my use of collective biography and memory work in this research, as a process of un/learning and opening up the previously un/authorised position of the embodied woman/self. My work has used poststructural insights and analytic strategies in support of feminist aims towards social change. By prising open

intersecting discourses and practices that fuse power, material conditions and bodily experience in a closed circuit (Adair 2001:452) this work has demonstrated that the personal is indeed political. The performance of respectability is influential in achieving women's compliance with gender and class practices that become entangled by emotional investments. Discourses such as *bohemia* are cut through with sanctions that effectively silence women's desires if they transgress respectability, and constrain women's understanding of self within a patriarchal framework.

In this last chapter I explore issues raised throughout the thesis that limit and constrain women in their quests for self-representation. Collective biography and memory work are enabling methods for women to explore the experience of their own author/ity by taking their personal stories in their own hands. The shift of perspective this allows, from objectivity to embodied knowing, begins to unhinge woman's p/lace from its gendered fate.

Entering the s/lash also begins to unpick the hold of violence implicit in polarities. To enter the s/lash is a life and death move if women are ever to be free. I am not speaking only esoterically. Brushing across disparity allows discursive violence a route of expression in lived practices. This is evident when tensions encompassed in the performance of respectability erupt.

Once there was a girl named Leigh, who by a quirk of fate became Leigh Leigh when her mother remarried. When she was fourteen, Leigh was repeatedly raped and then murdered at a beach party in Stockton, NSW. Leigh's is a story about life and death in the borderlands of respectability. It's a story that inhabits me.

This is a storyline in the narrative of respectability that inhabited me long before that violent night in November 1989 when Leigh's dead body was abandoned in the sand dunes. Leigh is the embodiment of fears I learned growing up. In that storyline girls are responsible for our own safety even while we learn gendered attributes that inscribe dependence, lack of strength and powerlessness according to cultural myths associated with the heterosexual binary. There is violence as well as fear in this paradox that robs girls of freedom. Robin Morgan (2001:322) describes the paradox as a psychosis that women live, silently. The psychosis is disguised by respectability, a resilient discursive hood whose chameleon qualities unhinge the connections between personal responsibility and social need, at the same time as they obscure the discursive dance that binds them dependent on each other. Kerry Carrington (1998)

demonstrates this phenomenon in the book she wrote about the criminal investigation into Leigh's murder. Carrington (1998:138) explains, for instance, that in crimes of sexual violence, 'victims are understood in simplistic and dichotomous terms. They are either the outlaws of femininity who somehow invited their attack, or the golden girls of innocence whose rape [...] represents a gross violation of the virtuous'.

Respectability came to assume prime significance in the rape and murder of fourteen-year-old Leigh Leigh, shifting public attention away from the ritual degradation, sexual violence and her murder (Carrington 1998:129). Responsibility for the crimes perpetrated on Leigh was shifted away from the perpetrators to the victim, in a glossing over of the obvious anti social and sexist behaviour that took place at the party. What emerges is an attempt to preserve the semblance of social cohesion in the working class community (Carrington 1998). Respectability and shared moral values are aspects of the need and desire for social stability, however shifting responsibility to individuals can disguise antisocial behaviour and its origins in gendered relations, as happened during the investigation of Leigh's murder. The discursive violence enfolded in dominant class and gender discourses became a deadly cocktail of actual violence perpetrated on Leigh in her murder, and later in explanations of the events of that night, which cast shadows on her behaviour and character. The investigation and the community responses discursively re/packed the devastating acts to preserve a semblance of function and stability in the local community which replaced Leigh as the innocent victim of the crime (Carrington 1998:147). Ultimately blame for the rapes was conferred on Leigh anecdotally, and none of the perpetrators of the rapes was prosecuted. Only one boy was convicted for Leigh's murder that followed the gang rape (Carrington 1998:x). Kerry Carrington (1998:174) is concerned about why the rapes don't matter. She frames the book with the query, *Rape Doesn't Matter?* But of course it is Carrington's conviction that rape does matter that motivated her to write the book. Carrington concludes the book by acknowledging the conflict she experienced herself, between understanding intellectually the dilemma of pursuing the perpetrators of the rapes, and her emotional difficulty in accepting the outcome that did not pursue the perpetrators (Carrington 1998:174).

Felicity Holland and Jane O'Sullivan (1999) have explored the film *Blackrock*, based on Leigh's murder, and their discussion reveals similar problems and uncomfortable dilemmas arising in the film. Holland and O'Sullivan's critique of *Blackrock* makes a clear statement of the gender conflict underpinning the crime and they suggest that even the film, 'in its own way appears partially complicit with those operations of misogyny and violence that it

simultaneously critiques' (Holland 1999:84). While 'the rape is a hideous exercise of power, yet it speaks of a desperate sense of powerlessness' (Holland 1999:84). Ambivalences and ambiguities in the discourse of respectability are evident in the film which is identified as 'bound up with fears and grievances that result from male–female relationships'(Holland 1999:84). Significantly the film draws out the problem of dealing with actual crimes when they are associated with 'celebratory images of a youthful and exuberant Australia' (Holland 1999:84). This final cautionary comment is a painful reminder of the ease of brushing over complexity and obliterating the victim under pleasing, (and palatable) images (Holland 1999:79).

Respectability is implicated in the crimes and the injustices perpetrated on Leigh. It is an innocuous, even sanctimonious sounding concept in comparison with the crime of rape, but my argument in this thesis is ultimately, that the effects of the concept *respectability* matter very much to women's experiences of self, because it obscures violence and fear inherent in its sanctions and in the difficulty of reconciling rationality and emotions, where rationality is privileged. Violations such as rape are minimised by the performance of respectability when blame and responsibility are shifted to the victim through moral discourses that have a punitive underside. When I was a child I understood that one of the worst violations of respectable behaviour was to reveal private life and emotions. Feelings such as my gut knotting fear of a man within our family circle were contained, closed off and out of the bounds of discussion by my requisite knowledge of respectability. His abuse of me was well protected by closure on the narrative of the good girl that shaped my life, respectably. The s/lash that binds public and private in a naturalised hierarchy neatly packages abuse in silence.

The difficulty of reconciling ambiguities and ambivalences is summarised by the s/lash. Poststructural analysis is a fruitful way to grapple with the s/lash because it opens up for interrogation messy and dis/orderly con/fusion, such as the rational and emotional discourses Kerry Carrington expresses (1998:174). Poststructural analysis makes room for in/sight.

My determination to bring embodied knowing to this research has confronted me with the s/lash. That between place is very much an actual location. My body is the sinewy site of joined up connection between polarities like my own subjective experiences and the material manifestations of structures that intersect in my life. Margaret Somerville (1999) writes about such a place in *Body/Landscape Journals,* where she is reflecting on her excitement in writing relationships between body and place. Margaret refuses binary logics and explores the s/lash,

not as break or rupture, but the site of seeping joined-upness, a place of fusion (1999:151). Margaret (1999:151) recalls a conversation with Laura Hartley, where Laura speaks about her pleasure in the unboundedness of 'access to both the semiotic (body/mother) and the symbolic (language/father)'. The enthusiasm Margaret and Laura express about this unbounded fusion is the exact opposite to unhingedness and is a celebration of connections where sanity is also possible (Somerville 1999:151).

