

## Chapter one

### Writing self and community: a body of work

The Murray cod carries the map of his journeys on the lining of his belly  
When you open him up you can see where he's been.

In the cod there's a lining - we've got it too -

That separates the stomach from the other organs

It's like a skirting.

Trim gently around the skirting attached to the body

Take it out while it's wet and green

Place it on a flat piece of paper

And you have a beautiful picture.

The picture read properly

Will give you the home where the fish was born.

(Walsh, 1996)

In this chapter I offer a map of what I think of as my body of work, a writing practice that is specifically mine, socially-historically formed and contextualised. In doing so my focus is a particular, descriptive view which complements my theoretical exploration in chapters two and three. Chapter two, borrowing the metaphor David Turnbull (1993) uses in *Maps are Territories, Science is an Atlas*, provides atlas references for my writing work. Here I look at it in terms of the contours of a terrain which is particular to me.

#### South Australian Workshop (SAW), early 1980s

One of the first images that came to mind when I started to write about SAW was a handsaw that someone had hung at the door in honour of the acronym. Wood, metal, turps, paint, sawdust. Hammering, the whine of the saw. Alison lifting the screens of the silk screen printer. The sun on the

little balcony. How freezing it was upstairs in winter. Geoff sitting on the oil heater, tapping his fingers, jiggling his legs, smoking a lean cigarette, as he worked out the practical dynamics of a sculpture. The shape of the kitchen forms clearly - its length, the lino on the floor, the long bench down one side with the enamel basin and spurting hot water - as I remember him saying 'it's not about talent, it's about hanging around'.

SAW was an artists' workshop in an old factory in the west end of Adelaide. Most of its members were sculptors and ex art school students, working with large and expensive pieces of machinery which the Workshop enabled them to share and house. There were two floors; downstairs for heavy equipment and noisy work, and upstairs for individual desk space and meetings. A factory of its time I suppose, it reminded me uncannily of a chocolate factory I had worked in between school and university, 1969-70, on the opposite side of town. I imagined people like the young women who had worked upstairs in the stuffy glue bound packing section, and the supervisor with the wandering hands, as the agents of its past life. I felt connected to work, to the daily activity of labour by the very shape of the place. But I felt that, unlike those other workers, I had been liberated from drudgery and petty hierarchy into the power and pleasure of producing my own work.

I joined the artworkers' union along with most of the other members of SAW on the basis that art was work rather than garrets and ghettos. In this vein I also remember a SAW members' meeting about something that the one other writer member of SAW had written for an artworkers' newsletter. I think the issue was that it hadn't been printed as it went against the intentions of the newsletter. Tess argued that this was censorship. I was on the side that said that individual self expression did not take precedence over the common good.

On other occasions Tess and I were aligned as the two writers in the Workshop, engaging with other members in a running teasing discussion which replayed the boundaries we had all crossed in becoming 'artworkers' and inhabitants of SAW. **They**, the visual artists, always worked with the radio on. **We**, the writers, couldn't stand it. We had to hear the sounds of

words and voices in our heads, catch the aural texture of language and radio noise drove us mad. On the other hand we never noticed anything until it was pointed out to us, couldn't find anything that was described to us, couldn't tell the difference between an x headed nail and a y.

At SAW I worked on the life of Edith Hubbe, turning it into a museum exhibit (1982) and a radio drama-documentary (1982, 1983). I turned my sociology honours thesis into a couple of experimental radio pieces (1981) - more poetic than dramatic. I wrote stories and articles for this, that and the other, including an anthology of South Australian women's writing (Boult and Brady, 1983), and contributed to an artists against nuclear arms exhibition. I remember sitting with Christine at the meeting table upstairs, sorting out bits of copy into a visual arrangement with her advice. I can't remember the substance of the piece.

For many years I've hardly thought about my membership of SAW. Working now with memory fragments, that past persona, moving rather shadow-like through the spaces of the workshop, becomes more full-bodied; a mixture of romantic ambition and determined realism. I remember that it was the time I read Goreau's biography (1980) of 17th century playwright, Aphra Behn, and took strongly to heart the opening lines 'Aphra had to invent herself' (3).

Alistair Thomson (1996) suggests that remembering experience is a process of composition which draws on the 'public languages and meanings' (5) of cultural time and place as well as previous subjective renderings of that experience. On this basis I think of my memories of SAW and other writing experiences as a 're-membering' of my body of work, a shaping of it from the vantage point of now and in the language and interests of this thesis.

In using the idea of a body of work, I am also suggesting that there is a materiality to my experience which is not located in the traditional opposition of mind/body (Grosz, 1994: 3-24), but in what Grosz calls 'embodied subjectivity' (22). My body of work, like the body of 'me' is constituted discursively **and** materially. I

represent it in many forms through the discourses available to me; it is also the tangible and specific stuff of my representation.

Bringing this concept of body to the work that I do enables me to construct it as a particular, but not static or transparent, 'doing'. Walked by my legs, held in my arms, written with my hands, worried over by my brow, it is made but never fixed, by the things that I do. It becomes through its doing in time and place and with particular people. It becomes in my writing of it.

### **Philippines Educational Theatre Association (PETA) cultural action workshop, Canberra 1987**

By the time I attended the PETA workshop I had been working as a theatre writer, particularly for community theatre, for several years. I'd also worked on a women's history source book for secondary and tertiary students with an organisation called the South Australian Women's History Task Force (Allen, Hutchison and Mackinnon, 1989). And I'd moved my belongings permanently across the Hay Plain from Adelaide to Canberra.

The PETA workshop made an enormous impression on me. I'd never really been in a learning context designed to empower me, or one that started from what I had to offer. I was amazed by the generosity that the workshop leaders extended towards me as a participant and later took up their example, as it was intended, as a model for working with community groups both as a participant and leader.

As testament to the skill of the PETA workshop leaders, despite my experience of conflict with several other people participating in the workshop, I felt unafraid, prepared to be open about the way I understood the world. In the moment of the opening of this capacity in myself, they seemed like gods to me.

I don't think I really got an intellectual grip on who PETA were and what they did (although this was offered as a matter of course) until I read about community theatre in Nigeria (Bappa, 1981: 24-35) in the adult education

course I started a couple of years later. Despite this (or perhaps because of it) the workshop gave me a firm basis for putting into practice a number of things that I sort of knew about from my varied participation in oppositional community-based political activities - things like the value of group process and each individual's voice in that process. Most particularly it gave me practical experience of how learning happens and the connection between learning and change. It seemed that these things came to be part of my body.

PETA emphasised learning with the body, essentially through the forms and practice of theatre. In groups we made static shapes with our bodies to convey meaning, as well as developing action as a way of showing something to an audience. Working with the concept of racism, a group I was in developed a kind of football scrum which hurtled towards the audience. Needless to say we terrified rather than illuminated our spectators.

A lot of the workshop revolved around finding ways of saying who I am as an individual in my world. We did movement-based introduction games, introducing ourselves on the basis of personal attributes, and moved from this into locating our experience in a wider social context, both separately and in groups. The static body shapes exercise was part of this I think, but the one that has lived with me most strongly was drawing a map of my life experience - where I have come from and where I am now. Locating myself in space rather than time was an entirely new challenge. I have no idea what I drew on the blank piece of butcher's paper in front of me. Being stripped of the explanatory mode and consigned to the metaphor of terrain was shocking - and liberating.

When I first thought of making a map of my work for this thesis, I envisaged a geographical terrain - a group of islands, sharing certain characteristics but distinct in other ways. There'd be some larger ones with little ones around them, like broken-off bits, and small groups with their own pattern. I liked the idea of the sea as the connective tissue between them. But before long I became trapped in a coherent narrative of relationship between islands and islands, islands and sea, the

nature of particular islands, that threatened to become a veritable Lilliput. The problem was not the organising principle but the lure of unity.

I then moved to the idea of a mud map as a way of breaking out of coherence. If mud maps are in any way a recognisable form, then the key ingredient of that form is eccentricity. I often use mud maps as part of my writing work. The unlikely shape they offer for what is known as 'creative' writing, gives them the power to unsettle the most obvious and coherent constructions of accounts, memories, stories, poems and so heighten the potential of writing to be more genuinely creative.

As well as representing place from an individual perspective, mud maps, as I learned from PETA, can also locate you - you in your world, you in your work, you in your past and future. But in taking up the idea of a mud map, as something that could exist in fragmented form and didn't want to be part of a unified whole, to represent my work practice, I found myself getting 'stuck' on the surface the term 'mud map' suggested. In another move I worked with the idea of a map in the sand but as I started this project, the image of the map in the sand, so shifting, so redo-able, took over. Each shape I drew to make sense of my work suggested another shape, other meanings. It wasn't that the surface was so fragile, so disintegrating, as opposed to so sticky. The problem was its generality (a quality which mud shares). I felt that the material I was working with could be or become anything in the world.

*It's probably about 1962. I'm standing in my shortie pyjamas, bare feet on the welcome cool of the laundry's cement floor. The sounds are the pfit of small insects pitting themselves against the bakelite shade over the light globe and the regular thump of the iron on the laundry table. Beyond the laundry door a vast sky of stars surrounds us. The laundry is just another minute bright dot in the enormous embrace of the universe*

*What makes this laundry specific to me? Or me to this laundry? Why am I this bright dot and not any other?*

*My mother pushes the iron over a handkerchief - once, fold, again, fold, again - and puts it without pleasure on the 'done' pile, at the same time reaching for another. She can't be bothered with handkerchiefs, but she is and there are more to do. The ironing in this laundry, on this Adelaide summer night when the children should be asleep, is a certainty. The bakelite shade is a particular shade that was bought for this laundry light. The insects always pitter and spitter against it. Outside the laundry, beneath the night sky, is the cement yard which surrounds the house that the children should be asleep in, and now here is one of them, slipping out through the back door - its particular loud ping is hard to silence - nothing on her feet on the cement floor, wondering whether she really might after all be someone somewhere else. The simple fact of the matter is that one is definitely in this laundry doing this blasted ironing when every muscle aches and longs to be at rest.*

**Homefront women's writing and publishing project - *Belles' Letters* workshops, Canberra 1990**

The visual artist employed to work with participants during the workshops which produced the publication, *Belles' Letters: Voices from Homes of Violence* (Doris Women's Refuge and the Incest Centre, 1990) was eX de Medici, at the time in the formative stages of her work as a tattoo artist. At some point during the process eX suggested to Sam that they make photocopies of her face and arms. This became Sam's 'Body Map'. Sam and eX developed the text as they discussed the pictures.

a map  
 my past on my body  
 I scribbled Jason out  
 Tattoos  
 The cross was the first  
 I was fifteen  
 Most of them are people I've known (32-33)

In this text Sam makes the writing on her body readable to a wider audience. Her scars, jewellery and tattoos become the legend to a

landscape of violence and fear, 'adopted, ugly, a piece of shit' (33) - and love - 'all my rings were given to me/they all have meaning' (32).

In any context Sam's body map is a powerful embodiment of experience. In the context of this thesis it offers the point of connection between the idea of embodied subject - my body of work - and the intention of a map.

The intention of a map, as David Turnbull (1993) demonstrates, is to show what constitutes a given terrain. And what constitutes it, as he says of riding a bike, is the practice rather than the explanation (62). I create a map of my body of work by providing examples of its doing as a material/discursive landscape. Indications and directions. Vital signs and markers. Body/Map.

### **Women at Work Writing Project - Tasmanian Public Sector Union, 1989**

In Hobart I lived in an eyrie perched between Mt Wellington and the Derwent River. The offices of the Tasmanian Public Sector Union, as it was then (though it had only just stopped being the Australian Clerical Officers Association), were close to the water. There I had a desk and telephone in the meeting room which usually didn't take on its main function until late in the day when union members had finished work. Some time during the project the union moved to another office space and I had a room to myself. I felt less transient then - though that is the status of a writer 'in-residence' - and certainly by the end of the project I was 'part of the furniture' in that I had become familiar with, and a familiar part of, the union's day to day work.

Over the eighteen weeks of my residency I planned, conducted and evaluated two sets of six weekly workshops in Hobart and four weekend workshops in Launceston and Devonport. Taking up the theme of women at work in terms of both content and form, I developed workshops which explored participants' work experience and played with the forms of white collar workplace writing as a way of opening up new shapes and spaces for writing experience/self. Often this spilled over into workshop members' wider experience of mothering and domestic life and we drew on familiar



forms of writing from the everyday domestic milieu - forms such as shopping lists - as well as on the shape and form of words in their workplaces.

We worked with women's talk about their work, phone conversations, memos and minutes of meetings. A teacher/librarian found a way of working with a Dewey Wheel, a Commonwealth Employment Service officer worked with the acronyms of her workplace - both producing economical and poetic renderings of their experience and point of view. Notes of things to do appeared between the lines of official minutes - don't forget to pack the nappies - and Shopping with Fiona was a shopping list which took the reader up and down the aisles of a supermarket with great patience until the final moment at the checkout.

The value of process rather than product has often been stressed in activities funded in the name of community arts. For me, working with those women clarified the vitality of product. What could an arts project offer these women, embedded in the endless process of the white collar workforce and domestic life, if not something they could see as a result of their work, something they could read back in the context of a wider audience, as their voices, their making?

The annual Salamanca Arts Festival in Hobart offered the opportunity for a public outcome of the project. With the help of graphic artist, Jane James, a number of participants developed their writing for display in an exhibition for the Festival which we called *Working with Words* (Tasmanian Public Sector Union, 1989). The forms we had worked with became an important visual component of the project. Shopping with Fiona, for instance, appeared on a long strip of docket paper. Some teachers used the form of the handmade kindergarten book. Different shapes and textures of paper were used, including continuous feed computer paper. And of course there was the Dewey Wheel. We included a computer in the exhibition and some stories appeared on that. Some were simply mounted as text pieces. The centrepiece was a graphic representation of all the work done by all the participants over their lives - including part-time, voluntary, and unpaid work at home, and all the combinations of these. This was an impressive group

embodiment of the individual working bodies of more than seventy women ranging in age from over sixty to their early twenties.

*Working with Words* opened out participants' expectations of writing. It emphasised the value of a material and public outcome, claimed work stories as the stuff of imaginative writing and took the step of 'showing' writing in the form of a visual exhibit. Pushing established boundaries in this way was not comfortable for everyone, but the majority took up the odd writing activities I suggested with enthusiasm, despite being unsure of what the result might be. For all of us it was risky but exhilarating.

In *The Film Sense*, which I read as an undergraduate drama student, Sergei Eisenstein (1943) says '... two film pieces of any kind, placed together, inevitably combine into a new concept, a new quality, arising out of that juxtaposition' (14). In some lights this may be read as a commonplace. For me it contains all the excitement of edges and intersection, of transgression and hybridity, and I see what I do as a writer, my body of work, in these terms.

