

NEW DIMENSIONS IN WATER CONVERSATION; AN INTER-  
ANIMATION OF WRITING AND WATER

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2003

## CERTIFICATE OF AUTHORSHIP/ORIGINALITY

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text. I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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Annie Bolitho

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The central acknowledgement in this thesis is to all those who took part in *new dimensions in Water Conversation* and gave permission for their work to be included in this study. Each person took a unique and personal interest in water, and stopped to look more closely at their personal experience of it. Each found a way of representing it in order to share it with others. Their efforts open out a fresh sense of interests in water. Thank you to all Northern Rivers Water Writers.

The support of the Australia Council for the Arts, the Federal arts funding and advisory body, through a fellowship from the Community Cultural Development Fund, gave me a unique opportunity to experiment. I would also like to acknowledge Rous Water whose support was central to my investigation.

I welcome this chance to appreciate all those who have overseen my water study. Dr. Veer Bhad Mishra and Fran Peavey played a major role in broadening my perspectives on water, and I would like to thank them for handing on their commitment. Fletcher Roberts, Agnes Roberts and Fay Smith gave me straightforward reminders about water, and an insight into a Bandjalang perspective. Sadly Fletcher died in 2002, and Fay this year. I see land and water here in Lismore in a very different light, having shared time with people of such generous and resilient spirit.

During the writing of this thesis I was fathoming unfamiliar perspectives, often well outside my depth. My academic supervisors, Stephen Muecke and Stuart White, did not let me sink, and I am happy to say that their patience, optimism and humour inform this thesis throughout. Specifically, Stephen took me on as an unknown quantity, yet kept an easy-going faith in the integrity and significance of the work I was doing. Every provocation he offered called forth a surprising result. His gift of making light of conventional thinking has influenced my writing on water. This thesis is testimony to the way Stuart led me through the intricacies of contemporary water management and supported my connection with Rous Water. It was a privilege to work with someone so refined in curiosity and

kindness, able to make instant connections on the basis of an intellect of incredibly broad scope. I hope that the way I have dealt with 'the stuff of water' does justice to his generous engagement with my project.

Sharing stories is about friendship, nothing more or less, a participant in a community writing project once said to me. It is in the nature of an experiment like *new dimensions in Water Conversation* that it is populated by friends; those I knew before, and those I have come to know through carrying it out, all of whom have played an important role.

Thanks to Kath Fisher, whose heartfelt precision inspired me to make better sense of myself. Thanks also to those who read and commented on draft material, particularly Sue Andrews, Janet Bolitho, Jo Kijas, Bill Standish and Jinki Trevillian. Mary Hutchison makes a unique contribution to this thesis. Her influence on the way I work with writing played a part in my initial and continuing interest in bringing water 'out of the ordinary.' Her willingness to be involved in the research process (see Ch. 7) reflects her open-handed spirit in our on-going collaboration. Katrina Schlunke generously put her mind to the draft in the final stages, in a most productive way.

Two dedicated groups have supported the production of this thesis, the project reference group for the 'water conversation' and my 'Collaborators' group. I am most grateful for their steady commitment to me and to my work. Thanks also to Jill Trevillian of the Dollfins, and to Jenny Taylor, for the 'Water Cycle' book included in the final chapter.

Finally, this thesis draws attention both to wandering and to hospitality. Thanks to all those who made room for me.

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## ABSTRACT

Water is a finite resource which is increasingly valued as a commodity. This thesis explores the use and appreciation of water, in the context of community response and exchange. Its focus is a community writing practice, and in particular a project entitled *new dimensions in Water Conversation* based in the Northern Rivers region of New South Wales. This project was a non-crisis driven investigation into a wide range of interests in water. The central proposition of the thesis is that techno-scientific and broader cultural world views on water rarely connect, and that bringing them together reveals awkward tensions between specialist and non-specialist standpoints. These disparities are shown in the group writings and outcome of the project, which bring water provision into closer perspective. A story emerges from the project and its influences. It is one of material relationships to water over testings, tastings and visits to a water treatment works. It suggests links which would not normally be anticipated, for example between a regional bulk water supplier and a group of water writers.

The study combines fiction and contemplation with critical analysis and the thesis crosses disciplinary boundaries, drawing on insights from critical cultural theory and the philosophy of science. The writing is performative rather than accumulative in nature, yet is a concrete record of the interplay between water users and water specialists, in a local and global dimension which includes the Northern Rivers, Australia more generally and Varanasi in India. Using this transcultural approach, it decentres theory and locates value in the situated contexts and views of different stakeholders in water, which range from sacred values to indifference. The work calls out for a way of thinking about water that is not yet in the public discourse.

Through the practical connection of the project with an Australian water instrumentality, it draws in developments in contemporary water management, and raises questions and doubts about how instrumentalist and market values have come to dominate imaginings of a global water future. At the same time it points to the importance of putting the values of the arts and humanities into practice in the increasingly inter-disciplinary environment in which the resource of water is managed and maintained.

## PROLOGUE

*There's nothing quite like jumping in to a river. But as a first approach to water, let's have a glimpse at the molecular level. Put on your goggles. It's neat! You can reach right in to the 3D wonder of virtuality and get in-sight into a spit of water a billion trillionth of a raindrop in volume.<sup>1</sup>*

*The structure of water at a molecular level is immensely complicated. It would be unfair to expect a simulation to make sense of the changing environments and trajectories of thousands of molecules in liquid form. For one thing, the way a hydrogen bond forms, as two water molecules approach one another, is very complex. There are numerous difficulties. One is that hydrogen bonds are constantly forming. Another is that they are forming cooperatively not independently.*

*So what can a big screen simulation of a water molecule show? It suggests that the hydrogen-bonded network is random and disorderly, and extends throughout the entire collection of molecules like a collapsed climbing frame. However, since this provides an image of a failed structure, let's take up a view with more emphasis on moist process. It would be apt to think of the high degree of structure as being brought about by the 'stickiness' that binds the H<sub>2</sub>O molecules into a 'dynamic, ever-changing labyrinth.'*

*Where 'normal' liquids hinge on the 'packing constraints imposed by the repulsive forces between molecules,' water's structure is made manifest through forces of attraction – as hydrogen bonds form. They 'introduce profound preferences for the positions and orientations of neighbouring molecules ...' Water molecules are captivated and taken hold of by other water molecules. The resulting linkages, due to hydrogen bonding, lead to a tetrahedral<sup>2</sup> arrangement of neighbours around each molecule, which forms 'the central*

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<sup>1</sup> This summarised description draws on Philip Ball's inventive elaboration of water's molecular structure in *H<sub>2</sub>O, A Biography of Water*, pp.165-168 (all underlinings mine)

<sup>2</sup> A tetrahedron is a four cornered solid. In a water molecule, lone pairs of electrons on the oxygen atom sit at the corners and the bonds between oxygen and hydrogen are splayed at an angle of 104.5 degrees where a perfect tetrahedron would be at 109.5 degrees

*motif of the structure of water,' and the key to its strangeness and eccentricity, including the way it accommodates dissolved molecules.*

*If water at a molecular level were not enmeshed in all the contradictions of cooperation and attraction, there would be no wetness, no flow and no water pollution. To take this as my starting point, it seems that the sticky nest of water is woven in such a way that it expresses tensions which bear a resemblance to those of human communities which rely on it.*



## INTRODUCTION

This thesis emerges from many people's daily interaction with and appreciation of water. At the start I would like to invoke an aspiration: that the refreshment I had with others in a collaborative exploration of water, in turn refreshes others, and that water continues to refresh on its path.

### **A network of connections**

Water in all its forms is in constant relationship, in a delicate process of pressure and tension, reaction and redistribution, as a lubricant, a solute and a transportation agent. At a molecular level, complex interaction and exchange are its way of being. This is equally apparent when one looks closely at water use in daily life. In some sense it is misleading that, popularly speaking, it is often represented as a stand-alone formula. H<sub>2</sub>O. An object, sufficient unto itself.

This thesis is about water relations. In the project on which it is based I set out to bring water home from a far-flung objectified position, to provide a more personal, inter-subjective view. Much of the action in *new dimensions in Water Conversation* took place in the Northern Rivers region of NSW in Australia. The experiment was supported by Rous Water, a water authority unique in the NSW context. By and large, regional towns have water supplied by local councils from local dams. Rous involves four constituent councils – Ballina, Byron, Lismore and Richmond River. It involves a large dam, bulk water, a large infrastructure, and capital. This has enabled it to investigate two major new directions. Firstly, an innovative program in demand management in which consumers are paid to fix leaks and put in water efficient hardware, secondly a venture into real estate development, featuring sustainability.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Perradenya Estate was the overall winner of the 2001 Local Government Awards for Environmental Excellence in the Environment. It also received the Urban Development Institute of Australia's commendation for energy efficiency. 'Housing Estate a Winner' *The Northern Star*, 4 Dec. 2001

My research project took place after the 'Sydney Water Crisis',<sup>2</sup> Melbourne's ten day loss of gas supply<sup>3</sup> – something of a water crisis since there was no hot water – and the Auckland electricity crisis.<sup>4</sup> Each of these late 1990 events, in its own way, initially seemed unbelievable. Each was a reminder that immediate access to convenient resources is a 'story that lives us'. In this sense these crises revealed the formwork of cultural support for a broad approach to resources, one heavily weighted in favour of centralisation, and of technical specialists taking care of things. Equally significantly, they raised concerns about corporatised structures being the most appropriate form of management for public utilities.<sup>5</sup>

Rous Water's participation in my research enabled the investigation of a vital and creative community cultural approach to engaging people with the details of their water use, with the places where their water comes from, and with those who are engaged in the process of seeing a bulk water supply through from a storage dam to the tap. The gathering up of water that this thesis presents is about people and how they represent water. It is about water in a non-atomised sense; it makes a network of connections visible. In the thesis I show how the writing workshops and meetings of people around water that I brought into being, nurtured an active sense of connection to water on an imaginative and practical basis.

### **My own connections**

Various influences have a bearing on this study. I am a writer. Through the intervention of Dr Veer Bhad Mishra, an engineer and spiritual leader, with whom I worked on the Ganges at Varanasi in the mid-90s (see Ch. 3), my pen is blessed by the god Hanuman, the deity of the Sankat Mochan Temple. I am a teacher, of writing in various contexts, and of Group

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<sup>2</sup> The 1998 'Sydney Water Crisis' involved cryptosporidium contamination in the city's water supply. People were advised to boil all drinking water for over a week. Although the health implications were serious, the health outcomes were negligible. However the crisis led to the resignation of the managing director and chair of Sydney Water. (see Ch. 4)

<sup>3</sup> Melbourne's gas supply was crippled by a massive fire at Esso's Longford plant in September 1998 which killed two people and injured many others. The plant supplied 80% of Melbourne's gas and was out of action for about ten days.

<sup>4</sup> In March 1998, Auckland's privatised wholesale electricity supplier, Mercury Energy, experienced major cable problems, causing loss of power to the inner city of Auckland for several weeks.

Processes at Southern Cross University. The influence of my father, a specialist in waste water, draws me to water. I am a maker of books, in published and one-off form. I am a minor celebrity in my own Terania Creek valley, as much as anything for my appearances as a Mermaid. I have relationships with Koori elders in Lismore whose forebears' tracks made their way to a site in the basin. I have connections through my work with writing in the community, in Northern NSW, the ACT and South Australia.

From this brief summary it is apparent that I have not followed a singular course. However, the influence of a Buddhist practice has been formative in my sense of direction. A key factor of investigation is awareness or response/ability. My response to the invitation to theorise which thesis-writing presented was one of prolonged confusion, and it was a long time before I was able to loosen the opposition I had in my mind between practice and theory. However, as things settled, I came under the deconstructive influence of Derrida. Those who would see a French theoretical influence as being due to my supervisor, or to the fact that the contemporary bottled water phenomenon and global water industry spring from an inalienably French history, would not be entirely wrong.

However, I love language and was drawn to Derrida's subversive 'exercise of language itself.'<sup>6</sup> His work is not easy to read, and some might see it as obfuscating, hardly in tune with notions of Buddhism being about laying down the burden of thinking. Yet Derrida points evocatively to blindspots in the philosophical underpinnings of a western thinking condition. Today, I am amongst many others who are troubled by some of the assumptions associated with this condition, even whilst we are at home in it. In Derrida's explorations of the limits and potentials of response, as in Zen, I find no judgement of what would provide a good example to follow, but rather hospitality to paradox. Derrida's notion of an off-centre state as one in which we can go beyond limits, identifications and aggression is also a feature of Buddhist teachings.

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<sup>5</sup> see Christopher Sheil, *Water's Fall, Running the Risks with Economic Rationalism*, pp156-8

<sup>6</sup> Toby Foshay draws attention to this similarity between Derrida and Dogen, legendary 13<sup>th</sup> Century founder of the Soto stream of Zen Buddhism in 'Denegation, Nonduality, and Language in Derrida and Dogen', *Philosophy East and West*, vol. 3 no. 4, p555

Throughout the thesis I speak of dialogic intentions, referring to Bakhtin in some chapters. However, the overall dialogic engagement is one of relationality, of seeing one thing 'in the face' of another, as Emmanuel Levinas proposes (see Ch. 1). Thus instrumentalist practices are seen in the face of cultural practices, Australia in the face of India and vice versa (see Ch. 3), European cultural practices in the face of Indigenous practices (see Ch. 7) and so on, so that broader relations become apparent.

I am Australian but not Australian and this gives me an unequal interest in Australianness, and in bringing out perspectives which to me reflect the gift of this place. South Africa wells up into each of my chapters, and my Johannesburg contemporaries, William Kentridge and Jonathan Morgan, influenced the direction which my thesis took.

### ***new dimensions in Water Conversation: Compounding Interests***

There is something unoriginal yet fresh in the title of my research project which people have commented on. A playful imaginative spark has invented a name which is new, but not quite new. As a capitalised *heading* it contains within it ideas about orientation, destination and direction,<sup>7</sup> and hence what the study proposes.

Initially I took 'conversation' into my title warily. At that time there was something of a cult of 'conversations' promoting alternative dialogue on any number of social issues, such as economic rationalism and the role of community in the face of technological change. Further, although my work rests on an understanding that conversation – listening and sharing stories – constitutes a fundamental form of cooperative exchange, it is through valuing and enhancing this exchange by rendering what is said into text and bringing it to small and larger audiences, that new dimensions are opened up.

However, before long my heading's impressive capacity to confound became apparent. Although I capitalised *WATER CONVERSATION*, it was printed in the newspaper and spoken on radio as WATER CONSERVATION. This did not change, however much I

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<sup>7</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Other Heading, Reflections on Today's Europe*, p13

purposely drew attention to my title by pointing it out or underlining. A young person I knew commented: 'Lucky I found out it was you, or I wouldn't have looked at it because I thought it said water conservation, and I don't give a shit about water conservation.'

Derrida could easily be talking about water conservation, when he says, 'They do not forget us these unforgettable programs – we know them now by heart, to the point of exhaustion – since these unforgettable programs are exhausting and exhausted.'<sup>8</sup> Could water conservation not be said to be exhausting, simply because of the eternal demand it makes on us? As a national program, it has played its part in Australian cultural identity, as a sort of inscription on individuals of a universal understanding of life on the driest continent. Many generations have been 'at home' with it. Yet, unforgettable as it is, today, with its edifying connotations, it may appear exhausted to a younger generation.

Even as water conservation's own message becomes increasingly sophisticated, with water conservation ratings on plumbing hardware and highly specific and targeted irrigation education, there is a sense of imminence and anxiety relating to new stakes in water. The logic of National Competition Policy introduces a new lexicon – water trading, water exchange rates, water supply security and water rights, corporatisation and privatisation. This unveiling of the ownership of water and its supply systems reveals wrinkles of paradox around public water conservation. For example, some privatised water supply systems have discovered problems in the profitability of their operations where people are extremely careful with their use of water<sup>9</sup> and where rules are inappropriately formulated.<sup>10</sup>

When I decided to offer a spell of being lighthearted with water and writing in public, there was an element of setting out for a way of relating to water which does not yet exist, under what might be conceived of as this other heading,<sup>11</sup> water conversation. Yet the title

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<sup>8</sup> Derrida, *ibid.*, reflecting on the European cultural tradition in light of European 'unity.'

<sup>9</sup> William Finnegan, 'Letter from Bolivia, Leasing the Rain,' *The New Yorker*, p53

<sup>10</sup> However it would be simplistic to link ideas about privatised profit and water use deterministically, since this does not acknowledge the fact that water suppliers, whether privatised or public, are monopoly service providers. They are always in a position to guarantee a rate of return, regardless of water use, provided that the rules are formulated appropriately.

<sup>11</sup> Derrida, *op. cit.* p8

provides evidence of responsibility to the memory of water conservation. As Deborah Rose points out, the very words 'conservation' and 'conversationist' were brought into popular useage by ecological issues.<sup>12</sup> The fact is that European-style land and water management has consistently been out of proportion with the ecology of the Australian continent. Thus what I proposed consisted in not exactly continuing or opposing the 'unforgettable program.'<sup>13</sup> In a sense it was, through experience and experiment, an opening out of the heading, and a responsible act of memory. My title capitalised on water conservation.

So what is this play on the word 'capital', this 'capital logic'<sup>14</sup> about? I introduce it at some length at the beginning because it has a bearing on numerous dimensions of my study, and the Derridean influenced theory I refer to. 'This word [capital],' says Derrida, 'compounds interests it would seem; it enriches with surplus value the significations of memory, cultural accumulation and economic or fiduciary value.' Thus, where the significations of memory are concerned, Dipesh Chakrabarty draws on Derrida to show the limits of European history's capitalising on time in any examination of non-European history. (see Ch.3) Cultural accumulation, Peggy Phelan points out, makes artists part of an economy which confounds values of production and reproduction (see Ch.1). Her views on performance influence my discussion of the problematic of Community Cultural Development, the artform on which this thesis is based. The word capital bears on the context of the water conversation. It took place at a time of tremendous capitalising on water, within rapidly changing techno-economic givens.<sup>15</sup> Finally, within a capitalizing logic, my research project in the Northern Rivers is not parochial or 'buried in one locality.'<sup>16</sup> Rather it challenges the cultural hegemony of 'capital', be it Sydney or a western centre beyond, and orients toward 'the other of the capital'. This is a situation of relation in which the project and its circumstances have a position and cultural value independent of, yet influenced by, the centralizing force of cultural authority. Today airlines and electronic media hold these

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<sup>12</sup> Rose, *Nourishing Terrains, Australian Aboriginal Views of Landscape and Wilderness*, p4

<sup>13</sup> Derrida, op. cit. p29

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.* p69

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.* p38

<sup>16</sup> Michel Serres in *Conversations on Science, Culture and Time*, p143

relations in one term, just as steam navigation companies and telephones did a hundred years ago. Derrida uses the term a-capital, suggesting that there are 'contradictory injunctions' associated with this decentering orientation.<sup>17</sup> Here there lies a responsibility, that of 'inventing gestures, discourses, politico-institutional practices' in response.<sup>18</sup>

### **Water, Hospitality and Deconstructions**

I made drinking water and household water the predominant focus of my study, with a view to exploring the Taoist percept, 'The world can be known without leaving the house'. Thus, in a project which explored water under 'the other heading' people came back to what might be seen as 'the best known and most familiar capital', the body.<sup>19</sup> In fact, water reveals the body as a pseudo-capital, which exists within a complex environment of interdependence on sources and the prevailing conditions which govern them (see Ch. 4).

The subject of water in relation to body, house and household with their potential for hospitality first claimed my attention in India where hospitality to westerners inevitably involves meticulous attention to providing guests with reliable drinking water. This 'doing' of hospitality involved a unique combination of cultural values and practical realities in a context in which the protagonists were working, against the odds, to improve local water quality.<sup>20</sup>

Derrida refers to hospitality throughout his work<sup>21</sup> and his analysis engages with what I observed, as our hosts took on quite an onerous responsibility, in the light of the stress members of our western team experienced around the possibility of the water making us ill. Derrida would point out that it is not that hosts resent going out of their way, or that guests are necessarily demanding, but rather that hospitality includes tensions and implies demands being made on the host, at the same time as it enables the host to make what is

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<sup>17</sup> Derrida, *The Other Heading*, op. cit. p44

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.* p66

<sup>20</sup> This story is expanded on in Ch. 3

<sup>21</sup> John D. Caputo, ed., *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, footnote p109

ultimately a kind of gift. In other words, 'we do not know what hospitality is, not because the idea is built around a difficult conceptual riddle, but because in the end, hospitality is not a matter of objective knowledge, but belongs to another order altogether, beyond knowledge, an enigmatic "experience" in which I set out for the stranger, for the other, for the unknown where I cannot go.'<sup>22</sup> In these terms, it is somewhat akin to the Buddhist practice of mindfulness, which assumes intimacy and presence in the moment, and that the quality of response lays the ground of the path.

The etymological derivation of hospitality which Derrida draws on shows its self-limiting aspect. It comes from the Latin *hospes*, which is formed from the following combination of elements: *hostis*, which originally meant a "stranger" and came to take on the meaning of the enemy or "hostile" stranger (*hostilis*), and *potes* (*potis*, *potes*, *potentia*) to have power.<sup>23</sup> It was also in India that I began to question what it might mean if water came to be seen in the form of the "hostile" stranger. In the intervening ten years, this question has started to insist itself in Australia. What does it mean to have water hovering on the threshold as a kind of spectre, harbinger of salination, catalyst of future wars over its 'blue gold', severely retarded in its flow? What responsibility does this situation entail for us in our relations with water? Above all, can we still 'let it in'? Can we let it go, and release it?

In order to seek out a future in water, I argue, hospitality to the Other, to ideas and to water itself, are all of crucial importance. Water hospitality is vitally performative, and in these terms proposes a shifting of power. It does not come down to having ideas about something but to doing something, and it is not possible to provide an easy universal example to show it. Thus I am talking of something that is of the same order as deconstruction. If deconstruction has anything to offer as a fresh 'take' on water, perhaps it might be seen through the door of hospitality. Water itself is deconstructive in the way it takes to the cracks and gaps and the fissures. By bringing hospitality and water together, I hope as much to question solid constructions and interpretations, as to open out to new ways of thinking about water.

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<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, p110



## **Water, facts and fictions**

My key assumption is that water is not always best understood by carving it up into the subjective and objective elements of interest in it. Thus it should come as no surprise that this thesis is presented in terms of facts and fictions. The water conversation looked to open and embody connections between water as commodity resource and source of inspiration, between the private and public sphere, rationalism and feeling, the image and the concept, the 'real' and the representational, the visible and the invisible, pragmatism and poetry.

It is necessary to name the dualistic elements concerned in order to open up connections between them. However to suggest that there is any kind of actual limit or border, say between subjectivity and objectivity, would be counter-productive to the idea of seeing them in process. 'It is always the most difficult question ... the place where between *who* and *what* the limit trembles, in some way,' says Derrida, pointing to the promise and problems of attempting to create momentary contexts and opportunities where ideas about relations between people and things can come alive (see Ch. 6). Mingling fact with fiction is not likely to make instant sense in a thinking environment which favours structured single-disciplinary solutions. Equally it does not give rise to a program in which all comers will comfortably reside.

## **This is Watery**

One of the problems of this exercise in thesis-making, which ranges across different disciplinary frameworks and attempts to open up a space of connection and exchange, is that the product might be seen to lack theoretical focus or concentration. Indeed my work may be found to be too watery, and to have taken on water's qualities as solute and transportation agent and absorbed questions and material which would seem to belong in different fields. Issues relating to perceptions, representations, imagery, stories, history, education and cultural practice arise in the chapters that follow, and it is inevitable that

there is some swimming between the discourses of different disciplines. There is a small, but distinct contribution in the form of quantitative and qualitative scientific data. The fact that I relate the story of an arts practice which claims to have social as well as cultural value, and explore an interest in people's participation in decision-making in a field normally held to be that of specialists, brings in an element of social science.

This does reflect the way in which the water conversation attempted to create a cross-disciplinary domain. In this space outside the mould, I hoped people might think in public, gain skills in self and community expression and exchange information and impressions with a view to reaching a wider audience. The fact that it was neither hierarchical nor linear, subjective or objective, was out of line with orthodoxies associated with water management. However, it seems to me that out of loyalty to a structured, strictly disciplinary approach to water, we stand to live out a restricted, dissociated and cut-up conception of it. A bigger picture emerges when a context is created in which people can go free in their own water world, come into closer contact with the technical side of water provision, and share their water world with others.

A water conversation can draw in a range of people to a subject that is most often documented from the point of view of ecological and economic deficits and can look beyond water as a troubled resource in the hands of bureaucrats and specialists. This study contributes to an understanding that statistics and data, which often represent the-magnitude-of-the-problem, and cultural specificities, ultimately need to be contemplated alongside each other.

### **The Making of Water Writing**

Community writing, the medium through which the water conversation was conducted, is not unlike water in some respects. Like water, it is able to go 'beyond those boundaries that say stop.'<sup>24</sup> Like water, it is intrinsically cross-disciplinary. As a form of writing it can

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<sup>24</sup> Bernice Johnson Reagan, in M. O' Brien and C. Little (eds.), *Reimagining America, The Arts of Social Change*, p8

involve both people who see themselves as writers and those who don't. It takes up inventive and inclusive strategies and encourages unconventional understandings of writing. Its outcomes are flexible and can be combined with other artforms such as music and dance. It allows for difference. It is intriguingly intimate. Like water it can appear ephemeral.

