

## Chapter seven

### Writing self and community: a cultural practice

#### Introduction

In chapter one I described my body of work as a particular incarnation of writing self and community. Here, on the same premise that ‘relationality and individuality’ (Phelan, 1992: 140) are intertwined, I am interested in the wider cultural terrain which the cod’s map points to - the ground we inhabit together.

*When we first started looking for a house to buy, our estate agent said, ‘What about a Tocumwal?’ The name meant nothing to me. He drove us to a relatively cheap example of this particular type of house and as soon as we walked into the lounge room we decided to buy it. Of course we weren’t instantly resolute. We had to invite the opinion of our friends. For days groups of women aged between thirty and fifty, many with short hair, and usually wearing jeans, visited and revisited the house in various combinations. Leaning on his letter box, an elderly neighbour, usually clad in grey work pants or shorts with a T shirt stretched across his paunch, kept the proceedings under constant surveillance.*

In the first place my discussion in this chapter rests on my understanding of doing community as a form of relationality based on mutuality; one which recognises difference and collaborates across cultural borders. In the second, it steps off from my analysis of the politics and poetics of Homefront women’s writing and publishing activities. In that analysis, I argued for re-writing the subordinate subject as embodied and agentic through the appropriation of imaginative writing strategies by non-hegemonic writers and collaborative processes. Here I focus more on the politics and poetics of writing community. Thirdly, in a way that connects with my first chapter, I draw on examples from my wider body of work. Through the chapter the examples I use focus increasingly on the matter of place.

My intention here is to draw on the literal ground between us as a dramatisation of doing community through representing ourselves.

On the literal ground between us, imaginative, diverse representations of ourselves may produce moments of connection – however brief, however uneasy – when glimpses of different ways of belonging are caught, and ground in common, may be felt as common ground.

### **Practising culture - writing culture**

I've argued that the stories we make of our lives give shape to our experience of ourselves as individuals and in relation to others, and that these are constructed according to story lines of the discourses accessible to us and the positions we take as subjects within them. Like the map showing the cod's home in the river, our stories are examples of cultural practice (Turnbull, 1993: 62). They show us 'doing' or as Annie Bolitho (1998) suggests, 'practising culture'.

... at Griffith University's Unmasking Whiteness conference I was moved by the contribution of a young Murri man, Chris Matthews. When he was a child, he said, his family had always gone to Stradbroke [Island] for holidays and he'd always thought that was just ordinary, what everyone did. It was only later he realised that they had been 'practising culture'. This struck a chord with me ... I had always thought that what I'd done as a child and young person was broadly similar to my peers. It was only a couple of years into writing the *White Skin* book that it came home to me that we had been 'practising culture'. It was a moment where I both took hold of what a violent culture it was and understood myself (15).

Changing oppressive cultural practices, as I've argued, means changing the story lines through which we understand ourselves. It means, as Drusilla Modjeska (1998) writes, changing 'the stories we are willing to hear, and claim, and live by' (21). In her article about reconciliation between Aboriginal and white settler Australians, Modjeska speaks for the vitality of language in this process - the

words we will need ‘to cross the great divide’ (21). She refers to Greg Dening’s interest in a memorial like the Vietnam Memorial in Washington. Dening ‘can’t imagine the words on it but whatever they are “people should weep when they read them ... They should break long silences and make those that read them ask questions that had never been asked” (in Modjeska, 1998: 21). Modjeska responds:

Maybe it’s poetry we need as much as history, words that will grow, crack the isolation of our closed hearts and reflect our own faces in the memorials of others. That kind of poetry. That kind of history (21).

She is talking here about the embodied, specific, moving language of imaginative writing that allows us to read and write ourselves in new and multiple ways; to break out of the discourses, as Haug (1987) writes, that imprison us in ‘slavish’ (63) narrow forms of subjectivity. As Haug also writes, the ‘division of labour’ (38) between these forms of language mirrors wider oppressive cultural practices - the great divide. This is not crossed by poetics alone but by a counter hegemonic politics and poetics which moves to produce stories of who we are through agentic and inclusive writing/cultural practices.

### **Practising self - doing and undoing the proper sentence**

What I think of as the ‘proper sentence’ is a writing practice and pedagogy that supports an exclusive and colonising cultural practice. It enforces the division of labour between imaginative, interpretive writing, and language as an apparently straightforward means of communication. Treating language in this way, flattens it and the self it speaks. It is ‘thin’ (Denzin, 1994: 505), fixed and closed. The kind of poetry and history that Modjeska is talking about is not made with the proper sentence. It is made by working with language imaginatively, figuratively, in a way that mobilises it; making self possible in many forms and opening up the relationship between text and reader in the way that hooks (1991) suggests in her discussion of critical fictions (53-61).

Adult literacy contexts offer a particularly powerful example of the proper sentence as a manifestation of oppressive cultural practice at the site of textual practice. It seems so simple and incontestably correct to reform a 'student's' words into a 'proper' sentence. This however, as British literacy activists like Sue Gardener (n.d.) and workers at Gatehouse Books (Frost and Hoy, n.d.) point out, firmly locates the writing subject as the peripheral object of the discourse. It changes her vision, submerges her voice, and often quite literally takes her out of the sentence by impersonalising it. 'I saw', 'There was'.