My work displays too much unhingedness for my liking. There is too much writing either one side of the s/lash or the other. My writing is sometimes personal, other times theoretical, and not mixing the two very well. It feels like a madness that dances me from one to the other, threatening to split my body in two. This is a dialectic Margaret says must be acknowledged if we are to disrupt the liberal humanist self (Somerville 2004:51). It means keeping sight of the body at sites of subject formation, and oppression. I want to write the place of unbounded fusion (Somerville 1999:151), but that is unfamiliar. Cixous (1997:170) writes that in entering the unknown, 'fear is necessary, instability: setting foot right in the text's earth, so as to be able to let oneself go there, blindly, doing the splits'.

When I was at school, some girls could do the splits and I was always envious of them. I tried, but my legs didn't have the supple tones and stretchability. The stinging in my thighs was bad enough, but I imagined myself like a dolly peg splitting right up the middle in two. I didn't know that physical movements like doing the splits require practice, lots of practice, and stretching until suppleness is achieved. Eventually the practice becomes invisible and the splits look natural and effortless.

Rethinking childhood memories, writing life stories, writing against the grain of traditional academic research to write from within the between place – to write fusion rather than rupture – these all require practice. Telling and retelling stories reflexively undoes habitual practices to reveal storylines that shape self-representation. For women who are more familiar with dissociation and disconnection it takes practice to explore embodiment and to listen to embodied knowing lodged in the body. I have struggled in this academic work to re/member my body. Margaret says that the body is usually the abject in theoretical work, and then she goes on to write:

> Kristeva's abject is always a space of disgust. I want to turn her abject on its head and claim as a positivity this space of becoming, the not quite separate, not quite the same,

> the space of the abject, which allows one to be *corporeal* as well as *speaking* subject, out of the fluid space of the sea. (Somerville 1999:152)

However, writing the place of fusion, or claiming the abject as a space of becoming, is not an intuitive act, though it may well be the home of intuition. Speaking the s/lash involves danger and vulnerability. The attempt to uncouple female self-knowing from patriarchal ideology and untangle the overlay of social and cultural learning is experimental, and often involves a negotiation with fears that are both immediate and/or perceived. Fear may be expressed as uncertainty or a hesitancy to overcome, and it is naturalised by a culture where violence against women is not an uncommon threat or response. The threat of actual physical violence and covert sanctions that are aggressive can necessitate women's silence. Fear is not necessarily displayed in a demonstration of fearfulness, because an individual is not always aware of the "'motives and repressions which constitute the real driving force of [...] action'". (Weber quoted in Johnson 2002:13). As Toni Morrison's fable illustrates, it is important to listen to fears, and listen for fears.

It rings true that when women attempt to speak the body's affective responses to their lived social position and speak or write outside of their familiar contexts it is seen, in Kristeva's terms, as either 'madness, holiness or poetry', (1982 quoted in Grosz 1989:77). This was evident in the Lifestory Workshops, in the stories of attempted suicide, quest for spirituality, and bohemian tendencies as responses to frustration with the life lived. 'Madness', an expression of inappropriate behaviour, came up in the Workshops in a frivolous way in discussions and more seriously in Maryanne's story about when she was institutionalised after her attempted suicide. Some of the women explained their search for self as spiritual, however, for most of the women, taking time to think about their lives and writing was an indulgence that had negative associations reflected in the indolent behaviour associated with a bohemian lifestyle.

The evidence of fears about writing ability and lack of education, as well as hesitations about exploring self, are class and gender responses reflecting the alienating work of classifying practices. Since self-reflection is often considered either therapy or indulgence, I will side with Cixous and Calle- Gruber (1997:170) and situate the life writing as an artistic endeavour that is an attempt to bring the personal into the social world, an incursion of the semiotic into the symbolic, and therefore, an act of creative resistance to hegemonic practices.

The work of Cixous, like Kristeva and Irigaray, is sophisticated and often criticised on account of the privilege it represents, yet the writing both fascinates and challenges me in its movement beyond familiar ways of expression. Cixous' (1997:167) floribunda writing has 'no allegorical figure of liberty [...] except through the cracks: where unconnecting connects' and 'the eternal making surges from the breath of the letters'. However, the level of literary and philosophical sophistication of these women does place the writing beyond everyday access and comprehension. Yet, the lyrical flow entices me and I read as I might hear a song in a foreign language or watch the beauty of a religious ceremony in Bali, listening with intuition.

Dominant discourses[18] are seductive. They are a flow of rational ideas distinct from intuition and infused with cultural storylines. In the Lifestory Workshops I drew on experiences the women were likely to be familiar with, using the resources relied on to negotiate everyday life. Of course this is a great unknown and unknowable, but my aim was to not assume a particular prior expertise and to allow women who may have been marginalised through poverty, class, age, ability or any combination of disadvantage to reimage their lives and experiences from what they know of life themselves. Collective biography and life storying, as I developed them in the Workshops, went some distance to achieving this aim. Ultimately telling life stories, writing and speaking beyond the familiar involved undoing objectivity and re/learning ways to express self, and that is a courageous act.

In this thesis I have been interested in the role of discourse in structuring women's subjectivity as a fate of gender. My work contributes to the de/mystification of women's own self-repression (Mies 1998:71) through a focus on the emotional landscape. My decision to adapt collective biography and memory work to use for data collection has proved useful in ways I had not anticipated. Most significantly, collective biography demonstrated the ability to stretch and limber up imagination, and the gradual uncoupling of personal stories from the bounds of constraint in dominant discourses. Unlike therapies that also rely on talk and run the risk of undoing the whole fabric of identity (Irigaray 1993:161), collective biography stretches memory to unfurl untold stories and, new ways of telling. Collective biography allowed participants to enter the s/lash, and it revealed discourses fused with class and gender that effect narrative closure on the self. The gentle stretching of collective biography unpicks exclusions that have shaped self-knowing, not in abstract concepts, but through the memory

[18] Discourse from Latin *discursus* running to and fro (*Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles* 2002)

of actual lived experiences that reveal fear's caul fabricated by the hand or eye of the other, in me.

Looking back over this research now, through the lens of collective biography, I will bring together the basic tenets of the memory work, the adaptations I made, and show how life storying has the potential to refocus women's self-reflexive gaze beyond familiar discourses.

Revisiting collective biography in the Lifestory Workshops

Collective biography is a practical demonstration of intersubjective and collective learning through conversation. The group work of collective biography mimicked situations that motivated me to start this research.

The initial conversational phase fostered confidence, and allowed each individual to make their own decisions about how much or how little information they shared. Some of the participants spoke more often than others, some were more prolific writers and Bea didn't have time to write at all, but she said the work 'got her thinking'. Her participation in the sessions was lively and stimulating. Angelina only put a story into written words after four weeks. Taking a flexible approach to the outcomes of the Lifestory Workshops was a departure from the basic tenets of collective biography, which is considered a collaborative research method with specific named outcomes.