Northern Rivers water writers made connections over water which allowed for sharing in a material sense and cost little. Their meetings were relaxing, deepening and widening. Those who contributed to this experiment – a range of lay people and specialists of all age groups – attempted to represent water as it appeared to them in their immediate environment and in their personal histories. An easy interaction between the spoken word and the creation of written accounts allowed people to explore water in a friendly setting, to extend their knowledge and understanding of an everyday subject, and to speak to a broader public.

Of those who participated, a small minority had previously submitted a piece of writing for publication, or belonged to an environmentally focused group. A reasonably high proportion had written letters to the editor of newspapers. Most were readers. Some had done writing workshops before. Some belonged to writers' groups. Some were visual artists. One was a songwriter and singer. One was something of an orator. The impressions and conversations on water that resulted are the subjective responses of all of them, and of their subjective responses to each other.

The writing and story that has emerged from *new dimensions in Water Conversation* features these people, their places, water purification, pipes and drinking water, and invites the reader to think more curiously about them, as well as about Mermaids, Goddesses and fairies. It invites them all to be included.

The writing is collective at the same time as it is my own, my own at the same time as it is collective. In a practical sense, around sixty people contributed to the project's process and outcome. My role was to stimulate participation and thinking, and to find forms which

invited this. I developed collaborations that led to young people in a dance program interpreting the writings of some of the participants, and to an interactive outreach for the regional art gallery's 'water works' in an old people's home. I was involved in the curating and editing of written material for the final event. There was a to and fro-ing between myself and others throughout – in terms of meaning, intention and outcome, though ultimately it was of most interest to me, to look into the limits and potentials of what was created.

### **How I have 'treated' the water writing**

Confluences are distinctive water places. They suggest both an eternity of meeting and the immediacy of momentary conditions. They bring about new water. Michel Serres uses confluence to describe his work: 'what I seek to form, to compose, to promote – ... [is] a *syrrhèse*, a confluence not a system ... An assembly of relations.'<sup>25</sup> Derrida too has drawn on the image of confluence, speaking of material he has written over the years as a 'confluence of small texts'<sup>26</sup> rather than as an oeuvre or work.

Confluence is an apposite image for the form of this thesis. The coming together of pieces, with their different contexts, forms and rhythms, presents a series of stages or events in the water conversation. Each of these episodes, written as substantive chapters or productions, shows how I brought into being the performance of water; each gives a sense of a particular coming together of community, and of the 'watering place' concerned. Each is a gap or fissure through which to tap into privileged glimpses of what was a much larger water conversation.

These productions are interspersed with lighter weight pieces or 'floating connections.' They come from a heterogeneous range of sources, and each differs in density and degree of displacement. Perhaps the reader might imagine them as elements of a scrapbook, randomly plucked out and dispersed on to the surface of the body of water text. What each

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<sup>25</sup> Serres, op. cit. p122

<sup>26</sup> Jacques Derrida, *I Have a Taste for the Secret*, p29

reflects is a world of water conversation, which both informs and goes beyond this project and its many scrapbooks.

To introduce the chapters in sequence, the first *Taking to the Water, At Home with Water Lovers* personifies and brings together two elements in the contemporary culture of water – a structured instrumentalist view and a less visible but enduring cultural one. Neither 'water lover' can be expected to give up her hold. Each divines in the other an unfamiliarity which could easily give rise to hostility. Their relationship continues because of the way they differ and the complete unlikelihood of there ever being a reunion or reconciliation between them, or of either of them ever going away. With water as their most strongly held interest they can find little common ground.

*New Dimensions in Water Conversation, A First Splash in Academic Waters* opens the space for bringing my ideas from their community-based, rural regional context into an academic institution. By creating this seminar performance of water, I successfully negotiated the university's requirement that I make a doctoral presentation at the end of my first year. I also engendered faith in my supervisors that a water conversation, invented out of a heterogeneous range of informal ingredients, was a legitimate and worthwhile object of formal study.

*Ganga, or Problems of Translation* gives an insight into the genesis of my project. Here float questions about what I observed working with an Indian NGO, cleaning the Ganges at Varanasi, where I witnessed a different paradigm situated in a completely different framework of time. Here both cultural and instrumentalist strategies were brought to bear on water quality problems. Australian news media and activist campaigns put high value on data and its presentation in the form of the crisis news story as a catalyst for interest and action. I was taught at Varanasi that motivation for action could come, not from fear, but from love and care. I saw that stories and cultural meanings could be used as a vehicle for inviting new popular understandings about an environment, whilst maintaining traditions involving interaction with the river.

*To Mouth, to Mouth, to Mouth; Water Relations* – relations, as Michel Serres points out, are in fact ways of moving from place to place, or of wandering<sup>27</sup> and this chapter introduces the complexity of relations that are revealed when one investigates drinking water today. The chapter is tied together by a proliferation of mineral water, an inter-subjective experience of water tasting, and matters of judgement that arise from asking: What is this water?

*Water Running to Us; Making Contact* is a small play on what making contact with water can look like in one community and shows the varied negotiations which took place – with the board, executive, white and blue collar workers of Rous Water, with lay water lovers in the context of Adult and Community Education, with the Lismore Regional Art Gallery, a local nursing home, and with a high school dance program.

This chapter is in script-form in the spirit of 'raw water' – as an acknowledgement that a process such as the one I adopted is not going to bring out the kind or degree of coherence which 'scientific' approaches would anticipate as acceptable outcomes in research.

*Water/Story Testing – Unequal Perspectives.* The focus of the testing of ideas which informed my study is a public event, a *One-off Splash! of Water Celebration*. Here I explore this performance of a 'flash mixing' of elements, with a view to adding rather than subtracting, making space for hospitality rather than denouncing.<sup>28</sup> I challenge the idea that technical/scientific models are divorced from cultural frameworks and set rippling hard and fast ideas about subjectivity and objectivity, poetry and science, theory and intimacy.<sup>29</sup>

*A Nest of Water, Mediations, Translations and Weavings* – putting the fictional characters of Flow Engineer and Mermaid in their places proves difficult. Issues of disciplinarity and time interweave with those of international water management and the politics of writing.

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<sup>27</sup> Serres, op. cit. p103

<sup>28</sup> See Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, pp46-48 for more on a cautiously constructive approach to critical exploration

<sup>29</sup> Jane Gallop, *Thinking Through the Body*, p6

Inventing or envisioning a nest of water is a project which is both localized and situated in a framework of global relations.

*No Flow, the Consequences of Disappearance* makes the subversive claim that responsibility to water involves 'dreaming with the river'. I do not mean to imply that more coherent beliefs about water are immaterial, but that the consequences of disappearance are such that there is room for expansion. In the realm of this chapter we find bookmaking, a landmark waterfall and the question *What's the Water Closest to You?*

Water is part of human experience across space and time. So let's forget about a predictable sequence to this piece of work. Let's give up the illusion of simple limits of opening, closing and development in the face of the pull of current, tide and flow. The likelihood is that water will erode the territory that I set out to work in, taking its own course, away from the 'lure of the origin, the end, the line, the ring, the volume, the center,'<sup>30</sup> as Derrida describes the promise of the book.

### **Reading Water**

The cross-disciplinary outlook and 'undisciplined writing' (see Ch. 1) of my thesis may make unusual demands on a reader. As will be seen in the chapters that follow, hospitality to ideas in relation to water can be quite problematic. Some readers may come to this text expecting to consume it rapidly. They might have expectations of what they will find here. However, I admit that I have created a context for water which may not be easily recognisable and which 'not everyone will be able to appropriate through immediate understanding.'<sup>31</sup>

I hope that the way my writing comes to influence or interest its audience is outside the experience of time-saving efficiencies and rapid consuming. For water itself, in its appearance today, is a reminder of the problems associated with consumption. In 2001, 90

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<sup>30</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Ellipsis*, p296

billion litres of bottled water were sold around the world, contributing to a \$20 billion industry in plastic water bottles and attendant waste.<sup>32</sup> This lends weight to my interest in the limits of mechanical fulfillment, and the rewards of attending to points of difficulty, tensions and contradictions. I would like to draw the reader in to linger with the confluence of texts I have put together. Perhaps this involves challenging at the start the human tendency to see our own real as the single 'Real real', and hence to limit our view to the environment or 'palace' we believe we inhabit:

Now when dragons and fish see water as a palace, it is just like human beings seeing a palace. They do not think it flows. If an outsider tells them, 'What you see as a palace is running water,' the dragons and fish will be astonished, just as we are when we hear the words, 'Mountains flow.' Nevertheless, there may be some dragons and fish who understand that the columns and pillars and pavilions are flowing water ... Now human beings well know as water what is in the ocean and what is in the river, but they do not know what dragons and fish see as water and use water. Do not foolishly suppose that what we see as water is used as water by all other beings ...<sup>33</sup>

Water is not what we thought it was, this text suggests. But if water is not what we thought it was, we are not what we thought we were either.

This kind of talk will lose impatient water specialists, such as a certain Flow Engineer who appears in the next chapter, the reluctant companion of a Mermaid, seemingly in search of 'a true land friend'.<sup>34</sup>

### **Whose story?**

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<sup>31</sup> This quote comes from a passage in which Derrida discusses his desire to create contexts which do not allow for the mechanical fulfilment of the reader's expectations, see *ibid*, pp30-31

<sup>32</sup> Maude Barlow and Tony Clarke, *Who Owns Water*,  
<http://www.thenation.com/doc.mhtml?i=20020902&s=barlow>

<sup>33</sup> Kazuaki Tanahashi (ed.), *Moon in a Dewdrop, Writings of Zen Master Dogen*, p104. This extract is from 'Mountains and Waters Sutra'.

<sup>34</sup> Jan Harper, *Marina*, p6



To conclude I would like to speak for the value of community-based cultural practices. In a career stimulating these kinds of activity, working across the broad terrain of art and community, it is as well to be incarnated in Flow Engineer form, pragmatic and respectful of operational rules. In the water conversation project I have benefited from growing insight into the frequency, magnitude, duration and timing of flows in the realm of public/private, and into the importance of channel maintenance. Being equally at home as a Mermaid I am able to speak out for values which are quite foreign to calculation, to do something to break the spell of 'fascination with quantitative immediacy.'<sup>35</sup> In relation to the distinction private/public, which this thesis addresses, its rigour will always be threatened by language, by language alone.<sup>36</sup> Thus the central interest: 'Whose language, whose story is it anyway?'<sup>37</sup>

Much that is promoted in the name of water in Australia arises from practices, both urban and rural, associated with over 200 years of Australian colonisation, now entrenched in useful physical and socio-political structures. Here Christopher Sheil presents a picture of the power structure:

... massive in scale, routine in their management, commercial in their orientation, intensive in their capital investment, rich in cash, hierarchical in command, significant as employers, dramatically unequal in their remuneration, primarily male in their workforce – these are some of the general features of water infrastructure.<sup>38</sup>

Those who contributed to the water conversation to which this thesis refers, are small fry when one considers this perspective. Nonetheless, they should not be considered inconsequential. I believe that it is only by a more active engagement with water relations that water will 'find its level.'

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<sup>35</sup> Derrida, 'Call it a Day for Democracy,' in *The Other Heading*, op. cit. p103

<sup>36</sup> *ibid*, p93

<sup>37</sup> Margaret Innes in *Stories, Writing and Publishing for Cultural Action, A One-Day Forum Held by the Centre for Popular Education*, p7

<sup>38</sup> Christopher Sheil, op. cit., p14

I trust that the pleasure of this text will be in suggesting a larger perspective, in which all of us, including past and future investors, political appointees and water managers, are only small in relation to the vastness of water. Equally I would like it to hand on a sense of agency. For it is our individual and collective successes and failures, which, along with myriads of others, 'trickle, tumble and torrentially build the future of our biosphere.'<sup>39</sup>

The water is here already, does not need turning on. The switch at source says:

*Flow running ...*

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<sup>39</sup> Stuart Kauffman, *Investigations*, pp 119,120

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## TAKING TO THE WATER, AT HOME WITH WATER LOVERS

To introduce my taking to the water on the terms in which I understand it immediately sets up a tension between what is conceived of as telling a good story and what constitutes being scholarly. Yet this study represents unaccustomed testimony for water. Water is alive in this moment, and to live is to echo the vibrancy of things.<sup>1</sup>

This makes it possible for me to say that I felt the pressure of water, insisting that I bear witness to its vagarious nature and not be insulated, as I would have been had I been approaching it from within a specific discipline and its concepts. It is straying across disciplines that has made my investigation into the contemporary water scene fresh and invigorating. At the same time I am aware of how easy it would be to falter and choke on a high tide of information and ideas. Thus, in making sense of what I did for others, I would like to provide various 'percepts' as markers. A percept is a ficto-critical term for what stands out, ineluctably, when an argument develops within the embrace of a story, or a story develops within the embrace of a critical argument. One of the interesting things about perceptual 'reasoning' is that it makes for interesting relations between 'surface' and 'depth'. It invites. It seduces. It offers a particular kind of hospitality for thought in that it allows for a play between what would otherwise be seen as separate – detached, critical, conceptual thought, and fictional enchantment.<sup>2</sup>

In the intimacy of water's influence – on the way I have formed my understandings of it, and the way they in turn have formed me – I bring you a Mermaid and a Flow Engineer. They emerge at a time when there are a great range of positions from which people may relate to water. As William Kentridge, a contemporary artist who inspires me, expresses it, 'I'm just picking up two strands in the world around me ...'<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Alphonso Lingis, 'The Murmur of the World' in *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common*, p96

<sup>2</sup> see Stephen Muecke 'The Fall: Ficto-Critical Writing' in *parallax*, 2002 vol.8, no. 4, pp108-112, for an enactment of this 'critical invention.'

<sup>3</sup> Okwui Enwezor, *Truth and Responsibility, a Conversation with William Kentridge*, p170

## A Flow Engineer

It's funny family influence, isn't it, how we take up the proud things? I am my father's daughter, and it's no real surprise that I came to have an appreciation of 'Works'. The social good of bridges and highways and waste disposal were something I could make conversation about from very early on. Lewis Mumford's *The City in History* sat on the shelf above the radio. In the late 50s and early 60s in Johannesburg, its spine title alone spoke of social progress and a breadth of intellectual concerns. *This book opens with a city that was symbolically, the world: it closes with a world that has become in many practical aspects a city... .*<sup>4</sup> Plans came home rolled up, ready to become something. Capital letters carefully contained in corner legends made known the stage and aspect of the design. Nothing in that city, my known world, was an accident – drains and sidewalks and roadsigns had been put in place by the City Engineers' Department, along with water reservoirs, dam walls, municipal swimming baths and cooling towers.

Yes, that's what brought me to Flow Engineering, though in my dad's day this field wasn't even dreamt of. I aspired to be good at what he was good at, even though I was a girl, and I wanted to have the title I saw on his professional journal, *The Civil Engineer*. I often lingered around his desk and I remember picking up abstracts and articles. This was where I came across the 'death' of the Great Lakes.

Not long ago I had a dream which brought that to mind. I don't often dream about my colleagues. We are swimming upstream. There is the sense that it's not the first time we have been in this situation together. I am ahead, and have come up through rapids and heavy stormwaters to arrive at an open stretch of water. It has been hard going, but it is not till I pause at the edge of the pool that I really see the force of topsoil saturated water that is rushing down the channel which I've come up. Because there is a sense of urgency, as if we should move on to our destination as soon as possible, I go straight into the water and realise from the taste and feel of it that it is heavily polluted. I return to the bank and look at a pool of water we have swum often, always aware that the water quality was not terrific, but always glad to use it as a way to get through the area.

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<sup>4</sup> *The City in History*, preface

I now see layers and layers of debris. Despite the stormwater rushing down on the far side, this pool has become revealingly clear through the change of water regime. There are as many layers of accumulated rubbish from years and years of industrial and domestic output as there were delicate infinitesimally exquisite layers of leaf litter in a pool I once came upon deep in the forest in Fiji. In the dream, I look out, wondering what I will say to my colleagues following behind about what I have discovered, and a woman and a man in uniform emerge into view. They are spraying the water, reminiscent of aerosol spraying by quarantine officers on planes, as if to kill anything that might arise from it, and to make the possibility of swimming across definitely impossible. How the hell are we going to get to where we must go?

A strong reminder of my lesson from Dad on the Ontario, Michigan and Erie as a twelve-year old. I had learned about them in geography. I had to find out about what I had read. He took describing the extent of the problem to me very seriously. I suppose he saw how shocked I was that lakes and rivers were as much about waste as water, and that it was a matter of choosing which rivers to restore, and which to leave as drains. He told me how things had changed with cities and industries, large populations, and non-organic wastes. I simply could not understand why factories would not change their practices in line with these realities. I think this was when I first realised the importance of minimising impacts, and of taking a precautionary approach where standards are concerned. Interestingly, in Kanpur in India, where I did some consultancy work a few years ago, the outputs into the Ganges were of a very similar nature to what was going into the Great Lakes all those years ago.

I wanted to tell him about that trip. Do you know that there are people who know me well who have never heard me talk about my father? He was not an easy man. Actually, some of the best memories I have of him are of the sense of advantage I had over anyone else in our family when he shared his professional interests with me. He was never really well, and this meant he was often irritable and aggressive. I left home as soon as I could. Coming to Australia almost immediately after he died gave me further distance. But there are plenty of people who would remember him as a charming and eloquent man. I know he would have loved this poem of Coleridge's I came upon when I got back from India. Most reminiscent of going down to inspect a waste outlet on the Ganges with full face mask on!:

In Köhln, a town of monks and bones,  
And pavements fang'd with murderous stones,  
And rags, and hags, and hideous wenches;  
I counted two and seventy stenches,  
All well defined, and several stinks!  
Ye Nymphs that reign o'er sewers and sinks,  
The River Rhine, it is well known,  
Doth wash your city of Cologne;  
But tell me Nymphs! what power divine  
Shall henceforth wash the river Rhine?<sup>5</sup>

Fantastic, isn't it?

He loved language and music. Even now I am cautious about trespassing on Mozart. But yes, when I think back on it, he was an extraordinarily imaginative man. It seems incredible now that his generation never anticipated the implications of limiting flow. In that era, water storage was at the heart not only of liberal capitalist, but socialist planning – there was nothing to contradict what was a highly centralised state objective. The construction of the large dams was part of where modernity was going, whether the water was for irrigation, electricity or urban water supplies. In Australia, water resources held significant status in bureaucratic and government circles right up until the seventies. You'd be amazed how many future state Premiers and influential party elders held the portfolio of Water Supply.<sup>6</sup> The longstanding conservative premier of Australia's largest state, New South Wales (NSW), Cahill, for example, held the portfolio for many many years.<sup>7</sup> Early embarrassments were smoothed over, for example when Moore Creek Dam at Tamworth silted up. But the paradigm simply didn't include the very expensive process of major dams being put into retirement fifty years down the track. Now the mega-project has lost face in economic and environmental terms, although broadly speaking this shift in attitudes has yet to

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<sup>5</sup> *The Complete Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, (ed.) Ernest H. Coleridge, p477

<sup>6</sup> J.M. Powell, in *Watering the Garden State: Water, Land and Community in Victoria, 1834-1988*, speaks of this change occurring in the 70s, p14

<sup>7</sup> Cahill at the opening of the Rocky Creek Scheme: 'As most of you know, I have a personal interest in this work. I knew the scheme in its blue-print stage; I helped get it underway, my Government contributed £59,549 towards its estimated cost.' *Northern Star*, 20 Nov. 53

translate into the scale of works actually in progress, particularly over in Asia.<sup>8</sup> Dams and pipes will probably always have a political appeal, if you think, for example of the efforts of the National Party through the 80s and 90s to dam the mid-North Coast's Clarence and Nymboida rivers to water Grafton and Coffs Harbour.

When I began my studies in water management in the late 70s the field was already under scrutiny.<sup>9</sup> My own technological interests, along with those of graduates in the natural sciences and social sciences were beginning to be accommodated. Things were changing rapidly away from the restricted focus of the civil engineer. Interesting when I think back on those influential moments when, as a family on a trip in the Zephyr Zodiac, we'd drive in to the viewing area of the Dam, and take in the velvety quiet sheen of bulk water meeting concrete by that extraordinary wall. Over time, the policies and dynamics of decision making that went along with those large primary developments have fallen out of favour with a more educated public. We now take it for granted that public accountability is as much part of the picture as interdisciplinary research. If you take demand management for example, in many places conservative allegiances towards new dam construction are being edged out, not only by their unpopularity, but by the cost-benefits of micro-interventions.<sup>10</sup>

I can't say though that university or the work I did with large firms in the early years gave me any encouragement to come to terms with the social and political factors associated with the work of Flow, or to understand my own role within it. Young researchers in the new programs at Wollongong and The University of Technology Sydney are fortunate in this regard. I think we can be reasonably optimistic that, having been exposed to interdisciplinarity, and knowing the breadth of skills and experience required to apply various options, they may not be as beset by issues of self-preservation where professional territory is concerned.<sup>11</sup> What we really want is for engineers to be prepared to be challenged and solve problems within a broad

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<sup>8</sup> Dennis Cosgrove, *Water, Engineering and Landscape, Water Control and Landscape Transformation in the Modern Period*, p9

<sup>9</sup> see J.M. Powell, op. cit. p247, on the emerging criticism of water management by economists and environmentalists in the 60s and 70s,

<sup>10</sup> Loyalty to dams actually remains strong in many local governments, with dams being seen as an insurance of supply to meet future population needs.

<sup>11</sup> Sharon Beder argues that despite change, the 'engineering community' is inured to challenges to its autonomy by the fact that it is engineers who hold the reins where defining options and creating designs is concerned. Author's response to open peer commentaries on *Technological Paradigms: The Case of Sewerage Engineering*, p208

engineering community that includes operators, contractors, vendors, suppliers, politicians and regulatory agencies. Some would even say that customers need to be seen as part of things today.

An increasing awareness of the environmental costs of supplying water on a dry continent probably accounts for the fact that I've become the specialist I have – we've reached the top of the hill basically. My interests are in efficiency outcomes, estimation and implementation of flow, and more recently, cost efficiencies associated with natural flow reconstruction. I don't think it's sentimental that the dam remains a source of professional pride. It is a reminder of continuing progress, and that it is possible to make cumulative improvement to major components of a system.<sup>12</sup> The clay core dam and the spillway are reminders that what I am doing is useful work. And frankly, the vastness and peace of the water is inspiring – I'd love to paint it one day. On some mornings a soft mist comes over and I just think how incredibly privileged I am, to be part of a not insignificant lineage of resource managers who have worked for the love of it.

I probably do neglect friends and family, and have been accused of having a heart on a distant planet. When I've really got my head down, nothing else matters. So people tend to feel they should drop reminders that sustainability is about improving quality of life, and being aware of the processes that life depends on. I'm not sure that work practices should be influenced by debates about sustainability, and there's a lot happening at a time where there's quite a renaissance for Flow, even in unexpected places. I'm alive and kicking. I do long distance cycling and I love the challenge of holding my own with the blokes. Problems always seem less of a problem when you're fit. There are some thorny issues in a project that I'm currently implementing, but at stage one I've got something that looks good to assist consensus interpretation of some quite controversial data. I spend a lot of my time, even when cycling, going over flow engineering puzzles. There's a mingling of anxiety with excitement that tends to keep ideas – often very good ones – rushing around in my head.

***Flow Flow Flow.*** Oh, I've had that sign up in my office for a long time now to remind me what I'm on about. I hear a lot of people say, 'I could do with that.'



In conclusion, for the sake of easier familiarity with terms, for those who thought there was just Flow, I'd like to introduce something you're free to digest in your own time:

*Flow conditions/flow variability/flow management/flow profiles*

*Flow meters/flow switches/flow direction/volumetric flow/flow running/flow per second/outflow*

*Flowing*

*River flows/stream flows/low flows*

*Reduced flow/very low flow/no flow*

*Flowed*

*Environmental flows/flow protection/flow implementation/influences on flows/estimation of flow/*

*Flow trials*

*Loss of flow/visible flow restriction/elevated flow conditions/return flows/high flows/inflows*

*Flow objectives mimicking natural flow conditions/flow data/natural flow reconstruction*

*To flow*

## **A Mermaid**

If you are ever lucky enough to go to Woodford Folk Festival, you may be drawn, as my Mermaid sister and I were, to the venue near the stream and the bridge called the Murri Tent. When we washed up there we were met by an Uncle Bob Anderson, who introduced us to the place and told us we were welcome, provided that we made sure to respect the people whose land we were on. This made sense to us. As you probably know, we mermaids are quite thingy about respect and can turn a person's world upside down if we're treated badly. It was clear that this tall, steady, white-haired gentleman was not particularly surprised by a sighting of two mermaids. It turned out that he's from a saltwater people, round Stradbroke Island. He expected to find out where we came from as well, and told us quite firmly that each of us knowing who our ancestors are is intrinsic to his vision of reconciliation. For example, he had made a trip overseas

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<sup>12</sup> see Beder, *ibid.* for a summary of the tendency for technological paradigms to favour improvement on

some years ago, to renew connections with his Cornish roots. So he was pretty chuffed to find out that our merfamily originated in the sea off the Cornish coast and that we have been at home in places he went to, like Padstow, Seaton, Perranzabuloe, and the Cove of Lamorna. For us, just saying the names was enough to create resonances of the moonlit nights on which we have blessed rare Cornishmen with powers that they have bequeathed to their descendents generation after generation.