Undoing the proper sentence involves undoing the proper hierarchy of teacher and student which is part of exclusive pedagogical discourse in which the teacher is the knower. It's a practice of freedom in which the particular expertises of the student writer and the literacy teacher, are in a lateral and collaborative rather than hierarchical relationship. Here teachers and learners are both learners and teachers, questioners and experts (Freire, 1985: 53-54).  
 What is it you want to say here? What did you see? What sprang to mind?  
 What's your word for it?

Each year the Women Writing course in the Outreach Department at Canberra Institute of Technology was shaped in relation to participants' interests, which in turn sharpened their distinct writing preoccupations and styles. Often inspired by her contribution to group writing exercises, Marjorie wrote in the moment of her mind's eye, capturing exact detail of sights, sounds, actions. The shape of poetry suited her well, but this never seemed to grip her in the same way as the quest for command of punctuation and spelling. In working together on her stories we found the best method was to allow a particular 'flow' of writing to come to an end and then discuss it. This would lead to reordering some of the detail so the reader could get the vision of the piece, and finding appropriate places for full stops and paragraph breaks. Sometimes one 'flow' became two or three stories.

When Marjorie became more confident about the stops and starts of sentences and narrative generally, she started writing stories that somehow sounded like

popular romance narratives. They became less immediate, more clichéd. For her it was a mark of development, but less satisfying than what she saw as less controlled creations. To me it seems as though she had to read herself back as the ‘disciplined’ literate subject in order to discover the power of re-writing self in an ‘undisciplined’ and insubordinate imaginative form.

Marjorie’s struggle with the proper sentence and a vivid painterly way of recording and associating detail also offers a metaphor for a wider discursive struggle concerning stories of her life. The following is part of her story, *Leaving Home*.

My father was chopping wood for the bathroom chip heater, smash, crash, bang - weird dark-shaped mallee roots flew everywhere. I asked him what had happened to my bike. He said he had used the tyre and the hand brake to mend my little sister’s bike. ‘It’s my bike. It’s my bike’, I shouted. ‘You have no right to do that’. The bike gave me a sense of freedom and it made me feel safe. I could hop on it and get away if I wanted to. Now what would I do?

When I shouted at him he threw the axe down and stormed into one of his regular rages, shouting at me that I was poisoning his young daughter’s mind with all that ‘Catholic rubbish’. At the time I was going out with a Catholic and studying for the faith and a curious young sister was interested and wanted to know all about it. My father hated Catholics.

He was standing there with his fists clenched and glaring at me and shouting. He raced towards me. I thought he was going to kill me. I had never seen him in such a rage. For a moment I stood still while he thrashed out at me. Then I started to run around the tank. He ran after me beating me. Suddenly I saw the tomahawk. I felt God was protecting me. I grabbed it. I turned around and chased my father shouting, ‘I’ll kill you’. His face went ashen and I’ll never forget that stare of his cruel grey

piercing eyes. They stared straight through me in disbelief. He ran inside and locked the back door.

Marjorie (Women Writing, 1993: 15)

Writing this experience as an agentic subject - young woman freeing herself from her father's abusive treatment - rather than 'bad daughter' was not clear cut for Marjorie, as the story itself shows. The Women Writing group supported and applauded her writing of it, but the powerful discourses of church and family which also described her life, did not.

The transformative capacity of imaginative writing is at the heart of Marjorie's engagement and disengagement with it. It offers new ways of taking up the reality of life and circumstance for both writer and reader, not because it is 'fantasy' but because it 'returns us to the real more fully' (hooks, 1991: 55). The proper sentence, on the other hand, is an abstraction dedicated to wringing out the last shred of the particular body and circumstances of the subject. It appeals to what we 'know' in the broadest, most general terms. It could fit anyone, anywhere. Imaginative writing, 'thick' (Denzin, 1994: 505) and bumpy with specific description and relationships between details, demands that mind also grasps matter and makes something with it.

When hooks (1991) bases her argument for imaginative writing on the idea that 'The ability to be empathetic is rooted in our capacity to imagine' (57), she is not thinking of the kind of 'social feeling' (172) created by the separation of 'the heart, the region of pathos' (Armstrong, 1993: 172), from thought. She is talking about 'a conscious gesture of solidarity' (hooks, 1991: 57), based on a critical understanding of oppressive social relations as well an embodied engagement with their conditions. It is a thinking-feeling-thinking mind-body engagement with stories of me which provides a basis for new lines of connection between us. It is the means of making connections across cultural borders (Probyn, 1993: 147-148).

### **Practising self in relation to others - converging and unfolding**

The convergence of worlds in the Women Writing and life story writing groups I worked with at Canberra Institute of Technology, could be dizzying. Refugees waiting for trains on bleak foreign stations, a mother throwing herself down the cellar stairs to bring on a miscarriage, a ten year old returned to her family of birth and years of sexual abuse, young women dedicating themselves purposefully and efficiently to war work, a child catching a wild piglet in far north Queensland and keeping it far up a tree away from its fearsome mother for the better part of a day ...

What? ... How did that happen? And you were ...? Really! Why don't you start there ... You could write it that way first ... I think that's the most interesting bit ... Read it to us again ...