During the course of the Workshops, discourses that marginalised the women and appeared likely to have silenced them previously became clear. However, it is important to acknowledge that silence is not in itself detrimental but can also be an act of resistance or revolution as Diane Bell and Renate Klein (1996:xxvii) point out when they write that 'telling a woman's story can be a revolutionary act: but, under certain circumstances, so can silence'.

My interest is in the silences shaped by the negative construction of women's subjectivity. Significantly, conversations early in the Workshops revealed an embodied belief that some parts of a woman's life are not worth remembering or writing, an observation Ruth Wajnryb (2001:282) also makes. Silence involves more than experiences that are *not said* and waiting to be spoken, silence is a response or an effect of other experiences, even though it is also sometimes a conscious choice (Wajnyrb 2001:282). The Lifestory Workshops revealed that silence is an absence carved in response to embodied knowledge that is not necessarily consciously recognised. In her work, Ruth Wajnryb (2001:282) found that silence is

multiplicitous and exists in compounding layers of responses that are fused and muddled around absence. Silence is not an absolute, not a blanket effect that extinguishes sounds but rather it carries its own messages encoded as a function of the stories told, as Ruth Wajnryb (2001:282) explains. Silence has its own storylines crafted within master narratives.

Recognising the absences of stories thought to be unworthy, finding confidence in the ability to write, identifying storylines muddled by silence and smoothed over by dominant discourses, were all accomplished in the Workshops. Although not specifically named as intentions, these were some of the issues that came up in the questions and conversations in response to stories told.

Although the Lifestory Workshops were not part of a collaborative research project, our beginning place was not altogether different from how women beginning collective biography and thinking about embodiment formally for the first time, also experience it. Bronwyn Davies (2000b:47), for example, explains that her colleague, Sue Gannon, was initially, 'caught up in the landscape of student/teacher binaries, handing all authority to me'. An awareness of, and sensitivity to, lines of authority and hierarchies are well learnt lessons of feminine subjectivity. Likewise authority, as it is invested in the student/teacher binary, was initially a concern of mine for the Workshops, but the significant related issue I detected was to do with who *has* knowledge, who it *belongs* to, and the notion of truth and truth claims.

Life stories: truth or fiction?

The participants in the Lifestory Workshops wanted to learn ways to make their stories into *legitimate* autobiography that told *the truth* about their lives. They judged their writing abilities and ways of telling against both professionally written biographical and fictional works. Most of the women perceived a knowledge and creativity threshold they needed to cross in order to speak and to write. They were not confident of their abilities, and some of the women were frustrated with writing they had already done. They looked to me for tools to give them knowledge and facilitate the *process* of writing an interesting and objective viewpoint.

Lena for instance, had been writing throughout her adult life, including a considerable chunk of her memoirs, but she wasn't entirely satisfied with the writing. In Davies' (2000b:50) collective biography process there are identified ways of challenging and refining the stories by unpacking experiences explained away, for example, by looking specifically for clichés

and gender binaries. However, in the Lifestory Workshops issues raised by stories were discussed in a less formal way when and if they came up in the conversations, because I didn't want to introduce procedures that might inhibit storytelling. As Davies suggests, clichés and common language reveal nuances in the lived relation to language, for example as classed and gendered. These are inroads to embodied experiences I encouraged the women to write. Never the less, my aim wasn't entirely different from Davies since both approaches seek meanings enfolded in language practices. In a sense my approach was a step prior to Davies. The participants in the Workshops needed encouragement to write in language they were familiar with, because they were inhibited by the notion they must write with a level of expertise that precludes writing the everyday language that might, for example, produce clichés.

Nevertheless, issues that challenged the writing and stories did come up in Workshop discussions, for example when Lena expressed her frustration with writing she had done in the past:

> *I do know that what I write often doesn't turn out the way I feel it,*
> *how I feel about it.*
> *One of the frustrating things about the writing...*
> *and all these feelings...*
> *that sometimes the words just are not sufficient.*
> *The words just don't have the punch of the energy that you want,*
> *of the emotion that you want.....*

Bea:

> *that's the frustrating thing about language I think,*
> *there is so much of it,*
> *but so little of it is actually useful*

Lena:

> *a lot of it doesn't really reflect what you feel.*

I was initially confused about what Lena meant by this comment because she was resistant to writing about emotions in her memoir, as discussed in Chapter Six. Lena, like Angelina, was a storyteller who told vivid oral stories that were evocative and engaging, yet her written

stories took on a descriptive objectivity that failed to convey the meanings she felt and desired to her own satisfaction.

Like all the participants in the Lifestory Workshops Lena wanted to represent her life stories in a well formed, neat and tidy way as though the many threads and strands could be woven to artistic coherence. The women looked to me for ideas about how to weave their stories together beautifully and coherently. However, there were several prior steps I considered important, beginning with the idea that there are different threads of stories. I wanted to undo the idea that an individual has *one* life story they might represent in the dimensional capacity of a tapestry. Though metaphors can be powerful bridges between language and consciousness, the idea that life is a tapestry is inadequate or at best misleading, as Marion Halligan writes in her novel, *Lovers Knots*:

> Life is not a rich tapestry. Its shapes and colours are not delineated in tidy threads, rather in a human eye view anyway they're a matted tangle like water hyacinth in a river, beautiful possibly and charmingly named, but what a pest. But okay, you want to stick to the tapestry idea, maybe the definition of God is seeing the right side, the front, while we mortals have to make do with the reverse, the back, the knots and tangles and rough ends, and work out the pattern as best we can. (Halligan 1993:376)

The tapestry metaphor assumes a view of life separate from the body, packaged in tidy objectivity and observed from a distance. This notion facilitates narrative closure that provides answers to questions out of its own completion, albeit a representation of multiplicity. However, as Marion Halligan (1993) puts it, the neatly finished *right* side is a god's eye view. This view of coherence assumes the liberal humanist subject position, a patriarchal perspective that has a hold on legitimacy. It sutures apprehension onto women's self-knowing and can produce silence.

One of the first tasks in the Workshops was to find the storylines in the knots and tangles of life experiences. However, introducing the idea of complexity and multiplicity in life stories was asking the participants to risk confusion or conflict with other family narratives and other versions of life experiences. However, I thought that the women's participation in the group was an exploration of their agency and a step that nurtured agency.

This exploration is reminiscent of Rosamund Dalziell's (1999:258) remark that changing power relations, both personal and more broadly social, were demonstrated in beginning autobiographical writing. In her research looking at shame, Dalziell (1999:258) found that

writing autobiography is a step to increased agency. Deciding to write life stories appeared to be a similar step for the participants in my study.

In the Workshops we discussed the idea of different *truths,* depending on who was telling the story. Some of the women expressed a fear of potential conflict with family members, while others hesitated to acknowledge that no single perspective on family and life experiences had a legitimate hold on *the truth.* There was an expectation that when events were stripped down to a linear sting of experiences, *a truth* would be revealed. However, like some of the other women, Bea had observed that she and her younger siblings had different versions of their family life, and she was relieved to hear that this is not uncommon.