As we left, Uncle Bob invited us to enjoy ourselves and gave us each a badge saying *Working Together*, on the theme of reconciliation. As beings who bring together elements of life, we have a strange form of reconciliation in our bones and scales. Working, alone or together, is more difficult for us to make sense of. We're playful babes, and have led people away from working and workaday life since time immemorial.

Let's take to the water. Come with me mermaiding where I am adored by little girls with big eyes, and women who want to be mermaids. My breasts behind the line of a perfect scallop are translucent. It only takes moments and a passing man is hooked. He has felt up the pearl in the clamshell and can't walk off. For a time we bathe together. It's just a momentary relationship. It's not only an outward projection, a movement towards, but an acknowledgement that desire and fulfillment are in the imaginative realm, that our mermaiding conjures up something previously unconsidered, in a way that is as distinctively fresh as the clear salt water we come from. He is mingling with the name and form of mermaid and losing his footing in the dusty street world between the Chai Tent and Spaghetti Junction. Through all the thronging and happy movement, he is hearing the mermaid song and being carried away from an autonomy in which he is husband to the lovely woman who stands next to him, father of the adored little feller holding his hand. In a fleeting exchange he is being pulled away from what he genuinely loves, and remembering his relatedness to something quite outside the playful moment of stepping into the fun of the festival. It is as if I am seeing in his eyes a faraway place in which he knows whatever it is that mermaid qualities reveal.

Listen to the way someone who has thought a lot about performance, Peggy Phelan, invites one to think about an economy where 'matter (and the Real) is created out of

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past achievements and building on a tradition, rather than the consideration of new options

nothing – "the nothing that is not there and the nothing that is". This is what she says: 'This reproduction works according to the invisible calculus of multiple offerings of what one does not have.'<sup>13</sup> Mermaids shimmer and smile at people's certainties about what constitutes the 'Real-real.' We invite 'the generation and reproduction of doubt'<sup>14</sup> for after all, we aren't supposed to exist. You might consider it our finest accomplishment that we resist the acquisitive tendencies of 'Western power knowledge',<sup>15</sup> by swimming into situations of fleeting temporariness, which elude reproduction. To us it is a pleasure.

I didn't become a mermaid willingly. I found myself in a mermaid world. Jill and Jae had been mermaids since long before I exchanged inland for North Coast. They lived for mermaids, as if life underwater would necessarily be a pleasure for everyone. They acted out of the conviction that I would eventually be seduced. The mermaid daughter had been born on the beach at Cape Tribulation, and she too evinced qualities of shell and pearl, even though she never took on the costume.

Whilst Jill and Jae were making our tails and scallops and shimmering sleeves, I was at my computer writing an application for a fellowship to the Australia Council for the Arts, looking out of the window of the garden studio at banana leaves and frangipani in bloom. They'd come in thrilled about a piece of fabric that was now available at so much a metre from Spotlight, and ask if I thought that amount of money was justified for the quality of production we were going after. Then I had no choice but to break off from my work and take a serious look at the sample piece of ripple-casting turquoiseness, and make decisions as if I was already a mermaid.

I didn't put in a stitch. I couldn't see mermaids as justifying the time. I was busy being as good as I could at what I did, trimming bits off my cv and embroidering the seams of what was turning out to be a major piece of writing. At that stage I was very focused on a vision in which I would bring together ordinary water lovers with specialists, with a view to opening up new perspectives on water. And I was living at the Hurley Street house, where the bathroom was dripping with strings of pearls and littered with

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<sup>13</sup> Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked, The Politics of Performance*, p178

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.* p180

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.* p173

seashells, and the sewing machine and overlocker were whizzing with mermaid-creating thread.

No one ever believes that I didn't put the work in. That I stepped off as a mermaid ready-made. But that is because they know nothing of the generosity of the imaginative waters in which mermaids are at home, and the way in which they stream blissfully in and out, making an impression even on the Sheer Hulks<sup>16</sup> of those who like things in rational order and call themselves responsible and realistic.

*Oooh you're gorgeous! I want to come back with you to your special bit of ocean!*

*You're not real – I know, there's just foam inside there ...*

*Just pose together like that and say, Queer! Queer! Queer! It's really Queer out of the Water ...*

The Mermaid lives in the hills and rarely sees the dancing patterns of light beneath wavelets. The Flow Engineer can only claim the instrumentation, outlets, weirs, locks and channels that give the average person a sense of security, a structure through which to reassure themselves that their life is flowing smoothly and under control. Perversely, stripped of their suits, they even look strangely alike, and could be taken for the same person.

Can the Engineer be forgiven for living an instrumentalist life? For keeping her head down and not seeing the clouds, for living insulated from the vastness of water, which is not under the control of a professional? Can she be allowed to swing up skinny ladders, knowing that she's in an unusual position to do a job well? If the Mermaid is only a vision of froth and foam, can she expect to speak into the material world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

### **Participating in the Ideology of the Visible**

If the mermaid does chance to speak, of re-instating the mythical dimension to public experience, is she obstructing the power of the unmarked, the unspoken, the unseen,

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<sup>16</sup> The Sheer Hulk – a pub in Sydney's The Rocks in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, known for being 'full to suffocation of the lowest women, snaring and waylaying sailors on shore.'

through participating in the ideology of the visible. Or is she simply rendering it less stable?<sup>17</sup>

2 May

The Manager of Ballina Tourist Information Centre  
at Norton Street, Ballina

Dear Liz

**What do the Mermaids think about acting as representatives for Ballina?**

You may be surprised to get a letter wrapped in seaweed. Until now you may not even have been aware of there being a higher authority on Mermaid Matters. We speak very rarely.

The matter of us being called in to advertise Ballina is a big one, for we come up from the water to inspire many things. We make our own meanings. No one else can do this for us.

As you know, we evoke the importance of dream, wonder and inspiration. However, these days many people only have childhood memories of us and may believe that we are entirely mythical. Sadly, the fragments of a nursery rhyme or a story are all that they can remember when pressed. Even you have left out our pearls in your advertising.

Nonetheless we are glad that you have decided to invite a mermaidly sphere of influence to Ballina, by choosing us as your representatives. We sense that this may enhance the feminine aspect of the town, its breakwater, beaches and sea.

A rare photograph accompanies this letter. As you can see we are beautiful, and exercise a strong power over women, children and men. Together with your information centre, we can encourage the most reverent and respectful attitudes to

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<sup>17</sup> Phelan, op. cit. p7

Mermaids. Of course we would be willing to be part of Mermaid awareness activities at appropriate festivals, functions or openings.

Yours in the one Ocean,  
Deep Sea Belle and Pacific Pearl

Here are two Mermaids getting political, attempting to make known their concerns and negotiate for their interests. Nobody knows better than they do the problems of making an appearance, let alone pursuing a politics which involves heightening one's image and identity. They might be put on display, even stuck in a barrel of water. 'Visibility is a trap ... it summons surveillance and the law; it provokes fetishism, the colonialist/imperial appetite for possession. Yet it retains a certain political appeal.' There may be value in emerging in all their glory and living out bigger ideas surrounding relations with water. 'Visibility politics have practical consequences; a line can be drawn between a practice ... and a theory; the two can be reproductive.'<sup>18</sup>

### **Perspectives on Water**

*Mermaid:*

You may have heard that we have our own way of communicating, in the form of rippling sound shapes so sweet that people have plunged into the tide after us. These sounds alone won't mean much to you, so here is a rendering of one of our old songs. Our water goes back at least two billion years. Steam was no longer filling the air. The continents humans live on had taken form and the watery landscape of oceans, creeks, waterholes, rivers and lakes was settling into place.

The ocean is still as large as it ever was. But now we are rising from the water to lodge complaints. Anything you put in what you see as *your* water reaches us eventually. Take note – we can be precursors of serious storms!

*Flow Engineer:*

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<sup>18</sup> *ibid.* Phelan draws attention to the limits of visibility politics, but does not underestimate its successes. Rather she points out the risk of 'securing the gap between the real and the representational'.

Water has terrific integrity – and it can maintain it without any loss of mobility or flexibility. Think of its cohesion – the way it holds together, to support a leaf floating downstream. This is surface tension, which contributes a slight resistance to gravity and means you can fill a glass fuller than full. It means that long columns of rising water don't break easily – I don't know if you've seen the fountain in Lake Burley Griffin in Canberra? It's a terrific example. You could see this watery tensile web as a kind of molecular glue. But water is also extraordinarily adherent – it sticks, in the form of a surface film. It wets. These molecular qualities of coherence and adherence are something that we always have to bear in mind in our calculations.<sup>19</sup>

Mermaid: Did you expect that I would be intimidated by you?

Flow Engineer: If you were anxious about that, it might be because you are vain.

Mermaid: I found you more interesting than I expected.

Flow Engineer: Did you expect me to be dogmatic?

Mermaid: I realised that you would want to preserve your values. And that the same would go for me.

Flow Engineer: It'd take time and commitment to find a basis for cooperative team work.

Mermaid: Surely with flow as shared property, we could both be good at taking abrupt turns, making detours .... living between regimens of truth.<sup>20</sup>

Flow Engineer: I don't know if my organisation would welcome a Mermaid. We're not really set up to have dealings with one.

Mermaid: And I need to remind you that I'd always be calling into question your notion of things fitting – the way you see everything as part of a derivative order, one thing imposing hierarchically upon another, easy to conveniently tuck away, like a nest of tables.

Flow Engineer: Your lack of any rational order makes you terribly woozy. In terms of speaking out about Flow, it's going to be very hard for you to make an impression. I am within the province of Science. I can protest from inside it.

Mermaid: I am a Mermaid, and what Mermaid does not have her strategems?

### **Flow Engineer/Mermaid Supplements**

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<sup>19</sup> Peter Warshall, 'The Morality of Molecular Water' in *Whole Earth Review*, no. 85, 1995, p.8

<sup>20</sup> Trinh T. Minh-ha, *When the Moon Waxes Red, Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics*, pp21,24

The Mermaid can see in water what others can't quite make out. The Flow Engineer has piles of information that the public hasn't caught up with at this stage. Some might discern that by being in relationship, without doing anything further, the one draws attention to attributes and interests which are less obvious in the other. There is already evidence to show that this sets up a tension between them, which in Derridean terms, constitutes 'supplementarity.' The Flow Engineer's existence draws a more distinct definition around the Mermaid. At the same time, Flow Engineer-being points to the limits of Mermaid-being and vice versa.

We will draw later on what Derrida has to say on the subject of accommodating different ways of being and thinking, which the Mermaid and Flow Engineer exemplify. He talks about the demands, limits and potentials of opening the door to difference in terms of hospitality,<sup>21</sup> and later it may be appropriate to consider some ways in which hospitality is the very condition of water discourse. You might not know, but the Mermaid and the Flow Engineer actually end up working together in the fold of that Flow Organisation.

We've seen that the Mermaid can be quite forward. Don't be surprised if it was her who set things up in the first place. 'It is necessary *to begin by responding*. There would ...be, in the beginning, no first word. The call is called only from the response ...'<sup>22</sup> Try to picture her finding her way to an old public works building, going up tight-fitting stairs, examining an aerial photo of a forest-green site earmarked for dam construction hanging on the hard, dry face-brick wall. There won't be any need to introduce herself at the front desk. Before she's had a chance to have a look at the pamphlets in the reception area, someone will appear to usher her inside.

Against all predictions, the Chair of the Flow Engineer's organisation has made time to see her, even though he's understandably baffled as to what might come of the meeting. She gets herself seated, wrapping her tail round to the left. He moves towards a small

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<sup>21</sup> See Jacques Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*. Derrida treats philosophical questions about hospitality through an examination of Levinas' *On the Name*, which addresses these questions vis à vis Israel and Palestine. It is poignant to note here that the displacement and settlement of Palestinians over many years has involved the strategic takeover of water resources. (Noam Chomsky 'The Solution is the Problem' *Guardian Weekly* May 16-22 2002)

<sup>22</sup> Derrida, *ibid.* p24



kitchenette. 'Tea or coffee?' She shakes her head. He has to do a double take. 'Of course! My apologies ... a cool drink would be more your kind of thing.'

He is a barrel of a man, diplomatic but direct. 'Could you explain yourself please?' he asks. 'What exactly are you doing here?' Some might see the Mermaid as ingratiating, but charm comes naturally to her. She didn't come up on dry land for nothing. She is careful not to make incomprehensible sounds, or to say things that would be difficult to understand. She doesn't voice the fact that she is suspicious of the way Flow Engineers look at water. She doesn't express her regret that the reports lying on the coffee table make water dry and over-organised. She is quick to agree that people are irrational where water is concerned. She suggests modestly that she'd be the perfect person to assist in bridging the gap. 'Water is so pervasive, even for you land-loving people,' she says sympathetically, 'that it's impossible to hold. It's not a subject you can address completely logically.' Her glass of water sits on the nest of tables throughout their time together. She's quite in her element and has forgotten all about it.

The Chair is understanding – and also somewhat surprised at the range of her knowledge on flow, for example the different ways water flows through living beings. The way she sees it, people and plants are all in a sort of down-to-water guise that ripples as visibly as river or ocean. It is just a matter of bringing this wateriness into a light which enables people to notice it. The idea she is putting forward of working with consumers comes at an interesting time. The organisation has recently implemented some innovative programs. There are a few problems with blue water that have resulted in anger at the end of the pipeline. She is just a Mermaid, and shouldn't be too much trouble to have round the place. He thinks nothing of the fact that in practice, it is the Flow Engineer who will have to deal with the siren.

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We have seen how the Chair makes a commonplace gesture of hospitality towards the Mermaid, by offering her a drink. Water is the practical substance of a myriad first moves in hospitality every day, as people put on kettles and go to the fridge. In some situations, such as when the Flow Engineer visits India, it is necessary to refuse water, set down generously in front of one, because of fear of waterborne diseases. She never feels comfortable about supplanting this hospitality with her own supply of Jenne

bottled water. At the same time, she is interested to see that however many times in the past westerners have turned down a metal beaker of water, and will do so in future, this never puts their hosts off offering it.

In the light of this practical relationship between water and hospitality and of the word hospitality's interesting development in English, I'd like to trace its path as it moves between public and private meanings from the Middle Ages to the present. The contemporary sense of the word suggests respect for people outside one's own immediate sphere, as it did in its earliest sense in which was strongly associated with religious organisations and protection of the poor. In its etymology, hospitality is closely related to hospital, whose origins arise in the holy land where certain Knights of the Hospitallers set up 'hospitals' for poor pilgrims, and to hospice, originally a place of shelter and rest for pilgrims kept by a religious order. A relationship with public charity continued over centuries. However it gave way to a much stronger sense of sharing individual household wealth in the nineteenth century.

The word had been in use in a secular, and more intimate and personal sense since the seventeenth and eighteenth century, coming to have the commonly held meaning of being well disposed to entertain. Today, hospitality combines with industry, to create a definition that includes tourism, services to travellers and so on. This reflects the increasing capitalization [and] organisation ... of what were formerly thought of as non-industrial kinds of services and work.<sup>23</sup> Hospitality is highly visible in this sense, as an economic asset. The implied capitalisation does not deny reciprocity or reception with goodwill, but emphasises the commodified nature of the exchange. In this relation, it is part of work and a public world rather than the personal domestic sphere, restoring an earlier public sense of the word, albeit stressing different values, including standardised transactions. This is part of an accompanying trend across the public domain of favouring the standardised and regulated over anything with unpredictable implications.

Derrida, whose interest in unsettling the standardised and the regulated is well known,

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<sup>23</sup> Raymond Williams, *Keywords, A Vocabulary of Culture*, p167

'I don't know if my organisation would welcome a Mermaid,' says the Flow Engineer. I believe this statement betrays apprehension. She herself, and those she works with are water specialists, conditioned by influences and events that have led them into a complex way of knowing. They are intimate with the eccentricities that water displays when confined in narrow spaces, or is brought up against certain surfaces, and it is this they base their sense of flowing on. Everyone knows that Mermaids live within a surplus of water, without the human sense of boundary. Of course there would be uncertainty for an organisation in opening out its 'at-home with itself' here.<sup>24</sup> In fact with Flow and water as common ground there are difficulties to confront. The Organisation, the Flow Engineer and the Mermaid could all be seen as the subject of these uncertainties. 'The subject is hostage. That is, it is 'less a "question", than *in* question.'<sup>25</sup> Why would any of them want to place themselves under accusation,<sup>26</sup> when they presently enjoy a confidence that they can offer a secure foundation for the understanding of water. Indeed Water could be seen as the subject '*in* question', since the Mermaid would not dream of seeing it otherwise. However, spare a thought for the Flow Organisation, a time-honoured institution. Water as the object of its regular and ordinary business has never been in question.

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The day will come when the practically focused Engineer has difficulty maintaining a 'non-allergic relation'<sup>27</sup> and puts her hand over her mouth to mask a sigh as she confronts the vision of ripply turquoise sitting on the other side of her desk. Luckily, even in contemporary Flow organisations, hospitality can entail temporary truces, guests having reasonably high status:

Mermaid: Nice flow device.

Flow Engineer (impatiently): That's a Venturi meter. (uncomfortable pause) Look, I have piles of work here and not a lot of time for your somewhat esoteric proposal.

Mermaid: I'm here to help. It's inevitable we're going to have problems, with people thinking they're just 75% water. What is it that allows you to see water, yet keeps you from seeing it? What makes you appear so independent? There needs to be a

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<sup>24</sup> *ibid.* p28

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.* p56

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.* p56

<sup>27</sup> Levinas quoted in *id.* p27

refreshing sensitivity to the way water holds up people and culture in an infinite array of interconnection. It's no good constantly kissing water goodbye as you do, always flushing it down toilets, sinks and drains. What makes you see it as an accessory? In a sense you *are* water.

Flow Engineer: I'm sorry, it'd be asking a lot of us to educate our clients and customers in the way you're suggesting. And I'm not sure it's that important. (Thinks to herself: Interesting ... what she's saying is true for the vascular system – water does act like a mechanical stiffener for plants.<sup>28</sup>) Flow's situation is dire. We need to be planning for foreseeable results.

Mermaid: You talk about water as if it only concerns a human life span. Isn't that what got you into trouble in the first place?

Flow Engineer: Of course its necessary to think about the big picture, but we don't have the resources and I'm not sure it'll get you anywhere. (Thinks to herself: Of course there are those of us here who do think in terms of a bigger, more integrated picture, but it's infinitely more relevant than this!)

Mermaid: There have been times when a glimpse of a bigger picture has been influential.

Flow Engineer: So let's cut to the chase. You need to send us a Memo saying ...

Mermaid: ... that I want to keep it so practical and ordinary that people don't lose hold of the tension between our worldviews, and I want the support of an organisation with instrumental objectives.

They try their best. Each has their world. From the Flow Engineer's point of view, water is in the world, in dams, in pipes and channels, in off-stream storages. She's pretty fascinated by infrastructure and technique. She got into the field because she's pragmatic. With her current focus, she tends to lose interest when talk moves away from efficiencies. And we've seen she's also a little on the serious side.

To the Mermaid the world is in water in its movement and mingling, within pregnant women, trees, buildings and concrete bridges. She completely underestimates what it takes to put this across. When the going gets rough, and others can't imagine, she feels abandoned. It's not simply that she's touchy. Bear in mind what it'd be like to have had stories handed down, mermaid to mermaid, since the Middle Ages, of priests of the

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<sup>28</sup> Philip Ball, *H<sub>2</sub>O, A Biography of Water*, p220

church cruelly cursing you and your kin as devils. The only possible response to such cruelty was to burst into tears, and evoke a greater sensitivity in others.<sup>29</sup>

The Mermaid has a legendary reputation as a shape shifter. She's already got the Flow Engineer recollecting things she hadn't thought of for a while. Why wouldn't the Flow Engineering Organisation be sensitive to their limits, to the problem of 'a tenable threshold' and the possibility of her taking their terminology out of context, and perverting it by putting it into another?<sup>30</sup> An outsider might question whether it is fair to either party that they are on such unstable ground in opening up a difficult future terrain of community. Any hope of fully recognising themselves in the terms by which they think they have signified are sure to be disappointed.<sup>31</sup> The Memo which the Mermaid writes opens a door. 'This open door is anything but a simple passivity, anything but an abdication of reason.' It allows for the kind of questions Derrida addresses when he asks: 'what can this hospitality of reason give, this reason as *the capacity to receive* ... this reason under the law of hospitality? This reason as the law of hospitality.'<sup>32</sup>

Derrida speaks of the law of hospitality implying a 'dissymmetrical disproportion'<sup>33</sup> Across time and cultures, this is seen in practice in the relationship between hospitality and travel and journeys. The Mermaid, for example, has come on a journey from a free flowing world, influenced by currents, tides and the moon, a world she knows well and loves. She has stepped into a world which assumes that everything takes place within certain structures, according to timetables, and that activity is as real represented on graphs which map inputs and outputs, as it is in fact.

Mermaid: In my meeting with your Chair, we talked about my conducting an activity to involve people who love water, people who work with water, people who want to express themselves about water. What are your thoughts about the form this water conversation might take?

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<sup>29</sup> G. Benwell, *Sea Enchantress, The Tale of the Mermaid and Her Kin*, p71

<sup>30</sup> Derrida, op. cit. p35. Here Derrida is addressing much more lofty ideas than Flow terminology, as he considers issues relating to Good, Justice, Love, Faith, etc.

<sup>31</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, p242

<sup>32</sup> Derrida, op. cit. p27

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.* p26

Flow Engineer: You mean *Conservation*?

Mermaid: No, hardly, I'm thinking more in terms of floating connections, showing the way water touches different people in different ways depending on who they are and what they do and have done ...

Flow Engineer: Would this be observed in detail?

Mermaid: Yes, in a friendly environment where people could drink and talk and write.

Flow Engineer: How would it be of use? You'd need a control study.

Mermaid: The shape and order of it might only emerge in the doing of it, in settling in, to imagery, to sounds of voices speaking and writing water.

Flow Engineer: You'd need a framework. Pipes running between, connecting people up, you'd need to monitor their condition pretty regularly. You'd need a system, so that once everyone was connected, the conversation would flow. You'd have to have faith in the pipes, the joins, the mains and the valves, the miles of infrastructure between your headworks and your consumer.

Mermaid: But you wouldn't want that to get in the way of the real tide of expression that's possible, to see it pulled down by gravity feed to *This-is-real – I made this happen, I did not make it up.*

Flow Engineer: I think it'd be well worth considering a degree of rigour in this study.

Mermaid: Can I remind you that you are held up by water? It is not only that nobody here has time to notice, but that you have suppressed this reality through what you call 'hypotheses', 'claims', 'rigour' and 'rationality.' I am not interested in your way of being normal, of holding yourself outside to explain and argue. Where you offer rigour, I offer freshness and solidity, and freedom from time.

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The Mermaid's sisters prepared her for surfacing on land by telling her about Celtic traditions of hospitality in which wanderers and bards were welcomed into households by people eager for new information and stories. Traces of this form of journeying are visible in Australia. It is a legacy to which John Berger refers when he suggests that the role of the storyteller is not so much in the realm of seduction, as of hospitality and how we receive one another.<sup>34</sup> However, a number of words in the family of hospitality and hospitable, all to do with the relationship implied in it, fell out of use in the twentieth century. *Hospitage* – the position of guest, guestship, *to hospitate* – to take up one's position as guest, and *to hospitise* – to lodge and entertain with hospitality. These terms are a reminder of what Levinas has spoken of as a referential or deferential bearing<sup>35</sup> which is implicit in the fact that hospitality arises from a radical separation between self and Other. It is this that makes it a useful framework of thinking for those who in contemporary idiom, 'are coming from very different places', since 'welcome ... as hospitality – remains inseparable from separation itself.'<sup>36</sup>

Of course the Mermaid and Flow Engineer keep being pretty strong on 'your water' and 'my water'. The waves will spill over and over, outside these containers.

### **Resisting smooth reproduction**

The insights and experiences of the Mermaid and the Flow Engineer, and the context of the Flow Organisation inform the writing in this thesis. 'Isn't storytelling always a way of searching for one's origin, speaking one's conflicts with the Law, entering into the dialectic of tenderness and hatred?' Roland Barthes proposes.<sup>37</sup> The stories and reflections represented in the following chapters are an attempt to extend the reality of this deeply social sense of story into a process, not only individual, but collective, not only local but global, that engages with storytelling as a way of finding a consciousness of relations in the places where we live. What I hope to bring to light is a sense of story as a semi-invisible thread that connects us into an ever-evolving, ecological world. In using the word ecological here, I am aware that it may lead the reader in the direction of science and an associated notion of technical competence. In this respect it is worth

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<sup>34</sup> Nikos Papastergiadis, 'The Act of Approaching, A Conversation with John Berger' in *Dialogues in the Diasporas, Essays and Conversations on Cultural Identity*, p20

<sup>35</sup> Derrida, op. cit. p46

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *The Pleasure of the Text*, p47

noting as George Seddon points out, that in Australia, the imported nature of our ecological view, and its very Eurocentric inappropriateness, has given our 'ecological' science a more confident base in information content than theory, and that this in turn has affected popular understandings of where and how we live.<sup>38</sup> The understanding of the ecological which I would like to draw out is ordinary and practical. It refers to the Mermaid's way of being and to a sense of integrity where human and environment are not seen as separate, but as inter-penetrating, inter-animating elements of each other, and yet does not exclude the Flow Engineer's understandings of technicalities that are vital to remediating the current state of water.