In the group workshop context the imaginative engagement that takes place as people read their stories to each other is palpable. It's as though the reader is throwing streamers, as they put out, rather nervously perhaps, in a ship of their own. And then the people on shore start catching them. And between reader and listener they ripple and stretch, tangle and cross, making bright, unpredictable patterns.

Another metaphor for this imaginative engagement with stories of who we are, which also picks up the reverberation of the connection across the space between on the individual subject, is 'unfolding'.

One of the activities Annie Bolitho and I were involved in as part of our Community Literature work was a 'memories session' at a local library. The participants were people who attended a nearby aged day care centre. The librarians had organised it as part of their community work and asked us if we'd help the group get the stories they shared at their sessions down on paper and into a book.

We suggested having a theme for stories at each meeting, with readings from community publications put together by similar groups at the beginning of the session to get things started. While the librarians facilitated the event we scribed the stories that were shared. These were then read and passed round in 'snippet' form at the next session. We also took our scribed material back to individual tellers for them to check, correct or further develop. Some participants started to write stories and bring them along.

We discussed the arrangement of the booklet with a group of interested participants. What could go on the cover? Did these chapter divisions make sense? When it came to the title, everyone thought it should have 'memories' in it and Mavis suggested 'Unfolding Memories' (ACT Library Service/Arts Council, 1992) which is what it became.

Kirra members referred to their experience of the memories sessions as an unfolding. They felt that they unfolded their own stories, often remembering things they had thought forgotten, and that through this there was an unfolding of each other to the group which they delighted in (Bolitho and Hutchison, 1998: 118).

Unfolding became a very powerful image for Annie and I as we started writing about our work with groups like this one - unfolding memories, unfolding a story, unfolding to others - the opening out of surfaces and articulation against other unfolding surfaces, shaping new senses of self and others, of the individual and the group. Folding out and gathering up, unfolding a performance of self, reading self back in a performance with others. Unfolding memories, like unfolding the wrinkled skin of old people re-remembering and reshaping themselves through the sharing of stories with others.

The Kirra group's sense of unfolding through sharing stories of 'me', suggests a double movement in which 'me' becomes 'us' becomes 'me'. In this sense it is a performance or writing of the self for the self as much as for others. Unfolding is an outward movement. It shakes out the surfaces and brings them into new



positions and relationships. In the reflexive, return movement, 'I' am reconstituted, refolded. These folding movements are not like folding a sheet so much as folding egg whites into a batter, aerating and opening up the mixture, visibly and texturally altering it.

The movements of folding also call to mind Elizabeth Grosz's (1994) use of the Möbius strip to show the relationship between mind and body (xii). Using Probyn's (1996) understanding of social relations as taking place on the 'outside' (11), I see the torsion of interior into exterior and exterior to interior (xii) as an image of movement between 'me' and 'us'. The point I want to make here, is that if 'I' am altered in the unfolding/folding process, as stories of 'me' unfold onto or are folded into the outside, so are 'we'. It's a process in which stories of me become part of the world of stories of who we collectively may be and in so doing, contribute to re-writing that world. This world may be something as circumscribed as the Kirra group, or as disparate as a 'nation'. It may be any number of social relationships and locations that develop around a particular place.

*While we were going through the process of borrowing money to buy our house, we'd often go to the park at the end of Quinn Street from where we could gaze unobtrusively at our proposed purchase. The rest of the environment; the park itself, passers-by, dogs, neighbouring houses, the activities of their residents, held no interest for us.*

*Once we'd moved in we started to connect with immediate neighbours. Maureen already knew Andy over the road, through her involvement in folk music. Andy is an ardent Scot and horseman. He has a stable in his backyard and teaches riding in the park which his house abuts. Our watchful neighbour, directly opposite Andy, and so also on the edge of the park, quickly introduced himself to us as George. Before long he was responding to our feeble attempts at handy work with offers of help. Like Andy, George is a retired carpenter. I met Shirley from over the road, across the fence of our other immediate neighbour, a frail elderly man who spoke little English. She had her preschool age daughter with her and was helping out with housework.*

## **Practising community**

On the 'outside', my interest in an embodied agentic re-writing of the subject subordinated in the dominant order, is in an inclusive mutual practice of social relations which I have called community. My argument has been that this community is a dynamic intersubjective relationship in which we collectively make and remake ourselves. I've used the idea of doing community to suggest the action that this involves; making connections and alliances between different embodiments. I've argued for the vitality of specificity and distinction in this process and suggested that in the context of 'writing culture', the intentions and strategies of imaginative or creative writing, may enable the movement such connection requires. Here my focus is on generating those movements through writing community - the poetics and politics of crossing the great divide.

In a sense I'm talking about what Margaret Somerville (1995) calls 'a practice of love' - a 'reaching out to difference' (184) - and taking up Paul Carter's (1992) injunction 'to devise new movements between' differences that are 'as much poetic as political' (in Somerville, 1995: 188).

Writing community engages writing strategies which enable the collaborative and inclusive representation of distinctly positioned subjects. It is a poetics of encounters and conversations. It undoes hegemonic textual forms. It works with the rhythms and cadences of speech and hybrid forms that provide frames for group composition. It works with lateral connections. It develops sideways, through juxtaposition. It's a poetics of presenting writing in performance and exhibition contexts as well as in books, of encouraging writing and reaching an audience in contexts not associated with writing. It's a poetics of relationship, where the space between contributions is as important as the contributions themselves.