In *The Body/Landscape Journals*, Margaret Somerville (1995) describes the actions of the women who set up a peace camp outside the Pine Gap military installation in 1983. One action was 'the dismantling of the gates' (22) to the highly controlled and guarded area. This involved taking down the gates in opposition to the police, after which they were 'garlanded and interwoven with wildflowers and native grasses' (24) by the women, and placed at the entrance to their camp. Although these remade gates were subsequently removed, their meaning had been transformed 'from legislative/exclusive to garlanded celebratory, the (always open) gates to our camp' (24).

It's change, transformation that interests me. Crossing imaginative writing with subjects and forms, activities and places not usually associated with it is a way of undoing, redoing and creating new spaces for imaginative writing. It opens up opportunities for re-writing and re-reading ourselves, our place, our journeys.

**Making changes: a writing and sculpture project at Revolve, the community recycling business at Mugga Lane Tip in the ACT, 1990.**

Today I saw

An ancient cement mixer with a gear lever

Three black letters - RDO - they looked heavy but were quite light

A book documenting an exhibition of Chinese archaeological objects

A very serviceable wash bucket

Two small and beautiful terracotta bowls

The star book

When it's busy all I can see is feet and hands - reaching, finding a foothold - and **things** in full detail - the little tube of glitter, a high-heeled shoe and there! its pair.

(Hutchison, 1990)

Marilyn and I always thought of the tip as a beach. (I loved the way she formed the word, as in 'life's a beach') Tides of rubbish swept in on trucks and trailers, and the bulldozer boys swept them back, creating mountains and valleys and plateaus which the next day would be reformed. In the shallows of the incoming tide, one step ahead of the bulldozers, the Revolve workers scavenged with the seagulls. The rhythm at the recycling yard was the same. Stacks of material of one sort or another would be brought back from the tip and allotted a place. By the next day it would be unrecognisable as the pile of material from the day before - plundered, moved, amalgamated.

The Revolve workers seemed to me extraordinary, quixotic beings; tanned and wiry, passionate and inventive. They were crazy collectors of marbles, tonka toys, ties. They were sea gipsies riding on carts decorated with garlands and streamers from the deep. I worked with them on a map of the tip and the Revolve yard. 'We saved the cat from dying, tied in a bag of grass cuttings with his dead brother', 'dead cars', 'boys' new shed', 'the ducks sit on the cable drum', 'the bird was plucking the dog in the spaceship to build her nest', 'the Bedford caught fire' (Arts Council of the ACT, 1990).



I commandeered a little wooden shed that appeared one day, as something to write on. I used chalk. I stuck paper to the walls with drawing pins. I used letters that came into the yard from old signs. Words washed away in the rain. Wind tore the paper. The letters were sold. At the time I was so embedded in the everyday physical issues of writing in that place that I only rarely glimpsed what is more apparent to me with hindsight - that every day was a dramatic performance of the act of writing, that every day I performed writing with more or less confidence - that every day I invented writing and myself as a writer. I wrote on whatever came to hand with whatever came to hand. I made books with old photo albums and files, I used sticks and pull-top rings from cans, bits of glass, to form letters in the gravel of the yard. I used the huge blue letters that had once been put together to read 'Coolamon Court' to make the word 'art' ('tar', 'rat'), amongst the varying piles near the shed. Marily found a boat which she dreamed of sailing over mounds of plastic bags.

A couple of years ago a friend wrote an article about me as part of the work required for the University of Canberra professional writing course. It was published in the *Canberra Times* under the title, 'Writing in all the wrong places' (Beasley, 3 December 1995).

I work as a writer/editor/social historian in community settings. I teach writing. I teach literacy. I work on community history/literature projects. I develop community writing and publishing activities. I've worked on cultural planning projects. I work as a writer in the field of community cultural development. I do community artwork. I've written for community theatre. I've worked on development of scripts for large-scale puppet theatre. I work on place and heritage projects. I write reviews. I write articles for professional journals. I write stories. I lead writing workshops. I was employed as a writer in residence. I write for performance. I've worked on art and working life projects and public place making projects. I was a member of the Literature Board's Residencies Committee. I support writing and publishing groups.

I have done this work with theatre companies, educational institutions, arts organisations, community organisations, trade unions, a hospital, a neighbourhood, a library service, a museum, community radio, a rubbish tip, a health centre, as a subconsultant to an urban design plan. When I explain it I invoke the discourses of literature, theatre, history, oral history, sociology, adult education, adult literacy, community arts, community development, cultural planning.

As writing, such work may seem to be stretched so far out of shape as to be something else, if not entirely unravelled. Is working on the juxtapositions of action and image in an almost wordless piece of multimedia puppet theatre, writing? Is scribing stories on a walk around a local neighbourhood, writing? Is working with life story in a basic literacy classroom, writing? Is collaborating with a photographer to make melamine souvenir plates representing perceptions of landscape in a new suburb, writing?

I argue that these edgy collaborations are vital and productive, taking imaginative writing out of itself and into multi-disciplinarity. Writing with and in the distinct material of various territories I create overlapping writing spaces, hybrid textual shapes that are neither and both, multi-formed and voiced.

### **Community Literature Program, Canberra 1991-93**

Job sharing the position of Community Literature Officer in the ACT with Annie Bolitho began a long and satisfying collaboration. We now have a history not just of shared work experience but of collaborative writing about those experiences. The walking group, the hospital project, *Unfolding Memories* (ACT Library Service and Arts Council of the ACT, 1992), *Stories of the Inner South* (Bolitho and Hutchison, 1992), *Out of the Ordinary* (Bolitho and Hutchison, 1998) are really only memorable/tellable through the form of we/us/our - a distinct plural body of work knitted into the bones of mine.

Community literature as Annie and I developed the program, worked across territories and, in a sense, across ourselves. We were two people in one

position. In a skin-stretching way we were Annie-Mary. There were other double aspects to our work. The Program was funded jointly by federal and state arts bodies. We were employed by the Arts Council of the ACT and located in the ACT Library Service.

As we developed our program on the basis of our joint experience and interests we began associations with health centres, adult education and literacy work, and oral history and heritage activities. We hung onto the description of our work as 'community literature', using 'literature' rather than the more simple term 'writing' to encompass our interest in story sharing through telling, and publishing activities, as well as writing. We argued against dropping the term 'community' from our title because we felt it was more important for a funded literature position to open out the possibilities of literature, than to serve those already involved. We sometimes felt the anxiety of border troubles, but managed for nearly three years, to confound the singular.

### **The Narrabundah Walking Group, Canberra 1991-1993**

For the introduction to the small photocopied book Annie and I made with the Walking Group, *Group Walks around Narrabundah* (Arts Council of the ACT, 1992), Annette Fisher, the health worker who initiated the group wrote, 'Every time I go back to Narrabundah, it feels sweet because of the walking group' (2).

When I find myself in the area I look for the streets, the routes we walked, the houses of people whose stories were told, but they don't seem the same. All the streets that used to be first, second, third, fourth ... thirteenth, fourteenth, etc., the English lady's house, the Irish lady's house, the house of the lady who taught Olga English - this is a cup, this is a saucer - Elizabeth and Rocco's garden, the house with the cannon, the beeman, the 98 year old Italian lady, the spot where Hazel and Annette collected wild mint, and where they picked the mushrooms they thought might have poisoned them, the black stump - I expect them to be there, fully revealed.

It's as though when we went on our walks we made the contours of that geography through our walking and talking. The stories are the geography I know, the geography you make when you walk not too fast with people who are responding to what they see, and each other, and sharing stories through those connections. The geography and history Annie and I made as we walked not too fast with our notebooks and pens, moving between twos and threes and groups of people, up and down the streets, taking down the voices as we heard them - the conversation, the communion these people made as they walked and talked.

A walk which took us back: early spring 1991

We should have a photo of you Hazel  
 Because you were the first person on the walks.  
 That's right! Annette and I went down and gathered mint.

I came in 1950 to Narrabundah  
 When I arrived here it was just fields.  
 This was the primary school  
 Here there were horses and sheep  
 My daughter-in-law and son used to live there  
 All that side, monocrete, since 1954  
 English people used to live here - a very nice garden at one stage  
 Some friends of mine live here  
 A nice Austrian family there  
 An old lady, 98, I visit every day  
 And that's my house.

I worked on all these houses  
 I used to be with Jennings  
 That's one of the old originals.  
 This was all pre-fabs - they were built from plywood from the 'planes  
 There's one of the old ones - he's just bricked it in.  
 These were the houses for the workers  
 Over there for the bosses - they were all double brick.  
 There's one of our old friends



This one here's a half-way house  
 Italian, Greek, Spanish, Ukraine - that's Australia (4-5).  
 (Art Council of the ACT, 1992)

### **The Hospital project, Canberra 1992-95**

Annie and I collaborated on the first Hospital project as the writer members of a small team of artworkers who developed a four-week pilot project at Canberra's Woden Valley Hospital in response to union interest. On the second, longer project, developed by the Trades and Labour Council's (TLC) Art in Working Life Committee and managed by the Union Arts Officer, Annie worked as the writer with a musician and photographer, and I edited the publication of material that emerged from their work.

The hospital as a site of work rather than sickness was revealed to us as a vast network of underground corridors, conduits for beds, trolleys, machines, vehicles. The corridors connected areas of activity - the boiler room, the morgue, the kitchen, the linen room, medical records, the staff canteen. Above were the wards, the purpose to which all this work was ultimately directed. That's where the lifts became major players as the vertical conduit of work.

confusing pathetic deliberately extremely slow lifts  
 (currently under review)  
 'bing bing'  
 (Combined Unions Art in Working Life Committee, 1992: 8)

All work traffic converged at the staff canteen, the various working bodies differentiated by their clothing.

The Floriade<sup>1</sup> of the hospital  
 Mainly navy (it's the new colour)  
 Yellow  
 Blue

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<sup>1</sup> Floriade is an annual spring flower festival held in Canberra.

Red  
 Pink  
 White  
 Coats (8).

The canteen became a key site of writing activity. Alphabets pasted on the walls of the entrance corridor.

A is for ambulance, administration and anxiety,  
 B is for boiler room, busy and bosses  
 C's for coffee, canteen and chef (6).

Annie and I standing by with pen and butcher's paper as the queue moved along the *bain-marie*.

You should come when we've had a bad day.  
 Then you'd have some things to write down! (13).

Scrapbooks on the tables for people to read and write in. Annie and I scribing as people drank coffee and shared the stories of the day so far.

We're a bit down at the moment;  
 She's not permanent  
 She doesn't know what job she's in  
 My job's been upgraded (21).

The writing in both projects became a site in which the different bodies of work that constituted the Hospital came together. It marked their pleasure and distress.

It's a perfect day  
 You smile at people, you talk to people, you laugh  
 You do a good day's work.

You help people  
 You're creative  
 You're responsive ...

We hear rumours they might privatise our area  
 It's a process to them  
 It's a stress we can live without  
 It doesn't make us work any faster, better, smarter  
 You just do what you have to do  
 You cease to take the corporate view, the vision  
 You pull back into your day, your department.

Whenever you go back to the corporate view  
 It ruins your day.

...

It's like living two lives.

(Art in Working Life Committee, 1996: 19)

### **What is a book? September 1992**

One of the things Annie and I do as writers is make our own books. For me it is something that started at the tip, for Annie, it's been thoroughly embedded in her life and writing. As one of our community literature activities in Feminist Book Fortnight 1992 we held an exhibition of books at Annie's place. We had a lot of delighted visitors, some bemused ones. One elderly lady was highly indignant. Picking up a beautiful little scroll book of Annie's she turned it round and backwards and forwards, perhaps trying to find a beginning point or something that looked like a continuous story. She thrust it at me in disgust, 'This isn't a book!'.

The examples of maps in *Maps are Territories, Science is an Atlas* (Turnbull, 1993), show how they engage with cultural discourses concerning land practices and ownership. A modern western map envisages the whole world through a grid of latitude and longitude (25-26), and through this system co-ordinates territories

and their relationships. The borders that mark my body of work map are part of this tradition. They separate and divide, create margins and centres.

Crossing the borders of particular practices, taking them up in 'foreign' territories, upsets territorial power relations. It creates spaces of merge and overlap, sites of subversion across the storylines which shape and demarcate our sense of ourselves as individuals in the world. It is in these spaces that stories of self and community may be written otherwise. bell hooks (1990), for instance, turns the margin into an inclusive zone, a productive, creative space from which to 'imagine alternatives, new worlds ...' (150). She sees it as a place where 'we' (152), working against borders and the power they embody, may meet on the basis of alternative selves and alliances. Speaking as a sociologist, Laurel Richardson (1990) overturns the opposition of margin and centre, arguing that 'resistance narratives ... keep alive the dominant culture in the psyches of the nondominant' (8). She suggests 'resisting resistance narratives' (2), through a transgressive sociological writing that pays no respect to borders but privileges human agency as a basis for creating 'communion' (10).

In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa (1987), writing materially of the U.S.-Mexican border culture - 'the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third' (3) - creates a rich imagery for crossing borders of race, language, gender, sexuality. The 'new *mestiza*' (77) refuses the dualism that the idea of the border as dividing line creates, and drawing on the power of her own border culture plurality, creates a space for change - for action rather than reaction. The *mestiza* stands 'on both shores at once and, at once see[s] through serpent and eagle eyes' (78-79).

*Soy un amasamiento*, I am an act of kneading, of uniting and joining that not only has produced both a creature of darkness and a creature of light, but also a creature that questions the definitions of light and dark and gives them new meanings (81).

To look more directly at the way my body of work engages the embodied subject and cultural practice, I use the model of an Aboriginal Australian map.

The Aboriginal Australian map shown in *Maps are Territories* shows landscape as constituted by the action of Ancestors (Watson, 1993: 28-36). In this tradition journeys give shape to territory and make it readable. Maps are stories of journeys through the landscape. Hilton Walsh's (1996) story of the map on the lining of the cod's belly echoes this tradition in a way that illuminates the relationship, in this context and in a broader metaphorical one, between the individual subject and its wider community or culture.

The cod creates its territory as it journeys - journeys, we may imagine, which are culturally inscribed but also particular to that cod. It is also marked by these journeys - in effect they are written on its body as a map of its wider cultural environment, its 'home' in the large body of the river.

**Food for thought/food for the soul - writer in residence Goulburn-Murray-Edward waters region, 1996**

This was one of those residencies where you have to keep all your receipts. Meals become such an issue when you have to account financially for every bit you eat. And then, in unknown country, where to eat? When I'm alone my preference is to combine food and planning/writing/reflection. So I started to self consciously keep pace of where and what I was eating and how much it cost as part of my place diary. I even took photographs, which I thought in extremis I could present to the tax office. As my contribution to the project's writing exhibition I included bits from the diary, receipts and bits of photographs, cut and pasted into a small autograph book with coloured pages.