Bea:

> *That's quite a relief,*
> *To know everyone's viewpoint is different.*
> *even though you grew up in the same house,*
> *and you had what you think,*
> *that all your experiences were the same.*
> *But each person has an individual way of interpreting that experience*
> *And I found that very relieving, you know,*
> *Listening to what my brother might have to say about a certain situation,*
> *I'd think, 'oh streuth'*

Authority, legitimacy, validity and truth were concepts that had a resilient hold on the women's auto/biographical imaginations. Discussions about these issues in the Lifestory Workshops helped to refocus the participants' reflexive gaze to an embodied self-reflexivity.

Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (2001:47) have challenged the assumption that autobiography represents a unified story about a coherent subject, stressing that, 'there is no coherent "self" that predates stories about identity, about "who" one is. Nor is there a unified, stable immutable self that can remember everything that has happened in the past'. Undoing the hold of the past as fixed and not negotiable stimulated a playful flexibility of imagination and loosened the grip of rationality over embodied memories in the Workshops. I encouraged the women to take pleasure in the story work, joining up odd pieces, then fleshing out obscure traces to find the storylines threaded within their memories.

I was concerned by the women's dismissive approach to the family scrapbooks and albums they said they had made, such as the one Claire brought in to Show and Tell (Chapter Five). The scrapbooks were another site of ambivalence where the women judged their personal endeavours against the authority invested in public knowledge. In particular I resisted the negative connotation of scraps and reiterated the worth of these books that had been painstakingly and lovingly made. In essence though, the stories that were told in the Workshops *were* scraps, to be gathered rather than discarded (like rose petals for pot-pourri). The scrapbooks were useful in the way Margaret Somerville (1990:42) explains that the stitching together of 'talk and text', including photographs, brings multiplicity together for a time, and with it, the possibility of new discourses of the self. The scrapbooks probably represented particular desires of the maker, but they also offered multiple ways of viewing family life and different storylines. Making scrapbooks is a useful technique for women to explore their lives because it is familiar and accessible, yet I remain concerned about use of the word, *scraps*. Women's ingenuity in making use of odd scraps is often a source of pride and delight, however, the negative association attached to scraps as rejected, worthless and disposable is very real for women whose lives are characterised by the necessity of making ends meet.

The place of emotions in the writing was a problem often discussed within the shadow cast by the notion of *truth*. There was confusion over writing *about* emotions and writing *embodied* stories or memories, writing *self* and writing *about* selves. A shift in perspective was needed to bring awareness of truths to be found in embodied stories. This shift does not require opening up emotions, but rather listening through the sensory experiences of the body and to intuition. Of course, recognition of sensory input was not unfamiliar to the women. Judy and Martina told stories that very clearly illustrated the value of sensory messages. Judy remembered going inside the school building on her first day of school:

> *Up on this big, big wardrobe,*
> *which was about ten metres in the air,*
> *in my opinion,*
> *was a little girl, sitting on top of it*
> *and she was just screaming and kicking her feet*
> *and thrashing around.*
> *I was down below with my stomach thrashing away too.*

Judy's description illustrates her view of the room and how small she was at the time. She remembered the feeling inside her that the other little girl expressed outwardly. Whether or not this is an accurate version of the event, it provides a wealth of sensory information Judy can draw from to write embodied stories, the sound of the screaming and kicking, the view looking up or the thrashing of her stomach are all evocative beginnings.

Martina also described an evocative experience to the group when she talked about how she brought to mind the day she first understood what *lonely* meant, through her sensory perception. She imagined herself the little girl she had been more than seventy years before, on a boat in a very quiet place. By putting herself back in that landscape imaginatively, the experience of understanding *lonely* that first time flowed back to her.

Martina:

> *I was a child on a boat with my parents,*
> *(and I was really into the child, I talked childish)*
> *I still remember the feeling of this word in my mouth,*
> *Lonely.*

Martina remembered the moment the meaning became clear to her:

> *As we sat quietly looking out over the wide water in the late summerlight,*
> *I was very aware of there being just us in all of that,*
> *and I remarked, It's lone-ly here.*
> *It was a word I had read in stories,*
> *and now I knew just what it meant,*
> *but it felt strange in my mouth.*
> *I saw the grownups look at each other.*

What was that feeling in her mouth? Why did she recognise 'late summerlight'? I encouraged the women to imagine the experience in their bodies, of emotions as well as the senses they named, and to write/speak from the memory of that, so that the body could be an absent presence rather than a present absence. The women said that emotional involvement in stories they read is an aspect of the pleasure of reading. Judy explained that emotions are important in stories.

Judy:

well, to me they're really important!
and when I read a novel, um,
the emotion and the fear and the love and the joy
they're so much what makes me so interested.

Lena:

when you're reading a novel you put yourself into it,
you read a novel and all those emotions that come off the page
are something that you personally feel.

Where as Lena explained that you put yourself into a novel, the memory work necessary to write life stories requires an immersion of self in memory. In contrast you discover life stories *inside* yourself. Although the scope of a completed life story is limited by its representation in written words, it does not provide the narrative closure and resolution that fiction traditionally involves because memory work is potentially interminable (Kuhn 2002:6). The difficulty of reconciling fact and fiction, rational and emotional revealed that dissociation is an effect of a perceived a lack of authority to speak, to write, or to be.

The participants in the Workshops were not generally tertiary educated or experienced writers, and while their stories were often descriptive, they unfolded rapidly when the women were given the opportunity to remember. *Talking story* and conversations that followed, began the work of undoing named meanings explained away by words such as shame, confusion, anger and strength. Bronwyn Davies makes the point that practised ways of telling often make lived events inaccessible:

> Writing in collective biography seeks this before-the-naming, before the explanatory words that parcel it up as meaning one thing or another, peel the detail away from it, allow it to go quickly, to be summed up or explained away. (Davies 2000b:50)

During the Lifestory Workshops the participants came to think of named emotions as thresholds or doorways, to new memories, or to experiences before-the-naming (Davies 2000b:50).

When I became aware of the lack of familiarity and confidence in telling embodied stories, I introduced short memory exercises to stimulate ideas and to help the women to recover body

knowing. Exercises to stimulate memories are commonly described in life writing manuals and are often a focus of life writing workshops. I had attended one of Patti Miller's Life Writing Courses a few years before and found the techniques she used for memory work helpful, though not without some problems. These exercises are explained in detail as a series of self-directed activities in *Writing Your Life: A Journey of Discovery* (Miller 1994). I was initially cautious in my use of memory prompt exercises in the Workshops because in my own experience I sometimes found that prompts would catapult me into an experience where I crash landed in a turbulent sea of emotions and painful experiences. By contrast the re-memory work of collective biography allows a more progressive unfolding, though of course painful memories are sometimes uncovered. Generally though, collective biography provides a self-paced and progressive opening of Pandora's Box. Perhaps the heightened reflexivity and awareness of embodied emotions that develops through collective biography allows glimpses of difficult memories so they can be approached with care, or left unexplored until some other time. The process of undoing, or peeling back layers in collective biography is not fragmenting but allows each individual to stretch into the process, gradually finding increased suppleness and courage in the process of re-membering.