Along the lines of Probyn's (1993) reading of de Certeau's 'geography of the possible' (144), the poetics of writing community offers not just one map of the ground between 'her identity and mine' (144), but something more like a

compendium of ‘multiple transparencies which, without any one taking precedence would allow us to see points of possible contact’ (144). In a material way, it’s a practice, using Probyn’s (1996) sense of the outside, which may be expressed as encounters between bodies, or more directly, body surfaces. To paraphrase her, writing community suggests a poetics of the skin (5). But, as I’ve indicated, I’m also interested in those other surfaces on the outside, those surfaces of place, the environment of our daily lives; the way we touch it and it touches us, and all the marks of touching imprinted on it.

In this last part of my thesis I want to think about the politics and poetics of writing community in terms of the ‘complex and multiple movements between self and self, self and other and self and landscape’ (Somerville, 1995: 184) and the maps they make on our bodies and on the many surfaces of our environment.

*Sometimes I’ve felt great anxiety about neighbours. There isn’t after all much between the walls of one fibro and weatherboard house and the next in a suburban context. One side of them is public, the other we take as private. Inside is a different field of belongings. What about those late nights with loud music when the O’Connor Cocktail Club lets her collective hair down at our place? But if that concern is about the inside leaking out across the threshold, stepping into someone else’s belongings may also be culturally shocking. One year we were invited to Christmas drinks at Andy’s and were thrown quite off balance when we found that it was not a neighbourhood drop in but a gathering of family and musician friends, and that an invitation meant participating in a sit down meal and staying for the music. It was the sort of experience based on what is common that seems to highlight difference. It makes the everyday street connections seem very fragile.*

## **Writing home**

The Good, the Bad and the Tuggeranong

It’s strange without

Petrol stations

Motels

The beach

Extended families

Delis

Takeaways

Chemists

Coffee shops

Front fences

Places for friends to stay

There is never a policeman around

You can't take your dog to the river

The major roads are outside the suburbs

Where do people live?

Where do you go for a litre of milk?

How do you get between the suburbs by bus?

It's strange

You need a connection to the past

An idea of what it was like before

You need

Old buildings

Memories –

A history

To make it more like home

(Isabella Plains Women's Neighbourhood Group, 1995)

When I took up a residency with the Tuggeranong Link, an umbrella organisation for neighbourhood centres in the region, I was located in a centre in a suburb that was still being built. I wondered what was involved in coming

to feel at home in what for many people was a 'new' place, and in this place in particular.

This question became the stepping off point for the project. People answered it in various ways and as I worked with quite differently situated groups and individuals it became logical to bring them together through their stories. The response to a gathering to celebrate all the different stories through readings and displays at the end of my residency was so strong that we were encouraged to plan a second stage.

The second stage involved photographer, Katherine Pepper, as well as myself, and a wider variety of people. It culminated in an exhibition - A Living Place (1995).

A Living Place featured photographs of frail old people, robust old people, school children, people in the national dress of Lebanon, men at work, Aboriginal people, Aboriginal scarred trees, farm buildings, suburban roads and houses, pets and parks. These were accompanied by stories and impressions written by participants individually and in groups.

The word 'home' was handwritter on a banner in various languages and scripts by individual participants. The stories and images of the young Arabic speaking women and their mothers, which spoke to the negotiation between 'motherland' and 'home' through descriptions of national culture and the experience of emigration and life in Australia, were displayed next to the stories of the women of the over fifties social group. Their images and text claimed the capacity of older women's bodies and their pleasure in gardens and fellowship. The impressions of women who found life in Tuggeranong isolating and difficult were juxtaposed with those of women in similar positions singing the praises of the place. Views of a suburb through the eyes of high school students sat next to the views of electricity and water workers who had been part of constructing the suburb and continue to be involved in its maintenance.

In bringing together into the one space these worlds which are part of the particular locality of Tuggeranong. A Living Place was a 'contact zone' (Mary Louise Pratt, 1992 in Massey and Jess, 1995: 191). In more active terms, it was a performance of connection (Rose, 1997b: 193).

As the makers, and a wider audience, came to view the work, they met the different bodies and worlds represented in the space as exhibits, and in the flesh. The area of the Tuggeranong Library where the material was exhibited for a few days became a crossing place, a gathering place. Women in *saris*, 'blokes in their singlets', (as one librarian reported some unlikely library visitors), a rowdy gang of ten year olds, women and men in wheelchairs and leaning on walking frames. One of the contributors was Rebecca, a woman in the forefront of a battle to save one of the few remaining sites of the farming era. Her poem opened up the history of the suburb. Another part of the display featured a series of postcards by women showing the delight they took in bringing up their children in a new house and in close proximity to a relatively unspoiled natural environment. In looking at this exhibit, Rebecca saw that, in complaining about the housing development that had threatened the site, she was referring to people with just such interests and dreams. In reading Rebecca's poem, those women heard about Tuggeranong homestead in a way that really awakened their interest.

Jean-Luc Nancy (1991a) offers an understanding of community as a moment of connection or 'communication' when subjects 'become' in relation to each other, 'beyond' the discursive categories that produce subjectivities (in Rose, 1997b: 188). He understands this as a moment in which 'you' and 'I' are 'unworked' (188) - perhaps 'unfolded' - but connected, 'in community'(188). Drawing on Nancy, Rose suggests that the process of participation in making and audiencing community arts work involves 'groups and individual performing themselves and changing shape as they do' (201). As I see it, what is critical to this reshaping, is participating collectively in an imaginative process - making something together.