Walking along the Edward River. The spasmodic whistling and chattering above me thickens in fits and starts. Not dusk. Preparation for dusk. The river glistens, set easily in its bowl (15/4/96, Green Pepper Pizza, Deniliquin, \$7.00).

Grass tree - Xanthorrhoea - roots eaten

Murnong - yam daisy - cooked in baskets in earth oven. Minne (juice)

Taloom (cooked roots)

Old Man Weed - centipeda cunninghami

Food grown at Cummera - rice, tomatoes, potatoes (29/4/96, Barmah

Tourist Information Tea Rooms, \$4.00).

Delwyn's plunger coffee and lumberjack cake. The coffee in a big orange cup. Substantial. Warm. The cake on a solid white plate ringed with dull red. Food as a full bodied experience. Present. Meaningful. In here, at this little table against the shelves of Dilmah and Twinings and Jefferson's teas, of handmade chocolates and the Mustard Sisters' pickles, it feels like a kitchen. The rhythm of slicing and wrapping behind the counter, the ripple of voices in request and response - desires fulfilled by ham and silverside, the cutting of cake, the pouring of coffee (12/5/96, Amy's deli, Numurkah, \$12.55).

In two seconds there's a fire going, a barbecue plate is out, and a fold-out table. Lucina, Melanie, Suzanne and Gladys have it all under control, buttering bread and throwing chops on the grill (The Narrows, 13/5/96).

I seem to be forever sitting in Fryers Street Cafe, moaning into my journal (14/5/96, 15/5/96, 17/5/96, Fryers Street Cafe, Shepparton, \$2.00, \$8.00, \$8.50).

Near the dairy, as I make my way back and forth along the Nathalia road in a flurry of leaving things behind, I smell the warm sweet scent of cows. It comforts me as I peer under the witch's silvery skeins - beautiful wraiths, they can turn you to stone if you falter in their path (c. 28/5/96, Nick and Soula, Nathalia, \$4.50).

It became clear that I could no longer live on raisin toast (battered with a teaspoon) and take-away from Nick and Soula. And dining alone on a stiff white tablecloth next to an open fire was filling me with increasing horror. I went shopping at Superking. I borrowed a plate and a knife

and fork from Judy - she tried to persuade me to take a dessert spoon, but having survived on a teaspoon all week, this seemed extravagant, and I declined her offer. Small pleasures: ryebread and ham, crackers and camembert, cabanosi and mushroom salad - and butter spread with a knife (1/6/96 Superking, Nathalia, \$16.90).  
(Hutchison, 1996a).

In a sense that autograph book does carry my signature - a sign of 'me'. As though I lay across its pages and left an impression of my journeys through the work and places of the project.

### **Body/Map**

He knows the forest  
Like the palm of his hand  
The mounds and pouches at the base of his fingers  
Are the red dunes of Kanyapella  
The Cadel Tilt sweeps around his thumb.  
Following the path of a woman dragging a digging stick  
The line of his heart is the course of the river -  
Looped and densely grooved.

Here is the map of Moira  
Here of Barmah  
The deepest cross hatching marks the massive trunks of Algabonya<sup>2</sup>  
This sunny triangle Ulupna Island  
And chained and etched across the floodplain  
The paths of the people.  
They meet in the rich ash of campsite middens  
At the box ridge to cut canoes and coolamons  
They make the trek to Maloga  
To Ngulunja  
To Cummeragunja

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<sup>2</sup> Local Aboriginal word meaning mistletoe (Atkinson, S. 1999, pers. comm., 8 February).

A steady lifeline  
 On this land, his skin.  
 (Hutchison, 1996b)

In writing self we inevitably write our social relations, the pattern of our 'belongings' as Elspeth Probyn (1996) calls them. Self is constituted discursively, inscribed or written through cultural practice.

A map provides an example of cultural practice (Turnbull, 1993: 61). It is a way of reading or writing a territory on the basis of shared understandings and 'connections' (Turnbull, 1993: 62) rather than explanation (62). In the way that an historian makes history by constructing a map of past activity, my body map, or more precisely my body of work map, is an artefact constructed, to 'capture and evoke' (Ellis and Flaherty, 1992: 5); to generate connections and responses to it, locations for it on other maps. It is through this imaginative, connective engagement that we, as distinct embodied subjects, read and write ourselves into the world of relationship with others.

*For me the universe wheels tantalisingly. I long to be specifically inside another of its dots, to know it in the way I know this one, but to know its otherness. But this is a conundrum; if I were truly inside it then it wouldn't be 'other'. It would be just the same as the laundry and just as here in the laundry I cannot experience my difference because I know no other, all the dots I could inhabit would be just the same in terms of my experience of them. It's the knowing I long for - to be Denise Spry and to know the otherness of that from Mary Hutchison.*

*In translating the feeling of vertigo I experience in seeing the laundry as an utterly non-specific star in the universe, to my mother, I say 'how do I know I'm me - and not Denise Spry'? This sort of gets at my problem with specificity but it doesn't express my desire for experience beyond this laundry, this bakelite shade, these insects, this ironing, this mother. Perhaps I am half afraid of the potentially unfixed quality of that thing called 'I', half afraid that I might float off my moorings - shortie pyjamas and bare feet notwithstanding - but I also long to be a*



*space traveller. The issue I can't resolve is consciousness. I want to be adrift in a sea of identities and able to reflect on the other-self-experience of each of them.*

*The iron thumps with finality, the little stool cum step ladder - known as the laundry stool - that my mother sits on, scrapes over the cement. There are dresses, shirts and blouses on hangers, mounds of children's underpants, singlets, shorts, shirts, pyjamas, tiers of sheets and towers of the despised hankies. There is no doubt that it is time for bed and in the morning I will wake up and do all the things I normally do without the least consciousness of the identity that performs them. And Denise Spry will do exactly the same.*

*But tomorrow, on my way home from school on the newly pebbled path along the oval, it may catch my eye at last. The best crystal, the one that will twinkle me back in multiform, and though it lies like a stone in the pocket of my school uniform, I only have to take it out and hold it to the sun.*

## **Chapter two**

### **Doing it ourselves: radical adult education and feminist social activism**

In this chapter I draw out the theoretical and political underpinnings of the writing practice I have described in chapter one as a body of work. This is a move to the other side of my body of work map; from a focus on the embodied subject and its doings, to the discourses which mark it. In making this exploration, I am also setting the scene for a detailed analysis of the particular example of my body of work that is the main case study of this thesis - Homefront women's community writing and publishing group.

Radical adult education and feminist social action both inform my work as theories and practices of adult education for social change. Here I discuss aspects of their political intentions and theoretical and practical development, with a particular interest in mapping how they have constructed the concept of community. In chapter three I show how such constructions of community have been variously taken up and contested in the more immediate discursive context of my writing practice.

My discussion here is not intended as either a definitive or causal excursion into community in radical adult education and feminist social action. I think of myself rather as working with what Johnson (1988) calls 'resonances' (3-4). I'm using particular historical experiences or, more precisely, renderings of those, to develop an understanding of community in relation to my interest in changing the story lines which frame stories of 'me' and 'us' in terms of domination and exclusion.

#### **Radical adult education - 'doing it ourselves'**

In documenting the history of 'systematic' (Whitelock, 1974: 16) adult education,

generally understood to be a nineteenth century phenomenon (16), there is a wide claim for the historical relationship between adult education and social movements. R. H. Tawney - 'All serious education movements, have ... been also social movements ...' - may be invoked whether documenting the development of adult education in terms of the 'liberal tradition' (16) or in terms of a radical concern with oppression and social change (Field, 1988: 224). The difference between the liberal and radical tradition however is the way in which 'social movement' is understood. 'The great tradition' (Whitelock, 1974:7-8), suggests that adult education is a social movement in itself, implicitly bringing about social improvement through increasing individual access to learning. Lovett (1988) and his colleagues, in *Radical Approaches to Adult Education* offer a view that is concerned with common causes and collective action as a basis for social change. It is in these terms that I see community taking shape through the radical discourse. The following discussion traces this shaping in some detail through radical adult education philosophy and history.

In *Philosophical Foundations of Adult Education* Elias and Merriam (1980) discuss radical adult education in terms of its antecedents in oppositional movements for social change; anarchism - which opposes social authority and the structures, including school systems, which support it (140), Marxist-socialism - which opposes capitalism and the structures which support it and seeks alternative approaches to education to bring about socialism (141-143), and the Freudian Left - which suggests that psychological change is required to support structural change (143-145). They also suggest that Paulo Freire's theory of education is a major contemporary example of radical adult education in that it is education for freedom from 'political, social and economic oppression' (139). His approach involves working from the 'cultural situation of the learners' (156) as a basis for problem solving leading to political action.

When Tom Lovett (1988), drawing on Freire, writes about radical education in contemporary Britain in terms of 'cultural action for freedom' (144), he refers to it as 'community education and action' (141-163). In doing so he pulls in a constellation of meanings of community. One is the description of a shared social

location of oppression, as in 'working-class communities' (142). Another concerns the form that such education takes in terms of organisation, control and location - whether it takes place on the terms of the community or those of state institutions (148-155). A third emerges in his discussion about education for a cultural democracy in which people are not governed through elected representatives but participate actively in social and political structures and 'care for each other in an active, convivial manner' (143). In this case community is suggested as a form of sociality which people actively create, one based on 'co-operation, fraternity, egalitarianism' (143).

My exploration of these three constructions of community in the radical adult education discourse follows the social-historical discussion offered by contributors to Lovett's (1988) *Radical Approaches to Adult Education* (1988). As such it is located primarily in what Elias and Merriam (1980) would describe as the Marxist-socialist philosophy, combined with Freirean developments of this in the context of colonial oppression. This means that a significant area for discussion concerns radical approaches to working class education in the nineteenth century. In the interests of containing it, I have concentrated on the British context and its sphere of influence.

The background to the detail of radical working class education is the industrial revolution. The process of industrialisation which began well before the end of the eighteenth century in western societies, had a revolutionary effect on the structure of society. As social relations came to be shaped in terms of capitalism rather than feudalism, the old bonds of society, and the power they engaged, gave way. A new 'middle class' emerged through its capacity to make itself; to compete, discover, acquire, change. In response to the needs of capital, embodied by this class, less powerful groups became part of a mobile workforce (Clark, 1995: 7-8).

What was critically different in this new order was that the individual became a distinct social unit. The social order, as much as the prospects of an individual life, came to be seen as a matter of consent or contract (Kramnick, 1975: 25) rather than divine ordination. For the middle class such individuality was something like a

*raison d'être* - the basis of its new power. As Terry Eagleton (1990) notes, 'autonomy' is the 'mode of being' that fits the 'material operations' (9) of the middle class. For working people it was something that had to be overcome through the development of a 'class consciousness' based on labour (Clark, 1995: 8).

Liberal thinking about the individual in this new framework of social life, proposed that education was the basis on which individuals might become responsible or virtuous (Kramnick, 1975: 46) citizens and uphold justice and equality, at least in terms of the needs of the bourgeois order.

If government is to be based on the consent of its citizens, then the citizens must be virtuous. If a change in the affairs of society must be made, the need for a change must be recognised by wise men and women (57).

As the state increasingly took up the reins of social regulation during the nineteenth century, including provision of education, on the basis of this thinking, it did so in terms of the power relations of capitalism. Mary Wollstonecraft's (1792) 'plan for national education' (Kramnick, 1975: 44) prefigures this development.

... higher education is provided for those of "superior abilities or fortune", while an unspecified group of children "intended for domestic employments, or mechanical trades" go to specialised schools' (44).

Socialist thinking, concerned with such oppressions of the bourgeois order, saw education as a basis for developing awareness of the common conditions of labour and the social relations of class. Working class radicals in early nineteenth century Britain called for 'really useful knowledge' (Johnson, 1988: 21) which would equip them to understand their social position and take action to change it. It explicitly opposed the 'coercive and knowledge-denying' (4) fare of education provided by the Church (for example Sunday Schools) and the bourgeois state, and looked for knowledge that was practically related to the working class 'social standpoint and political purpose' (21). It was secular, had a rational rather than moral approach

to justice and equality, and offered political analysis (5). Really useful knowledge was also acquired as part of 'life' (18), rather than through distinct 'schooling'. 'People learned in the course of their daily activities and were encouraged to teach their children too, out of an accumulated and theorised experience' (18).

There are clear echoes of this call for really useful knowledge in Freire's (1985) twentieth century methodology for education for social change. He opposes what he calls the 'banking' (46-59) system of education, in which students passively store knowledge rather than actively come to know through their own sense of reality (Elias and Merriam, 1980: 155) and proposes an active, critical engagement with the cultural situation - the lives and social conditions - of learners (156). In the banking system teachers own knowledge (Freire, 1985: 53), but Freire's '[L]iberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transferrals of information' (53). He suggests a 'problem-posing' (52-59) approach which creates a horizontal, rather than 'vertical' (53) and hierarchical, relationship of 'dialogue' between teacher and students (53).

Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers ... Here no one teaches another, nor is anyone self-taught. Men teach each other, mediated by the world, by the cognisable objects which in banking education are 'owned' by the teacher (53).

In this alliance between teachers and students, in which 'we' are all participants in education for social change, 'we' produce our own (really useful) knowledge. In nineteenth century Britain, the radical resolution to acquire really useful knowledge involved just that - producing our own knowledge on the basis of the determination 'we must do it ourselves!' (Johnson, 1988: 14). Johnson suggests that radical education may be best understood through the story of attempts to preserve independence and win desired knowledge by 'doing it ourselves'. Taking my cue from him once more, I want to offer a reading of this evocative phrase as a reference to each of the strands of community contained in Lovett's (1988) discussion of community education; the oppressed social location of participants,

independent organisation, control and location of education, and the creation and practice of an alternative to oppressive social relations through education.

In the first place, doing it ourselves suggests a vigorous collective purpose. While the oppressive conditions of a common social location may inspire us to take our education into our own hands, the focus of doing it ourselves is the action sparked by the intention to change, in the language of early radicals, our ‘circumstances’ (Johnson, 1988: 5). As E.P. Thompson (1977) has shown in relation to class consciousness, it is not those circumstances *per se* but our awareness of them and their oppressive nature which creates ‘us’. ‘We’ are a dynamic ‘relationship’ rather than a static ‘thing’ (11). The conditions of a particular oppression may remain the subtext of the action but it is the conscious determination to act and the action we take through which ‘we’ evolve, as a ‘community’. ‘The working class community of the early nineteenth century was the product, neither of paternalism nor of Methodism, but in a high degree of conscious working-class endeavour’ (457).