What enables me to use the word ecological as a basis for experience is the very thread of story, which weaves me in to Aboriginal relations with land and water, the fundamental social fabric. I also draw on the Buddhist oral tradition, in which water has been used as a metaphor to clarify the illusion of separateness surrounding the individualism of a 'sole self'. Imagined in these terms, an ecology, like water, is patient, undifferentiated, yet minutely particular, and moves powerfully along a course on which it is continually making its mark. It is a dynamic in which things arise in relation to each other, and equally move on into other becomings in an infinite constellation of inter-dependence.

'Can you name one thing that was once a nothing?' asks the contemporary Buddhist teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh, in the spirit of throwing light on this conditioned reality. 'A cloud?' 'Do you think a cloud can be born out of nothing?'<sup>39</sup> His challenge is to look deeply into an origin which extends beyond the seemingly determined meanings surrounding individual identity.

Like the cloud, the Flow Engineer and the Mermaid are appearances, made up of non-Flow Engineer and non-Mermaid elements, which may reconstitute in different forms in any moment. It may be a little difficult to bear this kinetic view in mind. Nonetheless I would like to suggest that in a time in which we are called on to look at water outside previously considered categories, we have to open new doors. On any threshold there is the risk of clinging to what we 'see.' 'By declaring our eyes blind and impotent we may

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<sup>38</sup> George Seddon, *Landprints*, p81

<sup>39</sup> *The Heart of Understanding, Commentaries on the Heart Sutra*, p21



be able to resist the smooth reproduction of the self same. We may begin to be able to inhabit the blank without forcing the other to fill it.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Peggy Phelan in *Unmarked, The Politics of Performance*, p33

## A DEEPLY WATERY SITUATION

The contemporary artist William Kentridge depicts two characters throughout his body of work, identical in build and feature. Soho Eckstein is a worldly success of a man. He always appears in a pin-striped suit, 'whether he's in a coma, or in bed.'<sup>41</sup> Felix, a sensitive fellow, is always naked.

There is a drawing of Soho, man of business and profit, standing alone in a bare room, in which water is rising.<sup>42</sup> The gathered volume of water is well above his knees, but still he stands in the middle of the scene in his business suit and tie. Although apparently unmoved, he does look downwards. Is it the stress of existence that has brought him to this?

At first sight it seems that he is a man in the centre of half a roomful of water over which he has no control, and that it is no coincidence that his rational schemes have met their hubris in the form of the mysterious forces which water represents. Water, voluptuous and powerful, has it all over a high achiever who has lived as if his existence depended on himself, his own efforts and his dollar value alone. Yet I am puzzled: why doesn't he step out of this place, call for his car and go home to his easy life, his luxury house, his properly contained swimming pool?

Looking more closely I notice something most unexpected. The water filling the room is pouring out of his suit pockets. This is why he is looking downwards. This is why someone who should be able to buy his way out of any discomfort, cannot fend off a deeply watery situation. Is it any wonder he is lost for response or reaction?

Still there are many questions: Is it simply that he has accumulated far too much and that there must now be a letting go? Or has the whole over-emphasis of his life been wrong? Is it that his pockets are actually crying, that what he **has** grieves for itself? Will this huge spilling reconnect him to the water 'from whence he came', or drown him? Is the water falling from his pockets the equivalent of real waterfalls, or of the overfall from major dams, 'white brilliant function of the land's disease'?<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Okwui Enwezor, *Truth and Responsibility, a Conversation with William Kentridge*, p168

<sup>42</sup> See *William Kentridge*, cover

<sup>43</sup> Muriel Rukeyser, 'The Dam,' in *A Muriel Rukeyser Reader*, ed. Jan Heller Levi, p43

Kentridge always says that he likes to represent intrigue and relationship, rather than to confront people over and over with disparate images.<sup>44</sup> He speaks of drawing as a model for knowledge, a sort of 'testing of ideas; a slow-motion version of thought.'<sup>45</sup> This is not to say that he rationalises as he works. 'First,' he says, 'the drawing doesn't begin as a moral project; it starts from the pleasure of putting charcoal marks on paper.'<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Kentridge, op. cit. p105

<sup>45</sup> *ibid.* p8

<sup>46</sup> *ibid.* p19

2.

## NEW DIMENSIONS IN WATER CONVERSATION

UTS Bon Marche Building, Seminar Room 4

29th November 00

The first time I tested out this research with an audience I had not yet explored the dimensions of my writing which would later give rise to a Mermaid and a Flow Engineer. Nonetheless I think it is possible to discern them well ensconced in this presentation. The occasion was an assessment seminar at the end of my first year at UTS. I made my way to Broadway through a heavy summer storm. I'd been looking at William Kentridge's exhibition at the Annandale Galleries. I reflected on how our antecedents as white South Africans had bred in us passion for representation. Neither of us became political activists. We did not become bureaucrats, lawyers or business people.

I got to the seminar room early to set up. I put clear plastic glasses on the table, with a bottle of Mt Franklin. I placed a few one-off handmade books made by Terania and Tuntable Creek<sup>1</sup> people on a little table by the door and stuck texts and images of Northern Rivers Water Writers on the wall. I set out to create a light water space along the lines of all the rooms I have prepared for participants in *new dimensions in WATER CONVERSATION*. I wanted not only to give people a flavour of the contexts in which I have worked, but in that moment to open up a space for a different way of thinking about and being with water.

The small audience reflected the interdisciplinary nature of my interests. Apart from my supervisors Stephen Muecke, an innovator in writing and cultural studies, and Stuart White, also an innovator, from the Institute for Sustainable Futures (ISF), there were people from History, Adult Education, Teaching and Learning, and someone doing a doctorate at ISF, who works at Sydney Water.

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<sup>1</sup> The waters closest to where I live.

This piece is an expanded record of what I said on the occasion of my first splash in academic waters.

**Prologue: the sound of water talk**

Welcome. I appreciate you giving the time to be my audience and I hope that as with other group activities and events I've held as part of *dwelling on water, new dimensions in WATER CONVERSATION*, something about it will be refreshing.

Would you like to be the host of water Stuart? (sounds of a gradual trickle of water as he begins pouring.)

I'd like to begin by showing a whole lot of fragments of the conversation, to give a sense of the flow and variety of sources which different participants in my project have drawn on. Fragments of text are an important aspect of my writing practice. (Begin projecting overheads.)

Those who offered these pieces did so 'in the name of water', in a context which was outside familiar procedures, either of a pedagogy of a genre-based writing practice, or of 'community consultation'. The process was one of 'enacting and defamiliarising the process of thinking and of genre- and meaning making'<sup>2</sup>, like throwing water in the air. Here, at the beginning, I have a dilemma which I would like to spell out. There is a risk, if the audience is not able to name and locate each element in the following sequence, of my not bringing out the makers and the framework of community and conversation that gave rise to them as strongly as I could. At the same time, these details stand to weigh down the pieces themselves and intrude on the flow, undermining a sense of the conversational environment in which they arose. At this stage, I'd just like to say that the conversational elements that follow begin with a piece from Phil Littlewood, a technical operator at Nightcap Water Treatment plant. This is followed by an anonymous piece from a member of a group that spoke and wrote with me about water, the North Coast Superannuants. Phil takes up after that and various voices follow, including Catherine Whiteman, Jay Schell and Liz Chandler who joined the

project specifically to write, John Thomas from Rous Water, Barbara Worthington, a contributor, and Roe Ritchie and Jan Oliver who were part of the project's reference group.

*Water's a renewable resource so we have to take care of it  
The rain comes down and comes back over the land  
It's protecting that water cycle  
Because we only borrow it don't we?*

*As a child when we used to cross the river and look down  
The water was like lemonade – that was the Hawkesbury.  
But they're all the same today.*

*When we talk flow we talk millilitres a second  
litres a second  
kilolitres a second  
megalitres a second.  
The raw water flow from the dam runs at 600 per second at the moment –  
About 52 megalitres for 24 hours  
That's 52 million litres*

*I remember in my youth living in the western suburbs of Sydney there was a creek  
at the bottom of the hill. It was clean. That was in the 50s.*

*Do we take care of water? Or does it take care of us?*

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<sup>2</sup> Anne Brewster, 'Fictocriticism: Undisciplined Writing', in *Writing-Teaching, Teaching-Writing*, eds. Jan Hutchinson and Graham Williams, p31

*In the old days – from 53 to 84 – water went straight into the outlet tower in Rocky Creek Dam, into the pipes and into town*

*A kalahari bushwoman spilt an ostrich egg full of water, and she cried. It just so hit me. I can't remember if it was in a film or on TV. She cried.*

*Lagoon Grass is on the road out to Boatharbour – that's where the water gets to Wollongbar and Alstonville – via that pump station – that valve is open and it's feeding to Wollongbar at the moment at 122 litres per second.*

*As a child picnicking by a creek, I threw a handful of water in the air  
and all these sparkling droplets came down  
And I said 'I wish they could be diamonds, so I could be rich'  
And my mum said, 'This is something more precious,  
This is water.'*

*From the big reservoir behind St Helena, it feeds up to Brunswick and Ocean Shores and into the Bay itself, over to Wategoes and down to Cooper's Shoot.*

*We all know that with water as children  
Puddles are lakes, creeks are oceans  
A fountain emerges from the water sprinkler when it's super hot. That inspires me!  
There are the water nymphs and fairies that we grew up with  
And we need them too.*

*They can go down to micro-filtrations now. In France and England they draw out of the Seine and the Thames and they bring it up to really high standards, but it's expensive to do – the technology's expensive and it's expensive to run, but they can do it.*

*While in Sydney this week – having a wonderful spree in Bronte – I noticed an ad on the main roads at Rozelle and Enmore Rd saying RAINWATER TANKS (SMALL) \$425. FREE INSTALLATION AND DELIVERY. TEL (02) 97385446 That's a sign of the times eh?*

*Britain's taken over many water supplies world-wide. Anglican Water is really big ... you see they privatised a while back over there. The French have Adelaide – but Anglican Water is in there as well. Thames Water is huge, and they're in Australia – well they're all over the world. They're turning into monopolies just like all the other things are – they'll just gobble us up.*

*If there was more of us, if we didn't have washing machines and systems to take waste water away, we would be exactly the same as the hundreds of people doing their laundry in major third world rivers ... except for being much whiter! We're the same – it's just that it's invisible. We don't see it because everybody's doing it on their own.*

*Part of my upbringing was learning about the waterways of the earth  
And the people along them.*

*For the first week after their water supply came back to normal, people in Sydney probably felt grateful and appreciated it. But after that it wasn't anything they*



*took any notice of again. It's the wrong way to be, but it's the lazy way we are.  
There's room to maintain that appreciation level.*

*My girlfriend went to this five star hotel  
The shower rose was almost a foot wide  
It was like a waterfall  
I mean ...  
How much can you consume?*

*Has anybody told you any stories of the crocodile that was in the Richmond  
River? – Hector  
The story went that it escaped from a circus  
But there were sightings  
Lots of people would go down to the river at the weekends looking for this  
crocodile.*

The final piece takes us into a deeper and different water:

*To create a map of ourselves is to swim the rivers, oceans and streams. Travel  
the unequal, contoured damp existence of rain. Of changing raindrops. Of force  
of winds and tornadoes. Of new visions of the past, present and future that float  
into our memories every waking moment. To feel the natural flow that is the glue  
of our pictures, that enables us to swim the channel of time and space that is  
water.<sup>3</sup>*

***Pause: there is a stillness in the room, as the sounds of water talk settles in the minds  
of the listeners.***

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<sup>3</sup> Belinda Gibson, *Water Conversation Records 1999/2000*

These pieces emerged from a project set in the Northern Rivers, which water-wise, a hundred years ago identified itself as a vital channel of the imperial stream of commerce – with cedar and butter going out on rivers which were still navigable at that time.<sup>4</sup> More recently I'd say John Howard's got it right.<sup>5</sup> We identify with the state of the roads – potholes, puddles and patched potholes are what make us who we are. Apart, of course, from the fringe of Byron and the beach. In this sense water has been forgotten, eclipsed by oil, though contemporary developments suggest that claims for water allocations within communities, and between regions and states, may in future have a political influence equal to, or greater than oil.<sup>6</sup>

The shift away from rivers being part of the way people knew themselves and were taught to know themselves is a part of my study, though it is not part of this presentation:

*It was almost like when you recited your Latin verbs or your tables –  
Murwillumbah's on the Tweed!  
Lismore's on the Richmond!  
Grafton's on the Clarence!*<sup>7</sup>

## **Dwelling on water**

When I chose this title I took it from Ivan Illich's *H<sub>2</sub>O and the Waters of Forgetfulness*.<sup>8</sup> It was only later that I learned that 'dwelling' is an important construct of Heidegger's, and that dwelling could be seen in terms of being and thinking, of where we live, and of the process of constructing this place. I wanted this community project to have a 'dwelling' aspect, in the sense of people being in one place long enough to reflect on water, to realise a sense of being. Yet at the same time I hoped that a community

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<sup>4</sup> Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, p5

<sup>5</sup> Howard had recently a \$4 billion commitment to rural roads in the lead up to the 2001 election. See editorial, 'On the Roads Again,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 Nov. 2000

<sup>6</sup> This was reflected in the March 2000 World Water Forum's closing statement, that water security for all in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is a goal not a right. Coverage of the NSW Water Reform Agenda in the regional press also reflects these tensions within various NSW communities, for example 'Compensation for water cuts not an option', *Namoi Valley Independent*, 24 Feb. 2000

<sup>7</sup> Barbara Worthington, *Water Conversation Records*, op. cit.

<sup>8</sup> Illich, p8. Illich refers to the spatial associations of 'dwelling', particularly in relation to making a mark on an environment, in this instance a controversial proposal for an artificial lake in Dallas, Texas.

building process, an agency in relation to water, could arise from dwelling. Perhaps some of these ideas are ones which I will be able to represent more fully later in my writing.<sup>9</sup>

I would like to give a sense of the range of people who came to 'dwell on water' in this project. Community-based writing projects bring together a combination of practices – reading, writing, story-telling, oral history, performance and publishing – and are far more inclusive and accessible than the term 'writing' might initially suggest. Their focus is on bringing stories and life experience to audiences – to start with, within and between the individuals and groups that take part in a project – but ultimately creating more public exchanges and connections through displays, performances and publication. When I began the creative component of my research, I knew people who had enjoyed being part of past projects would come to participate. I could also expect people who I'd taught at TAFE and Uni, and people who live in my valley. I knew that I'd develop relationships with men and women who worked for the regional bulk water supplier, Rous Water, with whom I was setting up arrangements, that would probably bear some similarity to relationships I'd had in other workplace-based projects. I was confident they would come to see me in a largely positive light, on terms such as '(she's) the funny artist, from the funny project.'<sup>10</sup> The elders and I would try and work out what kind of exchange might be entailed in what I was doing. Given the fairly limited circulation of my book with Mary Hutchison, *Out of the Ordinary*<sup>11</sup>, I was surprised when one person answered the question 'What brought you to *Water! An everyday subject?* (a course that I advertised under Literature and Creative Writing through Adult Community Education [ACE] in Lismore and Mullumbimby):

*I accidentally found your book 'Out of the Ordinary' in Mullumbimby Library whilst doing a project for ACE, working with older people. My brief work of collecting photos and stories, displaying them and seeing the results excited me about this form of community conversation.*<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> In fact I chose to drop the term 'dwelling' once I came to have an insight into the complex philosophical dimensions of spelling it out.

<sup>10</sup> My collaborators and I realised we were warmly regarded when we heard ourselves referred to this way in a stressful working environment – see *The Heart of the Hospital*, p2

<sup>11</sup> Bolitho and Hutchison, *Out of the Ordinary, Bringing Communities, Their Stories and Audiences to Light*

<sup>12</sup> Gurunaam Saraswati, *Water Conversation Records*, op. cit.

Others came for different reasons:

*The title, 'Water' brings me. If I had to categorise my interests in order, let's say to a casual acquaintance in the street, I would say, first water (fresh water) and writing. This is why I am here.<sup>1314</sup>*

*A love of words and word craft. As an expatriate South Australian, I spent my childhood in 'the driest state in the driest continent' so have long-standing ideas and feelings on both the good and the bad sides of water. Some of my best memories involve water as well as some of the worst. North of Goyder's line! South you lived - north you died!*

*I seem to be held spellbound by water. About three and a half years ago I was working as a water survey worker for Dr Stuart White and Rous Water. I grew to appreciate how easily we as residents take it for granted. I found it a simple everyday subject which everyone I interviewed had plenty to share on. Curiosity about the course with its alluring subject 'Water', and about myself, and my ability to write.<sup>15</sup>*

*Intriguing lateral name for a course, not highlighting writing. The price was right.<sup>16</sup>*

A broad range of interests and capacity to 'let go with the flow' of writing and imaginative life characterises people who engage in my writing projects. My work originates in the radical cultural practices of the 70s in Britain, which gave rise to the unorthodox Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers, a lively organisation which nurtures and provides a distribution network for the publications of an eclectic range of non-mainstream, collectively-based writers. The original intentions

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<sup>13</sup> J.J. *ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Barbara Miller, *ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Kia Trainer, *ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Kath McMillan, *ibid.* Thanks to my Australia Council fellowship, I was able to offer the workshops for a nominal fee.

of this genre of writing are collaborative, reflecting an early statement of Ken Worpole's, that 'the origins of possibly all cultural forms are collective and shared, though individualised cultural production and its forms are assumed to have superseded or transcended all other kinds of cultural practice.'<sup>17</sup> Mary Hutchison gives a sense of the extraordinary variety of settings in which a writer-in-community operating 'in the borderlands' may work.<sup>18</sup> These include workplaces and community facilities as distinctive as a hospital, a union office and a tip-face recycling centre. In each context the priority is to evoke for others the possibility of understanding the democratising of imaginative writing, that is, the idea of 'a radical and inclusive, rather than conservative and exclusive, writing practice.'<sup>19</sup>

One of the paradoxes of working with this form of writing is that whilst I am working towards an aesthetic outcome, I am not particularly concerned with what might be considered in a mainstream sense 'good writing'. Rather I am concerned with creating the conditions in which people can connect as strongly as possible with their own voices and writing, and develop a sense of conviction about the value of presenting it alongside the voices and writings of others. Hutchison and I have discussed the implications of this in relation to identity in *Out of the Ordinary*, where members of a particular group describe the process as they experienced it in terms of 'unfolding' – to themselves, to each other and in turn to a public they had not previously considered speaking to.<sup>20</sup> Other groups have described 'gliding', where a collective energy and interest empowers imaginative flight, large and surprising perspectives and views come to be seen, and touch-down occurs in unpredictable places.<sup>21</sup> Some water writers described the pleasure of feeling like children again, particularly in relation to being read to by other writers. All these descriptions share qualities of what Ricoeur refers to as 'world-disclosure',<sup>22</sup> by which he means the use of language to disclose possibility. Here language is directed neither towards scientific verification nor ordinary communication, but towards a third dimension, the worlds which authors and texts open up.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ken Worpole, *Reading by Numbers*, p94

<sup>18</sup> Mary Hutchison, *I am the Amazon who Dances on the Backs of Turtles*, pp7-22

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.* p134

<sup>20</sup> Bolitho and Hutchison, *op. cit.* p118

<sup>21</sup> Annie Bolitho (ed.), *Elements of Life, Memories From the Real Back Days*, p4

<sup>22</sup> Paul Ricoeur in Mario J. Valdes, *A Ricoeur Reader*, p490

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*

At this stage I'd like to say a little about the location of what I do in the context of the funding body, The Community Cultural Development Fund (CCDF) of the Australia Council for the Arts, which gave me the opportunity to unfold into this exploration of water in the Northern Rivers through a two year fellowship. Gay Hawkins notes that community arts in Australia is most accurately described, not as a movement, but as a funding policy which has gathered a constellation of diverse practices around it.<sup>24</sup> It is clear from an undated occasional paper written c. mid-80s by Peter Hicks and Rick Martin about the Footscray Community Arts Centre, that at that time community arts went hand in hand with explicit political agendas.<sup>25</sup> By the early 90s in video documentation by Mary Laine and Daphne Cazalet of a project in Western Sydney, community arts is on the cusp between being a process unto itself and being a tool in a partnership package with local government, in this instance, Fairfield City Council.<sup>26</sup> In the mid-90s in *Restoring the Waters*, also with Fairfield City Council, an image of a 'memory line' – of rye grass planted in the original course of Clear Paddock Creek – becomes the salient feature of a project which aims to re-configure stormwater channels, and strongly colours the way the project is construed by participants and a broader public.<sup>27</sup> In 1998, Deborah Mills, troubled by what she sees as a loss of integrity, offers this perspective at a Regional Arts Australia Conference:

... in assuming the camouflage necessary to work within the institutions we have chosen .. have we allowed the value of those institutions to influence our own and not noticed how our own colouring has changed over time ... What are the official stories being told about community cultural development? Are they about political processes of empowerment or are they about activity and civic enhancement.<sup>28</sup>

Nonetheless, despite, or perhaps because of CCD's difficulty finding a language for all those with a stake in it, its practitioners enter into it with an optimistic outlook. This, I consider as I fly out over the intricate pattern of millions of Sydney roofs and streets,

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<sup>24</sup> Hawkins, quoted in Hutchison, op. cit. p58

<sup>25</sup> Peter Hicks and Rick Martin, *A Process of Organisation*

<sup>26</sup> Daphne Cazalet and Mary Laine, *Memory and Imagination, Community Arts: Community Development Study Guide*

<sup>27</sup> Barbara Schaffer, 'River Rituals, Water Stories', in *Habitat*, vol. 24, no. 5, p30

<sup>28</sup> Deborah Mills, '... A Fracturing From Our Past ... Notes on the Real Communities Conference' in *Artwork* issue 42, p5

and imagine people doing the ordinary thing of turning on taps, is reason to have confidence that I have something in common with those who provide a public water supply.

### **Relating to Water**

After the Sydney Water crisis, which rippled throughout the community-in-anonymity<sup>29</sup> of readership of the national newspapers, I wanted to try to hone in on people's immediate relationship with water and to develop their interest in looking more closely at what Illich calls the 'stuff of water'<sup>30</sup> and various Buddhist writers term 'the suchness of water.' I also wanted to try and bridge a gap between a specialist and non-specialist point of view on water and develop interest in dialogue across various positions, particularly where such dialogue would not usually be anticipated.

I was interested in investigating the application of collaborative and imaginative approaches, focusing on writing, to opening up discussion on water issues. I found Hutchison's use of Stuart Hall's work pertinent to my conception of the project. Hutchison takes up Hall's framing of representation in terms of 'politics' and 'poetics', to situate her body of work in the world of reflective cultural activism.<sup>31</sup> In this way she addresses a central issue for a writer working in the area of community. It would be simplistic to see oneself walking a fine line between taking up an activist position, whilst keeping in view questions involved in forms of cultural representation. This work demands that one emphasise that 'the modes and styles of representational practices are themselves political.'<sup>32</sup> It is the dynamic interweaving of the 'politics' and the 'poetics' of representation that makes for a satisfying practice in this field.<sup>33</sup>

Hutchison also coins a useful term to describe a writing practice situated within, and inscribed with a world of broader social relations, calling it 'writing self and

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<sup>29</sup> Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities*, speaks of the daily ceremony associated with newspaper reading, and the fiction that 'seeps quietly and continuously into reality, creating that remarkable confidence of community in anonymity which is the hallmark of modern nations.' p36

<sup>30</sup> Illich, op. cit. p5

<sup>31</sup> Hutchison, op. cit. p113

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.* p49

<sup>33</sup> *id.* p113

community'.<sup>34</sup> In developing a project which would represent water and community, and my own and others' multifarious connections with it, this term speaks for the multiple dimensions in which I intended to work. Here I would also like to bring in ideas Stephen Muecke raises when he suggests that Aboriginal models concerning cultural production and ownership are 'good to think with'<sup>35</sup>, in relating to the significant tensions that exist between respect for singular claims to authorship and the desire to celebrate collectivity in the public domain.<sup>36</sup> He speaks of traditional protocols involving distribution of roles, in which different people may 'own' and 'manage' particular stories.<sup>37</sup> An element of 'moving around' questions of 'ownership, originality, creativity and singularity' and the way it confounds a familiar 'primacy of origin in Western conceptions of authorship'<sup>38</sup> is also central to community writing, and is what makes it so interesting. In *new dimensions in WATER CONVERSATION*, I would 'conduct' and 'manage' the writings of a community, as much by having an overall sense of the possibilities of a community story, as through putting on writing workshops and acting as a scribe to those people with stories to tell whose attitude to writing was 'No way!'