In her reading of *The Color Purple* Wyatt (1990) suggests that making things together is the key to both remaking self and communal relationships. The relationships between characters ‘inspire their creative production’ (178) - in this case quilting and sewing enterprises - which in turn ‘binds people into new social configurations’ (178). ‘The very differences that make the quilt an appropriate metaphor for the patchwork of variegated personalities in this evolving family also create a field of energy between them’ (178). In the collaboration across different subjectivities, which is the making of the quilt, subjects take up new positions. For instance Celie moves from the position of submissive female towards self assertion, Shug becomes less determined to be ‘wholly self-sufficient’ (178-179). In the end even Celie’s husband makes something, carving a frog for her, indicating his movement from an entrenched masculinist position which depends on control, to one which is able to see her as the subject of her story, rather than the object of his (173).

Unlike the white middle-class artist novels that construe autonomy as the antithesis of close relationship, in Walker’s novel affiliation inspires creative self-expression and sustains its development; creative expression, in turn, becomes the basis for self-definition. Relationship, creativity, and the autonomy that emerges from them are mutually enhancing rather than mutually exclusive (Wyatt, 1990: 179).<sup>1</sup>

In *The Color Purple*, ‘doing community’ is the expansion of the family circle (179) through new and different connections which are both creative and practical (179). The quilt stands for mutual support in necessity (180) as well as collaborative production. As I’ve discussed it, it’s in the making together that participants ‘unfold to themselves and each other’ (Bolitho and Hutchison, 1998: 118), and in the reflexive process of reading themselves back in what they have made, change as ‘me’ and ‘us’. In writing community, new stories of ‘selfhood – singular or communal’ (Bhabha, 1994: 1), may be written.

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Celia Munro for drawing this reading of *The Colour Purple* to my attention.

These stories, written across difference, may be exciting, confirming, productive, but they may also be difficult, produced through contact that irritates, scratches, bruises. They are not predictable, happy ending adventure stories. They are an ongoing construction, shaped through contact, which would not 'move' if it did not unsettle. Rose (1997b) writes, 'Community then is about connection, but its connections are understood as in process. Connection itself changes what there is to be connected' (199).

At a work in progress display during the Tuggeranong project, a Central European woman from the over fifties group complained to me about a poster made by several of the young Lebanese women. On it they'd written 'peace' and 'freedom' as well as 'Lebanon', amongst other expressions of their sense of being part of two places. Cultural contact zones are also zones of culture shock. They are disordered and uncharted. There are no landmarks, territories overlap, 'home' becomes uncomfortable. The lateral, mutual connections of 'doing community', as Minnie Bruce Pratt (1991) writes, changes our sense of where we are in the world. 'To see the world of overlapping circles, like movement on the mill pond after a fish has jumped, instead of the courthouse square with me at the middle' (33).

A Living Place offered a view of the locality of Tuggeranong as a hybrid space straddling cultural borders: a place where the desire for freedom and peace in Lebanon intersects with the traditions that shape the building of a wisteria arbor as a garden feature. It suggested that as much as 'making a home in Tuggeranong' may take place through these specific traditions and desires, 'being at home' does not necessarily involve privileging either one over the other. Writing and reading self through mutual egalitarian social relations, as writing community invites us to do, challenges us to write 'home' in ways that are neither fixed nor exclusive, but open and multiple.

The reflexive movement of 'unfolding' through writing community asks us to recontextualise self in social relations that are not singular but multiple and diasporic. It's a movement in which we may recognise our place in the world in



terms of ‘overlapping’ cultural ‘routes’, rather than linear ‘roots’ (Hall, 1995: 206-208).

For Probyn (1993), imagination, as the source of empathy, is the key to this movement. Imagination sets in motion, propels (148) and enables us to ‘reach ... the specific pain, needs and joys of other selves ...’ (149). In effect it is a form of transport between one self and others across the ground ‘between’; a movement in which skin stretches (Probyn, 1996: 6), like streamers, creating a ‘... momentum for change in social relations ...’ (14).

*Several years after we moved in to Quinn Street - or the Vale of Quinn as some of our friends know it - we received information about the possible heritage listing of the Tocumwal houses in O'Connor. Most of the one hundred and thirty odd houses in the eight cul de sacs which back on to the park, and the four main streets which border them, were transported to Canberra from Tocumwal, a town on the NSW side of the River Murray. During the Second World War, Tocumwal had been selected by the American air force as part of its Pacific defence strategy. The Australian Civil Construction Corps built an aerodrome there, in accordance with defence strategies of the day, in the form of a township. The houses, laid out in streets, were in fact barracks without interior walls or plumbing. Not long after the completion of the base, the Americans moved north of the Brisbane Line. Tocumwal then became principally an Australian air force training base. After the war the federal government's Department of the Interior, trying to solve acute post war housing shortages in the National Capital, decided to transport about 200 Tocumwal houses along the Hume Highway, some 514 kilometres to Canberra. Sylvia remembers seeing them on the road.*