The independent pursuit of really useful knowledge may be read as part of this endeavour. Early radical working class education was organised and controlled by working class activists through their own resources and in their own domains. It took place through working class political associations; their newspapers, meeting places and libraries. Johnson (1983) documents the creation of the independent radical press (20) as well as the ‘collective forms’ (20) that radical educational activity took, from the informal that were part of everyday activity such as ‘conversations with friends’ (18), ‘workplace discussions’ (19), public and communal reading and discussion of newspapers, to more formal public meetings (20).

More ambitious and continuous radical branches organised a whole calendar of events, including lectures and classes, plus one-off special events like big public meetings or the public confrontations with the clergy sought especially by Owenites (20).

Eileen and Stephen Yeo (1988) further document this activity, describing socialist ‘halls of science’ (236) which were ‘multi-purpose cultural centres, owned and controlled by working people, where socialists and others could practise their own versions of education, recreation and religion’ (236). All ‘contained libraries and reading rooms’ (236).

Another example which gives some insight into the detail of this independent collective education process, is that of the Rochdale weavers who set up a workers’ production co-operative and set out to get the education they needed to manage it (Adams, 1988: 265-267). In his essay on worker control of the production of knowledge, Frank Adams (1988) notes Tawney’s recollection that in teaching this group he had to change his teaching methods ‘because his “students” knew what they wanted to learn ...’ (266). Again this suggests Freire’s (1985) ‘teaching-learning’ methodology in which the relationship between teachers and students is one of dialogue rather than domination, in which both learn and teach and ‘become jointly responsible for a process in which they all grow’ (53).

So, in the second place, doing it ourselves is the independent organisation and provision of education on the basis of our learning needs, and in forms and locations accessible to and managed by ‘us’. Vitality, this involves a fundamental change in an education process based on relations of domination, suggesting a democratic or perhaps even ‘dialogic’ practice of education in settings which themselves bear no resemblance to hierarchical classrooms.

The third component of doing it ourselves that I want to draw out, is what might be called, in Freirean terms, a methodology of education for social change. Central to this methodology, as the above examples suggest, is the practice of alternative social relations through the development and management of education that is related to our lives and interests and based on principles of participation and collectivity.

Education is of course about change as Tawney made clear. The liberal tradition sees it primarily in terms of individual change - my life, my circumstances; the



radical in terms of freedom from oppression. This does not simply describe the result of an ‘oppressed’ group achieving practical and political literacy. As this discussion has already shown, the radical tradition is vitally concerned with particular forms of ‘us’. At its heart is the development of a social life that is, as Lovett (1988) suggests, ‘convivial’ (143) and caring, rather than dominating and exclusive, one in which people participate in society in an ‘integrated’ (143) manner, rather than through representation. This ideal finds expression in a particular idea of community, distinct from but related to the practice I am suggesting.

As Eileen and Stephen Yeo (1988) explain, what I am calling here ‘doing it ourselves’ was part of a context of radicalism which took up the idea of community as a political intention. The use of community as ‘a positive, self-made quality of social relationship’ (232) in which human potential is unlocked and developed through living in ‘supportive social relations’ (232), developed predominantly in Britain through the philosophy of ‘Owenite socialists and co-operators’ (232). The Yeos identify this radical use of community as ‘community as mutuality’ (232). What I want to suggest on the basis of this political understanding of community is that the methodology of doing it ourselves involves practising or doing community, as an inclusive and co-operative form of social relations. Although in the late twentieth century the political antecedents may not be obvious, this meaning of community is a vital thread as an ideal and as a matter of practice in radical adult education discourse.

In summary then, community, in radical adult education discourse, has several related meanings:

- the common intent to change oppressive social conditions - community as common purpose
- independent participant management and control of the form and content of the educative process as a basis for such change - community as the source of provision
- a methodological approach to education which practises democratic, egalitarian, mutually inclusive social relations - community as methodology.

I'm not suggesting here a static definition of community in radical adult education, but a discursive pattern which is figured and refigured through the practice of doing it ourselves in various social-historical contexts. I now want to look briefly at some further examples of radical education that emerged through the early working class movement, and in more detail at feminist activism in this context, to show something of this shifting configuration. In particular, given that community is often understood to imply conservatism (Revill, 1993: 119-120) - stasis, monoculturalism, exclusivity (Rose, 1997a: 2-3) - I am interested in teasing out the radical adult education practice of community, in terms of the change and transformation which doing it ourselves rests on and, in various ways, implies.

### **The changing pattern of 'doing it ourselves' in radical working class education**

A major shift in the form of independent working class education activities took place in the second part of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, as the labour movement, a term suggesting some sort of consolidation of the earlier ferment of radical activity, took the direction of setting up formal alternative education programs (Armstrong, 1988: 35-58). Drawing on examples from western Europe, America and Canada as well as Britain, Lovett (1988) provides a number of examples of working class movements of this period establishing schools, colleges and associations in the framework and spirit of doing it ourselves (xvi-xxi).

The Work People's College, set up in 1907 by Finnish socialists in Minnesota, provides one such example. Its courses were dedicated to changing the conditions of the working class by providing participants with the knowledge and skills to achieve industrial demands and ultimately a new social order. In some schools work took place alongside study, blurring the distinction between education and 'life' and sometimes reversing the roles of teacher and students. The college was established through the labour movement and was a key player in labour movement activities, but collapsed in the 1930s as unions and government became more conservative (xvii-xviii).

Examples of partnerships between established institutions and community activity also emerged in this period. For instance in the early twentieth century, the Antigonish education movement, involving rural workers in Canada, was developed in association with St Francis Xavier University. Education was delivered in terms of the life and work of its participants in settings which varied from mass meetings to kitchens (xix-xx). Such partnerships with academic institutions were often expressed in terms of 'extension' of the institution, or 'extra-mural' education. The education provided through the Workers Educational Association (WEA) in Britain and Australia is a well-known example.

Another partnership example is that of Ruskin College at Oxford University in England, founded at the turn of the century. It offers a very different model from that of the Antigonish movement in that it set up a working class space within an established academic institution (xx).

The issue of independent community provision has offered a particular challenge to the idea of doing it ourselves, in the more recent era. For commentators such as Paul Armstrong (1988), this shift in resourcing and management makes serious inroads into doing it ourselves. He cites the loss of worker control of curriculum at Ruskin (45-47) and although he suggests that in some instances workers did control the WEA agenda (51), his article highlights the dangers of setting up socially transformative education within 'existing structures' (55).

In the context of increasing state and charitable concern with health, welfare and education in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in western countries, it is possible to identify, as Stephen and Eileen Yeo (1988) do, the increasing use of 'community' in liberal discourse, to mean 'service' (236-237). This suggests 'provision for', rather than the mutuality of doing it ourselves. The Yeos see this sense of community being employed in Britain in the development of a whole range of public facilities from hospitals to libraries which were for common use, and contend that it masks inequalities and is, in practice, hierarchical (237). They see doing it ourselves as being eroded through resourcing in terms of the 'provision

for' discourse. However the evidence suggests that independent community activity has continued anyway, through new forms and configurations.

An example which has survived from the first part of the twentieth century without being overwhelmed by issues of provision, is that of the Highlander Folk College in Tennessee. It was founded, in the same decade that the Work People's College collapsed, by radical Baptist minister, Myles Horton. It had a less directly socialist intention than the Work People's College, but its axiom, in Freirean style, has been 'learn from the people and start education where they are' (Lovett, 1988: 160). The 'people' have been the workers of Tennessee and other 'oppressed groups' (160). In responding to their interests, it played a key role in the development of the Tennessee trade union movement and in the 1950s and 60s, the Civil Rights Movement (xviii). Most recently it 'has focused on balancing environmental concerns with the struggle for economic recovery in the South' (Sandercock, 1998: 234). As part of its educational activities it has fostered the expression of local working class culture through art and encouraged an ongoing collective approach to problems rather than individual relief from them (Lovett, 1988: xviii). Lovett comments that, among other attributes, the Highlander Folk School has survived because it has a 'non-institutional base' and has been able to adapt to 'new social movements' (160).

In this context, the 'craggy independence' (160) of the Highlander Folk College offers an interesting example of a continued capacity to do it ourselves. Independence here means independence from any one particular source of provision and, to some extent in association with this, any particular social location. The practice of social change through a community - participatory and inclusive - methodology of education, is shown in this instance as working across different social locations. These include class but do not take it as the only term of oppressive social organisation or radical community practice. The common purpose here may be expressed in terms of changing an oppressive social order which includes particular sets of oppressive conditions, while 'we' may be seen as a multi-positioned community of resistance (hooks and West, 1991 in Sandercock,

1998: 195). The following section explores more fully the complexity of who ‘we’ are in the radical practice of community.

### **Feminist activism**

In the examples of doing it ourselves I’ve looked at so far, the community of ‘us’ has been implicitly constructed on the basis of the common or universal social position ‘male’. Looking at political activity to change our circumstances as women immediately highlights the individual’s embodiment of different social locations and further problematises the idea that community resides in a single social location.

The labour movement was not the only oppositional social movement in western societies of the nineteenth century. Nor the only one to identify education as a significant aspect of its agenda. The discourse which saw social relations as contractual and identified individuals as capable of making their own position in the world, opened the way to various challenges to the order it supported (Eagleton, 1990: 8).

In 1792, ‘when the issue of the rights of man was bringing revolution to the United States, to France and threatening even to shake the venerable English Parliament’ (Kramnick, 1975: 7), Wollstonecraft wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). In this she applied the same liberal thinking about the individual’s capacity to reason and through education participate in society as a responsible or ‘moral’ (Kramnick, 1975: 46) citizen, to women.

A principal feminist concern of the nineteenth century women’s movement, showing the influence of this discourse, was that women as individuals did not have the same rights as individual men, and were regarded as their property. Feminists claimed that women should participate equally in society; that women should have the right to employment, to own property, to vote, to divorce men who treated them cruelly and to have custodial rights over their children. They saw education as a critical pathway to and aspect of women’s equal, self-

determined participation in the social and economic order (Allen, Hutchison and Mackinnon, 1989: 194-5).

In practice, their struggle for access to the range of standard education available at the time was mediated by class. Women from families where men had access to a university education, fought for admission to university degrees (Mackinnon, 1986: 23-24). Women who were admitted to the Mechanics Institute were offered courses in practical domestic skills (Thompson, 1983: 66-70). Others worked for access to labour movement education and failing that, set up their own programs, as writers like Sallie Westwood (1988: 66-71) and Jane Thompson (1983: 71-74) have shown.

In a sense this division may be read as implicit in the liberal discourse that produced an awareness of women's rights as individual citizens. At the same time however, in seeking to change the oppressive conditions of the social position 'female' as it affected women across class, women might find men of all classes opposed to them - for instance in relation to the right to vote or their legal status in relation to divorce, custody and property. Feminist community organisation for survival and change was not confined to class, nor to the discourse of enlightened individualism.

An example of women working across class, on the basis of the socialist interest in education for social change, is that of the Working Women's Co-operative Guild in Britain. It clearly indicates the ramifications of doing it ourselves as feminists in relation to the contemporary concerns of working class men. These concerns, as Anna Clark (1995) suggests, were directed to universalising the bourgeois construction of gender power relations in terms of the 'separate spheres' of work and home (1-9).

The Guild was established in 1883 as an auxiliary body to the co-operative movement (Scott, 1988: 131), with the intention of giving 'the wives of male co-operators an interest in the movement, and of encouraging them, mainly in their role as consumers, towards some form of independent self expression' (Dallas,

1978: i). However, with the appointment of Girton College educated feminist and socialist Margaret Llewelyn Davies as General Secretary to the Guild, it became 'a vigorous campaigning organisation of some 32,000 working women' (i). In *Life as we have known it, by Co-operative Working Women* (Davies, 1978), Mrs Layton recorded, 'From a shy nervous woman, the Guild made me a fighter' (Thompson, 1983: 72).

In the tradition of pursuing really useful knowledge by doing it ourselves, the Guild operated through locally managed branches which ran their own educational activities in relation to Guild-wide interests (Thompson, 1983: 71). Commenting on the value of the Guild's education program, Thompson suggests that 'its success lay in its relevance to the material and cultural concerns of its members' (72). Typically, Guild education involved activities such as 'collecting information on various topics, preparing and reading reports at conferences or reading and discussing books of political interest' (72) - all of which had a strong connection with the practical circumstances of members and were often the basis for taking political action (72).

As Thomson (1988) documents, the Guild gave equal time to domestic education alongside other main topics - 'the [co-operative] store, trade unionism and women's citizenship' (113). In the context of the topic 'The Home' (113), many branches concerned with improving the conditions of women's work, collected information on 'labour-saving articles' and investigated the development of 'co-operative wash-houses, bakeries, kitchens, gardens' (*Co-operative News*, 8 October 1892, in Thomson, 113). Guild members were also involved in a successful campaign for a maternity benefit which, through their efforts, was made the legal property of the mother (Dallas, 1978: ii). They continued to campaign for improvement in infant and maternal care for working women by documenting their experience in letters which were published in 1915 (Davies) with the support of Virginia and Leonard Woolf. The book was well received and rapidly sold out, due in part perhaps to the fact, as Gloden Dallas (1978) suggests in the Virago reprint, that all Guild branches were urged to buy a copy and lend it out at a

modest cost per week (ii-iii). This in itself speaks volumes for the success and method of the Guild's approach to doing it ourselves.

The strong connection between the Guild and the radical working class intentions of independent and participant-managed education activities to change the circumstances of a social location, is made clear in a quotation used by Gill Scott (1988), from 'an 1896 pamphlet entitled "How to Start and Work a Branch":

Working women are beginning to find out, as men have done, that the means for improving their conditions and redressing their wrongs lie largely in their own hands' (132).

However, the writer is also aware that there are some social wrongs that as working **women** they do not share with working men; that 'privileges' (132) are a matter of both sex and class. This was borne out through the Guild's long term struggle with the Central Board of the Co-operative Union, the governing body of the Co-operative Movement, over the issue of divorce law reform. The overwhelming majority of Guild members felt that the grounds for divorce should be the same for women and men (134-6). In 1913 the Central Board, concerned about the response of the Catholic Federation, took the decision to withdraw its four hundred pound subsidy to the Guild unless members stopped working for this reform and agreed not to take up any work of which the Board did not approve (137). As a result the Guild gave up the subsidy until 1918, when more support for their position was forthcoming from the Board (149 -50). As Scott indicates this struggle was as much about the 'the need for a women's organization to determine its own political agenda' (130) as about particular issues, which included involvement in the women's suffrage campaign (134), as well as divorce law reform.