The material which emerged would bring to light other people's experience, perceptions, memories and interests – and I would not 'own' it. Yet within the same context of relationship, I would be 'writing self'. The paradox of this is that, as much as I might say 'I own this particular piece of writing', it would also reveal a pattern of my own 'belongings'<sup>39</sup>, influenced by the impressions that other water writers and water worlds had made on me.

Thus the process of interweaving of voices is one in which relationship is both implicit and explicit. I want to speak for my 'I' voice and other people's 'I' voices and our 'we' voice, in the interests of opening up the water subject, more generally concerned with the voice of informing and information. The work of Bakhtin and those subsequently influenced by him, colours the way I see this. Bakhtin's thinking is ontologically concerned with matters of variety, paradox, mutual influence and contradiction, and his

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<sup>34</sup> id. p23

<sup>35</sup> Stephen Muecke in an interview with Chris Healy, 'Moving Around', *Meanjin*, vol. 3, p177

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.* p176

<sup>37</sup> id.

<sup>38</sup> id.



ideas underlie many writings looking critically at monologic and dialogic approaches to representation.<sup>40</sup> The phrase *Dialogic Imagination*<sup>41</sup> in itself speaks strongly to my intentions, even though the novel, the genre which provides the locus of Bakhtin's complex work, represents a very different dimension of social world than the one I wish to investigate.

I am aware that the majority of people find the idea of working with a range of writing and text forms, outside a classroom or relatively exclusive writing workshop framework, rather puzzling. In developing *new dimensions in WATER CONVERSATION* I came to see that the idea of taking up a cultural orientation to consulting a community on water is likely to be viewed by the majority of specialists/bureaucrats/technocrats as outlandish, unrealistic and nebulous. This is not only to do with transgressing inappropriately on specialist territory. It is probably just as much about different understandings of the basis of cultural production. Muecke makes the proposition that Aboriginal culture inscribes knowledge in relationships,<sup>42</sup> and I would like to make a parallel with what I was tentatively trying to do, in creating contexts in which people could learn about the operation of a water supply, and by bringing the voices of technical operators and writers together. In Muecke's terms, the ideas I was suggesting were about 'producing a cultural thing *in order to let it go by way of exchange* ...'<sup>43</sup>. His analysis points to the way in which Western conditioning would frame this in terms of loss, rather than in terms of the cultural continuity of what Derrida would term 'the gift'. Organisations seeking their secure corporate identity might not factor in the economy of the gift, which is essentially their relationship to the community, if they are too much concerned with loss.

Could my unsettling ideas be put into practice in a regional centre at a time when there is both a strong argument for increasing people's stake in the debate on water management,<sup>44</sup> and at a time when conditions for practising a culture of community are

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<sup>39</sup> Elspeth Probyn, quoted in Hutchison, op. cit. p23

<sup>40</sup> See for example, Karen Hohne and Helen Wussow's *A Dialogue of Voices, Feminist Theory and Bakhtin*, and Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford's *Singular Texts, Plural Authors, Perspectives on Collaborative Writing*, pp91-92

<sup>41</sup> Michael Holquist, *The Dialogic Imagination, Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*

<sup>42</sup> Muecke, op. cit. p177

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Lyn Carson and Stuart White, 'Sydney Water contamination Crisis, Manufacturing Dissent' in *Science and Public Policy*, vol. 25, no. 4 pp265-271

unfavourable? A neo-liberal discourse emphasising market values and an accompanying individualism now has exceptional weight in public policy, in the media and in personal lives. This trend involves changes in definition, for example, services and practices previously defined as elements of a 'welfare state' become 'products' delivered as efficiently as possible to 'customers'. This is nowhere more prevalent than in local government managerialist ideology. An outlook which sees people as an atomised collection of individuals rather than in terms of relationship makes it less likely that contexts will be developed in which we may 'stretch outside ourselves' into the wider web of community relationships.<sup>45</sup>

### **Performing water**

In reflecting on my difficulties in explaining and locating what I set out to do, I have been drawn to identifying it, broadly speaking, in performative terms. In this groping towards a new way of defining my work, I make myself part of moves around the world to claim a role for poets, artists and the broader community in enlivening water and rivers. Lewis MacAdams describes the Friends of the Los Angeles River's original 'performances' where a small group took wirecutters to the L.A. County Department of Public Works' fence. 'We clambered down the concrete walls into the concrete channel of the Los Angeles River. We felt like we were exploring the moon.'<sup>46</sup> In the U.K., the arts/environment organisation Commonground's *Confluence* is a project which is taking to the water with live performances on barges. In Asia, Tana Lauhakaikul and Kamol Phaosavasdi's performance pieces *Mud Crab* and *Give Me a Glass of Water* and Ichi Ikeda's water projects ritualise human and other beings' interaction with water<sup>47</sup> (for a fuller elaboration of projects involving water, arts and community, see Appendix 1).

In my case, the idea emerged out of taking writing groups to the Nightcap Water Treatment Plant. I note in my documentation after a visit with one of the writing groups:

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<sup>45</sup> Bolitho and Hutchison, op. cit. p125

<sup>46</sup> Lewis MacAdams, 'Restoring the Los Angeles River: A Forty-Year Art Project', in *Whole Earth Review*, Spring 1995, p63

<sup>47</sup> Christian Chambert (ed.) *Strategies for Survival, A Global Perspective on Ethnicity, Body and Breakdown of Artistic Systems*, pp268-270

*There's the 'What-will-we-need here?' uncertainty. Someone's brought their runners. No, I don't think you'll need those. There's the looking in the back seat. Looking in the boot of the car. Notebooks? It's up to you. Linda, pale, hands behind her back examining the commemorative plaque. Elena set up with her little backpack, eager. Kia gingerly stepping forth with her back injury. The moment of getting it all together and looking around. What a beautiful place!*<sup>48</sup>

In the most literal terms, the powerful and loud water backdrop, the contrasts, sequences and taking up of roles involved in the excursion, strongly suggested performance. Greg Dening notes that 'the exhilaration of seeing the world from a new perspective', in an ethnographic sense, has a reflective character,<sup>49</sup> and this was certainly the case at the Nightcap Water Treatment plant. I'd also like to bring in a remark of his to the effect that theatre challenges 'fundamentalists of every sort.'<sup>50</sup> I don't think it would be going too far to suggest that there is a new 'drinking water fundamentalism' abroad, with drinkers putting considerable faith in what are considered original sources. Here, in conjunction with five weeks of 'writing water', a range of people inhabited a space where they came into full sense contact with the treatment process on bulk water at the beginnings of its journey to the tap, and formed various interpretations as a result of the experience.

In broader terms, as the key figure bringing people together around water, I had to consider what exactly it was I was making. In the CCD field, there have been various high profile water projects undertaken in recent years. *Waterworks*<sup>51</sup> in country South Australia and *sunRISE21*<sup>52</sup> in the Mildura irrigation area both made public art a significant emphasis, aiming to leave a lasting impression of 'local distinctiveness'. However my interests were more to do with the less tangible questions of subjectivity and identity. The process I created directly or indirectly brought together more than 70 people to write and tell stories in groups, or to discuss water and negotiate the creation of texts in workplace settings. It created unlikely links in my regional community by initiating contacts between adult education providers, Rous Water, an old people's

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<sup>48</sup> Annie Bolitho, *Water Conversation Records*

<sup>49</sup> Greg Dening, *Performances*, p108

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.* p101

<sup>51</sup> *Waterworks* was instigated by the South Australian Country Arts Trust (now Country Arts South Australia) in the mid-90s. See documentation by the same title.

residential hostel, the regional art gallery and a high school dance program. Yet how do I locate, represent and name this cultural experience?

Jane Blocker's *Where is Ana Mendieta?* makes the location of the performance artist Mendieta's work the central matter of her investigation. She claims that the Cuban American's works are most fruitfully considered, 'not in terms of description or mimesis, but in terms of their ability to produce new homes for identity, new conditions of being and identity.'<sup>53</sup> Translating this claim to my experience with *new dimensions in Water Conversation*, a project where understandings between myself and a water utility were developed slowly and were not straightforward, there were quite a few opportunities to observe shifts in my own identity, some of which I became more at home with than others: I went from writer to woman, research student, nuisance, learner, community worker, teacher, mate, listener, stirrer, artist, investigator, visionary and victim. The conditions of my engagement with the project introduced me to expert language and positions in relation to water, and I came to be something of an expert myself. In order to develop and carry out the project, I brought into being interactions with Rous Water's board, executive and blue collar workers, and a relationship with The Rous Centre, the Kyogle Street Depot and the Nightcap Intake Waterworks, a range of people and environments which adds up to Water Business. Together with the writers I worked with, through conversations with specialists and circulation of texts about the infrastructure they were part of, I developed an imaginative sense of water gravity-feeding and being pumped to reservoirs, of water on a journey to Lismore and the coast, and of the work of personnel in white Toyota trucks with blue Rous Water logos travelling North Coast roads and backroads. This made for a different perspective than that which would be expected between 'consumers' and provider, within a discourse of customer service.

I am intrigued by the way *Where is Ana Mendieta?* argues for the paradoxical value of Mendieta and others' exclusion from the places and texts where, as artists you would expect to find them. Blocker identifies the way in which lack – 'lack of authorial privilege, lack of commodity, lack of objecthood, lack of permanence and lack of celebrity' – defined their work, and how this 'troubled the critical and aesthetic

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<sup>52</sup> The project is documented in *Interceptions, Art, Science and Land in Sunraysia*.

conventions of modernism.<sup>54</sup> I would argue that modernist values still hang around conventional understandings of what writing is, what it can do, and where it is to be found. By asking where? and being unable to definitively provide an answer, Blocker contends that Mendieta is placed in motion, 'thwarting the logic of fixed categories yet making space for alternative identifications.'<sup>55</sup> This affirms my particular aesthetic choices. This is why I do this ephemeral thing at Nightcap treatment plant, give non-specialists the chance to play around with words like *turbidity*, *polyelectrolyte* and *flocculation*, and to take water terminology out of context, rather than what other people do.

*Kia: I'm going to try that on my teenage son: 'You won't get away with that turbidity.'*<sup>56</sup>

I also make political choices. Today water is identified by lack: lack of purity, lack of safety, lack of clarity, lack of sufficiency, lack of flow, and generally by a lack of solutions to pressing problems associated with our assumption that it will always be there. Some of these 'lacks' are very real ones, as with flow in the majority of Australian rivers. Others like clarity are merely ideals, since turbidity is a frequent condition in natural waters. Where purity, safety and sufficiency are concerned, outside specific contexts they easily become abstractions, which can be used for political point scoring. They gradually become the medium by which we lose touch with 'the stuff' of water.

My work with the 'politics and poetics' of water yields the following responses to the question 'What did you sense?' from a range of people who came to the final event of the project:

*I sensed the Rous Chair wasn't quite sure what he had on his hands there. I sensed him seeing possibilities ... 'There's actually a community out there, that's actually interested.' I sensed an opening of possibilities - the operator, the Chair, the school kids all doing their thing together ...*<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Jane Blocker, *Where is Ana Mendieta?*, p27

<sup>54</sup> *ibid.* p6

<sup>55</sup> *ibid.* p3

<sup>56</sup> Kia Trainer, *Water Conversation Records*, op. cit.

<sup>57</sup> Jim Nicholls, Manager, ACE North Coast, *ibid.*

*A strong compassion for water. It sparked a thought in people's minds about thinking about their water.<sup>58</sup>*

*Pleasure and pride, a sense of coolness, anticipation, a sense of hope – that sort of sense of hope when you're a child when you know your birthday's coming and it'll be done well because there's enough people caring about it.<sup>59</sup>*

*I sensed the different mixes of minds - the political mind, the councillors, I sensed them, the more environmentalist people, knowing I was totally different from all of them.<sup>60</sup>*

### **Outlandish tastes**

To become more familiar with an instrumentalist outlook on water, I have done a fair bit of what Italo Calvino refers to as 'poking one's nose into scientific books.'<sup>61</sup> To contextualise the following reading for those non-specialists in the audience, some water authorities train people to be able to pick up smells and tastes in problem water – the approach is called Flavor Profile Analysis (FPA). The training handbook's earnest flavour gives me renewed delight in encouraging a fully subjective response to water. In FPA:

... humans are the instruments, making this mode of testing unlike any other. In order for the 'instruments' to work well, management must provide a pleasant testing environment and motivation. The panel leader must be able to communicate and work with people under a variety of conditions.

#### Humans as instruments

Following is a list of factors that make using humans as instruments a very complicated matter. In general, signals from the sensory detectors to the brain for expression are confused with outside factors such as expectations, past experiences,

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<sup>58</sup> Elisabeth Brown, business and Corporate Services Manager, Rous Water, *ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Michelle Wainwright, audience member, *ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> Phil Littlewood, Nightcap Treatment Works, Technical Operator, *ibid.*

and the like. A sensory response involves perception, awareness, classification, remembrance, description, and judgment, all of which are influenced by outside factors.<sup>62</sup>

So what do the participants in the writing group make of this?

*Water tasting. But a few of us have to go and have a pee first. As Kia and I come out I say how much I enjoyed that she included the sign saying COLD WATER TAP OUT OF ORDER in one of her first pieces of writing. We come back into the room and there has been discussion about treated water. Barbara's saying 'Water's just water to me.' Linda and Elena, who both carry water bottles aren't from that school. 'We're on tank water at the Channon and I avoid Lismore water because it's treated,' Linda says. She's really nervous of taking water for the water tasting from my bottles in case it's treated water. So's Elena who pours her own water into her glass. Linda sort of shudders as she decides to accept my water. Kath isn't part of this discussion.*

*I introduce the exercise via the 'Flavor Odor Profile' piece from the Sydney Water library. At first people take very seriously the idea of humans as instruments. Then laugh. There's always a degree of uncertainty about what we're doing together here. I love the silence and stillness and concentration as people follow my instructions. Each person has their glass in their left hand and their notetaking pen in their right, and they're all tuned in to the same thing, the living qualities of this little glass of water.*

*The readings are beautiful. Kia reads the words 'cold stone marble' and someone says to Kath 'that reminds me of what you wrote.'<sup>6364</sup>*

## **Water conversation/conservation**

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<sup>61</sup> *Six Memos for the New Millenium*, p69

<sup>62</sup> American Water Works Association, *Water Quality Division, Taste and Odor Committee. Flavor Profile Analysis, Screening and Training of Panellists*, p9

<sup>63</sup> Annie Bolitho, *Water Conversation Records*, op. cit.

<sup>64</sup> In 2002, *The Age* reports: 'In an Australian first, South East Water – which supplies 1.3 million Melburnians with water – has established a Water Taste and Odour Panel ... The panel meets once a week, drawing on a rotational system of trained tasters ...' *Epicure*, 8 Oct. 2002, p7

As Hutchison argues, there are dynamic possibilities of 'changing the story lines'<sup>65</sup> through taking up a post-structuralist perspective in a community-based writing project, and approaching subjectivity in the light of a discursive process, where the subject is neither unified, fixed or necessarily consistent. She draws on Chris Weedon's discussions on identity:

From a poststructuralist perspective we are not so much "made" as always in the making and the vital ingredient of the making is language rather than experience because it is language that gives meaning to experience. Nor can we see the language we use to give meaning to our experience as unique. We do not invent the collections of words we use. They already exist, often in very powerful established arrangements, and it is they which often dominate our sense of self.<sup>66</sup>

Or of relationship to issues of the day – for example, water conservation makes us part of a national ethic and endeavour in which we are part of a generic, sensible and strong-minded public encouraged to believe it cares about water and has an effective way of doing this. Few people can read, let alone speak the words water conversation, without feeling they're getting it wrong. Yet it allows Elena to write the piece *Bathroom business*. The flatmate who invariably takes two-minute showers comes across as self-righteous. In fact she is blind to her own clothes washing practices which take more water than her showers. Elena is unashamed about her ten or fifteen minute showers. In fact she celebrates the way she is able to clarify her thoughts and solve problems in the shower. In response to her writing someone says: 'I enjoyed that step to a different way of seeing things. It was unexpected. You were being accused of wasting water – but you were saying let's look at the actual details.' The piece ends: 'We have such a big responsibility' and leads into a long group discussion about whether it is an individual or collective responsibility, and what that responsibility is seen by different people to be.

Paul Ricoeur, invited to speculate about what poetry and philosophy can do, 'to, with, for and against each other' in an investigation of poetry and possibility, speaks of the

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<sup>65</sup> Hutchison, op. cit. pp113-118



danger in contemporary culture of reductionism in language and communication to the point where it comes to be acceptable that it serves the purpose of manipulation. 'This instrumentalisation of language is the most dangerous trend of our culture,' he says. Whilst the manipulation of social consciousness in relation to water conservation can be seen as benign, and indeed vitally efficacious, at a time of tremendous stress on water resources in Australia, I am interested in the way in which this limits us to what Ricoeur terms 'one model of language'<sup>67</sup> and in so doing creates further limitations on what might emerge from a community in response to the water crises we are facing. As George Seddon suggests, 'intimacy, knowledge, love and the attributing of value' is at the foundation of all conservation.<sup>68</sup> The intimacy of talking about the length of showers, the choice of soap and the feel of water on the body in a classroom.

On countless occasions I saw the way dwelling on water allowed an intersection between the individual subjective and the public sphere to emerge. At the waterworks: *This reminds me of the Pilbara* as the woman concerned understood that it was iron that gave such redness to the froth on top of the floc tanks. At the depot, in reference to an earlier era in which acts of everyday heroism were performed to close off valves in tricky situations and preserve the water supply: *OH&S would fry you for it nowadays.*<sup>69</sup>

This was also demonstrated in the range of responses to my offering the starting point *What's behind the tap?* from:

*... telemetry commands going out to pumps/valves opening and closing on demand/electromagnetic flow meters/units capturing pulses/demand rising/demand slowing down/reservoirs feeding/watch it all from home on your laptop.*<sup>70</sup>

*Everything. Love. Lost love. Fear. Lots of fear. My life so far. What will be in the future./What am I? Why am I here?*<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> *ibid.* p117

<sup>67</sup> Ricoeur, *op. cit.* p448

<sup>68</sup> George Seddon, *Landprints*, p26

<sup>69</sup> Dave James, *Water Conversation Records*, *op. cit.*

<sup>70</sup> John Thomas, *ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> Elena Janavicius, *ibid.*

*... you can take a short cut/tap/tank/gutter/bird krap, leaves/which is good, but for a community you need a controlled water source ...*<sup>72</sup>

*... And I remember how frightened I was in Kosovo of water/knowing that NATO had used depleted uranium in the missiles/the tap seemed such a scary thing.*<sup>73</sup>

The final outcome of this project was a performance/installation at Rous Water's building in Lismore. Here a community was also installed,<sup>74</sup> enacting water, as we are here this evening – over a hundred people who had participated or were interested in the work. One of the things that most struck me was that so many people were reading in public. I think that people are wearied by reading at individual screens and that there is a freshness in seeing people looking at text together and discussing that they have read. Imagine an event at which there is no cheap champagne served, only water. At which some people sit reflectively writing their response to the event, or to water. An event at which the high school girls dance the piece written by the operator at the Treatment Works. The art gallery's works on loan are flanked by the stories of a group of proud older water-lovers. An event at which the atmosphere is all about water – like a clear pool.

I believe the event urged people who were there as newcomers to the conversation to question 'How will I take myself up?'<sup>75</sup> where water use and appreciation is concerned. In this inviting of 'me' and 'us'<sup>76</sup>, the event and the project as a whole fall outside the domain of community education focused on slogans, the hip pocket nerve and the presentation of data. On the community consultation spectrum, this approach is a movement away from INFORM, goes beyond the territory of LISTEN & ADVISE, beyond INTERACT to the somewhat unexplored COLLABORATE.<sup>77</sup> The mutuality of collaboration creates new identifications, and shifts old ones. 'I am a writer,' was the

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<sup>72</sup> Phil Littlewood, *ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> Carol Perry, *ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> Hutchison also speaks of this active, performative dimension of exhibitions of community writing work, *op. cit.* p185 and pp191,192

<sup>75</sup> Bronwyn Davies in Hutchison, *ibid.* p119

<sup>76</sup> This shorthand for the subjective and inter-subjective dimension of community writing is drawn from Hutchison's descriptions of radical adult education and 'writing community, writing the self.'

<sup>77</sup> This 'consultation continuum' is presented in diagrammatic form in *Community Communication Programs, a Seven Step Guide*, a program created by Melbourne Water on behalf of the major urban water authorities of Australia, p2

response of those with material on display. 'Thanks mate,' said Phil, after seeing his piece choreographed and appreciated by an audience, 'you made me into a poet and a playwright.'

Thank you too for being my audience. I'd like to invite you to have a look at the books and writing on display, and then I'll take any questions or comments on my presentation.

Stuart: It's funny, the Rous operators sound so poetic.

Annie: They are poetic.

Claire: Would you say more about what community consultation means to you in relation to your study?

Annie: Current trends in government process mean that consultation is a regular, if not always satisfactory, dimension of formal inquiries and planning processes – it comes into play in all aspects of water management. For example, *The Independent Inquiry into the Hawkesbury Nepean River System* speaks of having an intentional focus on 'The People and their River', but it adds a proviso to the effect that the available socio-economic data were not really adequate to allow the Commission to refine its recommendations so that they focused on specific community interests at specific locations.<sup>178</sup>

I see this as a practical reflection on the unfeasibility of conventional consultations dealing with specifics which arise from participation and this opens up the space in which I chose to work. I created a context for a varied public to discuss and write about their own specific relationship to water, so that they could 'read their own stories back, amongst others as stories of the world...'<sup>179</sup>. As such I also wanted to be able to represent the connections, existing and in the process of being made, by individuals with a shared public concern for water.

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<sup>178</sup> *Independent Inquiry into The Hawkesbury Nepean River, Final Report*, p11

Damian: What did the Bulk Supplier make of it all?

Annie: Over the time of our association it underwent a striking change in image. At the start it was a public works identified organisation with offices in a small public works style headquarters. The position of Business and Corporate Services Manager was filled soon afterwards and subsequently, the organisation moved into a large office block, painted it yellow ochre with turquoise stripes, and set its name in black letters on top of the building. At the beginning, although the project idea was strange, it was seen a modest opportunity for the organisation to raise awareness of its activities. As time went on it was apparent that it presented something of a risk to the coherence of its promotional image. I had seen it as a way of being attentive to the voice of the community, its attitudes and preferences, and an avenue through which participants might come to identify as potential members of a proposed Consumer Advisory Panel. It seemed a great way for employees to have a voice at a time of change. But overall, I think I'd have to say the organisation was uncertain and guarded in its support, and the possibilities which I saw for the project were only realised to a limited extent.

Stephen: I'd just like to make one comment, I think what you are doing goes beyond the dialogic as Bakhtin envisioned it – it's more of a multi-voice thing.

Annie: Thanks everyone for coming. That's it for water for today.

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But it isn't. Water is waiting at a benefit concert for Timor at Sydney Town Hall, with the Timor Choir 'Anin Murak'. Though young, they step on stage with all the precision and formality to be expected of a choir, young men in the back row and young girls in the front. Their best clothes aren't at all our style of best clothes. Their steadfastness and their smiles are recognizable, but unfamiliar also.

They sing in Tetum, *O Hele O– Small Streams*.

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<sup>79</sup> Bolitho and Hutchison, op. cit. p123

*Kandalak suli mutuk fila we inan*  
*We inan tan malu sa be tanan*

*Streams flowing together become rivers,*  
*When rivers unite, what can oppose them.*<sup>80</sup>

I can't imagine this choir not being. They make an incredibly sweet impression. In the program I've read of their relatives who were killed and of their own narrow escapes, running to the bush, leaving town, hiding. They are proud, and it is easy to see that they admire their conductor tremendously. What if the kids who hang on the streets of Lismore could be imagined standing together with this kind of confidence? What if the boys could be recognised by others as men? Fresh from talking with a responsive audience about water, I find myself crying. The phrase, 'sacrifice of tributaries'<sup>81</sup> settled like a stone in my mind when I read it in a report ages ago, and now Anin Murak sings it up and dislodges it. Tears drop on to my *Fish* tee-shirt.

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<sup>80</sup> *Timor Hananu, Timor Sings!, NSW Tour 2000, song program*

<sup>81</sup> *Independent Inquiry, op.cit., p99*

## **A PRE-SCHOOL SONG**

The life of a raindrop

never

never

stops

It flows

and flows

around the earth

**To be sung with accompanying body actions**

3.

## GANGA, OR PROBLEMS OF TRANSLATION

### **Paying Respect to Opposition**

In India, however crowded a room, a boat or a railway carriage, there is always room for one more. The national president of the Indian Baseball Association, who squashed into our bogie on the Ganga-Kaveri Express, pointed out to me that this is equally true for the pantheon of gods. We were talking about the manageable nature of a society accustomed to monotheism, compared with one which pays respects to four hundred million gods. Only five minutes before, he had finished his pujas to the Goddess Durga. Now he was more than available for extensive cultural interpretation. 'So many Gods have taken birth in India, and there are so many purposes for which they have taken birth,' he said proudly, almost gloating in fact. 'You see why the Gods take birth?' he challenged me. 'Why?'

I had no answer and he knew it. It was why we'd begun the conversation in the first place.