### **Writing a region**

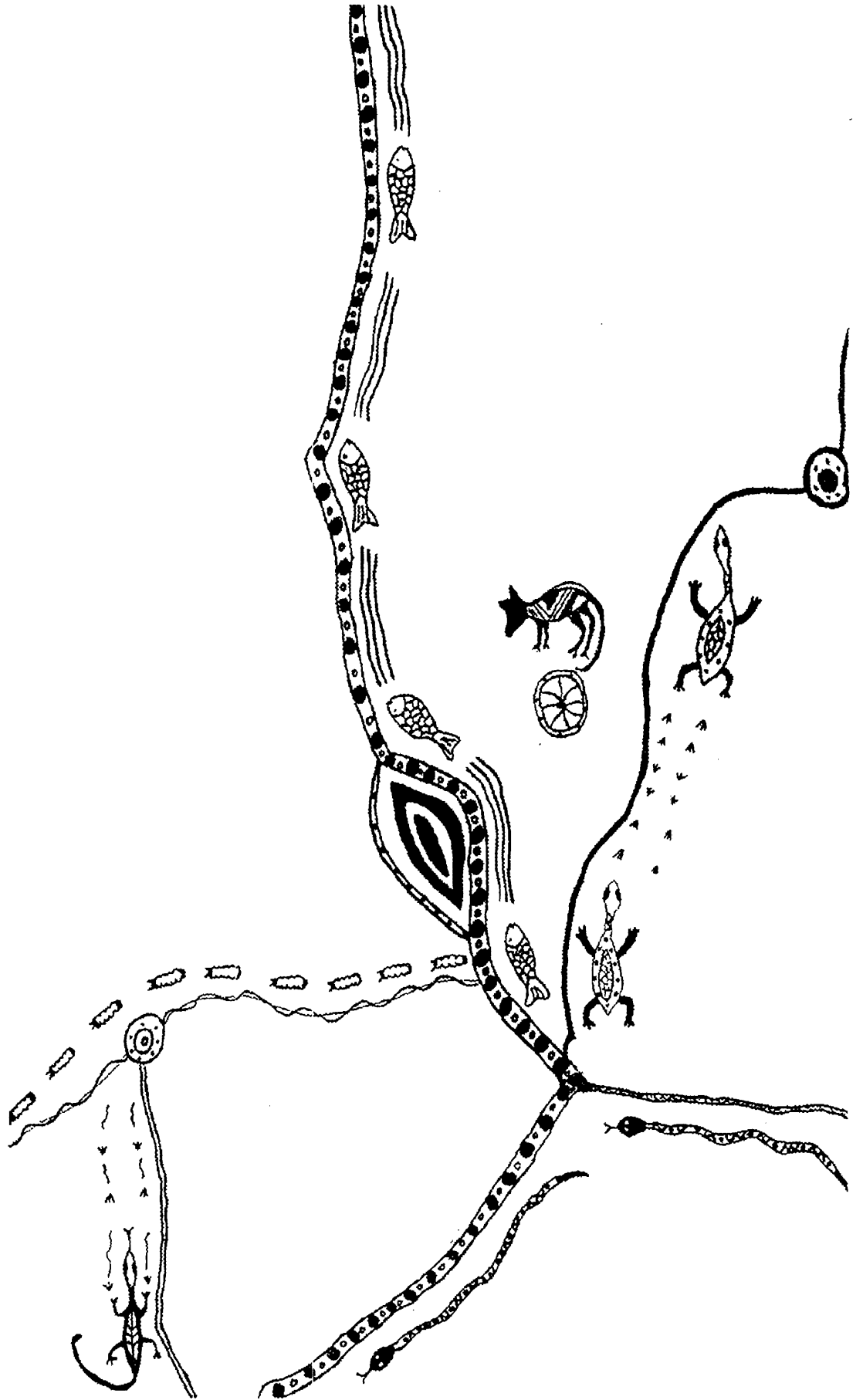
What Hall (1995) calls the ‘diaspora perspective’ (207) suggests that home is a making rather than a place, and that any one place itself is constituted discursively by cultural routes, by multiple geographies. But this does not mean that place is immaterial. It is, like the body, a particular incarnation of mind and matter. If

there is no 'single original homeland' (207), our actions in our environment still constitute 'land', and our relationship with it, in ways that are visible as 'landscape'. We cannot 'float above the mapped terrain', (Brennan, 1996: 9) as the Maori chief and English sailor do in Kelly Thompson's weaving. We are anchored in it, making and made through our relationships with it. If we are citizens of the world we still live on the ground, and draw our varied 'maps of meaning' (Hall, 1995: 207) on it.

Writing place in terms of community suggests an inclusive re-mapping of the multiple, diverse and contesting meanings that inhere in any one place (Massey and Jess, 1995) through our actions in it. It suggests addressing the literal ground between your identity and mine in terms of the specific material shape we each make of it. If re-writing self suggests the possibility of writing community through inclusive embodied connections, it may also suggest inclusive grounded connections - a practice of place which may be translated in postcolonial terms as reconciliation. In a sense it's a practice of love in which we attempt to practice our relationship with and love of a particular place through the mutual intentions of 'community' - not owning but sharing belongings, at the same time recognising and honouring particular attachments in lateral rather than hierarchical terms. In Carter's (1992) and Modjeska's (1998) terms this requires poetry as well as politics.