The example of the Guild's activities shows that the common purpose of changing the conditions of any one location does not necessarily address other relations of domination. Changing working class conditions may not change those of women, and *vice versa*, though points of connection may exist between the two.



Furthermore, although a common social purpose may be closely related to the experience of a particular social position, as a purpose it may be engaged from various positions. As the experience of the Guild shows, working women may find themselves in opposition to working men, and united with women with a different class experience. In other situations, the joins may be made differently, as with the reconnection between the Guild and the Union.

As I've suggested, the example of the Highlander Folk School shows the possibility of community as something more like an alliance or coalition (Phelan, 1992: 134-5) across different social locations. The feminist example of the Guild makes it clear that such alliances may also be made on the basis that individuals live through many social locations rather than one. The differences and commonalities of these social locations produce shifting connections and alliances on the basis of the common purpose to resist the relations of domination. In this sense community is in the making rather than something that is an *a priori* condition. As both Highlander and the Guild demonstrate, self government is critical to such making.

### **Feminist activism - 'second-wave'**

A 'second wave' of feminist activism emerged in the late twentieth century, alongside other radical social movements which took up doing it ourselves on the basis of identity and specific issues rather than class. In later chapters I look more closely at how contemporary feminism has addressed the issues of community and difference highlighted in this context. Here, I look at the contemporary shape of community autonomy and offer a more detailed discussion of the educational methodology of doing it ourselves through the particular example of feminist consciousness raising groups. The material I draw on is primarily from the feminist women's refuge movement which directly informs Homefront women's writing and publishing activities.

The 'women's liberation movement', as it was first known (Curthoys, 1997: 203), was powered by a great wave of informal doing it ourselves activities including the establishment of women's studies resource centres, women's health centres,

working women's centres, migrant women's centres and women's refuges, and the formation of numerous networks and coalitions - women's art movement, women's education coalition, women's history network, women's abortion action coalition, women and labour conference. Women's journals and newsletters, conferences and workshops, meetings, rallies and marches played a key role in the discussion and development of the theory and practice of feminism.

The wider landscape of identity and issue-based social movements of which second wave feminism was a part included the anti-war movement (which found particular expression in opposition to the war in Vietnam), Indigenous land rights, gay and lesbian rights, the environment movement and heritage activism, to name a few. As Morley and Worpole (1982) write of British politics, 'During the 1960s political and social activity turned away from the electoral, national and bureaucratic towards the local, campaigning, direct action, sectional and self-organised' (2). There are clear resonances of this in the Australian context - local squatting campaigns, local campaigns against destruction of heritage sites for development, local co-operative initiatives by unemployed people.

A critical part of such community action was education in the 'circumstances' of particular identities, and the issues of the day. In her personal reflection on the 'great tradition' of liberal adult education during this period in Britain, Thompson (1997) remembers working with a tutor organiser for the WEA in her locality 'to provide a range of evening meetings, political workshops, short courses and conferences for local people on issues to do with housing rights, education, community action campaigns and economic issues' (130). In discussing the radical nature of this activity, she brings Freire's idea of education as the 'practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world' (Freire, 1972 in Thompson, 1997: 128), together with the *Poor Man's Guardian*, which spoke for education 'to enable men to judge' (1832 in Thompson, 1997: 130) the causes of misery, consider the remedies and take action on them.

The pursuit of really useful knowledge through feminist consciousness raising groups provides a striking example of a participatory, collective approach to learning located in the life and questions of those involved. Consciousness raising groups investigated the relationship between personal circumstances and the social order and saw change in women's position as requiring both personal and wider structural change. Verity Burgmann (1993) writes:

[Consciousness raising groups] ...were groups of about a dozen women who shared their ideas and feelings with each other, enabling women to comprehend the social and collective nature of their individual problems. [They] also connected individual enlightenment with efforts to transform social structures ... [they] enabled women to understand themselves and the male-ordered nature of the world around them, to achieve a consciousness of their real interests as women and their need to work in sisterhood to combat the gender order that constrained them (1993: 92).

Working on the central tenet that the 'personal is political', or as Butler and Wintram (1992) put it the 'belief in the validity of personal experience as a means of understanding the nature of women's oppression' (8), a basic assumption of consciousness raising groups is that women are the producers of their own knowledge. Of the Halfway House women's refuge established in Melbourne in 1974, Lizz Orr (1994) writes:

So, we just talked, no experts - we were all experts, we had been there; it was just a matter of putting our experiences together and coming to conclusions (212).

This participative, problem-solving approach, showing a close relationship between an understanding of women's circumstances and the belief in providing really useful knowledge as a basis for changing them, offered a long term model for a feminist version of 'the practice of freedom' (Freire, 1985: 54). Papers by participants at the 1985 national conference on domestic violence showed that it was central to feminist women's refuge practice.

We learn and develop from discussion, sharing and analysing our experiences, and learning together to put our ideas and solutions into practice (Younger, 1986: 259).

Women's refuges provide ... a service by women and for women. It is a service that takes as its starting point the right of each woman to dignity and independence in making her own life decisions ... Women's refuges ... provide a caring, supportive atmosphere. They provide information and new skills in areas ranging from nutrition to child-care to legal processes. Refuges do not rush women nor direct them. Each woman is given the time and space and resources to work through her own crisis and to make her own decisions (Noesjirwan, 1986: 267).

In a similar vein, drawing directly on their own experience of feminist consciousness raising groups, Butler and Wintram (1992) have developed a model for feminist therapeutic work which brings women together to 'offer each other support, validation and strength, and a growing sense of personal awareness' (1). Their intention is to 'construct and maintain for the women concerned a view of themselves based in their own thoughts and feelings and not those of others' (1-2). They also work from the premise 'that collectivity amongst women is a major tool in the process of deconstructing masculinist oppression and reconstructing an alternative, personally significant reality' (2-3).

As Barbara Younger (1986) says, in a way that captures the idea of really useful knowledge for social and personal change, and the practice of community as an egalitarian form of sociality.

... I cannot separate our goals of breaking down male power, empowering women, and increasing our access to resources and taking control over our own lives from the approach we take when talking to the women who ring us, or from the way feminist refuges operate (262).

By raising awareness of structural oppression and practising alternative forms of social relations, consciousness raising groups were also catalysts and models for community action. As Burgmann (1993) writes, 'Women's liberationists believed in living out in daily practice the sororial and egalitarian values of the envisaged future society' (92). The first feminist women's refuge in Australia, Elsie, was established in 1974 when a group of women occupied government property and made it available to women in need of shelter. As Sara Dowse (1984) reports this made several political statements:

... that women were often homeless because they were victims of domestic violence; that the state had a responsibility to protect such victims; that women had a right to demand such protection; but that women would take it in their own hands to help each other. It was an attack on property by the propertyless. It was an attack on the patriarchy. And, as the Glebe estate was Commonwealth property, it was an attack on the state (148).

On the basis of a critique of hierarchical power structures and what Zelda D'Aprano called 'power positions' (Burgmann, 1993: 92), as a major source of women's oppression, women's liberationists addressed the issue of women's access to 'power' in their own organisations, through collective management and decision making processes.

What was particularly distinctive about the refuge was the creation of a collective decision-making structure and the commitment to include all women, service-users and workers, in the running of the house and in decisions about change strategies and action (Orr, 1994: 210).

The collective was essentially an extension of the consciousness raising group and its participatory practice of community. It was inclusive, valued the contribution of all members and offered a climate of equality in which to acquire and pass on relevant knowledge and skills. Orr (1994) documents how collective management structures and participative decision making processes encouraged many ex-residents of women's refuges to become refuge workers and activists (212). These

practices not only raised women's awareness of their personal and political circumstances and gave them the basis to take action, but also gave them practical experience in management.

By the time of the national domestic violence conference in 1985, when many participants spoke so strongly for an egalitarian participative approach to social change starting from the cultural situation of the learners, 'the collective' in its original form had come in for strong criticism. As Burgmann (1993) reports, it was found to encourage the emergence of 'de facto, self-perpetuating hierarchies' (93), encouraging feminist organisations to pursue 'a kind of collective watchfulness against the tyranny of hierarchy' (93). Such a critique demonstrates not the failure of a method, nor the impossibility of social change, but the dynamic involved in producing our own knowledge; the extent to which 'doing it' is a practice of social change.

The feminist approach to resourcing such really useful knowledge for social change in the recent period has involved various forms of provision, including the use of state resources and funding. In Australia, in the early 1970s, a new Labor Government took up the idea of 'community' (Hawkins, 1993: xviii) resourcing. As state education, health and welfare funding expanded outside the institutional framework not only in 'outreach' activities but in direct support of local and non-institutional initiatives, feminist organisations and activities blossomed.

Lovett (1988) ascribes the flowering of community educational activity, directly associated with radical movements for social change, to the co-operation between 'alternative education initiatives' and 'institutional guerillas' (300-301). In feminist terms doing it ourselves was often achieved through feminists working together across their positions in grass roots organisations and the bureaucracy or educational institutions. The initial funding of feminist women's refuges offers a case in point.

International Women's Year (IWY), in 1975, a year after Elsie was occupied, was seen by feminists as providing a vital opportunity for highlighting the need for

women's refuges and securing government funding. The Labor government, which had appointed the first Women's Adviser in 1973, now supported International Women's Year through the establishment of the IWY Secretariat. Women's Liberation Movement members pressed the IWY Secretariat to direct funds to refuges as a stop gap measure. However, feminists working for the Secretariat - Barbara Wertheim who had been involved in setting up Brisbane Women's Health Centre, and Lyndall Ryan from the federal government's Women's Affairs Section - took a long term view and played a key role in securing ongoing funds for women's refuges from the federal Community Health Program (Sawer, 1990: 9-13). In effect, the feminist women's refuges were established by a broad-based feminism that included liberal feminist organisations such as Women's Electoral Lobby, and feminists working for the bureaucracy, as well as the radical 'women's liberation' collectives who initiated and took up the management of refuges (Burgmann, 1993: 95).

But this is not to suggest that the course of women's refuges thereafter ran smooth. Battles for funding and feminist principles have been consistent identifying characteristics of feminist refuge work. For instance, recollections of the establishment of Elsie indicate that funds towards running the refuge were initially raised by the Elsie women through a levy on feminists in employment. It was not without considerable debate that they later applied for and received government funding (O'Brien, E. 1997, pers. comm., 9 July).

As the earlier examples of radical working class education show, the debate about independent provision has a long history. It clearly impacts on the extent to which doing it ourselves remains in the hands of participants and indeed the extent to which it can take place at all. Thompson (1997) points to the dramatic effect of the discourse of the New Right on the liberal tradition of adult education provision by the state, showing how the 'great tradition', in this context, becomes the 'new vocationalism' (127). In the Australian context, as I show in chapter three in relation to community arts funding, the identification of community as a location for government funding may suggest the possibility of self determination, but it may also be driven by the liberal discourse of community identified by Yeo and

Yeo (1988) in terms of 'service' (234-245). The effect of this is to perpetuate inequities rather than redress them.

Self-government, in the context of widespread 'provision for', remains critical to continuing to do it ourselves, but as the examples of the Highlander Folk School and the Working Women's Co-operative Guild suggest, this may not mean refusing funding so much as drawing on more than one source of material and philosophical support. There are a number of feminist women's refuges and other radical community organisations which have raised funds, set up constitutions and steered their programs through the waters of vigorous community debate and the shifting requirements of government authorities over a long period, while retaining key elements of their purpose and methodology.

The effect of taking up the common feminist purpose to change the social position of women, is close to the surface in the late twentieth century context of feminist activism. Taking up an awareness of 'the personal' as 'political', the educational methodology of women's liberation leaves no room for doubt that 'learning liberation' (Thompson, 1983) is a life changing activity. It suggests that in the collective performance of our common social purpose through participative and independent structures, we are effectively creating 'us' anew, or at least changing 'our' shape. In doing it ourselves the community 'us' is an active becoming.

As Thompson pointed out, a class is not a 'thing', but a 'relationship' which 'happens', and can only be defined dynamically and historically; the interactions within a group of people who choose to see themselves as a community continually alter the nature of that community, so that it is always in a state of 'becoming', and therefore growing ... (Watt, 1991: 61).

However, despite the intention and practice of change, the gender consciousness of second wave feminism, in the same way that the class consciousness of socialism has privileged class identity, has often reinforced 'woman' as a single and fixed social identity, rather than acknowledging the multiplicity of other social locations individual women embody. This 'identity politics' (Bondi, 1993), of community as



social location, produces oppressions and exclusions which cut across the intention to change the relations of domination, and indeed produce their own. (I discuss an example of this in the Homefront context in chapter four.)

Using hooks' (1990) words, it is not the margins *per se* which describe the radical meaning of community, but **meeting** in the margins (152). In the radical tradition, the political constant that may be called to bear on our 'meeting' and what we make of it, is the idea of community as mutuality; as a participative 'dynamic' (Watt, 1991: 61) 'doing'.

In doing it ourselves we are remaking ourselves, changing, just as the Rochdale weavers did when they took charge of their own production (Adams, 1988: 265-267), or as women have done when they've gained the confidence and material support to leave violent domestic situations. Changing the configuration of 'us' is the risk and promise of changing the story lines of domination.

The writing practice which constitutes my body of work brings with it the idea of an excluded social location; voices that are not heard. But it is also aware that exclusion is not a fixed or singular condition. It is interested rather in community as an action; in doing community as an inclusive, mutual practice which speaks with many resistant voices. It is supported by various funding sources and often carried out in association with or on behalf of a community organisation which is responsible for its management. Funding sources and management generally allow a degree of independence in process and outcome of nominated activities. The following chapter describes the specific context of my writing practice and its radical community interests.

## Chapter three

### **‘Representing ourselves’: community arts, community writing and publishing and homefront women’s community writing and publishing group**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter takes up the spirit of producing our own knowledge in terms of ‘producing our own culture’, and looks at community activities which inform my body of work as a practice of cultural representation. Drawing on Morley and Worpole (1982: 64-66), I work with the idea that ‘representing ourselves’ is the cultural activism shape of doing it ourselves. Representing ourselves challenges the forms and processes of exclusive cultural practices and speaks diversity in terms of the inclusive notion of ‘cultural democracy’ (Watt, 1991: 55-61).

Stuart Hall (1997) and contributors to *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* demonstrate that cultural representation engages both the discursive relations of the wider social order and the semiotic constructions that create meaning in relation to those discourses. **What** meaning is produced is related to **how** meaning is produced (6-9). In the terms of Bakhtin’s ‘sociological poetics’<sup>1</sup> (Morris, 1994: 160), ‘... narrative technique is not simply a product of ideology, but ... ideology itself’ (Lanser, 1992: 5). That is, the modes and styles of representational practices are themselves political. In Hall’s words this may be expressed as the ‘politics’ and ‘poetics’ of representation (6).