With these issues in mind I modified two of Patti Miller's techniques to use as quick, fun exercises in the Workshops. The first exercise involved the participants writing a two-line biography of themselves, and then changing the perspective through the writing of new versions each week. For instance, I suggested they write a biography to accompany an art or craft work in an exhibition, then a biography a partner might write about them, then something they would like to tell others about themselves, and so on. The second exercise involves writing a list of things you have done in your life and then a list of things you have not done. This is a timed exercise with five minutes each part and I asked the women to do this without stopping writing or stopping to think about their responses. As I came to expect, intense and interested conversation accompanied the reading of the biographies and the *have done/have not done* lists. These exercises generated emotions, generally laughter and empathetic murmurings but also a few tears. The exercises were a simple opportunity for the women to remember their lives. The participants enjoyed these exercises that limbered up the imagination and memory. These exercises encouraged the women to draw on their own desires and be reflexive through subsequent discussion of the responses. They also provided many new storylines. The memory prompt exercises were a beginning stage of the *talking story* phase of Davies' collective biography process (Onyx & Small 2001:779). The women were surprised at the variety of experiences they recalled using these methods and I plan to

include a wider variety of short, stimulating memory exercises in each session of Lifestory Workshops I facilitate in the future.

Talking story

In the advertisements promoting the Lifestory Workshops I had written, 'we all have stories to record and keep' and it seemed that this encouraged prospective participants. When I spoke to each of the women prior to the Workshops most of them told me one particular experience or story they had in mind, a story they wanted to record and keep. In retrospect, I understand that these stories were significant, not only as personal stories but also because they perform an important function in giving individuals permission to speak. They were all stories that resonated with narratives that had become public in recent years, for example about sexual abuse, adoption, and war experiences. Having gained public acceptance as stories of our time, those experiences (and others) have shaped legitimated, collective narratives. They provide a discursive framework for individuals to tell their own stories as versions of that narrative. This opens a window of opportunity for people to begin speaking about their own life experiences.

It was apparent these first stories were important to the way the women understood themselves and their lives, even though they were not experiences they had routinely talked about in the past. I began to think of these as *ur stories* after hearing Sidonie Smith use the term at a Seminar I attended at the University of Sydney in 2003. Smith was discussing *the comfort women* she has researched in a recent project[19] with Kaye Schaffer. The comfort women narrative refers to the experiences of women who were prostituted by the Japanese Army for the *comfort* of their personnel during World War Two. Smith referred to the comfort women narrative as an ur story that had enabled many of the women who were previously too shamed, to speak about their experiences as Japanese prisoners.

In an email conversation following the Seminar in Sydney, Professor Smith explained to me that she had used the term *ur story* loosely rather than as a clearly defined concept. Smith explained her use of ur stories as 'designating a common story that while there are variations, it suggests something fundamental or central in the form that stories about certain experiences take' (private email correspondence, 1st July 2003).

[19] This research is an aspect of the discussion in Smith and Schaffer's newly released book, *Human Rights and Narrated Lives: The Ethics of Recognition* (published by Palgrave McMillan late 2004), and the topic of the seminar she presented at Sydney University 2003.

I took up Sidonie Smith's use of the term *ur stories* to describe particular stories women used as authorising narratives (Skeggs 1997b:167). Similarly to authorising narratives the ur stories are a symbolically legitimate narrative used to explain subjectivity. However, the ur stories also make fundamental links with significant collective stories representing an ur myth. The concept *ur myth* is used in folklore to refer to the original or archetypal form of a narrative (Green 1997:823). According to Green it is 'composed at a specific historical moment in a specific historical place' (1997:643). Ur myths often follow an ancient heroic or quest storyline. Carolyn Heilbrun (1989:48) says that for women to pursue an heroic quest plot they have to invent an eccentric story, however, the ur stories provided an already legitimated story that the women used to speak their own experience of heroic survival. The identification of an ur story allowed the women in my study to contemplate telling their life stories and offered them an *authorised* speaking out position that is not stereotypically feminine, pathological, deviant or fetishised.

There are several points central to the form of ur stories. The ur stories place the experience in an historical context, they follow the pattern of an heroic quest plot, they are legitimated by their common acceptance and they build on folkloric myths that make a link with something more than human experience – spiritual endeavour. The ur stories involve a masculine humanist understanding of the subject with their focus on the individual as hero (Davies 2000a: 47), a position that is not usually available to women. The reliance on the ur story is indicative of the extent to which women feel their everyday lives are not worthy of remembering, and they have learnt to understand themselves as not legitimate and without experiences that authenticate their lives other than stereotypically.

In her article, *Identity and Lone Motherhood*, Vanessa May (2004:170) uses the concept of 'narrative identity' to explain how people locate themselves as an individual in social relationships. May (2004:171) points to an interrelationship between 'foundation myths' of the self that are usually anecdotes used to explain identity, and 'ontological narratives' which are recurring experiences that locate the individual in relation to the key patterns of dominant narratives. Both of these types of narratives are readily available to women. The stories I refer to as ur stories differ from both foundational and ontological narratives because they are based on stories that are collectively meaningful rather than anecdotal, and are stories that are outside of the everyday of dominant discourses.

I did not focus on the ur stories at all in the Workshops, or identify them in any way to the group but the concept *ur story* is a very useful consideration to the issue of women and

silence. The ur stories are influential and they frame a speaking position hinging on a single important event where adversity is experienced and/or overcome. Ur stories provide a context that validates personal experiences in a public discourse. The ur story situates the individual in a particular significant context within historical time, social conditions and political trends. In this way the ur story is a link between the personal and the political. That link also validates certain physical and emotional responses, and personal traits associated with the experience at the centre of the ur story. An example of this would be the current understanding that many Vietnam Veterans experience symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Typical storylines I heard that drew on an ur myth were; abandonment through adoption, the Second World War, and overcoming adversity. These have become legitimate speaking out frameworks due to intense public interest in personal testimonies of experiences such as the holocaust, the stolen generation, and sexual abuse.

The opportunity to speak through the ur stories also gave the women an opportunity to speak their defiance, transgression, individuality, strength or some other attribute they had no means of articulating in the conventional narratives commonly available to them. For example dominant narratives about motherhood don't accommodate courage and bravery even though the passive representations of those attributes are aspects of the dominant discourse of motherhood, that is, selflessness and devotion. Rachel was able to identify herself positively and actively through her ur story about World War Two. Therefore, the ur stories radically disrupted the everyday discourses in the women's lives and demonstrated what Dorte Marie Sondergaard (2002:199) calls 'cultural competence', the individual's use of cultural tools for the purpose of self-realisation.

An ur story offered the women a legitimated speaking position and perhaps satisfied the perception that there is an explanatory truth at the root of life experiences. In the Workshops many of the experiences related through the ur stories were discourses that defied respectability, resisted feminine subjectivity or stereotypes. Stereotypical feminine storylines are dismissive of women's work, and do not provide a frame for an individuated understanding and sense of self, while the ur stories do provide a route to an individuated storyline that is *legitimate*. Through the transgression of common stereotypes, ur stories can provide a step towards a more agentic position and the participants demonstrated this in

coming to the Lifestory Workshops. Effectively the women were *answering back* to stereotypical storylines through the identification of an ur story.