The writing project, Food for thought/food for the soul, took place in a regional area of Australia which crosses state borders and includes a major urban centre as well as small rural towns. It is divided by local government boundaries and a variety of land uses. It is loosely connected by a network of rivers - the Goulburn, the Murray and the Edward. A map of these designed by Koorie Art and Design student, Vicki Bux, for the publicity leaflet, was vital to my sense of the ground this project might cover.

Within this geographical area I worked with distinct groups of people separated by distance, social locations, interests and concerns. In most cases I worked with already established groups. though a few were groups-in-process, meeting for the



first time through public workshops. The overall theme of food for thought/food for the soul was a way of generating connection between stories of ‘me’ in this region. It was also my way of working with the glossy version of the dominant district which characterised itself as the foodbowl of Australia. As a finale to the project and an opportunity for participants to read themselves as part of the whole, an event of displays and readings in a location that was fairly accessible from most others, was planned. In the short time-frame of the project (nine weeks), it was a matter of enormous faith and optimism on the part of participants that they took up the process at all, given the distances, and as it turned out, the lack of resources.

Working in short bursts in each locality, I encouraged participants to find a form for displaying and holding their work together as an exhibit, and to prepare a few readings. The stories of members of the University of the Third Age group focused on farming and surviving during the Depression. They wrote them on brown paper, and constructed simple decorated books with the intention of hanging them from a washing line. Deniliquin Creative Writers developed a table setting of stories produced in various ways as ‘places’ at the table. Numurkah Primary School made a map of their town on calico, filling it in with words and images that told the food stories of the place. Barmah primary school students made a map of the bends of the River Murray as it winds through Barmah, placing themselves and Koorie food and language on it. Tatura East primary school children and parents brought objects and stories of food production together in a kind of museum display ... They were utterly different from each other.

For the exhibition, Koorie art and design students and teachers recreated Vicki’s map on the floor of the Nathalia Community Centre with yards and yards of muslin left over from Marilyn’s daughter’s twenty-first. Along the rivers were signs of Koorie meeting places and campsites; Murray cod, yabby, Murray cray appeared in the waters along with the words and images put together by the students. This river map stretched over the entire space, offering a tangible connection between the separate displays and the subjectivities they explored. As we walked along the rivers, stepped over and

around them, we encountered different stories and maps of the land they watered.

Bhabha (1994) describes Renee Green's (n.d.) use of a stairwell 'in-between the designations of identity' (4), in her site specific installation, *Sites of Genealogy* (Out of Site, The Institute of Contemporary Art, Long Island City, New York), as a connecting space. Walking along the rivers and through the distinct spaces of the Food for Thought exhibition similarly offered a passage between identities. The imaginative world of each display of writing transported you, drew you into contact - sharp, soft, dry, tough, skin stretching - 'open[ing] up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy' (4).

But if it was a passage between identities it was also a passage between 'grounds' or understandings of ground. In this way it offered something like Carter's (1994) image for the ground of a region - 'not a space cleared single-mindedly in the interests of self defence and attack, but ... the ground ... as it surrounds us in its unevenness, rising and falling, here bending away, there rising to meet us ...' (6). The movement through these 'lands', as he suggests, may be facilitated not by the passport, but by 'the gift, the exchange of information about each other's country' (6). Each display at the exhibition was in a way a gift, an exchange enabling movement across cultural borders; undoing the frontiers.

In a small way, the cavernous community centre hall, on that particular night, was a material, though partial and incomplete, expression of the shared, contested, exploited, appropriated, loved, denied, lost ground of the awkwardly expressed and rarely invoked, Goulburn-Murray-Edward waters region. The skein of muslin rivers threading between the displays suggested the skin stretching connections between those distinct perceptions of self and place and self in place, which were here embodied through the motif of food. It offered an image of the 'ground between' as a space for negotiating, re-writing 'intersubjective and collective experiences' (Bhabha, 1994: 2).

Rose (1997a) makes the point that her vision of community as a 'dynamic spatiality where nothing is fixed forever, where there are no essentialising inclusions and exclusions and no hierarchies of power' (13) is a 'utopic' (13) one. She notes in particular, that it 'erases difficult questions about power relations' (13) between participants. For me, however, the re-mapping of the space between as individual subjects unfold to each other through imaginative engagement, is not an erasure but an undoing of exclusive and dominating social relations. These are implicated in the encounters, new maps, overlapping spaces that emerge at border crossings, but 'unworked' (Nancy, 1991 in Rose, 1997b: 188).

The dominant story lines of relations between groups and individuals involved in Food for thought/food for the soul, which included hostility and contest over place, clearly marked the final event. However that event, as a performance or doing of community, also undermined those story lines. For instance, although many of the Koorie participants did not attend because they felt Nathalia was a hostile town, their stories were much read. People asked for copies. My vision is that the imaginative engagement which unthreads those dominant story lines in some degree, folds into the practice of social relations, changing the stories of you and me that we are prepared to 'hear and claim and live by' (Modjeska, 1998: 21).

Translating this into the matter of place, the ground we traverse and mark out with the way we use and abuse it, suggests a palimpsest of cultural activity in which our routes are some of many.