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<sup>1</sup> Bakhtin (Morris, 1994) suggests that a ‘sociological’ understanding of the formal construction of a text - a ‘sociological poetics’ (160) - as well as a sociological analysis of content is required in the analysis of ‘a work of art’ (161).

My discussion in this chapter looks broadly at the politics and poetics of representing ourselves through the lens of Australian cultural activism as well as the British community writing and publishing movement. It also discusses Australian provision for community arts which has offered funding opportunities for a range of non-mainstream cultural activities and has been a significant resource for my writing practice. It introduces Homefront women's writing and publishing group as an example of representing ourselves in the Australian context and in the frame of feminist activism.

### **The politics and poetics of representing ourselves**

As the examples of working class newspapers (Johnson, 1988: 20) and 'halls of science' (Yeo and Yeo, 1988: 236) offered in chapter two suggest, the radical determination to pursue our own education, in the nineteenth century British context, involves the production of our own culture.

A distinct Chartist social world was constructed, based on a positive rejection of the existing social forms and institutions: radical bookshops, coffee shops, a vigorous press (which easily outsold the "establishment" press) and reading rooms which often promoted public readings of news, of poetry, of serialised novels. It was not unusual for small groups to buy Chartist publications between them and to read these aloud together. There were writers' groups like the Poet's Corner in Manchester which boasted seventeen members when it published an anthology of its work in 1842 (Morley and Worpole, 1982: 68).

This move clearly demonstrates a radical poetics in keeping with the political intention to represent 'our' distinct interests. In the Australian context, nineteenth century radical democratic activities which developed through the trade union movement and various socialist organisations, echo the earlier British activities.

There were banquets, speeches and marches of protest and celebration ...  
The spectacular Eight Hour Day procession, with its trade union banners,

floats and decorations, was for years the greatest annual public celebration in Australia. There were picnics, sporting events and bands for entertainment. There were musical/political *soirees* for education and relaxation, displaying skills ranging from the musical to the rhetorical. There were lectures and classes; bookshops were opened and newspapers proliferated. Workers were encouraged to use the libraries and reading rooms established by Trades and Labour Councils and various political factions' (Kirby, 1991: 20-21).

Kirby also notes the operation of the labour press (21) and the involvement of such now well-known poets as E.J. Brady, Bernard O'Dowd and Henry Lawson, through their membership of socialist organisations, in both the press and other cultural activities. For instance, O'Dowd ran 'the Victorian Socialist League's Sunday classes for workers in economics and politics' (21).

Such activities seem to speak clearly to a radical intention and practice of community in which we represent ourselves on our own terms, through distinct forms and styles, independent organisations, and collective rather than individual processes. Certainly Kirby suggests that they produced a 'distinctive working-class culture that was self sufficient, popular and participatory' (21).

But, as I have suggested in chapter two, the extent that 'a working class culture' may be characterised in this way, rests on taking the position 'male' as universal. Feminist activities of the time, like those of the Working Women's Co-operative Guild in Britain, immediately problematise the notion of 'us' as a single social location, and of class as an exclusive term of social order - and the idea that a working class culture represents women on their own terms. 'We' are never individually or collectively the embodiment of a single social location, but of many (Phelan, 1992: 134).

In Australia, in 1888, socialist and feminist, Louisa Lawson, established *The Dawn* as a 'monthly ... magazine, edited, written and printed by women' (Kingston 1977: 140). 'The Dawn Club', formed around the magazine's activities to further

encourage and support women's rights (Teale, 1978: 225), suggests the strongly collective nature of this doing it ourselves activity. However it was not an initiative which found favour with the Typographers' Association. Heather Radi (n.d.) reports that members of this association 'which refused membership to women' (52), harassed the women printers on their way to work.

Like the Working Women's Co-operative Guild in Britain (see chapter two), *The Dawn* highlights the varied and conflicting oppressions of sex and class. Ruth Teale (1978) reports that, 'Its opening number was fiercely attacked for its support of divorce extension' (225), and in her 'documentary history of Australian women', *The World Moves Slowly*, Beverley Kingston (1977) provides an example of an editorial from *The Dawn*, concerning the issues of women's unpaid housework:

10,000 wives to be called out!!  
 Mass Meeting of the Amalgamated Wives Association!!  
 Demands of the Women!!  
 Domestic Life Paralysed!!

What would you say if you saw these headlines in your morning paper?  
 Yet why should you not see them? Wives suffer from long hours of work, low wages, lack of rest, and oppression, and women are citizens entitled to just such rights and privileges are claimed [sic] by men, among their privileges being the right to cease work, and to make terms for the betterment of their condition (*The Dawn*, 5 November 1890, in Kingston, 1977: 141).

The article goes on to suggest that working men - the Typographers' Association we may imagine being a case in point - give little thought to the issues of working women. Furthermore the writer clearly feels disenfranchised from the 'participatory' cultural activities described by Kirby (1991: 21).

Thousands of pounds are spent on organisation, circulating newspapers, bands, processions, and free meals ... while the grievances of men are being put to the test, but not a soul asks “Have the women any claims?” ... There is no Women’s Eight Hour Demonstration, though we can make a public holiday because the men have won this right (*The Dawn*, 5 November 1890, in Kingston, 1977: 141).

Magazines like *The Dawn* and *The Woman’s Sphere* (Teale, 1978: 225), are examples of women distinctly ‘representing ourselves’, through our own means of communication, with the intention of changing the dominant social order. They also show women organising across the issues of domestic and working life in a way that crosses class boundaries and resists the bourgeois separation of those spheres and the (male) working class struggle to make the same distinction (Clark, 1995: 2).

However, despite its distinct trajectory, feminist cultural action of the time also connects with other expressions of radical democratic interest. For instance, trade union newspapers often carried columns about working women (Allen, Hutchison and Mackinnon, 1989, pp. 198-200), and socialist and poet, Mary Gilmore, was editor of the woman’s page of *The Worker*, newspaper of the Australian Workers Union in Sydney (Teale, 1978: 225). It was in such publications that poems like this were featured:

A house without a woman’s care  
Is desolate and drear;  
The State is but a larger house  
With ever-widening sphere.

Each party has some show of wrong,  
Some reason to complain,  
That rankling deep within the mind  
Still jaundices the brain.

But women with unclouded sight  
 Should take a clearer view,  
 And learn betwixt these jarring claims  
 To hold the balance true.<sup>2</sup>

(Emily Clark, c. 1900, in Allen, Hutchison and Mackinnon, 1989: 210)

Another example of the complexity of representing ourselves is indicated in the nineteenth century interest in producing a distinctly Australian culture (Moloney, 1987: 174). This suggests the radical determination to represent ourselves independently and distinctly from an imperial culture, as well as a configuration of 'us' which may cross and include a wide range of different social locations. For instance, Kirby (1991) notes the influence of Nicholas Chevalier's depiction of 'the noble worker' (21). 'The new and democratic vision encapsulated in Chevalier's work permeated all aspects of cultural development from the Heidelberg painters to *The Bulletin*' (21). However, *The Bulletin* spoke strenuously for the prevailing concern of much radical democratic activity of the time for a 'white' Australia (Moloney, 1987: 175).

The issues of 'white' Australia and gender in nineteenth century radical cultural representation, highlight the problem of exclusivity in the construction of 'community' as a fixed, single social location. But they also show the necessity for claiming and highlighting the particularities of social locations embodied by individuals and the cultural impact of representing these on their own terms. The public and collective form of the eight hour procession, the sparse style of stories like Lawson's 'The Drover's Wife' (Falkiner, 1992: 61) which focused on daily life in the bush rather than British notions of 'Arcadia' (60), the way the Heidelberg school of painting 'captured Australia's squinting light' (Peel, 1997:33), are examples of particular styles and modes of representation associated with particular social interests. These, as Kirby (1991) notes, have had a lasting impact on Australian culture (20-21).

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<sup>2</sup> This was written after South Australian women won the vote in 1894 and dedicated 'to the women voters of South Australia by one of themselves'. These verses are excerpts from the whole.

During the twentieth century the Communist Party approached the cultural representation of non-hegemonic social interests by nurturing what it saw as distinct ‘proletarian’ expressions and forms (25). In Australia during the earlier part of the twentieth century, the Party’s activities on this front produced vigorous cultural activity and debate. The idea that the realist form constituted the particular poetics of proletarian culture was increasingly criticised, and led to a political split between social realists and those interested in the critical potential of *avant-garde* practices (24-25).

Cementing a relationship between a social position and a representational form suggests a static understanding of the relationship between poetics and politics, as well as of ‘community’. It reinforces the idea that community is a ‘thing’ (Watt: 1991: 61) and, in restricting it to certain forms of expression, fixes it ever more firmly. In practice however, communist-based cultural activity seems to have been less hidebound, generating wider connections with the revolutionary proletarian purpose. It produced several radical cultural organisations which dynamically addressed the Australian experience and were not exclusively proletarian (25). Perhaps inspired by realism, but not confined to a narrow practice of it, they explored various representational forms. They included the Writers League, New Theatre and the Waterside Workers Federation Film Unit (25).

During the same period that the Communist Party was most active, a quite different Australian political movement emerged. The Aboriginal rights movement, which started forming its own organisations in the 1920s (Burgmann, 1993: 31), provides an extraordinary example of the politics and poetics of representing ourselves not only through publications and protest activities such as the Day of Mourning (31-34), but also through its own cultural traditions.

Djon Mundine (1998) documents how, in the 1960s, Yolngu people offered traditional bark paintings showing their unbroken association with their land, as political statements (4). In the 1990s, ‘with the Native Title debate in full swing’ an exhibition of these bark paintings and Tiwi prints, ‘was named *Native Title*’ (4). ‘It’s about Aboriginal people claiming or, more correctly, reaffirming ownership of



their land' (4). Here the distinct poetics of Yolgnu representation of their relationship with their country challenges the colonising discourse, itself supported by representational practices that render land as 'viewed', 'exploitable', rather than the pulse of life.

Tree, grass, star ...  
 because star and tree working with you.  
 We got blood pressure  
 but same thing ... spirit on your body,  
 but e working with you  
 (Neidjie, 1989: 3)

Mundine (1998) also speaks for the dynamic quality of Aboriginal culture produced through representing ourselves. He shows that over time, in response to wider developments and in relation to particular purposes, Aboriginal artists have employed varied forms as well as different materials and formats (4-5). In addition to the examples of visual arts work Mundine discusses in this particular article, there are also many contemporary examples of Aboriginal cultural expression in all artforms, showing a dynamic and varied sense of who 'we' are as part of a political project to change the position of Indigenous people in Australia. A particularly strong expression of this dynamic 'living culture' is made by a Ngarrindjeri man, Major Sumner, in relation to the 're-creation' of Indigenous dance. 'It's about a living culture, not about trying to recreate things exactly like they were. It's not stagnant. It's not a stationary thing - it moves, it changes' (Styles, 1998: 4).

In representing distinct qualities and issues of our particular social locations we are shaping ourselves in an action of community which is both multiple and dynamic. It is a dynamic interweaving of poetics and politics; of forms and styles of representation and political conditions and developments around the intention to resist and change cultural domination.

In the 1960s and '70s, the activism of Indigenous people in Australia connected with, and in some ways became part of, a raft of new social movements which

were often centred around issues of identity. The interest in taking up forms of cultural expression in association with this upsurge of radical democratic activity produced an intense period of cultural activism for social change (Kirby, 1991: 29). In a vital re-invigoration of the engagement of politics and culture, murals, posters, song, poetry and theatre became potent forms of expression of protest and pride for the women's movement, Aboriginal Land Rights, Gay Pride, to name a few. As part of this, artists' collectives, from theatre workers to visual artists, produced material relevant to the organisations and activities in which they were involved. There was also a revival of trade union banners (29) and a wealth of politically motivated cultural activity which sought to bring forgotten and marginalised traditions and voices into view as 'living traditions' actively making and shaping Australian culture. The folk music revival is one example, closely linked to activities of labour historians and the development of the practice of oral history (Taksa, 1994: 112-115).

This burst of cultural activism around diverse social positions, may be understood as a practical expression of, and inspiration for theorising, cultural democracy.<sup>3</sup> It suggests the fluid and multiple quality of representing ourselves, as a politics and poetics of inclusive counter-hegemonic expressions of difference. It offers a model for the development of cultural activism in terms of dynamic and 'purposive communities of interest' (Watt, 1991: 64). Here the common purpose is sustained and made through 'broad alliances between autonomous groups working to undermine the dominant culture through an insistence on common access to the process of creating meaning and value within the culture' (64). This same activity and the understanding of cultural democracy that grew through it, also set the scene for encouraging and resourcing what has been popularly called 'community arts'.

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<sup>3</sup> In the British context, the independent publishing company, Comedia, produced *Culture and Democracy: A Manifesto* (Shelton Trust, 1986). This publication has had considerable impact in Australia (eg, Fensham, 1990, Watt, 1991).

### **Australian community arts - opportunities and issues**

In this section I look at the opportunities and issues for representing ourselves as I've described it, within the frame of Australian community arts policies.

Community arts is often understood as a movement which, like British community writing and publishing, emerged in the context of the localised, 'grass roots' non-bureaucratic (Morley and Worpole, 1982: 2-3) social and cultural activism of the 1960s and '70s. Gillian Rose (1997a) describes it as a widespread activity of 'diverse practices' (3), which 'began in the late 1960s in Europe, North America and Australasia' (3). In the Australian context, it is perhaps most accurately described as a funding policy (Hawkins, 1993: xviii) which has gathered a constellation of diverse practices around it.

The Australian federal government's community arts program was initiated in 1973 as part of the new Australia Council for the Arts which also included a specifically designated Aboriginal Arts Board (33). Since then the Community Arts Board and its variously named successors have served a broad function, allowing for 'the identification of multiple constituencies' (36). There is no doubt that as a funding source it has offered viable opportunities to cultural activist organisations and projects. It has funded union arts activities and a range of others directly related to the cultural activist revival of the 1970s. But if such support opens up enormous possibilities it also engages certain issues which may seem to contradict the radical purpose.

In the 1990s in Australia, 'community arts' activities are funded by the state under the banner of 'community cultural development'. As Hawkins documents, the program was initially conceived in the same political context as the funding of 1970s grass roots initiatives related to the issues of 'gender, ethnicity and race' (32). These were taken up by a Labor Government committed to social democracy in terms of redressing disadvantage and increasing access to and participation in a range of social institutions (32). As I've documented in chapter

two, feminist women's refuges received government support in this climate, as did a range of other community initiatives.

At first glance, the official use of the term 'community' here, to identify the Labor Government's approach to the re-distribution of funds (32), seems to bring 'doing it ourselves' and state policy together.