Ur stories are not without problems. Sidonie Smith was concerned that her informants would take up the narrative of the comfort woman as the one and only speaking position available to them. In Smith and Schaffer's research, where the women have received wide publicity and media interest on account of the comfort women narrative, it is a worrying possibility that the women could be fixed in a perpetual victim position by that story. During the seminar Smith gave in Sydney, she expressed the hope that the narrative of the comfort women would not be the only speaking out position taken up by the women in her study, but would lead to increasing empowerment.

The ur stories were a very important bridge to taking up a speaking out position for the women in the Workshops. Although these were important stories in the women's lives I did not encourage the participants to write their ur stories in the Workshops. Instead, I encouraged experimentation with everyday stories. Though the ur stories enabled the women to take up a speaking out position, they are a passageway, not a final destination, because the ur myths that underpin these stories locate women's quest for self within typically patriarchal storylines and spirituality.

Writing story

The women's willingness and capabilities to talk about their lives and question each other was not matched by confidence in writing or recording. Their enjoyment was obvious and I was concerned that *writing* might silence them, so we primarily talked and the women read stories they had written at home.

In the following conversation, Jenny is talking about her response during the intervening week to the previous session. She identifies absences and silences that she has previously experienced; feeling isolated from others, not being able to talk to her mother, always being in a hurry. Often conversations such as this one involved fleeting fragments that on reflection, signposted new and uncharted memories. Premature birth was a storyline that surprisingly framed the lives of three of the women in the first group in the way of an ur story. These women all weighed less than two and a half pounds when they were born, at a time when the chances of the survival of premature babies was poor. Survival and resilience were only some

of the storylines that intersected, and were revealed in the premature birth stories, as Jenny shows.

Jenny:

when I was trying to remember it took me back to my birth,
and like we talked about last week,
I was two months premature and
um I came in a real hurry.
And I was thinking that as a child I was always in a hurry,
I didn't walk anywhere, I ran everywhere.
And I don't know what the hurry was.
I just remember as a child I was a real little tomboy
and I was always in a hurry,
I've slowed up since then.
I've put it in terms of well, that I was in a humidicrib for so long.
I mean I haven't got anyone to talk about these things,
my mum she passed over a long time ago and
anyway she wasn't one to talk about these things,
but maybe that's why I always felt a bit isolated from her.
Well from everyone,
maybe it was spending those first weeks in a humidicrib.

Jenny's questions about the impact of being born prematurely are significant to the way she interprets her life in this discussion. Her questions reveal knowledge of dominant discourse about mother and child bonding, or a belief that activity in a girl is tomboyish behaviour. Jenny understands her life in this short piece in traditional biologically determined discourses related to feminine expectations. She makes sense of her life through discourses she is familiar with, but in telling this story Jenny draws into embodied memory when she turns her questions to why she was in a rush and her feelings of isolation.

Growing confidence

Roxanne Rimstead's research into poor and working class women's autobiography has been a useful resource helping me to clarify factors that inhibited writing in the Workshops, even though I would not classify the participants in my research within Rimstead's frame of reference. I have avoided making statements about the participants' class positions and

instead have noticed how they position themselves against various markers of class. For example, a number of the women identified their lives as being financially precarious and reliant on Government benefits, some saw their lack of education as a disadvantage, others had been marginalised from employment opportunities due to parenting responsibilities.

My interest in Rimstead's work is in regard to her observations about women, autobiography and marginalisation. In her analysis of C. T. Sand's story, *A Question of Identity*, Rimstead (1997:264) elaborates two particular types of exclusions that impact on writing by women who are marginalised, firstly 'symbolic exclusion' through use of language and secondly, a 'sense of lived exclusion' due to cultural isolation. Both bore relevance to activities in the Workshops. Several of the participants saw their lack of education as a limitation to telling their life stories, and writing their stories was a huge threshold for many of the women to cross.

Several of the participants were concerned about what they perceived to be limitations in their command of words and language. Maryanne reiterated Bea's thoughts on the vastness of language and lamented her inadequacy with vocabulary. She explained that she had enlisted the help of a work colleague to extend her vocabulary by suggesting daily words for Maryanne to learn by memorising the meaning found in a dictionary. Yet another woman had attempted to go through an entire page of words in the dictionary everyday to improve her use of words. There was a general perception that words, and *mastery* over language, were the key to representing experiences in an interesting way.

Melissa:

> *well I've had lots of experiences*
> *but I don't know how to put it into words,*
> *I don't know enough about writing to get it out right.*

Bea:

> *hmmm, that's why we're here.*

Certainly writing is a learnt skill that takes practice and experience to shape texts in particular ways, however the bigger hurdle for the participants in the Lifestory Workshops was taking their author/ity to write, and actually putting any words on paper. Initially I encouraged the women to step over the hurdle of expectation about style or innovation in their stories by acknowledging then ignoring it, and writing anyway. I emphasised that words are ingredients,

but unlike the ingredients needed for cake making, words can be reweighed, substituted, changed or removed. I supplied ring bound exercise books in beautiful colours for the workshop writing, explaining that pages could easily be torn out and destroyed if they chose. It was important to give the women power over their memories and their written words so they could experiment with greater freedom from self censorship, and to undermine the notion that only perfect words should be written. Written words were initially seen as permanently fixing meaning as truth.

I tried to install value in memories and written words, suggesting the use of a special book to record stories they wanted to keep. Maryanne brought in a small and exquisitely made chest she was giving as a gift for the purpose of storing treasured mementoes. The shift from a notion of sentimentality to finding value in life experiences is tangible in the material act of honing stories to keep, as it also is in untangling the discourses entwined in the keeping of mementoes such as the dolls at home in our cupboards.

As discussed earlier we experimented joining up different fragments of stories by finding common threads in experiences to make links and we also discussed less usual approaches to writing and compiling life stories, such as poetry and journals. Rebecca for example, wrote her stories as letters to an aunt who had died and this approach freed up her writing. During the first two weeks Melissa wrote several long pieces about her life. All she had needed to get started was *permission* and a little encouragement. She wanted to get her stories down on paper as quickly as possible once she had decided to *tell her story* and she covered broad sweeps of her life, revealing a very poignant story, though she wasn't sure it was *creative.*

Melissa:

> *Well what I thought I would do*
> *was start off with parts of my life*
> *and go through almost,*
> *each ten years.*

In taking this approach Melissa covered from her birth to twenty years in two parts, producing four pages of writing about her early life. These stories could be a very useful basis for a far more extensive life writing project.

Reading story

I was very interested in whether reading their stories aloud, or hearing their work read aloud, made any difference to the women's perception of their stories because I perceived a more reflexive stance when the formal writing was vocalised. I knew that it makes a difference to how I perceive my own writing when I read it out loud, or when I read it to other people and so I encouraged everyone to read aloud. Although there was no pressure to read aloud I thought that writing was only a first step in taking their stories proudly in their own hands. The reading aloud of written work always started another conversation and more questions, usually about the content rather than about writing style. Women who didn't have written stories often told stories about experiences they had thought about during the week and explained how those memories had surfaced and the feelings they inspired.