'Because there is always opposition,' he pounced. 'If a God takes birth, then, on the other side there is the potential for evil. So a God takes birth to fill that place, to prevent misery.' Everything about him said, 'See, it's perfectly simple, it's as logical as the rules of baseball,' I'd been in India a few months. Having familiar unitary cultural conceptions rubbished was no longer an assault. I was beginning to understand. There are no vacuums in India. It tends to involve. There is no thinking one's own thoughts about anything for too long – someone is bound to come and disturb them with suggestions of another reality. In my case, it was often one which demanded to know why any westerner would think themselves worthwhile, indeed privileged, because of needing so much in the way of material comfort.

I set off from Australia to see the Ganges, a river as laden with strange imagery as the *great, grey, green, greasy Limpopo* of childhood readings of Rudyard Kipling. What I could never be

prepared for is the scale of the moving body of water. I have never seen a Great River before, so when I catch a first sight of the Ganges the French *la mer* comes swiftly to mind, because its vast. It's like a soft sea stretching out almost indefinitely, with little wavelets coming in to shore. I fall easily into being in awe of its changing face and of the unceasing ritual activity, which goes on from three o'clock in the morning till late at night beneath my window. I try to imaginatively put myself in the place of a person who can see the river not only as a river, but as the greatest liberating force in their cosmology. This involves the discomfort of moving from the English naming – The Ganges – which includes the objectifying article, to the Indian name Ganga, feminine, and ridiculously naked of it-ness.

Why is it so alive? To be naked is to be alive, to produce uncertainty. At first I won't be sure whether to come closer, or whether to stay at a slight distance and catch glimpses. But I will not be able to ignore what I have seen. When I've let down my guard a little, Ganga will invite me to bathe in her, to give myself up and raise my hands up, revealing my own awkward vulnerability. I will keep protesting that I do not belong. I will not fall into intimacy with her. Nonetheless something about her challenge will continue to stir up my interest, so that I have to find out more. For years afterwards, I will keep reaching towards the promise she holds out, that it is possible to know a river, to know water in this way.

I have come to Varanasi to work with the Sankat Mochan Foundation's 'Clean the Ganges campaign' at the invitation of Fran Peavey, a friend of the Foundation's. Here I am part of an investigation of new, inter-cultural meanings of what it might take to change the situation of a vital living river for the better.

'Mahant–ji,' someone asks the campaign's leader, 'don't you think the Foundation's strategy should include publication of the water testing results?' In Australian terms, they are not a pretty sight.

It will not be the last time this gracious man, who is carrying forward the traditions of the thirteenth century poet and mystic Tulsi Das, explains his reasoning to those who have joined



him to work on the campaign. 'It is a very sensitive question,' he will say judiciously, 'the force of motivation needs to come from love and care, not from fear of destruction.'

Mahant-ji's professional life is as Professor of Hydraulics at Banaras Hindu University (BHU), where Upadeyeh and Mishra, his colleagues in the Foundation are engineering teachers too. They come to meetings in the reception room night after night, and sometimes in the afternoon on weekends, and we join them. Our talk is about management of the campaign and the issues involved in making the water quality safe for the 60,000 people who come to do sacred practices on the river's banks each day. The discussion necessarily involves clarifying and reclarifying, proposing ideas and countering them. It goes on till we are awash with chai.

To Mahant-ji, it is as important that we become familiar with the beauty of cultural traditions as see intake water works, poorly constructed outfalls, screw pumps and sewage works. 'Let us all join in learning Indian classical music at the temple tonight,' he announces one meeting. Over time I come to appreciate that strategy and planning in this long and committed campaign are built around a charming preface, absent of individual will, 'Let us!' 'Let us identify those activities we can do regularly.' 'For the purposes of sewage disposal, let us forget that the river exists in Benares.'

Varanasi had had World Bank funding to put in place a Ganga Action Plan (GAP) in the 1980s and early 90s. The early work of the Foundation was a significant influence on the Rajiv Ghandi government's formation of GAP with its agenda to clean the river.<sup>1</sup> In its first phase GAP achieved some useful changes, such as the introduction of an electric crematorium.<sup>2</sup> The optimistic engineering ambitions of GAP's Phase 2 became the subject of the correspondence with state and national government departments which was offered to me as background reading in my first week at Tulsi Ghat. I composed a litany reflecting this correspondence and the discussion in the meetings held in Mahant-ji's reception room:

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<sup>1</sup> Fran Peavey, *Heart Politics Revisited*, p177

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.* p179

*The enclosed data indicate that the Ganga water quality at Varanasi is still unfit for bathing*

*It is painful to tell you about these facts*

*The by-pass on the trunk sewer has become non-functional and useless*

*The screw pumps introduce a wasteful two-stage pumping and consume unnecessary power*

*The sewage treatment plant at Dinapur has virtually ceased to function*

*The sludge digesters are silted up with dry solid sludge speaking loudly about the non-functioning of the treatment plant*

*I am sorry to pass such information to you*

*The Ganga needs our help*

*The conditions have not yet gone beyond control*

*The Ganga water is still pure and clean at places where the sewers are not discharging the waste into her*

*Hope to receive an encouraging response from you*

*It is painful to tell you about these facts*

*But the quality of river water along the ghats is still far from satisfactory.<sup>3</sup>*

There is an important evening meeting on the subject of the Dinapur sewerage works, built as part of GAP to take untreated effluent out of the river, from the point of interception at the Konia pumping station. The poet Hari Ram sings a song he has composed about the river. The musician in our team responds in a haunting improvisation. Hari Ram invites us out to see the sun rise on the river; it will be a journey in silence unless someone wishes to contribute poetry or song. Baijnath the boatman has spread out his shawls for us over the damp on the plank seats. The boat glides softly down towards Marnikarnika Ghat in the pink dawn light, and as the sun rises, the silence is broken by Hari Ram singing one of his Ganga pieces – in the cultural world he inhabits, poetry and song are indivisible. Calling out from an ancient tradition, he sings of her grief, of her sense of people's indifference, and of her knowledge of what she was, and what she has become. One of the lines translates something like: 'I did not know that humanity would calmly attack me.' Adrift in our silence we share the fragility of the

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<sup>3</sup> Annie Bolitho and the SMF, *Ganga, Written in People's Hearts*, unpublished ms.

moment. Baijnath ships his oars and the boat drifts towards the centre of the river, where we stay for a time before he takes them up again.

Downstream is a group of houseboats. From our boat, we see a blonde tourist emerge, yawning and stretching, from an old boat with paint peeling off its fading green shutters. He positions himself on the deck, pulls out his dick and starts peeing over the side. Hari Ram speaks to Baijnath in Hindi. He quietly double dips his oar, steers us softly over to the houseboat. When we come alongside Hari Ram calls out to the man, 'Sir, I ask you not to make water in Ganga – she is our Mother, and to make water in her is like smearing dirt on her face.' The young blonde man is incensed.

'Don't you go coming and trying to tell me what I can and can't do. Anyway this is the most filthy bloody river I've ever seen, and it's not me that's polluting it, it's all you bloody Indians.' Hari Ram is a passionate advocate for the river. We sit silently witnessing the scene. 'I ask you not to make water in Ganga,' he says again firmly, 'when you need to make water, please go over to the bank.' The young man becomes angrier. 'You stupid old git!' he says, 'this is our boat – get out of here will you?' but his friend comes out from inside, sees us all sitting in the boat, and says, 'Okay, okay, we'll go over to the bank next time.'

We are back before eight, just in time for the morning meeting. Still, we walk slowly up the wide steep stone stairs of Tulsi Ghat, where people are going from shrine to shrine doing their devotions. We see Mahant-ji going into his reception room to meet with petitioners who have been waiting outside on the bench. He is the custodian of Tulsi Ghat's shrines and is as much part of his environment as the old fig tree that leans towards Ganga. Religious leadership or 'mahant-hood' of these significant places has been handed down to him over fourteen generations. Shortly before nine, he will change from his dhoti into his suit, and the driver will take him to BHU. In this aspect he is Dr Veer Bhad Mishra, Professor of Hydraulics, and another kind of head of the Foundation.

Confronted with an ordinary way of being colonial in the world, I want to be divorced from those young men, but I know that on many occasions on the street, I have also lifted an

impermeable and defensive shield between me and the person in front of me. If I were to try and cut myself off from what I have seen, I would simply be falling into an opposition with it. Intense involvement with Ganga undoes many certainties. Every ripple moves outward making changes as it goes. And many streams make up the river.

### **Water Writing Exercises**

Tale, told to be told ... /Are you truthful?<sup>4</sup> Trinh T. Minh-ha, a post-colonial scholar enquires. She is examining ways in which writing, as much as the sophisticated oral tradition from which she draws this formulaic narrative beginning, can slip away from 'the conservation systems of binary opposition (subject/object; I/It; We/They) on which territorialized knowledge depends.'<sup>5</sup>

On my journey to Varanasi, I cross the sangham at Allahabad, the confluence of the Ganges, Jamuna and the legendary Saraswati. In its etymology, the word sangham is a variant of the Sanskrit and Pali 'sangha', a collection or bringing together. I am travelling in the company of a Dr MN Arif. Because he comes from Birmingham (but from India), and I come from Australia (but from South Africa), and he comes from the widely respected profession of medicine, and I am going towards the SMF's Cleaning the Ganges campaign, we find our easiest common ground on the state of water in India in general. In the case of the drains at Sattna, which we pass, it is almost unfit to mention.

Critically speaking, this interaction invites two subtle questions: 'Who speaks?' and 'What speaks?'<sup>6</sup> in this seemingly ordinary conversation about water, as this fellow and I make our way on a delayed train across the north of India. Who is this 'I' who appears to be gathering areas of the unknown 'within the fold of the known.'<sup>7</sup> As Minh-ha asserts, it is important to go into this, rather than find that a seemingly objective 'truth' is motivating a monocultural reaping of the new and unfamiliar. What is the fold of the known in my case? On closer

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<sup>4</sup> Trinh T. Minh-ha, *When the Moon Waxes Red*, p11

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.* p12

<sup>6</sup> *id.*

<sup>7</sup> *id.*

examination, it turns out to be a disorderly one, held loosely together in the Australian exercise book I write in, between our conversations on the train.

I had started the exercise of water writing some months before on another train, or part of a train. It was an old guard's van which had ground to a halt on the southern tablelands of NSW. To speak of that train refuge, I need to go back a bit further, to a cold spring morning when I went over the handlebars of my Repco mountain bike. There was something about the pain I felt as I tried to get up, the way I knew I needed someone else's help and support to get home or to hospital, which intimated that change was trickling in. I had thought I was happy. Before setting off I had had designs on the day in front of me. They ignored that I was part of a process which I would be taken by, despite my picture of how things were.

Hitting the earth shoulder-first was like striking the rock with the rod. It was a shocking and miraculous moment, in which all that I had previously shouldered was thrown into question. Suddenly, in the setting of a life made up of solid and often stressful arrangements, a wildly impossible fluid element existed. I didn't recognise or welcome it. But it had emerged. It saw me sit down at my guard's table, and put on paper words which I hoped would compose the random branches, sticks and mud into which other forms and solids might flow and catch in the roaring flood that I had suddenly been set adrift on. I had the sense that whatever might take shape in my life, now that I was drifting quickly without a known purpose or a fixed sense of home, would not be something invented by imposing control over its creation.

I called this writing *Going to Zero* and made it a formal document, almost like a job application – to reflect where I had only just come from, and give it credibility to myself, in the light of lifelong learnings about the importance of being able to keep my act together. It would not have occurred to me to go seriously to zero without the inspiration of my friend Fran Peavey. I accepted the title as she handed it over. The word zero made it sound as if I was engaged with something no less purposeful than a space program. Going to Nought didn't have the same ring, sounded somewhat chilling in the state I was in.

At the time I was too uncertain of what I had written to imagine taking my *Going to Zero* proposal, still hot from the printer, and showing it to anyone. A couple of people saw it. However, as time went by, people taking similar nightmarish tumbles out of the tense security of lives dictated by time, were to find it helpful. And as it turned out, going to zero, closing the door on the familiar and habitual, opened up the possibility of new abundance.

In the concluding paragraph of the document, I had taken the risk of exposing a few dreams I had. One was the possibility of visiting India. This fabulous seed of a proposition to myself had been sown through stories. Since coming to Australia, I'd met a number of people who'd been on 70s pilgrimages, and had soaked up all they had to tell. It was an experience I felt I'd missed out on; while they'd been being hippies, my life in South Africa had been a serious struggle against the prevailing regime. There had also been a general embargo on white South Africans entering India.

Fran Peavey visited India each year. Her accounts of the magnitude of the task that a remarkable Indian spiritual leader in Varanasi had taken on, and the assistance she gave to his project had a dramatic, mythical nature. What would make anyone think of taking on the job of cleaning the Ganges River? I was fascinated by how strongly she'd come to feel about this river and the people's lives that focussed on it. She came to Australia after my crash, and I explored whether it might be possible for me to go to Varanasi and see for myself. But she was most unwilling to have me come. Her project depended on those who came offering dedicated skills. In my case what would I even be thinking of doing there? Her friends at Varanasi didn't need a burnt-out Australian bludging on their hospitality.

I went away to think about it. My work was with community groups writing down and recording stories. I knew those I'd worked with had been satisfied. The only skill I wanted to offer was as a writer, and I suggested documenting something of the project and how it had been operating. I approached Fran tentatively, suggesting that this was what I wanted to do. The day after I got her okay I began the project of the water exercise book.

Arriving at the guard's van, I cup out all the water that has collected in a depression in the roof of the old canvas annex. I have a cupful to drink. It's beautifully eucalypty. A soft golden colour with lots of twig bits and leaf bits disintegrating in it.

18. 8

7.30 report: The Sydney Water Board has developed computer monitoring devices to pick up giardia and another staphylococcus in its water supplies. The computer monitor responds to a water sample that has been made into an essence – up comes a red figure on the screen. Giardia or staph present. No mention of what they do when they find them. But they did say we're going to need to start recycling drinking water. It's a shrinking reserve, water that's clean, water we can trust. We draw this distinction between water and drinking water. We have the chlorine, the computers, the reservoirs, the system, to preserve or try to draw lines around it. Potable water. Potable re-use water. Did anyone else love the signs above the handbasins on European trains saying 'Eau non-potable'?

Thus my notes on water from Australia and India, although they included 'facts', were highly subjective. What 'I' was gathering into an uneasy fold informed what I heard and absorbed. What I was coming to know in turn changed the way I knew things before. No bringing together, no folding, is ever exclusive of inside and outside.

### **A Different Framework of Time**

Sangha and modern Indian words based on sangha, are used for communities, societies and associations, that is, people being together for a purpose. In my time with the Foundation I am involved in a broad community of water campaigners, including Indians, Australians, Swedes and Americans. Sangha, in the sense of gatherings larger than a couple of people, was the definition of trouble as far as the old South African government was concerned, and in this case, it is the Indian government's as well. What particularly challenges them about the Foundation is that it combines the secular and the spiritual.

The historian Dipesh Chakrabarty suggests that there are limits in seeing South Asian political modernity, ultimately deriving from Europe, as a hegemonic secular project. He highlights the tension that was part of the emergence of the modern state, and which exists today, between power in a secular sense and power of the kind involving 'gods, spirits, and other spectral and divine beings'.<sup>8</sup> The Foundation's work, representing the Ganga's interests in the realm of spiritual care and political advocacy, exemplifies this tension. 'Modern politics,' Chakrabarty says, 'is often justified as a story of human sovereignty acted out in the context of a ceaseless unfolding of unitary historical time.'<sup>9</sup> Yet the spiritual practices which are associated with the Ganges, and indeed the context within which they exist on those river banks, cannot be seen in terms of human sovereignty or of modern time. If they did fit with 'the idea of the human existing in a frame of a single and secular historical time that envelops other kinds of time,'<sup>10</sup> Varanasi would not attract millions of Indian pilgrims and citizens each year. The Foundation embodies this discontinuity between the modern and the pre-modern. It puts a state-of-the-art laboratory next to a temple. Neither is more contemporary than the other. And it insists that the river's power is disproportionate to any modern institution, and thus critiques the very idea of the political. At the same time it points to the fact that ancient tradition is fresh today, and contradicts its romanticisation.

*12.1.95 The Foundation was started in 1982 as a secular operation, separate from the Sankat Mochan temple's activities – but through Mahant-ji, they are part of the same fabric. So the team goes there too, most nights, very late. Our first visit is on a Thursday, and Fran explains that this is a sort of day of charity, when beggars and saddhus line the entrance in throngs. We pass by them in the Ambassador, pile out at a parking spot by the bushes at the back and follow Mahant-ji and his man in. When all the rituals that Mahant-ji has to do to close the temple for the night are complete, we take the stairs up to a plain room. Those of us who are new to the project awkwardly find places and try to work out the form of what we are here to do. Mahant-ji, in his unerringly kindly way makes the kind of fuss that we wouldn't expect from someone of his stature, encouraging us to feel comfortable.*

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<sup>8</sup> Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, p14

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.* p15



*It's a sort of question and answer time I gather. An occasional devotee comes and addresses his respects to Mahant-ji. We are brought blessed garlands of orange marigolds and little extraordinarily sweet smelling crimson roses – each of us gets one. I'm overcome. Fran, who knows the territory, accepts hers and goes on to ask Mahant-ji to refresh her on the story of the Saraswati. 'At Allahabad three rivers meet,' he starts off. 'Two are seen and one is not seen.' I follow for a while, and then the complexity of the story combined with the strangeness of it all and my incapacity to keep going after midnight – it's now 1.15am – overwhelm me. I drift along as best I can.*

*Now sweets are served on banana leaves. Mine is of pistachio and absolutely delicious. I realise this is my opportunity to ask about how people pray to the Ganges. Mahant-ji smiles. 'People will be coming to the river,' he says. 'They will be saying something to the river. They will be asking something from the river. That is their prayer.'*<sup>11</sup>

## **Holy Water**

Within the framework of cultural politics, there is a way, Trinh T. Minh-ha suggests, in which interest in 'Other' stories masks and re-inforces a dominant-subordinate relationship. She points to the way they provide a particular sort of entertainment, a diversion 'from the monotony of sameness,'<sup>12</sup> that is the equivalent of popular representations of endangered species. This is true for the Mahakumbh, which in 2001 attracted the world's biggest ever religious and tourist congregation, and accommodated 100 million devotees at the confluence at Allahabad.<sup>13</sup> How is someone who knows nothing of the holiness of this water, which can purify one of a lifetime of sins, to relate to what is popularly called 'a major bathing day' and which necessitates planning on a scale that most countries would only contemplate in preparation for war?

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<sup>10</sup> *ibid.* p16

<sup>11</sup> Annie Bolitho, *Water Exercise Books, Notes from India and Australia, unpublished ms.*

<sup>12</sup> Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native Other*, pp86-88

<sup>13</sup> 'Mahakumbh, A Mega Event Splendidly Accomplished,' *Swagat*, pp94-95

The Mela township, spread over 5000 hectares, was divided into 31 sectors. Each was provided with basic amenities such as drinking water, electricity, housing, shops, a fire station and a sector magistrate ... Medical facilities of all streams – Homeopathic, Ayurvedic and Unani – were made available ... Among the facilities were 15 pontoon bridges, a 100-bed hospital, 23 ambulances and 61 new roads. The capacity of two power sub-stations was enhanced ... The state Information Department, with its round-the clock media monitoring, catapulted the state into international focus. A dedicated media area was set up which had 105 cottages and housed over 600 correspondents from across the world ... the Information Department, in association with the Astha Channel, beamed a round-the-clock, live telecast of the entire event in 157 countries. Among others, Doordarshan too provided live coverage on all major bathing days.<sup>14</sup>

At the major bathing day or festival I attended on the Ganges in Varanasi, I marvelled that 40,000 people could worship at once, in a pulsing hum, without any apparent leader. I was immersed in the experience of the Ganges, but a holy dip on Makursankranti was not part of it. Our leader, Fran, reminded us that the river was not fit for bathing. Catherine and Stu discussed the faecal coliform levels in the middle of the river versus the immediate bank, within the context of the degree of auspiciousness of the day, and decided to hire a boat and take the plunge out there. My experience was one that I puzzled over from land.

Our host, Mahant-ji, held the tradition with a buoyancy only equalled by a pilgrim boat filled to capacity. He appeared hardly ever to sleep, and was almost always available, through the afternoon when he came home from teaching at the university, into the early evening and night, either to people who had matters they needed to discuss, or to the Foundation's campaign.

*Mahant-ji on Late Night Live tonight. The much loved and honoured friend of Phillip Adams. Phillip wanted to know how they (the Indian Government) could ignore him and his battle to find a solution for Varanasi's water quality problems. Of course Mahant-ji's response was all about 'face'. I loved hearing the old injunction 'Let us!' Let us build a system based on gravity*

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<sup>14</sup> *ibid.* p95

*feed! Let us dream with the river! Then (he didn't say either of those) he spoke of the two banks of Ganga. The bank of science and technical knowledge, and the bank, which I imagined as the closer bank, of culture and tradition, which he spoke of as religion. I could imagine the women and men coming down and their immersions and their baskets. And the other bank being such a particular green blue, barely discernible to them from this cultural bank, there being such a Great River between. Knowing as I heard, that Mahant-ji had listened to me, and that I'd been in his audience room night after night, I had a sense of carrying on that work.*<sup>15</sup>

If you take a boat trip from Mahant-ji's Tulsi Ghat, past the Edwardian intake water towers for the city's drinking water supply, and the ghats that follow, you have to dwell on the fact that Varanasi is known to have been consistently occupied longer than any other city in the world. One western commentator talks of its beginnings, contemporary with the dynasties of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, and points out that 'whilst no one sacrifices to the Egyptian sun god Ra or to Baal anymore, some sixty thousand devotees take the holy dip each day in Varanasi.'<sup>16</sup>

Upstream of the intake drinking water towers, and Tulsi Ghat, where people bathe, is the effluent overloaded tributary catchment, the Assi. As Peavey points out, those who built the intake towers at the turn of the century never anticipated that the city would develop and become so highly populated in an area that would directly affect the water supply.<sup>17</sup> Assi Nullah, or drain, is a name people speak with their noses wrinkled up, yet Assi is the end part of the name Varanasi – the first part comes from the river at the other extremity of the city, the Varuna. Below this junction is the evidence of untreated effluent meeting the river, in the form of large-scale algal blooms.

From the late 70s on the Foundation slowly and surely accumulated the wherewithal to test water, to communicate globally about their campaign on water quality, and to make up new designs for a sewerage system for the city that would work. They persisted. Mahant-ji hosted friends with an eclectic range of expertise – speakers at engineering conferences, activists in

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<sup>15</sup> ABC Radio, *Late Night Live*, 28 June 00

<sup>16</sup> Alexander Stille, 'The Ganges' Next Life,' *New Yorker*, 9 Jan. 1998, p60

campaigns with women and schoolchildren, musicians, including Pete Seeger, whose role in the Hudson Bay Clear Water Project was a model and inspiration.<sup>18</sup> He hosted the American Friends of the Ganges, strategic thinking activists, Ganga Venna, Swedish Friends of the Ganges involved with the setting up the lab, Australian Friends of the Ganges involved with water testing.

I am part of a continuing tradition when I visit in the mid 90s. As my familiarity with where I am grows, I realise that those on the westerner team I am part of, the lawyers, social activists, environmental lobbyists, and the student of watershed management bring with us the virtue of a rather demanding curiosity. The SMF also very much appreciates Fran Peavey's humour and spirit of playfulness. Later it dawns on me that we enjoy an action-oriented advantage over the locals. Our understandings derive only from the world of Varanasi and its colonial predecessor, Banaras. As activists, we are part of a tradition of politics, albeit outside the mainstream, in which, as Chakrabarty puts it, 'our imagining of a socially just future for humans, takes the idea of single, homogenous, and secular historical time for granted.'<sup>19</sup> This makes our sense of direction rather simple and sure.

We are with a realm where this is only part of the story. I use the word realm because it suggests a domain associated with powers, protocols and stories. Varanasi is known by an ancient name, Kashi or 'City of Light.' It has a continuity of place-being in which the contemporary city as Kashi is the same Kashi of which people may speak, when they refer to a time before the time when the river flowed.<sup>20</sup>

Layered into the city's fabric of temples, parks and ghats is evidence of the city's Vedic era, when the Buddha gave discourses on his insights there, the Gupta era and the later Muslim era. Change has marked this city. It is the power of a heterogeneous living tradition and its stories which has brought people to Kashi throughout this time to engage in pilgrimage, the reciting of texts, consultation with pundits, to undertake the performance of prayer,

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<sup>17</sup> Fran Peavey, op.cit. p171

<sup>18</sup> ibid. p170

<sup>19</sup> Chakrabarty, op. cit. p.15

<sup>20</sup> Diana Eck, *Banaras, City of Light*, p212

scholarship and death. This contributes to an 'all-pervading immemoriality,'<sup>21</sup> regardless of the perspective from which one observes it.

*Sitting in Benares and getting news from Peavey and friends we have been getting inspiration when we feel some inertia in our work. We have often found ourselves in a state of 'what do we do now?'*<sup>22</sup>

As a politically engaged tourist, with a commitment to people, place and project, I am simply treading water, occasionally gasping for air or being washed under by what are probably only unremarkable waves. I try hard to come to grips with the fact that in this tradition, if the river exists and its beginnings are part of its record, equally, before that beginning something else was. I make my way to a sense of this through reading and listening, but not through any kind of knowing.