This category was used extensively in various federal government programs aimed at improving participation rates in public services ... "Community" was represented as the most democratic organisational base for this process of secondary distribution, for the generation of improved access (32).

At its most radical this use of community in government policy may indeed suggest and support self determination. However, as Hawkins shows, its initial use as a term to identify 'disadvantage' in relation to access to the dominant order, affirmed the dominant order (37) and constructed community as a social location of 'lack' (32). In the 1980s this construction of community in relation to community arts was radically rewritten in terms of pluralism or cultural democracy. Now "community" was represented as the ultimate sign of pluralism: it was the site where difference was accommodated. It was the site where common identity was formed' (76) and, according to Hawkins, it was also a site where 'conflict and antagonism were denied' (76). In association with this redefinition, community arts became 'community cultural development' (78), a term in Hawkins' view which indicated a shift from 'arts' values (as set by predominant discourses on cultural representation) to community 'empowerment' (78).

What Hawkins seems to be suggesting here is some kind of discursive contest between the politics and poetics of representation; between politics and culture. Where community is seen in association with arts, it is fixed as an undifferentiated disadvantaged position. Where it is seen in terms of multiple positions and expression of these, it is no longer in the business of cultural representation.

Following Raymond Williams (1976), Alan Petersen (1991) shows that the way community arts and its later incarnation community cultural development has emerged as a policy, is located in the divergence between radical and liberal understandings of democracy. The liberal tradition, based on democracy through 'the open election of representatives' (1) privileges the individual. The radical tradition, interested in egalitarian participative decision making, emphasises the collective (Lovett, 1988: 143). In Australia, state policy is principally informed by the liberal tradition (Petersen, 1991: 2) and its view that cultural representation is a matter of individual accomplishment (2) thoroughly confuses the collective intentions of community. What emerges in these conditions is the understanding that the 'community' of community arts is an artistically disadvantaged social location, and an activity that concerns empowering processes but not representational practices and outcomes. A significant underlying issue is that the dominant liberal position is interested in maintaining its exclusive order of politics and poetics, while the radical community position seeks to make it inclusive.

From the radical position, artwork developed by women's refuges, local action groups, Aboriginal rights groups, migrant resource centres, trade unions etc. may be seen as confronting, delightful, breathtaking examples of cultural democracy. In various ways such work imaginatively speaks the issues and difference of Australian cultures, as well as breaking down exclusive, individualised understandings of cultural representation as a process and a product.

From the liberal position, however, the intention of representing ourselves as a collective endeavour which challenges the dominant cultural order, is unreadable.

... if there is one question that has been asked repeatedly of the Community Arts Program since its inception it is: what exactly is it? The answers to this question come thick and fast, ranging across a vast array of cultural forms and constituencies. Community arts are murals, craft workshops in prisons, agitprop theatre, a migrant women's embroidery group, regional arts centres, local government cultural officers, a photo exhibition of a

miners' strike, a mask-making project with children. The list goes on and on but little is clarified (Hawkins, 1993, xix).

Certainly, these activities, encouraged by the opportunities made available by the community arts program, may not all be concerned with social and cultural change. In a sense though, it is the heterogeneity it enables which challenges exclusive understandings of culture and provides space for 'a vigorous and oppositional practice' (Mills, 1991: 7).

Vivienne Binns (1991) writes:

From the beginning there were articulate exponents of community arts practice whose work was informed by conscious theoretical concerns, who saw their art practice as a political act very much a part of the struggle to claim and reclaim space for many kinds of 'suppressed voices' and denigrated art forms which expressed the variety and differences of cultural experience in Australia (12).

Peter Hicks (1990) describes his own career as a political activist and artist in a similar vein. He 'first began writing and performing for public events' (6) during the 1969-71 anti-war marches. He then moved into variously funded work as 'writer, tutor, organiser or administrator in arts programs run by trade unions, schools, local government, state and federal government, Arts Councils, country people's organisations ... (7). Hicks was also an early member of the Australia Council's Community Arts Board (Hicks, P. 1998, pers. comm., 6 June). His understanding of his artistic work is located in the tradition and methodology of doing it ourselves. This includes asserting 'our own culture(s)' (6), 'combating colonial control' (6), replacing the 'monoculture' (7) of the dominant and powerful media with diversity, overcoming the stranglehold of a professional elite on cultural production by supporting and developing 'self reliant structures and processes of cultural production among our population' (7) and resourcing this with the people's taxes (7).

Hicks' career clearly demonstrates the relationship between the official construction of community arts and the flowering of cultural activism in the context of 1960s and '70s political movements. As he articulates it, his work also exemplifies a radical approach to cultural democracy in which we represent ourselves through cultural activities which provide a medium for oppressed or excluded voices to be heard, and their distinct cultures made visible. In this it offers a basis for changing the dominant cultural order, including exclusive perceptions of what art is and does.

It has been my argument that funding *per se* does not undermine such a radical purpose. However the issue of independence or self-management is clearly vital in creating and using spaces for radical activities within the existing resourcing opportunities and ideological frameworks.

In the 1980s, radical critics of community arts as it took shape through the British Arts Council's policies, pointed out the dangers for cultural democratic practice in the therapeutic, welfare, 'cultural disadvantage' construction of community. Morley and Worpole (1982) for instance, supported the view that 'the Arts Council have bought off the potentially oppositional cultural movements of the 1970s by setting up a cultural bargain basement at 105 Piccadilly and titling this the Community Arts Panel' (56). The position Owen Kelly brought to Australia in 1986 suggested the need for greater self-sufficiency on the part of community arts activities (Roberts, 1990: 13), on the basis that 'its close relationship to government' had 'dismantled' (Fensham, 1990: 11) its political intentions.

In a way which highlights the difficulty of plotting an independent radical course through 'provision for' opportunities, the (Australian) *Community Arts National*, devoted a 1988 issue to self-sufficiency. In this case writers were offering responses to the influence of economic rationalism and 'user pays' policies (Barton, 1988: 2). Ironically perhaps, funding bodies were now requiring their clients to be self sufficient. The bottom line for Jon Hawkes (1988) is that '[e]conomic control is an essential precondition for cultural independence' (3), but given that the possibility of cultural activists seizing control of the banks (3) is

unlikely, he suggests a strategic approach. 'We must clearly know what our agenda is and effectively exploit every point at which our aims overlap with the proclaimed ideology of the dominant culture' (3). Perhaps ... perhaps, with structures for community economic control, economic rationalist self sufficiency might be turned into decentralisation (4). In the same issue Merryn Ricketson (1988) suggests an entrepreneurial approach with the initial support of appropriate charitable trusts (7, 9).

Finding some form of economic independence in relation to community arts funding through diversification of funding sources, including sales of work, is an important thread in maintaining community independence. Another, drawing on Kelly's position (Fensham, 1990: 11), may involve a critical view of the 'field' of practice produced through community arts policies (10-13). Fensham documents 'a plethora of publications documenting and explaining community arts in order to impress various target audiences' (11), written in 'Econospeak' (11). She also documents concern:

that the field of community arts or cultural work has begun to construct an ideology, a set of informing ideas, an orthodoxy of beliefs, which have obscured and disguised the very prejudices both aesthetic and political which they were designed to expose (12).

However, it also seems to me that taking the activities supported by community arts funding as a coherent practice. obscures their diversity and the visibility of independent and nonconformist practices.

A further important issue in taking up community arts opportunities from a radical or cultural activist standpoint, concerns the separation, in dominant liberal discourse, of the 'poetical' and the political, and the associated determination to draw a line between artists and communities.

It is clear in the challenge to dominant representational practices by Binns and Hicks, that the contest between 'liberal' and radical perceptions of art revolves



around the relationship between the politics and poetics of representation. Karen Fiss (1990) writes:

If politically engaged artistic production is to function as more than a utopian substitute for politics proper, it must subvert conventional artistic forms and institutions just as its content criticizes dominant ideology. The goal of activist art is not to aestheticize politics but to politicize the realm of aesthetics (156).

In a radical representational practice it is working with the dynamic relationship between politics and poetics, between discourse, and construction of meaning, that makes the difference. On the other hand it is part of the power of dominant exclusive art practices and their support of wider social exclusions, to maintain that such practices are neutral and have their genesis in individual accomplishment, rather than the relations of power. There is no doubt that the 'poetical is political'.

My perception is that it has been difficult for radical cultural activity in Australia to take up this discussion in any great depth. Certainly current reports on projects in journals like *Artwork*, emphasise participatory processes rather than representational practices. Participation, involvement, group decision making, respect for difference are watchwords of current community arts practice.

I assert that a key element of community arts projects is participation - people coming together to create something that no one would have conceived of as an individual (Evans, 1998: 9).

Fensham (1991) suggests that there is difficulty in holding the relationship between politics and poetics together in the community arts activities she is familiar with:

In community arts the questions are often inappropriate to the task to be performed i.e. the making of an artwork. For instance they are rarely questions that examine the nature of representation, the available aesthetics of dominant cultural forms or the socio-political world which receives

artworks. They are more likely to be questions about democratic process or social marginalisation which in turn, presuppose a set of desirable solutions i.e. politics or social change for the participants (84).

Another line of discussion concerns the emphasis of the liberal discourse on 'excellence'. Binns (1990) writes for instance that many community arts funded activities show that 'excellence' does not reside in 'certain kinds of styles alone' (74). This thinking informs the *Community Arts National* issue on Community Arts and Aesthetics.

We are in un-charted territory when we say 'no' to received standards and we must continue to evolve our own visions of what excellence might come to mean (Merkel, 1987: 6).

Other articles look forward to more in-depth discussion of 'symbolic production' (Fensham, 1987: 13), feel the need 'for a [critical] language' (Heks, 1987: 9) to discuss community arts products, and offer discussion from artists on their decisions and judgements in producing community artwork (Morrow, 1987: 7-8, Rew, 1987: 10-11).

How to get 'style' or 'excellence' together with political intentions? This was broached by Jude Adams (1991) in her controversial critique of the use of the realist form in visual work developed for a multicultural exhibition. She suggested that the realist form denied difference, universalised story and created a fixed spectator position (67-82). Her article produced serious responses which worked with the relationship between politics and poetics (eg, Hill, 1991: 90-95, Lesses, 1991: 98-101). These showed that questions of representation are considered, despite competing demands (Binns, 1991: 89). But there was also a sense that Adams' critique was prompted more by 'paternalism' (Hill, 1991: 94) and pretentious postmodern intellectualism (Kalantzis, 1991 (1989): 96), than the issues of the relationship between 'how' and 'what', or form and content.

There are even fewer discussions of these issues in relation to representations in textual form. The activities funded as community arts in Australia are dominated by visual and performance forms. In *Community and the Arts* (Binns, 1991), the written form is represented by a discussion of community theatre (Watt and Pitts, 1991: 119-133). This article clearly identifies the distinction between mainstream theatre and community theatre in terms of the latter's interest in working 'with' (121) particular cultures rather than taking a monocultural view of theatrical production. Although it canvasses several models of working with this intention, these concern organisation and approach rather than details of theatrical form. However it could well be argued that the stylistic demands of working 'with' distinct cultures in a variety of community locations - workplaces, outdoor rural settings, street environments, have produced theatre that is far more stimulating, experimental and dynamic than current large budget mainstage productions in Australia. For instance, the 'verbatim theatre' piece, *Aftershocks*,<sup>4</sup> developed by Paul Brown with the Newcastle Workers Cultural Action Committee and initially performed with minimal sets (Brown, 1991: 59-50) was later taken up by an established theatre company, and in another move, produced as a film (SBS, 1998). The hybrid documentary-drama form undercut traditionalist notions of 'performance' and developed a quite different engagement between character/performer/audience.

A recent publication of 'stories from the frontier of community cultural development' (Reid, 1997) offers 'national models' (5) of community arts organisations. Again it is in the examples of theatre work that the development of a challenging poetics which complements the political intentions of cultural democracy, is most evident.

To my knowledge there has been little real discussion concerning the production of text in book form or in association with other media. Fensham (1990), doesn't get any further than suggesting that in fact visual work and text don't go together, and

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<sup>4</sup> The play was about the experience of the 1989 earthquake which destroyed the Newcastle Workers Club. It was based on extensive oral history interviews with those who had key stories to tell about the impact of the earthquake.

that if text is involved it may most properly belong in a separate ‘oral history’ booklet, rather than with photographs (*Artlink* 1989). An article I (1990) wrote at much the same time, about my work with Homefront women’s writing group, addresses ways of working with language on the basis of changing the ways in which stories of domestic violence and sexual abuse are heard and told, but doesn’t contextualise it in the wider politics of representational practice (54).

A number of those interested in a cultural activist model for literature in Australia have looked to the community writing and publishing movement in Britain. As I show below this offers a vital, critical and independent approach to representing ourselves which for me suggests ways of taking up community arts funding opportunities and sustaining radical intentions. Homefront women’s writing and publishing group is a case in point.

Another issue which has been debated in radical community arts discourse concerns the relationship between ‘artists’ and ‘communities’. Again the liberal discourse’s polarisation of the poetics and politics of representation seems to demand such discussion by suggesting that ‘artists’ and ‘communities’ are distinct and mutually exclusive social locations (Kirby, 1991: 21). My argument has been for a radical practice that breaks down polarities and makes community through collaboration across the multiple positions and expertises that individuals embody. It is part of the practice of domination to conceive of individuals as embodiments of a fixed social location. Alternatively, Freire’s ‘practice of freedom’ understands the possibility of change in terms of an inclusive, participatory production of our own knowledge through ‘dialogic’ (Freire, 1985: 53) collaborations against oppression. ‘Representing ourselves’ pursues this approach through the poetics and politics of representation, developing a dynamic, creative making of ‘us’ as both distinct and multiple.

## **Community writing and publishing - the Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers (FWWCP)**

The community writing and publishing movement draws directly on the radical tradition of doing it ourselves and is formalised and connected through the FWWCP. It developed in Britain, or more precisely England, and has national and international associations with community writing and publishing groups which identify with its practice.

Morley and Worpole (1982) see the genesis of community writing and publishing in the 1960s and '70s community action which in Britain, not unlike Australia, saw working class activism joining forces with the women's liberation movement and 'black politics' (2-3). At a practical level it was strongly informed by the popular history movement that originated at Ruskin College in the mid 1960s. In the radical tradition of representing ourselves its intention was to 'disestablish literature' (18-44). Historian, Anna Davin's (1993) recollections of her involvement in the History Workshop at Ruskin give a strong sense of the political context of the community writing and publishing movement. They also reflect on that period of political activity, and its sociology, in Australia.