Although the women were willing to read out loud and eager to share their stories, even looking forward to doing so, it wasn't always an easy thing for them to do. Maryanne was typical in her willingness to read her stories, but she apologised for her reading performance.

Maryanne:

I'm sorry,
I'm not skilled,
I'm a bumbler,
when I read out loud.

Voicing the stories they had written was a significant threshold to expressing embodied stories with authority and I suspected that the difficulty was partly a shame response. What might be at play for the women writers and readers? Shame about writing ability, shame about reading ability or performance? Fear of making a mistake? Most likely a trace of all of these, but shame was not related to the content of the stories. It represented embodied fears about performance and the act of taking centre stage and was related to context. There was a definite difference in speaking conversationally and reading the written stories. This also bore the marks of the negative implications suggested by the discourse of bohemia discussed in Chapter Five. Having done the writing there was the possibility it might be seen as a testimony to laziness, could create misunderstanding, or upset someone else, like a mother. In spite of these concerns, the women enjoyed the opportunity to read their stories to the group. As Judy says below, the process of writing and reading her stories was an empowering act.

Judy:

to me it's about power and control when we didn't have it
and to me that's full of emotion,
like it's about anger and frustration,
a lot of negative emotion.
I have found writing stories quite emotional,
really stirs me up....
It's very healing.

(pause)

I'd just like to say
that since doing this writing,
it's got me looking at relationships in the family
and relationships in my life,
and you know,
how it makes one what I am today.

(agreement from the others)

Judy: *it's very useful, and cathartic,*

Rose: *it's a process of self discovery,*
isn't it?

Jenny wanted to read a vignette of a story she had written aloud to the group, however she found it difficult to do so even though she was pleased with her story and keen to share it.

Jenny: *I need to say that I find it difficult reading in a group.*
Rose: *It's scary*
Jenny: *When I was a kid at school I would just avoid it.*

Jenny explained that at school she was considered a good writer and was often required to read her work to the class. She found this excruciatingly embarrassing, being singled out, made a fuss over, having her stories made public and teased on account of her achievements.

Jenny:

I'd freeze up and I'd go all red and shaky,
My voice would shake,
and I got that way in the end,
I purposefully used to sort of
not put my best in then,
because I didn't like having to read out loud.

In the Workshop she was keen to share her stories even though she acknowledged her anxiety. Several of the women read their stories to their partners at home with mixed reception.

As a stage in the process of refining memories and stories in collective biography workshops the reading of the written stories is significant to clarifying issues and receiving feedback from others. While there was some nervousness about reading, pride and pleasure were also evident. Paul Eakin (1999:27) has suggested, drawing on Derrida, that 'psychologically speaking, reflexive consciousness – the self's sense of itself as a self – is liveliest and most immediate in the moment of speech'. According to Joy Hooton (1990:45), this heightened reflexivity may also account for the fact that the narrative voice of so many women's autobiographies is primarily a speaking voice.

I asked the participants if reading aloud made a difference to the way they perceived their own stories:

do you find...
Well, when the words come out of my mouth
it somehow changes...

Lena: *what you're feeling...*

Morgan:

it does.
I read out loud when I am by myself,
when I write something I find if I read it out loud,
just the hearing of it helps me,
and then it's part of my editing process.
I say it like the voice in my head is saying it,

and I am trying to match that feeling...
I find that really useful.
Do you do that?

Lena: *No, not my own stuff.*

However, later on, after reading a number of her stories to the group, Lena said that she found the re reading of her stories to the group an emotional experience.

Lena: *the more you read out loud the better it gets.*

Everyone agreed that it was a positive experience to hear their own stories out loud, through reading them or having them read by another woman. There was a willingness demonstrated in the groups to hand over the reading of written words and listen to their own words being read and in the listening to notice the reader's perception of the meaning as they intimated it in voice expression and intonation. Margot's stories were always read for her because she had difficulty holding the pages because of the arthritis she suffered. The reading instigated animated, interested, engaged and enthusiastic conversations. The women identified reading out loud as a pleasure, even if it initially involved emotional hurdles. Reading out loud was a demonstration of the participants' willingness to make the personal public, and revealed issues involved in working the s/lash.

Using collective biography to find common sense[20]

The evidence of fears in writing ability and shortfalls in education, as well as hesitations about exploring self, are typically respectable responses indicative of the dissociation and disembodiment created by gender and class discourses. When I have linked speaking/writing with subjectivity in my discussion of collective biography in the Workshops I am signalling, not only the attempt to dismantle speaking and writing as binary poles, but also that each similarly involves new thresholds depending on experience, education, confidence and so on. As the Workshops indicated, life stories open up multiple sites of subject formation and thresholds to self-understanding that can be traced through emerging storylines. The process reveals some of those sites, to speak out loud or to write each constitutes a threshold linked with subjective experience, while other sites of subject formation emerge from the storylines.

[20] Common sense is looked for 'recursively', by relating back to earlier discussions and theoretical engagement. This is part of Phase 3 of the collective biography process (Onyx & Small 2001:777)

Intersubjectivity

Stories told in the Lifestory Workshops revealed narratives that position women against social class – respectability and bohemia. These are inextricably linked with a traditional hierarchical and polarised view of gender. The processes (talking, writing, reading stories out loud) also revealed a predisposition to traditional gender narratives related to notions of authority and truth, expressed in hesitations and lack of confidence to speak/write embodied stories. The juxtaposition of the process of storying, and the content of the narratives were both revealed as contributing significantly to the outcomes of this research. Together they demonstrate that intersubjectivity is both an intellectual and a material process, a flow between actual living bodies whose experiences are shaped by threads of meaning made in the body and in the stories we rely on that position us against practices that construct subjectivity. The metaphor of threads is evocative of the multiple lines of connection, storylines and bodylines.

Margaret Somerville (2004:47) uses the term *bodylines*, to extend the idea that we learn about ourselves in the flow of information from one to an/other, through discourses and the eye of the other on us, as these incorporate or envelope, the lived body. In *Tracing Bodylines*, Margaret (2004:47) writes about bodylines as the connections that flow across the physically separated bodies of the thinker, writer, reader, 'My body at the scene of thinking, writing: your body reading, body connection, bodylines'. Here and now, in this piece of writing it is *my* body at the scene of thinking about Margaret's ideas, writing my own, and then another body that is yours, reading. Bodylines are the in/tangible threads of connection between self and other, from Margaret, to me, to you (the reader), spreading fairy floss webs of understanding like Chinese whispers. Bodylines flow through one body's experience, crosscutting webs of ideas from others embedded in their individual storylines. Webs of meaning envelope subject/object, the body in relationship with other bodies, and bodies of ideas. Bodylines map a genealogy of ideas that plots the embodied and relational processes involved in subjectivity and knowledge making.