*At the Macarthur Avenue end of Quinn Street there are a couple of street trees which bear small, red, hard plum-like fruit. The cockatoos screech and cackle over them, swaying untidily on the outer growth of the tree. In late summer, the ground around the trees is a mass of fruit and twigs. The fruit shrivel and blacken, or split open, bright and slippery if you tread on them. At this time too, people may come with ladders and buckets to pick what remains on the tree. One year I caught Frank and his friend with my camera. Frank told me the fruit is surva. In Canberra there are these trees in Quinn Street, and some in a street in Narrabundah. They are not eaten fresh, but dried in straw or hung in the garage.*

*Jim Raccosta, whose mother, Christina, lives around the corner, picked some recently because a friend in Sydney wanted the seed.*

### **Writing a landscape**

Carter (1994) suggests that the palimpsest of cultural ground may become visible through the four-dimensional practice of the fold, rather than the two-dimensional practice of collage (7). Collage produces distinct bounded or gated locations and identities. Folding offers a different connection; a flowing 'path-making' (6) movement which takes us through and into 'the uneven textures' (6) of a cultural topography.

Between the industrial estate of Mitchell and the new suburb of Gungahlin there's a couple of kilometres of what appears to be rural land before the roundabouts and houses start. As I drive along this in-between bit of road I always watch out for a low hill, more of a rise really, and the Canberra Nature Park sign on the right.

Small snake orchid Spear grass Button wrinklewort Wallaby grass  
Common bluebell Tussock grass Yam daisy Redgrass Kangaroo grass 50  
native grasses 200 native flowering plants<sup>1</sup>

This is the native grasslands area - two hectares of natural temperate grassland, of which there is only a small proportion of the original spread in south eastern Australia left.

The wind in the grass  
You'd think it was further out west  
It's flat and bleak.

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<sup>1</sup> This and subsequent quotes are taken from *Gungahlin on a Plate* (Wheeler & Hutchison, 1996), a project on which I worked as a writer with a photographer. We produced a set of 15 souvenir plates incorporating image and text, and a booklet.

All those lovely trees  
 There's one area they've taken them all away

My grandfather was one of those Aboriginal people employed by the  
 graziers to dig out the serrated tussock<sup>2</sup>

It was going to be the town centre, but it was found to be the habitat of the  
 endangered species *delma impar*, or legless lizard.

The striped legless lizard  
 A very ordinary worm-like thing  
 We've got it just before it's gone down the gurgler

The grasslands remain, sited in the middle of proposed housing developments

Surrounded by cats and dogs and houses - we've got a very difficult job

We just have to hope the community cares enough

Adjacent to the grasslands is the ruins of The Valley - a small homestead, easy to  
 pick in early spring when its tamarisk trees are in bloom.

In the near corner there's a pise structure  
 And behind that, the earlier stone slab structure

I was only very young  
 When my grandfather was here

From the Valley you can see the quartz ridge, which supplied the early farmers  
 with building materials, and mounds of earth which signal the building of the  
 town centre on the new site which abuts the ruin to the north. What you can't

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<sup>2</sup> An import from Argentina



see, back into the grasslands, but not far from the ruin, are the chert quarries which played a central role in the local Aboriginal economy for thousands of years. These quarries, visible on the surface as stone scatters, show extensive and long term tool making activity in the form of waste flakes and cores. There is also evidence that suggests that these quarries played a role in the early European use of the land, 'within a few decades' (ACT Heritage Council, 1996: 2) of their use by Aboriginal people.

You can see the Aboriginal sites  
 And the Gribble homestead together  
 - that time-depth

From the Valley it's not far to the first roundabout, the golf course and a tract of cleared land marked with the outline of roads and housing sites which proclaims itself as 'perfect' and 'now selling'.

I always say we're the house at the top of the hill with the rock  
 It was such a nice rock we couldn't bear the thought of having it  
 dynamited to pieces

So we asked the builders to move it over to our place  
 It took them more than an hour with heavy machinery  
 We've put ponds in at the bottom if it  
 And we've discovered, by experimenting with the hose, that you can  
 create a waterfall effect  
 We just have to get the money together for a proper pump

Grass please grow  
 At last I can do my own thing  
 A sign of permanence  
 A garden's a way of offering something back to the place

When I drive to Gungahlin from my place in what is known as the Inner North of Canberra, I drive out from a low lying area between two hills - Black Mountain and Mount Ainslie. From my back and front yards I look through houses and greenery to their rounded tops. It's only when I see them from the Gungahlin grasslands that I know I live between what Ngunawal people know as the breasts of that part of their country which I call Canberra, but which in any language might be called 'home'.

*Walking home in the autumn evening rain from Jill's, I think about what Harvey (1993) calls the 'tension between sensuous and interpersonal contact in place ... and another dimension of awareness' (15). That other dimension being the political, social, economic one, concerning appropriation, dispossession, migration, the movement of people and capital and how this is written into any one landscape. How do we take on both the affective 'sensuous' connection and the other layers of stories? I'm walking home from Jill's in gentle soaking rain - we've been waiting for it for so long. The shining tarmac, the intermittent gleam of headlights on Macarthur Avenue, the heavy trees, the mixture of damp eucalyptus leaves and bark and exotic sheddings underfoot, are familiar. I feel a profound sense of pleasure in this contact with ground and elements, it's as though my body is spreading out, dispersed, folding into them.*

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