My first workshop was the fourth, in November 1969. Behind the speakers, on the platform of Buxton Hall in Ruskin, was the big banner of the Witney Workers Union. Many of the talks were close to my interests and ... I was confident enough to join the discussions. I even felt able to protest after laughter greeted Sheila Rowbotham's proposal for those interested in women's history to get together. This is my only jarring recollection, tempered however by the support and apologies afterwards and the excitement of our women's meeting. I remember most of all the general intoxication of the occasion, how people listened and carried on discussions long afterwards. I also remember the singing ... it was a heady mix, this fusion of music, politics, history and like-minded company. In some ways it symbolised our common project.

... When in 1970 I moved to London to start doctoral work at Birbeck, I threw myself into History Workshop. It seemed possible to do everything. I was also in the Hackney People's Autobiography Group, doing oral history collectively and with the critical involvement of some of those whose memories we were recording and publishing. I was in the women's movement. I was a graduate student going to seminars. I was running a household ... The boundaries between academy and community seemed unimportant ... (1-2).

In 1976 the community writing and publishing movement was formalised when a number of groups collectively writing, publishing and distributing their own books through local outlets at affordable prices (Morley and Worpole, 1982: 4) formed the FWWCP (2). The express intention of the organisation was to set up a co-operative approach to publishing and distribution as an alternative to the competition of the mainstream publishing industry, and to provide an independent support and resource for the work of member groups.

Member groups of the FWWCP emerged from a variety of contexts, including the sort of radical community education activities that Thompson (1997) mentions in her personal reflection on 'the great tradition' (see chapter two). The groups have grown out of WEA classes, literacy classes, prison education, pensioners' groups (Morley and Worpole, 1982: 122). often with the support and involvement of tutors or other cultural workers committed to radical community activity. They have also developed from particular local political activities. QueenSpark started off as a newspaper that was part of a campaign to save a local historic building from development as a casino (5). The Liverpool 8 Writers Workshop came together to write about 'where we are at politically, socially and economically' (147-8).

As an umbrella body and fund seeker for community writing and publishing activities, the FWWCP's watchwords for maintaining the independence required to do it ourselves might well be autonomy and diversity. Morley and Worpole describe it as supporting 'local initiatives while respecting their autonomy' (143).

The first necessity is to support and develop the local projects that already exist, where new voices are telling their own stories, articulating their own demands and desires (143).

The FWWCP has sought funds for its broad networking support of member groups from a variety of sources, including charitable organisations and trusts, peak bodies of the labour movement and the British Arts Council (129-144). While the labour movement might seem a logical resourcing ‘home’, it has resisted the notion of formally coming under a socialist or labour movement banner on the basis of maintaining autonomy (141-4).

... We cannot prejudge what the voices will say, nor expect them to conform to some pre-defined ‘correct’ perspective ... (143).

On the other hand, in what might at first seem a contrary move, the FWWCP has waged a long battle with the bastions of the British literary establishment for recognition as a legitimate funding applicant to the Literature Panel of the British Arts Council (Thomson, 1990: 16). This has been seen as a critical strategy in resisting the patronage of the Community Arts Panel to which the FWWCP was referred on the basis that the writing it is interested in is not ‘literature’ (Morley and Worpole, 1982: 136). On the same basis Morley and Worpole speak against the term ‘community writing’, asserting that the FWWCP is interested in an oppositional writing practice which cannot be sidelined or patronised as ‘community’, ‘as though this were some kind of second order activity compared to “real” or “national” writing’ (56). On this basis they argue strongly for a ‘disestablishing’ writing and publishing practice in terms of both its politics and poetics.

Within the frame of the FWWCP umbrella, member groups draw on diverse funding sources and manage themselves in a variety of ways, which broadly reflect the contexts in which they have developed and operate. Their membership of the FWWCP is based on demonstrated commitment to a co-operative approach to writing and publishing, and a ‘community’ identity which speaks to an ‘oppressed’

social location. In the FWWCP's title, this is named as a particular location, based on class. As Thomson (1990) documents this has never been a simple issue as 'not all groups who want to make themselves heard from a position of exclusion or oppression define themselves as working class; and on the other hand, Federation groups have sometimes shared the mainstream culture's ways of marginalising' (16).

Over the twenty years of the Federation's life, the identity and issue based politics of the period have challenged the notion of 'working class' writing. Some member groups vehemently opposed the fragmentation that women-only, black-only, gay-only writing and publishing groups might suggest, arguing that the working class movement is primary and is weakened if split by women's, black and gay separatism (Morley and Worpole, 1982: 12, 74).

In recent years member groups and their publications reflect a wide range of specific positions. *From Dark to Light* is an anthology from Survivor's Poetry (1993), which emerged from the Campaign Against Psychiatric Oppression. The Ethnic Communities Oral History Project specialises in bilingual publications. *The Big Issue* is a regular magazine written and published by unemployed workers. There are a number of publications by women writers, gay writers, disabled writers and Afro-Caribbean and Asian writers.

In this context there has been discussion about the name of the FWWCP but it has remained unchanged. It seemed to me, listening to talk at the 1994 FWWCP AGM, that the term 'worker writer' was now seen as accommodating all these locations. 'Worker writer' suggests the history and antecedents of radical community activity in a particular social location as well as the community of alliances across difference towards the common purpose of disestablishing literature. In this way it offers a strong example of representing ourselves as implicitly dynamic, shaping and reshaping 'us' through a democratic participative methodology which engages us in the production of our own knowledge/culture.



Over twenty years from its foundation and over fifteen since *The Republic of Letters* (1982) was published, the FWWCP survives as a model of independent radical community activity. It has diverse funding sources and a flexible umbrella approach to self-management. More concerned with hearing alternative voices than defining those voices, it respects and enables participants as producers of their own culture, and is an example of radical cultural democracy as much as it is involved in working towards it through disestablishing literature.

If the common purpose of disestablishing literature creates the Federation as a dynamic community of alliances, it also concerns a particular representational practice. Working with the production of writing - its forms and contents, its contexts and makers, its readers - is the defining activity of the community writing and publishing movement.

‘Forgotten histories’ (FWWCP, 1989-90: 8) of poverty, racism, domestic violence, illiteracy, disability, in the language of those whose experiences they are, are the stuff of Federation books which include autobiography and local histories as well as collections of poetry and prose. This broad approach to what constitutes literature itself, as Thomson (1990) suggests, raises questions about the ‘artificial distinctions between history, autobiography and fictional writing [which] often blur as people write about their own lives and the life about them in a range of different styles’ (16). There is also a strong interest in claiming particular forms; writing in the voice of dialect rather than standard English, working with the form of working class autobiography and the rhythms of work (Morley and Worpole, 1982: 102-112).

In Australia, in the early 1980s, a vigorous community writing movement developed within the frame of the Victorian community arts network. It drew on the FWWCP model and organised two community writing conferences, the second of which had Ken Worpole as the keynote speaker. Writing in the same 1990 issue of *Community Arts National* as Hicks, one of the main movers in Victorian community writing, Bev Roberts, reflects on community writing’s split from the community arts network as an important step away from the ‘negative’

connotations of 'community' (13) as a disadvantaged location. Her key claim for community writing on the FWWCP model is the way it works on the basis of long term group effort. She represents the short term 'project' model funded community arts activities as 'imposed' and 'sanctioned' (13). For her the writing group, rather than the community arts funded project, is the site of radical and challenging activity (13).

During the 1990s the community writing movement in Victoria was formalised as a federation of community writing groups. A large number of them are in rural and regional Victoria. Some have emerged from Technical and Further Education (TAFE) courses, others as a result of community arts projects. For instance a vital cluster of writing groups emerged through the support of Footscray Community Arts Centre. Some are specifically women's or multicultural groups. Many are local groups brought together by their common interest in writing.

Around Australia there are writing groups who produce their own anthologies but there has never been a strong emphasis on publishing which I would argue is the basis for sustaining a radical poetics. Some groups have received funding to publish anthologies of work submitted from all over the country rather than from a specific 'community'. Many of the funded activities focus on enabling groups disadvantaged by distance from the 'centre' to attend workshops with established writers. A number of groups would see themselves as trying to access the mainstream rather than disestablish it. Funding may come through federal and local literature funding programs as well as community arts. Ironically perhaps, some of the most vigorous examples of community writing and publishing activity as an action of collectively producing our own culture have taken place on a relatively short term basis through community arts funds and literature funds designated as 'community'. Residencies taken up by Annie Bolitho, Robyn Friend and Peter Hicks are cases in point.

My writing practice is shaped through the Australian context of community arts funding and through my great interest in the British community writing and publishing movement as a model of oppositional practice. While usually working

within the frame of the short-term project model I have looked for ways of establishing ongoing independent activities and producing outcomes that show the possibility of 'our' own productions. I have thought of myself as a writer working in education, literacy, as well as 'the arts', to support and open up ways in which excluded voices, hidden stories may imprint themselves on the wider culture. The Homefront women's writing and publishing group projects which took place between 1988 and 1992, offer the most long term and radical example of my work across the two practices.

### **Homefront women's writing and publishing group, 1988-1992**

The activities which produced Homefront women's writing and publishing group were initiated through a community development program at Doris Women's Refuge in the ACT in 1988. Doris was established in the 1970s when, as I've documented in chapter two, a number of feminist women's refuges received government funding. As I have also shown, feminist women's refuges developed as self-managed community organisations based on principles of collectivity and an educational methodology inspired by the experience of consciousness raising groups. Working on the premise of doing it ourselves, their intention is to give participants a sense of authority over their own lives and enable them to more confidently shape and change their circumstances.

An important aspect of this approach is the feminist understanding of the need to change an exclusive masculinist order and develop, in practice, egalitarian, consensual and respectful social relations which open up opportunities for women in terms of support, change and development. At the time of the Homefront projects, Doris, and the ACT Incest Centre which later took on the role of Homefront's 'umbrella', were managed by feminist collectives of voluntary members, paid workers and 'clients'. A number of the women involved in Homefront had experience of participating in refuge and Incest Centre activities in several capacities.

The Doris community development program was strongly informed by the doing it ourselves practice of the feminist women's refuge milieu. It was also informed by an understanding of the relationship between culture and politics, and the vital role of representing ourselves in creating social change.

The primary aim of the community development workers' work was to organise support groups for ex-residents as well as carry out community development work and liaison and training with other community workers ...

By mid-October we had canvassed all contactable ex-residents who overwhelmingly expressed an interest in creative/self-esteem workshops ...

The idea developed into the Letter-Writing Workshops ...  
(Homefront Records, 1989)

The community development workers, Cascade Leggett and Lyn O'Brien, were both involved in women's music and theatre on the basis of representing ourselves and increasing the representation of women in mainstream activities. In encouraging ex-residents of the refuge to get together as an independent support network, they saw a particular opportunity for combining doing it ourselves with representing ourselves. Their approach was based on working and playing with creative forms as a basis for encouraging self confidence and making connections with each other. Above all the idea was to have fun together and enjoy each other's company and inventiveness.

The success of the letter writing workshops on all these terms, and the participants' overwhelming interest in making a publication of their writing for other women, led to a more direct expression of representing ourselves; to 'speak out about domestic violence and sexual abuse' (Doris/Incest Centre, 1990: 1). As this intention evolved through the making of two publications and becoming an independent community writing and publishing group, it spoke and wrote itself in many ways.

A vital thread through the process was holding the strong/delicate relationship between the distinct individual voices and the voice they made together as women speaking out. The idea of letter writing as a way of encouraging personal voices drew on traditions of women supporting and keeping in touch with each other, and was inspired in part by the Working Women's Co-operative Guild's publication of *Maternity: Letters from Working Women* (Davies, 1978). It featured as an image and practical expression of the individual intention to speak and make contact in the broader social frame of violence against women, throughout the workshops.

... For twenty years I was nursing or expecting babies. No doubt there are others fixed the same way as I have been ... I could fill sheets of paper with what I have gone through at confinements and before, and there are others, no doubt, have felt the pinch as well as myself. If there is anything else you would like to know and I could tell you, I should be glad, for the benefit of my sisters (19-20).

Dearest Isabel

Hello, I am sitting at the kitchen table with my daughter. She is drawing a picture of a ghost house. This reminded me of the Refuge and I started to think of you and your loveable monsters. My state of mind is unhealthy, but if I wait any longer for a healthier one, I may never communicate ...

Mothering - and related fixtures -

I look at my babies, Jess will be eight this year and Zac five. Jessica is a little woman and at this stage in her life she is exploring the bitch in her nature. When I'm positive the exploration must be complete she finds another avenue. I do try to keep the bitch in me toned right down, but occasionally the foul creature claws its way up. And we fight. After completing grade one and attending special classes, she can now read and write. A wonderful development ... Zac, my son, alas, is still a house wrecker. Bashing it out of him does not work. Talking rationally with him

works, while we are in the talking part of the process anyway ... Like Jessica, he is at his best when I am at my best ...

Paris (Doris/Incest Centre, 1990: 35)

Homefront's activities were resourced in various ways. The first workshops were supported in association with other activities of the Doris community development program through the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP). My contribution to them was made possible by a Community Writers' Fellowship which I had been awarded that year. Funding for the later projects was sought and received from both community arts funding programs, and government bodies supporting women's organisations and initiatives concerning women's issues.

One of the issues for Homefront activities over time was finding an appropriate umbrella or auspicing body for the administration of funds and organisation of projects. The support of Doris and the Incest Centre, including the support of their workers in planning and running workshops, was crucial to start with. More independent activities were auspiced by the Arts Council of the ACT where I was employed. At a later date the women's theatre company, Women on A Shoestring (I first met Cascade when we were both working with this group) became the caretaker of the bank account.

The evolution of Homefront as an independent feminist community writing and publishing group over a series of projects was influenced in practical terms by both community arts processes and the British community writing and publishing movement. Although very little of our funding came from community arts sources, my understanding of the process and possibilities of an arts activity with a community group was based on my experience within this framework. However the focus on book making as well as writing, the interest in working towards self-management and sense of the importance of distribution, was supported by the model of the FWWCP.

After the publication of *Hells Belles' Letters* at the end of 1990, members of the workshops became Homefront Belles Australia. They moved out from the shelter

of the Incest Centre umbrella, and took up shared office space and a cupboard at the Arts Council. With a small grant from the ACT Health Promotion Fund two Homefront members were employed as part-time co-ordinators of the group's work. This included distributing books and making contact with a wider network of women survivors of domestic violence and sexual abuse, as well as organising writing workshops with other women in the refuge situation and readings by members of the group at appropriate venues. A successful application was made to join the FWWCP and the networks set up by Jena and Paris as part of their co-ordination work also stretched to Canada.

The story of Homefront offers an example of representing ourselves in the Australian context through the practice of community arts and the influence of wider approaches to cultural work and social change including radical adult education and the community writing and publishing movement. It is also an example of radical community cultural practice which draws out the issues of community and difference and reflects the dynamic process of creating community.