Body-story flows

The invisible movement of ideas that shape and are shaped by embodied engagement is a process that cannot be cut up into discrete analytical pieces of truth, once and for all. The body/story lines always depend .... On what? On the storylines the body reading and the body writing/speaking already know, in the context of which they are a part. The flow of body and story lines that we use to shape our lives are both subjective and collective, and provide

both a means of 'knowing', and a method of 'telling', as Laurel Richardson (1997:58) explains. The body is the literal site where this intersection of knowing and telling occurs. For a woman to write her life stories from embodied knowing is to write her woman's signature, and to refuse to remove her woman-self from her place on the web of threads and intersecting storylines (Miller 1986:288). Telling and writing embodied life stories is to claim the body before-the-naming (Davies 2000b:50).

As Liz Grosz (1994:23) points out, the body is powerfully placed to critique binary pairs. Storytelling can bring to awareness discourses whose reliance on binary logics has the capacity to disconnect and dissociate women. While the body, as Grosz points out, has the potential to disrupt binary logics because binary pairs:

> can be more readily problematised by regarding the body as the threshold or borderline concept that hovers perilously and undecidedly at the pivotal point of binary pairs. The body is neither – while also being both – the private or the public, self or other, natural or cultural, psychical or social, instinctive or learned, genetically or environmentally determined. In the face of social constructionism, the body's tangibility, its matter, its (quasi) nature may be invoked; but in opposition to essentialism, biologism, and naturalism, it is the body as cultural product that must be stressed. This indeterminate position enables it to be used as a particularly powerful strategic term to upset the frameworks by which these binary pairs are considered. (Grosz 1994:23-4)

❖

I walk on the beach and paddle my feet in the water trying to imagine my body an indeterminate position. My body – cultural product, tangible and strategic?

I puzzle over Grosz' words and find myself going much further than if Misty were still with me. Her short legs used to tire quickly and she would turn for home, still straining against the lead as she sought the comfort of her basket. Then I would either have to carry her in my arms if I wanted to keep on, or go back. But this day, alone, I sit on a mound to watch for dolphins. I skim the surface for splashes and playful sprays of dolphin pleasure, but I see none. Be patient I remind myself, searching the dark shadows now for the flash of one silver body. But, I don't catch even a glimpse of tumbling spray. I draw two huge circles in the sand using just one finger, reaching as far as I can without getting up. Each circle represents one pole of a binary, either side of my in/determinate body. Where is the pivotal point? I draw lines from one circle to the other under my bridge of knees, so many joining-up lines the

circles start to disintegrate, and the sand cakes in the narrow slit under my nail. The damp finds skin with a seeping cold, now my shorts are soaked through, but I draw again. This time, two circles side by side, with an overlap that I know is the diagrammatic representation of Boolean operators designating 'and', a beautifully formed ellipse.[21] *The overlap allows for commonality without reducing either to the coordinates of the other, but the elliptical borderlines trace loss, omissions, lack, and the insufficiency to make complete sense. I stand up, put a foot in each camp moments before a wave laps over the mound and washes the sand smooth. A blanket of soggy grit coats my legs and I'm firmly planted, feet disappeared in the slurry, awashed, with a string of seaweed pearls wrapped around one ankle. But the circles, and the between place, the joining-up lines and the ellipse, they're all gone. And the sand, it's a new blank page.*

[21] ellipse: a symmetrical closed curve traced by a point moving in a plane so that the sum of its distances from two other points is constant.
ellipsis: an omission from a sentence of one or more words which would be needed to complete the sense (*Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles* 2002)

Epilogue

Life's experiences are lodged in the body, often even hidden out of memory. Aren't they disguised by the passage of time, traces inscribed on the flesh, and in muscles? Can't they leach strength from the organs, and vigour from the heart, drawing the mouth into smiles and frowns, weigh the step or the sag of shoulders? Don't they shape looks that flash across a face?

Dad always called mum Twinkle but I never saw it. Mum and her twinkle were an absent presence in my life. I became aware of mum's absence when I first went searching for baby photos of myself and then, for family photos. There are only a few. Positive images of mum were hard for me to conjure until now when she has begun to emerge out of the shadowy folds of memory, from beneath layers and judgments made in my teens.

She's not the woman of my familiar memories. It's that image of her at twenty-one that comes to me now. She's walking across the sand in the days when photographers would snap portraits at random, to sell to their subjects, as Mikelis does in Lover's Knots (Halligan 1993). The few photos of my parents in their youth were snapped that way by street photographers. The photograph of my mother is a beautiful image of a young woman almost smiling, on a beach before her marriage. I find my/self thinking about her more often these days and I recall Adrienne Rich's words:

> at the edge of adolescence, we find ourselves drawing back from our natural mothers [...] It is toward men, henceforth, that our sensual and emotional energies are intended to flow. The culture makes it clear that neither the black mother, nor the white mother, nor any other mothers, are 'worthy' of our profoundest love and loyalty. Women are made taboo to women – not just sexually, but as comrades, cocreators, conspirators. In breaking this taboo, we are reuniting with our mothers; in reuniting with our mothers we are breaking this taboo. (Rich 1985:255)

Breaking this taboo is a way of disbelieving patriarchy's myths and the well-kept secrets of hi/story. It's resistance to the disconnection and dissociation Robin Morgan calls the genius of patriarchy:

If I had to name one quality as the genius of patriarchy, it would be compartmentalisation, the capacity for institutionalizing disconnection. Intellect severed from emotion. Thought separated from action. Human beings categorised: by sex, age, race, ethnicity, sexual preference, height, weight, class, religion, physical ability, ad nauseam. The personal isolated from the political. Sex divorced from love. The material ruptured from the spiritual. The past parted from the present disjoined from the future. Law detached from justice. Vision dissociated from reality.

We are all affected by, wounded by, this capacity. It's reinforced by every institution around us each day. (Morgan 2001:51)

Re/membering mum through connections made in the conversations and storytelling in this thesis is a pleasure and Wyrd outcome.

Mum,
I don't remember elegance or tender moments
with you.
Just gaudy frocks made from the remnant box in DJ's.
Or you,
curled up on the lounge with a fag and bottle of beer
on Saturday nights,
when I was a kid
and we watched the late movie
together,
Just you and me.
I can't say we walked hand in hand sharing stories,
We didn't.

I do remember my unexpected crying
when I left to travel a year or two.
I was nineteen,
married a few months by then,
I cried all the way to Mittagong without explanation,
and we came back nine months later.
Came home,
to be nearer you.
Life was too rough
alone with him.

I remember when you were first diagnosed,
going to die,
or live,
but not as long as we had thought.
We packed the kids into the car and drove all night,
to be there,
when you woke.
And your surprise,
What are you doing here?
It's because of the leukemia, isn't it?
Well yes, because of you.

I remember a few days
before the end,
You rattled with laughter,
as much as you could laugh,
could watch TV lying in bed.
It was your favourite show,
Darryl Somers'
Hey, Hey, it's Saturday.
You asked for a glass of wine to have with Darryl,
and no more blood.
You said, *No more transfusions.*
But the wine made you hurt so bad

we called an ambulance.
Then you decided it was almost time
to go.

Next day you told us,
I'm tired,
I'll sleep now,
Start the morphine,
I'll drift off soon.

I remember your grace,
but I wish I'd held your hand,
and told you stories,
in the last tender days.

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