The substance of that water, in that place, is more intimately conceived of than what those on our westerner team think of as water.

*Chris: Does the river sleep?*

*Mahant-ji: The belief is that between midnight and 3am we should not touch Ganga water because she is sleeping.*

*Fran: Can the river sue?*

*Mahant-ji: No, Ganga will not sue.*<sup>23</sup>

It is never drinking water or swimming water, as we understand water, that is in question. What is in question is an embodied relationship with Ganga, held in an ordinary and exceptional tradition. Here Mahant-ji speaks of an endangered species, referring to 'these

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<sup>21</sup> Raja Rao, *On the Ganga Ghat*, p8

<sup>22</sup> S.K. Mishra, in Bolitho and the SMF, op. cit.

<sup>23</sup> Chris Seeman, Dr Veer Bhad Mishra and Fran Peavey, in Bolitho and the SMF, ibid.

people who still have this faith, this living relationship with the river,<sup>24</sup> his everyday neighbours, people whom I wrote about whilst looking out of the window of the White Room, in which numerous guests participating in the work of the project have stayed.

*There's a man folding the end of his dhoti*

*There's a woman throwing the soap to her friend*

*There's a child crying– he does not want to be rinsed.*

*There are five pastel coloured plastic bags, half sunk on the water's surface*

*Golden, orange and bronze marigold malas float amongst them*

*Galaxies of single drifting flower heads the background to these constellations.*

*There's a woman brushing her teeth*

*A woman wringing out a sari.*

*There's a man white with foam, pausing while washing*

*There's a girl splashing*

*There's a woman wading out to wash a bundle of cloth.*

*There's a boat drifting in through the malas*

*There's a heavy scum on the water today.*

*There's a family packing their clothes into a shoulder bag*

*A woman attentively scrubbing her forearm*

*A girl dropping clean washing into a bucket.*

*A bell rings at Tulsi Das temple.*

*There's a warm sun shining this morning*

*A boat-load of pilgrims pushing out*

*The women drag their fingers in the water, bring it to their lips with happy reverence*

*And they're singing*

*There's laughter and splashing, there's water lapping*

*The sound of material slapping on rock.*

*There's an old woman combing her long wet white hair*

*Two guys are washing their bicycles – the rims gleam silver.*

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<sup>24</sup> Stille, op. cit. p.60

*There's a young man lifting his hands to his forehead in prayer*

*There's a dog lying on the warm concrete*

*A waterbird pecking at the flowers on the beach.*

*A light wind stirs the scum on the water.*

*There's a boy dunking up and down, up and down, up and down*

*There's a child carrying up a bronze vessel of holy water for his granny*

*There's a goat, there's a boat, there's a tent*

*There's an umbrella, there's a corrugated iron shed.*

*There's a beach*

*There's a field of mustard...<sup>25</sup>*

'If birds can be saved, if plants can be saved, let this species of people be saved by granting them holy water,'<sup>26</sup> says Mahantji. This vision cannot but extend beyond his neighbourhood. 'It has to be part of the story,' said a woman with whom I later invited into a water conversation, 'that one day everyone can drink from rivers.'

## **Great Rivers**

Rivers. Great rivers. 'Other' rivers. Rivers as national icons. Here I turn to the much celebrated Columbia River in the US north-west. It is the dimension of planning for a river-as-abstraction, rather than as an entity with its own life, force and natural history, which fascinates the historian Richard White in his study of this much dammed and manipulated river. Over a period of thirty years, planners and engineers with different interests 'never lost faith in a fully rationalised river, an organic machine.'<sup>27</sup> Today, 'all stake a social claim to their part of the machine ... none of them are concerned with the river as a whole.'<sup>28</sup> In attempting to avoid essentialism whilst moving away from abstraction, White is drawn to focus on two discrete elements of commonality between a human and a river, which might be described in historical

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<sup>25</sup> Annie Bolitho, *Water Exercise Books*, op. cit.

<sup>26</sup> Stille, op. cit. p60

<sup>27</sup> *The Organic Machine, The Remaking of the Columbia River*, p64

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.* p110

terms, that is, energy and work.<sup>29</sup> It is the failure of modern environmentalism, he suggests, that it has not taken into account that nature can be known through work.<sup>30</sup>

White personifies the Columbia to some extent, attributing to it the energetic work, over millenia, of cutting into landscapes, creating channels and deltas, rapids and falls.<sup>31</sup> Here there are similarities with the story of Ganges' descent to earth, though hers is very much one of a negotiation between humans and Gods:

In her great mercy, she came to the aid of a king named Bhagiratha, who appealed to Lord Brahma to let the Ganges fall from heaven. Bhagiratha's ancestors, sixty thousand of them, had been burned to ash by the fierce glance of an angry ascetic, and only the funerary waters of the Ganges would raise them up again to dwell in peace in heaven. Having won from Brahma the boon of her descent, Bhagiratha persuaded Shiva to catch the Ganges in his hair as she fell, so that the earth would not be shattered by her torrential force. And so she plummeted down from heaven to the Himalayas, where she meandered in the tangled ascetic locks of Shiva before flowing out upon the plains of India. The Ganges followed Bhagiratha from the Himalayas to the sea where, at the place called Ganga Sagara, she entered the netherworld and restored the dead ancestors of Bhagiratha. Thus she is called the Triple-Pathed River, flowing in the three worlds - in heaven, on the earth, and in the netherworld. .... Bhagiratha came across the plains, they say, leading the Ganges behind him. And when the great tirthas of Kashi, such as Dashashvamedh and Manikarnika, were skirted by the River of Heaven, they became infinitely more powerful and lustrous than before. Even today, a Banarsi, speaking of ancient Kashi, will refer to the time before the Ganges came, or in discussing the antiquity of a temple or pool, a priest will say, 'It was here even before Bhagiratha brought the Ganges to earth.'<sup>32</sup>

White's story of the Colorado exists in a different framework of time – largely of the modern era. He suggests that by putting in the Grand Coolee and Hoover Dams, humans

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<sup>29</sup> *ibid.* p(x)

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.* p(x)

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.* p3

<sup>32</sup> Diana Eck, *op. cit.* p211



have simply given the Colorado River, previously extremely efficient on its own terms, work to do.<sup>33</sup> At the same time the 'organic machine' – an environment including artificial salmon habitat, nuclear power plants, dams and artificially created new farm land – which human beings 'manage without fully understanding what they have created' – demands more work. Energy and work as the unifying conceptualising dimension make this environmental history predominantly a masculine one. However, White also shows the work of the anadromous salmon, going upstream from the sea to spawn, and the labour of Indian women in the bountiful salmon harvests of the pre-rationalised river. I am intrigued by his conclusion that the river is still larger than 'us' in its capacity to reflect back our inadequacies – of foresight, planning, management and capacity to envision. 'The river is not gone,' he says, 'it is our hopes for it that have vanished.'<sup>34</sup>

White's unusual interpretive strategy draws my attention to the fact that I have also chosen attributes that could be said to be shared by water and people, to form the basis of the my thesis. One is reflection. Here there is no tangible or economic value, but one for which I can imagine the Flow Engineer, and her colleague, the-man-at-the-dam speaking. 'The dam is a place of presence,' they would say. The other is an unpredictable, non-rational nature. It is this that makes the Flow Engineer ask again and again, 'Why are people's ideas about water so woolly?' I wish to speak for these qualities as having the same legitimacy as 'energy' and 'work.' They too give rise to value, for as the debate swirling around the phrase 'economic rationalism' might suggest, there are significant values **outside** of the economic.

The telling of an American story of water alongside that of Ganga brings out the way in which different cultural habits and practices may be valued. This is not to say that India does not have its fair share of tamed rivers, controversial dam projects and water resource planners associated with the development agendas of the post-colonial state.<sup>35</sup> However the contrasts I

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<sup>33</sup> White, op. cit. p4

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.* p60

<sup>35</sup> see Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt 'Imagining Rivers' in *Perspectives*, vol. xxv no.27, pp2395-2400. For example, Lahiri-Dutt: 'We grew up reading and watching in documentaries the success stories of DVC [Damodar Valley Corporation] with its awe-inspiring high concrete dams spilling out into the canals' – p2396. Also Arundhati Roy, 'The Greater Common Good' in *The Cost of Living* on the Narmada Valley dam building industry and the role of the state.

have brought out highlight that culturally-based actions and rules of conduct are implicit in relations to rivers and water. To take note of them is to show up two prevalent misconceptions – that Western cultural values on water are 'natural' and that technological superiority necessarily implies superior cultural values. In fact a global elite's relationship to 'the organic machine' and its capacity for accumulation, power generation and purification plays its part in what could be seen as a broad spectrum of sensibilities and sensual relationships with water. This has distinctive ethical and ecological consequences.<sup>36</sup> For example, the ideologies of development have gone hand in hand with grandiose damming projects. River control, hydro-power schemes and irrigation have been put forward as 'objective necessities' without a plurality of options being considered.<sup>37</sup> Thus capital-intensive technology, as inappropriate as Varanasi's Dinapur Sewerage Works, comes to represent the World Bank funding regimes' contribution to rivers and populations.

### **Ganga Ma, Naming Realities**

After a few weeks in Varanasi, I thought I was becoming quite an expert on where I was. In fact a question I'd put in my notebook when I first arrived, only became more complex, vexed and central to how I stood on those banks of that river. It had jumped out at me: What does it mean to say Ganga Ma – Mother Ganges?

*A crack was what I first saw – the narrow space between little white temple, fig tree and stone steps – a hazy frame of boats going in and out at a slow drift, and people bathing – as I sat on the bench waiting for Mahant-ji to finish his prayers. Later the large scene as I looked out from my balcony and took in the expanse of it, the soft slow drifting size of it. It.*

*Ganga Ma said the rickshaw man. What does it mean to comprehend the maternity of this great river. So many people have addressed me as 'Ma' since I have been in India, in respect, in hope that I will see their need, in traditional greeting. Ganga-Ma is a wording I may adopt, but it is way outside my cultural tradition, my usual understandings and knowings, to really*

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<sup>36</sup> Here I draw on Gay Hawkins and Stephen Muecke's discussion of cultural value in 'Cultural Economies of Waste', in *Culture and Waste: The Creation and Destruction of Value*, pp.ix-xvii

*feel the meaning of calling a river mother. Even the feminine is a big step away from 'it' but mother is a further way to go.*

*Munna, the servant who brings me a collation of bhujia mix and fried chips for breakfast, looks out towards the river and says 'Ganga-Ma'. He looks for my response and then says 'Best! What might 'best' mean? 'Better than all other rivers', 'perfect', 'exquisite', 'the ultimate', 'beyond compare'. Without being able to command these subtleties, Munna uses 'Best!' with the conviction of having a word that is applicable, and in return I agree, 'Best'. But what does it really say of his experience of this river?*

*My third shit in Varanasi drifts down the toilet. The first, at the Varanasi Station's Ladies Waiting Room, and the second here at Tulsi Ghat remind me of how it all has to go somewhere. My shit goes into the bowels of a sewage system whose seventy-six year old trunk sewer is overloaded, whose sewage works cannot meet peak or even average discharges. There is no choice. And this is what I'm here for. To look into the work on this city's water quality, the problems of taking care of all those shits washing down the pipes this morning.<sup>38</sup>*

By contrast, I did not find coming to grips with the 'faecal coliform' idea at all difficult. It sat squarely within the rational paradigms of my own culture. Mahant-ji held up the slide that had been delivered to him.

*You see these dots. The blue dots are the colonies of faecal coliform. Here at Tulsi Ghat we can find 400,000 colonies per 100ml. But this one is from upstream - no growths.<sup>39</sup>*

We adjusted to living within a faecal coliform reality. 'Sewage, sewage everywhere and not a drop to drink,' Dr Upadaye would quip in meetings. When Peavey-ji, as she was known in the Tulsi Ghat context, called a number of meetings in the White Room with a view to making a range of water quality words more familiar, there was a degree of resistance in our team. This did not hold the same charm as a meeting she'd set up with

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<sup>37</sup> Lahiri-Dutt, op. cit. p2396

<sup>38</sup> Annie Bolitho, *Water Exercise Books*, op. cit.

Kashika and Anapurna Singh, to talk to us about what it was like to be young people in Varanasi. Or the afternoon she had arranged for us to meet Leela Sharma, a powerful activist, and hold her hand, which had once held the hand of Ghandi. Here we were to demonstrate and discuss our understanding of a report, written by a friend of the Ganges in San Francisco on the water quality characteristics of the Ganges and the waste water treatment process.

*We are supposed to have got up to speed on the first twenty pages for homework. Who has any comments? Only our musician Rhiannon. 'My favourite term,' she says, 'is the one about turbidity. It's exquisite. Those three initials. NTU. Nephelometric Turbidity Units.'*

*BOD is the next term. Biological Oxygen Demand. Here you have to ask: is the oxygen demand accelerated by the over-generation of nitrogenous feeding organisms and their transformational processes? Is the normal balance stressed to the point where instead of the exchange of gases being a moderate balanced meal it becomes a gargantuan madness leading rapidly to depletion of oxygen and decomposition of the water quality? Water tested above the city is right and proper in its BOD, but by the time it meets the Assi Nullah, trouble starts. This indicator confirms that in the meeting of water with waste, water's living qualities are being lost. It is no longer the breath-spirited drop that it was after its journey from upstream. Water tested at Kanpur, where activists put on masks to stand next to the river, has hideous BOD. Yet in its journey on, over hundreds of miles to Varanasi this changes completely. It is refreshed by the time it gets here. The same demands are not being made on it. It cools as it goes.<sup>40</sup>*

Looking back it is easier to see that I stood on the brink of taking the next imaginative step. I could almost see that what Mahant-ji's stories revealed was as real as the technical knowledge I was building up. What happened on Ganga-ji's journey? Every telling I encountered, whether in nighttime temple story renderings or the somewhat more blunted versions of younger

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<sup>39</sup> Dr Veer Bhad Mishra, in Bolitho and the SMF, op. cit.

<sup>40</sup> Annie Bolitho, *Water Exercise Books*, op. cit.

people, suggested that her qualities are, or have been considered beyond description. By these lights she pulsates. On her journey she dances. She snakes, spins and twists in spirals according to the tangled form of Bhagiratha's hair, is magnetised by the full moon, flows within the immeasurable holiness of being impregnated with the ultimate restorative powers. She is a miracle. As Fran would point out, we might never bridge the gap between our different understandings of the river, but we had to find ways of acknowledging it.

*In our human-centred environment movement<sup>41</sup> it's hard for us to understand the way in which for the Foundation the river and its water is alive. Animate as a person is. We do have a shared understanding that the health of the river is the concern, but for us it is hard to approach what they think of as river. It's why she is Ganga, and they couldn't conceive of her as it! They're talking about a living thing, a being and they talk about the river as we would talk about a person, for example a sick grandmother.<sup>42</sup>*

This meant that, easy as I found it to understand faecal coliform, it was hard to place in relation to everything else. It stood out front of the other water quality words, and to use it in a telling could easily condemn things that deserved their own appreciation. I struggled to write letters about where I was to my friends in Australia, fell back to putting my ideas in a sort of broken prose, a sort of poetry.

*Will you strain your ears to hear the sound  
Of frogs and crickets croaking their confident shore music  
This dark wet night, this misty velvet cool night  
Under the new moon at Varanasi?*

*I'm afraid you won't understand the holy dip  
The freedom from worry as men and women cup Ganga water in their hands to sip in  
prayer  
As they wet their children*

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<sup>41</sup> Here Fran is emphasising the constraints of a certain subjective orientation, rather than denying that western environmentalism puts a high value on wilderness environments in which humans do not centre.

*Laugh and chat with their neighbours*

*You won't understand the humming ease of people bathing in the same stretch of water  
I'm afraid to tell you that this water contains hundreds of faecal coliform colonies  
You may not even really know what they are. The easiest way to explain would be to make  
comparisons to the piped water you know, which would shock you into seeing this river as  
a problem not a gift.*

*So will you strain your ears to hear the sound of footsteps  
Descending the steep high stone steps of the ghat each morning at four  
When the conch's voice splits night from day  
Calling up life and the river's wholeness...*

*Another dusk in India with the sounds of closing: children calling, a flute sounding faintly,  
radio, hooting. Then also the sounds of Stu my roommate singing 'For nearly 20 years I've  
been a cocky' as he soaps his laundry. There's something about the sound of Eric Bogle that  
is not right. It's too Aussie, its lyrics telling a story of accepting because of being a battler, not  
because of how we find things cosmologically ordered.<sup>43</sup>*

### **Reasoning with the River**

Chakrabarty shows how the non-rational – Gods and Spirits – have never been banished in the writing of history. When history becomes 'multi-cultural' they tend to reappear. This challenges the assumption that runs through modern European political thought and social sciences that one can think about social modernity in terms of a singular human consciousness.<sup>44</sup> If our intellectual consciousness is born solely out of modern western rational analysis and observational procedures, he contends, we are in a predicament when it comes to speaking of practices within a participative, lived, pre-analytic cultural experience. Western secular assumptions lead us to assert that 'the human is ontologically

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<sup>42</sup> Fran Peavey in Bolitho and the SMF, op. cit.

<sup>43</sup> Annie Bolitho, *Water Exercise Books*, op. cit.

singular, that gods and spirits are in the end "social facts"<sup>45</sup> and this diminishes the cultural experience he wishes to represent. In his analysis and articulation of this problem, it is interesting to note that he does not abandon the rational, or European theory. Rather, he acts in a generous polytheistic spirit I associate with India, and is resourcefully generative. If a theory has taken birth, he must respond with a new theory to restore order – or culture – at the same time bringing the European theory to bear in a way that challenges its own limits.

I imagine myself sitting in the Sankat Mochan Foundation lab talking to the younger generation blokes in a way that both implies and does not imply Eurocentric universals. Where knowledge and analysis are concerned, they straddle a middle line, from which they may step either way: towards a rational technical understanding of water quality, including the idea of the 'straight language' that spells out this evidence, or towards a respect for the non-rational evidence with which their cultural understandings present them:

*Ganga is a mother so we don't tell people these scientific results in straight language. We just say Ganga is not clean. There are many ways to tell them. For us there is some difficulty knowing this information and having our spiritual life with the river. We bathe in the river on special days, and we know the river is not clean. Some people drink the water but I can't do that. Some drink Ganga water every day and their health is good. Bhatuk Sastri – he's a Brahmin, a very hefty, healthy man – when he goes outside the city, he takes Ganga water with him. And he gets his water from Marnikarnika Ghat!*<sup>46</sup>

In Chakrabarty's view 'the gods and other agents inhabiting practices of what is called "superstition" have never died anywhere.'<sup>47</sup> At the same time the universals of Enlightenment reason inhabit the coming of political modernity. This analysis is embodied in silver-haired, khadi-white, Leela Sharma who came to talk to us. She is a proud part of

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<sup>44</sup> Chakrabarty, op.cit. p16

<sup>45</sup> ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Rajesh Mishra and Ashok Pandey in Bolitho and the SMF, op. cit. Marnikarnika is one of the holiest places of pilgrimage, and one of the cremation ghats.

<sup>47</sup> Chakrabarty, op. cit. p16

the independence struggle. She is able to bless us. Old people in India can bless. She is every bit a teacher. A guru.

*When I was small my father's sister used to bathe every day at 4.00am and I would go with her. She would bathe and take Ganga water to put on all the Shiva lingams. One morning I woke up and she had gone. I remember running all the way down to Manikarnika Ghat – that is where she used to bathe – and finding her there.*

*Now the children don't think about the river any more or very little, maybe through the affection of their grandmothers or older relatives. They think only of pictures on the TV. So when Peavey talks about the importance of not frightening people away from the river, I think perhaps she is right. Now of course there are lessons in school on pollution – in my granddaughter's school in October they held an exhibition. It was well worth seeing. At my granddaughter's age – she's six – she knows about pollution.<sup>48</sup>*

I see myself struggling not to swallow the water which the Pundit puts into my mouth when I offer the five rupees an old man from Chenakothapalli asked me to carry to Varanasi for a blessing from Ganga, when he heard it was my destination. The Pundit's puja was for him not me. The water from her brass vessel came scooped from the river beside us. Was it within the form of a transaction I had not been able to imagine before undertaking it, even whilst pretending to hold the holy water in, to let it go out of the front and side of my mouth? Did the word faecal coliform protect or undermine my health in this moment?

I am equally choked as I stumble into opening a conversation with Dipesh at a forum on Subaltern, Multicultural and Indigenous Histories. His talk has turned colonial perspectives inside out, through stories from India, his experience as an immigrant historian at Melbourne University and an analysis of the historiography of reconciliation in Australia.

It has stimulated me to record a note in my exercise book.

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<sup>48</sup> Leela Sharma in Bolitho and the SMF, op. cit.



• *Ganga* • *river* • *it/she*

*how does he name?*

Dipesh talks of how he is able to write the sacredness of the river in the Bengali language – there is no separation between him and the sacredness of her. But in English, being part of the river is not a linguistic possibility. All he can do is write **about** the river. I speak of the conundrum that the meanings associated with Ganges and Ganga, *it* and *She* have presented to me. I talk of the Foundation and Mahant-ji.

We both specifically made journeys to the Murray to see how it looked in the light of our experience of the river Ganga. 'What a bland experience it was,' he says, 'there were no people doing practices on its banks.' And then we say in one voice as he talks of crossing it, 'no-one threw coins in!' I have a flashing recall of joining a young woman with a promising future as an accountant and businesswoman and her dad, at the door of the train just before Allhabad. The family has been on a pilgrimage to Varanasi and other important sites, to take their grandfather's ashes to the Ganges. We have met previously, on another train, and at the river.

We all go gleefully to perform the coin-throwing rite. It is a uniquely favourable moment to ask something of the river. My understandings about water, about purity and impurity, are all over the place. I hold the unequal edges of a ten rupee coin, and breathe into the dark starry place of wish combined with aspiration. The sound of the train wheels on the track changes as we come on to the bridge. I wish that I may uncover within myself a way of articulating my altered understanding of water, of the things that have started to make sense to me in the context of Tulsi Ghat. I wish that the juice of water-as-nectar should never seep away. The wheels keep clatter-thumping on. Together we choose our moment, throw, shriek a bit, then walk back to our lighted compartments.

Chakrabarty's theoretical endorsement of my questions returns me to Tulsi Ghat roots. It is this background, this insoluble puzzle, which impelled me to investigate Australian water and people's water stories, and what we do, or have done, or could do, to express a

relationship with water. I return to Mahant-ji who sees with 'both eyes', that is, as a person who is 'able to know and feel the river as a spiritual entity which comforts and provides solace ... and also as matter, physical substance which receives sewage.'<sup>49</sup> I come back to the idea of working on the cultural and the scientific banks of one river.

My experience at Varanasi made it clear that we could learn from the cultural bank of that river. I saw that technical specialisation, confident scientific language and bureaucratic responses, the currency of a Western approach, may suggest reliably successful outcomes, but that these are not necessarily more predictable in Australia than those that some of the failures of the GAP illustrate. 'If any strategy were guaranteed in and of itself, if its calculation were sure,' the philosopher Jacques Derrida reminds us, 'there would be no strategy at all. Strategy always implies a wager – that is, a certain way of giving ourselves over to not-knowing, to the incalculable.'<sup>50</sup> Cultural interests, traditions and practices need to be part of our calculations in making places and rivers, liveable.

I return to the sense of a world which allows a bigger picture. In the quiet renderings of stories from the deep stream of Hindu tradition, upon which Mahant-ji's understandings of the need to clean the river are based, are a reminder that not only the future, but the past and present may be at once graphically simple and fascinatingly convoluted and complex. They insist that historical time is not integral to being, as my culture would like to suggest. Time is, as Derrida puts it, 'out of joint.'<sup>51</sup> It is some years now since I made my wish at the sangham at Allahabad. It is not possible for me to relate my own story in the intervening years in a way that leans on an assumption of 'a continuous, homogeneous, infinitely stretched out time'<sup>52</sup> going backwards and forwards in one direction or the other. This story in turn informs the exercise of writing this chapter, of finding a way of narrating the relations between myself, the Friends of the Ganges with whom I worked, the Sankat Mochan Foundation and Ganga to take account of the ontological assumptions which Chakrabarty questions.

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<sup>49</sup> Tavis Eddy in Bolitho and the SMF, op. cit.

<sup>50</sup> Jacques Derrida in *I Have a Taste for the Secret*, p13

<sup>51</sup> Derrida cited in Chakrabarty, op. cit. p111

<sup>52</sup> Chakrabarty, *ibid.* 15.

The work of the Foundation brings to light the modern time in which environmental and social problems are a product of colonisation and the elaborate weavings of historicising procedures with contemporary pressures and problems. But it also invites us to take stock within another time, which cannot be understood in terms of a metronomic cause and effect. This has the effect of 'illuminating possibilities for our own life-worlds.'<sup>53</sup> It is this which makes the Foundation's work so compelling to western observers. It suggests that there are limits to what we know and how we know it, and that the outcomes of our strategies for instrumental projects can only really be imagined.

Varanasi is legendary for being so embedded in holiness, so rich in light, that simply by being there, one is within the fold of beneficence and spiritual redemption. It could be said that this belief engenders passivity and lack of concern for everyday material realities, such as the state of the river. On the other hand, the understanding that life does not necessarily proceed from the institution of cause and effect within a limited human-centred construct of time, gives rise to a special kind of patience. Mahant-ji and the Foundation make plans and act to relate to the situation in which they find themselves, but the perspective from which they act is quite different from what we are used to in Australia.

'Have you had time to dream with the river today?' Mahant-ji used to ask us, as we rushed round being busy Westerners working towards important goals. He always said it seriously, in his mellow voice, and as he said it he smiled. Of course he knew where our priorities inevitably lay. It's hard to say whether it was his smile, or the Tulsi Ghat setting with the sounds of monkeys cavorting around outside, but there was the suggestion: 'No act breeds an act. And so eternity, the bent meaning of the river.'<sup>54</sup> On this project with its unfamiliar frameworks of time there was no escaping the irony of getting worked up about our roles, schedules and plans. What was less obvious to me then, was that however difficult to discern, there is a space in which it is productive to let be.

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<sup>53</sup> *ibid.* p112

<sup>54</sup> Raja Rao, *op. cit.* p8

Tale, told to be told .../Are you truthful? ...

## THE CONSUMER EXPERIENCE

... water generally stimulates the consumer's thermal sensitivity, enabling the consumer to enjoy water's coolness. The consumer's mechanical sensitivity is also stimulated, so that water's fluidity is appreciated. In addition, filling a glass can evoke pleasant hearing sensations, and drinking water, when it is fizzy, can stimulate the consumer's common chemical sensitivity (fizzy water contains excess carbon dioxide, which is acidic in water), making the water pungent.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> AWWA, *Identification and Treatment of Tastes and Odors in Drinking Water*, p15

4.

'TO MOUTH, TO MOUTH, TO MOUTH'<sup>1</sup>; WATER RELATIONS

### **Water Qualities**

In its global aspect, water's circulation is powerfully defined by the fact that it moves in a closed system in which little of the water which was present at the Earth's beginnings has been lost, and no new water added either.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, it is not in the nature of water to be systematic. It is known to wander. In this chapter, The Northern Rivers, South Africa, Sydney and South Australia form the terrain which the water conversation traverses. A perceptible track runs through, in the form of a list of brand name mineral waters.

Water's wanderings are deeply relational, and this piece acknowledges that land, water and people are inseparable – my country is part of me.<sup>3</sup> Yet much of the focus is on taps, pipes, dams and drinking. From this perspective 'water quality' is an essential reference to potable drinking water. However, I stray from enclosed views and show water quality in terms of a human-water relationship with a view to allowing the qualities of water in our lives in a more extensive sense than would apply in the National Health and Medical Research Council's water quality guidelines.<sup>4</sup>

This piece of writing arises from the hospitality and responsiveness of the classroom, the waterworks and the intimacy of being in a car on an errand. It reflects my interest in multiplicity, the dialogic, and the sounds of every day water talk. In our local dam, Rocky Creek, there is a device beneath the surface which co-mingles the different layers of water to keep the temperature even. Here it is as if I turn such a mingling device on to the voices of experts and non-experts as they talk. This brings to the surface the many cultural layers and relations revealed by the water conversation and discloses the range of ways we may think and speak about this life-basic, drinking water.

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<sup>1</sup> Kath McMillan and Barbara Miller, *Water Conversation Records 1999/2000*

<sup>2</sup> Perhaps 0.2% since the planet was formed. See Philip Ball, *H<sub>2</sub>O, A Biography of Water*, p19

<sup>3</sup> *My Country, a Part of Me*, slogan, International Year of the World's Indigenous People, 1993

<sup>4</sup> These guidelines represent the minimum standard for drinking water quality in Australia.

The title of the chapter comes from a collaborative exercise in a writing class, 'riffing on language',<sup>5</sup> inventing dialogue in which water writers Kath and Barbara speak for coke and water, and conclude their piece:

*Ask any child what they'd rather drink!*

*To mouth, to mouth, to mouth.*

Here I am taken with the way the final line bespeaks the caress of water, habitual repetition, survival, multiple mouths. This immediacy is at the centre of what I set out to investigate.

### **An intimation of water conversation**

Here's a list I keep adding to. Do you have any you could add?

*Aqua Pura*

*Nature's Best*

*Clear Springs*

*Palm Springs*

*Lithgow Valley Springs*

*Rain Farm*

*Santa Teresa*

*Mount Franklin*

### **At Home in Water Every Day**

Lists, in the form of writing I practice, are a form of hospitality, an invitation for people to make themselves known. Everyone has something to give: an insight, an experience,

an image. The bottled water list was not intimidating, and it grew. In *Water! an Everyday Subject*, a six week writing course at Lismore's Adult and Community Education (ACE), it set the scene for the question: What is this Water?

Drinking is our most immediate everyday experience of water. Each time a sip of water disappears from the bright outside world of dancing glass, leaving a sense trace on the lips, it shares in the open channel of the body. It knows the dark cave and capillary space better than the one who picked up the glass, takes its cue from the epiglottis to flow down into its work of dissolving, transporting and becoming part of the cellular and molecular elements of the drinker.

It made sense to me to keep coming back to tap water and domestic water in general as a beginning point in this collaborative investigation of water – the Greek root of the word 'ecology' is home. My ambition for interactive, participatory writing activity was that it might play a gentle role in making us more 'at home', more knowledgeable and responsive to where and how we live, inside and beyond the body. I was confident that 'the world could be seen without leaving the house' as the Taoist expression puts it, or without leaving the salon, as evoked in this piece from Murray Bail's *Eucalyptus*:

She had just come in from the country, and hadn't even had time to change her dress. The apprentice hairdresser was gazing into the rinsing basin, pressed against her neck. Dust rinsing to lazy brown river water swirled into the basin where it rose to the level of dam water, pale brown as if translucent in sunlight, and the water in the basin was warm and dam-shaped too. A residue of pale sand settled at the bottom. Such country-brown water never made an appearance in the urban environment; certainly not in the salon at Double Bay. To the young apprentice ... it spoke of space, summer paddocks, isolated trees. Moving his hands in the muddy water he expected to come up against a yabby or a gumleaf ...<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> A phrase and practice learned from performance writer Christine Evans. She speaks of how words can 'springboard off in different directions and then lock together again' 'The Telstra Adelaide Festival Forums' in *playworks*, vol.7, no.2, p17

<sup>6</sup> *Eucalyptus*, pp172,173



Water is a 'pathway to each other and to everyone else.'<sup>7</sup> The word 'yabby' produces a particularly Australian sense of destination, and these little freshwater crayfish did cross our paths in various places. Yet my experience in community writing alerts me to how many story and place crossings can come out in an Australian context. To focus on all the water stories, wherever they begin and develop is to discover community inflected with the influences of instability as much as stability. At the same time anyone lingering on the taste of water comes into a sense of material commonality with others 'that we can perceive *with our senses*'<sup>8</sup> (*my italics*), a fresh experience of connection based on 'our perceptions of our realities.'<sup>9</sup>

In the fairly recent past a great deal of cultural production and reflection has been devoted to 'place' in the broadest sense, with the terms 'territory,' 'land,' 'earth,' 'terrain,' and 'mapping', featuring in both theoretical investigation and in practice.<sup>10</sup> CCD 'place-making' work has also undertaken the project of making a contribution to critical understandings of locality and place. My previous work with Mary Hutchison reflects this concern. It set out to make a mark on people's sense of Canberra, the National Capital, as a place which has grown out of ordinary people's journeys, efforts and interests in building a city, to give a sense of 'the fabric of a local community and its setting, as something that is made of many varied threads ... plural or perhaps multiple, rather than a single entity.'<sup>11</sup>

Now those threads ripple into the light and shade of drinks and showers, drains and creeks, and I begin seeing water as an open, flowing, infinitely connecting and immediate way of touching on similar questions. Water is global and yet very place-related. It works its way through individual lives in an understated way, extending out in patterns that have the potential to unsettle universal notions of place and culture. Its flow and influence can be paralleled with other global phenomena, for example the flow of money, images, electronic media and markets, all of which in turn are implicated in

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<sup>7</sup> Epeli Hau'ofa, in *The Ocean in Us*, p409. He proposes the ocean as an identifying commonality for the culturally diverse Pacific nations. There is necessarily a limit to the way in which island nations look beyond a primary loyalty to their own lands and traditions. Yet in a global world it is in their interest to do so, since their history is one of damaging strategic and romantic identifications by colonial powers.

<sup>8</sup> Hau'ofa, *ibid.* p407

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.* p398

<sup>10</sup> Lucy Lippard, *op. cit.* pp117-118

water's flow today. Water and its flow are very much the subject of global market forces, as well as global environmental contingencies. It could be said that flow has become the very language of globalisation. At a time when previously circumscribed place-based identities seem to be being supplanted by broader 'virtual' and global influences, water is an interesting area in which to explore being at home. 'The social bond,' says Derrida,

is a certain experience of the *unbinding* without which no respiration, no spiritual inspiration would be possible. Recollection, indeed being-together itself presupposes infinite separation.

In this paradoxical manner, Derrida invokes 'an at-home-with-oneself' as *no longer ... a sort of nature or rootedness, but a response to a wandering, to the phenomenon of wandering it brings to a halt.*<sup>12</sup>

### **Lessons in water**

1.

Murray Bail's deep look into a rinsing basin was a reading in an early meeting of the water writing group. We read from many other texts, did a water tasting and visited the water treatment works.<sup>13</sup> Water came into all our sessions, often in unconventional containers. It spoke to us, as I've recorded here:

*The large jar of water pours more water over my shoe than in the glass. Apparently the sign Pisces is about feet as well as fish, so this is appropriate. Everyone has the same style of little glass from the staff room. Some go ahead with sipping and tasting before the exercise begins. It's a bit festive. Everyone getting to know each other and water better. Getting to know the water of each other. The different perceptions.*<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Annie Bolitho and Mary Hutchison, p125

<sup>12</sup> Jacques Derrida in *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, p92 (my italics)

<sup>13</sup> This focussed the discussion on a bulk water supply, rather than on broader networks of water supply systems and the issues of getting water from where it is treated to the tap without adding bugs

<sup>14</sup> Annie Bolitho, *Water Conversation Records 1999/2000*

What kind of water is in the large, slopping water jar? In the bottles that Elena and Jay pull out of their bags? In Kath's green glass bottle with white wired stopper? For the sake of simplicity, but without being drawn unduly towards the poles of contrast, let's look at the waters that happen to come to the meeting in terms of those which have received treatment and those which are raw. There is something of a parallel here with the terms Levi-Strauss coined to distinguish 'the cooked' from the 'raw'<sup>15</sup> to differentiate between what has been prepared and given meaning in cultural terms, and what has not been imbued with cultural interpretation and practices.

Elena's water is Lismore tap water that has been through a home filter. The water in Jay's bottle has been drawn off from a vending machine next door to the supermarket. It is Lismore water which has been through reverse osmosis filtering and ozone treatment. Barbara brings no water from home. She gets tap water from the ACE kitchen. Lismore water has gone through a sophisticated treatment. Unlike many rural and regional supplies, it is filtered – through a gravel bed, in a dissolved air flotation system. Because this minimises the dirt, and hence the bacteria present in the water, it only needs to be 'finished' with chloramine, unlike unfiltered water which requires a heavier treatment. Kath has untreated tank water – it's rain water. I've brought in the water in the large jar, from a local spring. You can see it hasn't been treated – it has some soft flying green particles in it. I've also picked up some brand name mineral water. As with my privately garnered water, there is no regulatory requirement that this bottled water meet any particular standards.

Not present at our table is potable reuse water. Reclaimed water will soon be available as an option at a local Lismore housing development – Perradenya – which Rous Water has initiated as a model for sustainability. Encouraging interest in water reuse is an important step for all water suppliers in the light of consumer demand and finite future sources. Although there will be costs, such as a water treatment plant and separate reticulation, in making the reuse option available at the development, there is a \$5000 incentive offered to purchasers who choose to take it up. Like Jay's water it will be highly filtered, in this case through ultra-fine, membranous microfilters. Although

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<sup>15</sup> *The Raw and The Cooked, Introduction to a Science of Mythology: 1*, 1970

reclaimed water has to be highly treated and meet the highest standards, the fact that it has been used before makes it seem primitive or 'raw,' in the Levi-Strauss sense. This status carries with it implications of possible danger and the necessity to treat with caution.

One of the water conversationalists, Gayle, brings along a saying from Thoreau: 'Water is the only drink for the wise man.' Thoreau is suggesting a movement away from forgetfulness of what keeps us alive. At the same time, his maxim is part of an outlook in which water is seen as something of nature, rather than the culturally mediated and socially reproduced product which the range on our table represents. The canon of nature writing, in which Thoreau occupies a legendary position, has often proceeded from a position of alienational otherness, Patrick Murphy argues.<sup>16</sup> Murphy would like to see relation posited as the 'primary mode of human-human and human-nature interaction without conflating difference, particularity, and other specificities'<sup>17</sup> in this genre. Relation, in the form of influences, uncertainties and potentials for disagreement or common ground are certainly on view in the classroom water tasting. The active witness and practice of taking water, *to mouth, to mouth, to mouth* brings to light a heterarchical sense of difference. This is in line with Bakhtin's notion of *anotherness*<sup>18</sup> which is more complex and, it could be said, disorganised, than a one dimensional non-hierarchical difference.

In relation and in anotherness, our group lifts glasses of water. I ask everyone to look closely at it, at how light falls on it, at how it touches the rim of the glass. Save for the spring water, it is very difficult to **see** anything but water. Murphy notes that the verb to converse, the active intention of my project, stems from the root *conversari*, meaning to live with.<sup>19</sup> This supports my interest in bringing the water we 'live with' to class and 'living with it' more closely, through conversation and good companionship, rather than treating water with reverence as an object of nature.<sup>20</sup> *Conversari* comes from

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<sup>16</sup> See 'Voicing Another Nature' in *A Dialogue of Voices, Feminist Literary Theory and Bakhtin*, p59

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.* p63

<sup>18</sup> *id.*

<sup>19</sup> *id.*

<sup>20</sup> Murphy comments on a piety which is often associated with nature writing, *ibid.* p65

*conversare*, the act of turning around. What effect will this turning around of the bottles and the large jar and the little glasses, this turning around of stories and opinions and uncertainties, have on our perceptions of water?

*Phoebe's response to water tasting: 'It felt very expansive, this sense of the big world of water that got opened up. There was a sense of it coming from so many voices, almost like a choral work – all those voices singing up water together.'*<sup>21</sup>

In dialogic terms, the variety of dimensions of exchange that provide the ground of otherness make a difference in the way we see our drinking and each other, and in turn to the way in which our experience of water will later come to be read.

A key dimension of our water drinking exchange is that as drinkers we are consumers. Water is part of a broad trend in capitalism, in which the commodity form extends into ever-new spheres.<sup>22</sup> The American Water Association News regularly reports on takeovers of water supplies and of water and waste-water plants worldwide, as demonstrated in the example later in this chapter. Locally the almost invisible custodian of public works, Rous County Council takes on a full frontal corporate identity as Rous Water, within the context of National Competition Policy. Changing water's status to commodity legitimates its manipulation and management, and does not sit well with those who see it as a fundamental element of life, with strong metaphorical and spiritual associations. Is it a form of piety to suggest that diminishing these cultural values is to the detriment of water in its fullness?

William, a class member, speaks of water as a sort of 'pure gratuitousness'<sup>23</sup> and grieves its change in status. The alternative North Coast culture of which he is part has a history of informal and non-standardised exchange and a distrust of regulation. It respects spirituality in many forms. On the other hand, those operating in the pragmatic

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<sup>21</sup> Phoebe Havyatt, *Water Conversation Records*, op. cit.

<sup>22</sup> see John Frow, in *Time and Commodity Culture, Essays in Cultural Theory and Postmodernity*, 1997, pp130-152 for an extended discussion of the commodity form

context of water management see the desire to have water belong in an order of exchange outside the 'contractual rationality of the commodity,'<sup>24</sup> as nostalgia for a bygone era.<sup>25</sup> However, as much as there was resistance to the enclosure of the commons, there is a marked resistance to water becoming a commodity, though at this stage, few notable reversals.<sup>26</sup> In the case of water, the best known contemporary example is when the people of Bolivian city of Cochabamba held out against water prices imposed by IWL (International Waters of London) in April 2000. Six people died in the protests.<sup>27</sup>

I recognise William's name when he comes to the first meeting. He has written more than once to the local papers on the subject of water pricing. At the first meeting I noted:

*In the first half hour William expresses his dissatisfaction with Rous Water. He is fed up with the corporate nature of their mission and that they have bought real estate with Lismore residents' money. Why should they be making money out of us? 'I have had dealings with the General Manager,' he says, implying that these dealings are not yet over.*

*Catherine comes back at him. 'We are part of how we got that way ...' People have opinions. Different views.'*<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Derrida, quoted in Frow, *ibid.* p108. Derrida is referring to the complex relations involved in the 'gift' and suggesting that there is no such thing as 'pure gratuitousness.'

<sup>24</sup> Frow, *ibid.* p217

<sup>25</sup> I read Frow as taking the view that commodification is part of our culture and that the best that can be done from a critical cultural standpoint, is to look at what is not predictably systemic about it. See pp 142,143

<sup>26</sup> Frow comments on the way resistance and reversals mark the extension of the commodity form, p135.

<sup>27</sup> See 'New British Empire of the Dammed' *Guardian Weekly* April 27-May 3 2000. This uprising highlights tricky issues relating to water *supply systems*. In 2000, the Canadian activist Maude Barlow praised what had happened. Two years later she acknowledged that the cooperative-run water system was out of its depth, with neither capital or experience. "'Why can you find money for a private company and not a public company?'" she asked, arguing that international agencies should help local water authorities run water utilities.' See Mort Rosenblum, *Who Owns the Water? Suez, Vivendi, RWE or you and me?*, p2

<sup>28</sup> Annie Bolitho, *Water Conversation Records*, *op. cit.*

Putting a price on water has an enabling and productive aspect. There are costs involved in giving water a good treatment and creating and maintaining the infrastructure of dams, pipes and reservoirs. None of this comes for free. However, the most significant justification for charging for water is that people will see and use water differently when they're paying for it. Of all the things that motivate people not to waste water, dollar savings is most powerful. They don't use as much. Where 'water conservation' was largely an ethical category, water pricing brings together water management and micro-economic reform. As it turns out, it may not be the case that not as much water gets used in this system. In the domain of water rights, entitlements and trading associated with the irrigation industry, there is an accompanying interest in 'water security'. Water security can entail hoarding, with individuals gaining vast entitlements (see Ch. 5, Chorus).

Water as an 'unelaborated primary product'<sup>29</sup> easily becomes a generalised abstraction and loses the qualities implicit in it being part of manifold social relationships full of impressions, experiences and stories, which contribute to its 'historicity and social peculiarity'.<sup>30</sup> The limiting, destructive aspects of commodification concern people. Major corporations such as Ondeo, Vivendi Universal, Suez, RWE-Thames Water and Bechtel-United provide freshwater services for profit. Water conservation can no longer say what it used to about respect for water. This makes it a good time for a water conversation. *Water! An Everyday Subject* touches on the soft spot in people's love of water. William appreciates the opportunity to have his say here.

2.

Nightcap is a name that might call you to visit, it is so evocative. Some might even find it suggestive, with resonances of delicious invitations to 'come up for a nightcap!' Suffice to say that the Nightcap Water Treatment Works, where North Coast water is treated is, is not a factory-like, synthetic environment. The rainforest is a mown strip away from the carpark. The walk up to the main door is through birdsnest ferns and treeferns. You do come up against a scale model of the operating system under

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<sup>29</sup> Frow, op. cit. p132

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*

plexiglass and a range of instrumentation in the foyer. But the strongest impression is of water talking at its loudest, gushing and crashing, as if one were approaching dramatic water features, like rapids or falls. Once one has been initiated through taking a tour, it is clear the impetus and movement of bulk water through the treatment operations is ordered. It is just that the rush into channels and the dispersal of oxygen through the water which finds its way into the tanks, is on a very large scale. Steve and Phil, the blokes who operate it, are at home with technology and daily attune to the fine details of water arriving and leaving from the plant.

When guests from Sydney and Canberra enjoy and appreciate my water and ask where it's from, and want to take it home in bottles, I could talk about a dam and flocculation tanks and finishing with final ph adjustment and chloramine. I think, in fact, that they expect me to say tank water rather than town water. But, believing that it is this water's contact with its source that makes it memorable, I say, 'From the forest – it's rainforest water.' They like the water even more when they attribute this meaning to what they've taken from the tap. It goes with my relationship with the land source of the water I am able to offer. The remnant rainforest country of the Big Scrub.

The contemporary obsession with bottled water and mineral water is hard for the treatment works operators to fathom. Simply in terms of the investment, it does not add up:

*300 mls for \$3.50 – that is bloody expensive water! We supply water at 70c a kilolitre – that's a thousand litres. How could the mineral water companies be losing?<sup>31</sup>*

Knowledge of the chemical composition of water is second nature to Phil. His second nature is a culture he imparts to me, so that I too will come to talk of 'sending out' water after treatment to reservoirs and tap and find it odd that it is not more common knowledge that all water has traces of the land in it. Iron with its rusty taste features in the Rocky Creek supply. Then there's potassium, which gives sweetness, magnesium



and calcium that give water hardness. A little bit of sodium and magnesium makes for a nicer water. The sulphate aspect can be problematic. It is in the nature of water that it comes from the land, or is part of the land and its processes.

These processes open out to very large perspectives:

The composition of the oceans has been constant on a time scale of millions and years. However, the composition of surface waters and groundwaters continually evolves and changes on time scales of minutes to years, as these waters move along hydrologic flow paths that bring them into contact with a variety of geologic materials and biological systems.<sup>32</sup>

There are a huge variety of influences on fogs, mists, dews, dust movements and rain, otherwise known as atmospheric deposition. Naturally occurring CO<sub>2</sub> and anthropogenic emissions in industrial areas both contribute to acidity. Sea salts in coastal areas and volcanic particulates and gases from eruptions also penetrate water in the atmosphere. Thus altered, it is then 'modified by biological processes as it passes through the vegetative canopy and upper organic soil horizons and by mineral-weathering processes as the deposition passes through underlying mineral soil and bedrock.'<sup>33</sup>

It is contact with the vegetative canopy of Whian Whian State Forest and its upper organic soil horizons to which my guests' tastebuds respond. In the light of the contemporary demand, knowing they work with rainforest water, the operators at the Nightcap Water Treatment Works fantasise about Rous Water bottling its product under the label *Nightcap*, and putting it into a specialist market, like the military, or an airline.

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<sup>31</sup> Phil Littlewood, *Water Conversation Records*, op. cit.

<sup>32</sup> Owen Bricker and Blair Jones, 'Main factors Affecting the Composition of Natural Waters,' p1 – a reading in the 'water conversation' groups.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.* p1

Wayne Franklin, their superior at Rous Water, also ponders the relationship between a public supplier and its rank-and-file consumers, one which has to involve him in questions of public taste, and is puzzled that people make such a strong distinction between his water and bottled water:

*Water quality is complex because no two sources of water are the same. It's affected by the environment. People see water as a pure product with nothing in it. The water with nothing in it is distilled water – anyone drinking it would comment on its bland unpalatable quality. All water is flavoured with trace elements. People think that anything in water's bad for them. The minerals that are local to the catchment where the water's taken from are what people get excited about in bottled water. But tapwater has them too – my major concern is this misconception.<sup>34</sup>*

3.

When I ask Bandjalang elder Uncle Fletcher Roberts about water, he always reflects on it as intimately related to survival. 'In our cultural tradition water is very precious,' he says. When he speaks of the apartheid-style moves and resettlements his people went through in the Lismore area, from the late 1800s till the late 1950s, all his stories involve elders making considered decisions in confined circumstances on the basis of having good water to drink and clean with. Of there being a spring on a hill or a certain curve in the river. I notice how, at the mouth of the river at Ballina, at the river's edge at Cabbage Tree Island, on the bridge in Lismore, he smiles in a certain way and says, 'My Richmond River'. He makes it the beginning of his accounts, emphasising an unbroken connection with this river.

*I drop Fletcher off at his place after driving round town and 'over North.' There's the moment before getting out of the car when you can get into the conversation you haven't quite had. I am a girl with wounded pride. My contact at Rous Water never responds to my calls. They don't particularly want what I have to offer. He hears me*

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<sup>34</sup> Wayne Franklin, *Water Conversation Records*, op. cit.

*out in my struggle. 'No wonder,' he says, 'they want to keep it for themselves.' His response jolts me, and I see the experience I am having of ownership and claim in perspective.*<sup>35</sup>

### **Losing one's head for water**

*Mount Lofty / Currumbin Springs/ Great Divide Natural Spring Water/ Linton Park /  
Mount Aqua / Spring Plus*

The land is in water, as water is in the land Aboriginal teachings remind us. They cannot be rationalised apart, in spite of having the most irrational of rationalities imposed on them in an effort to do so. Conversely, what might seem irrational can prove very practical. There are different ways of 'losing one's head' for water. Hugh Webb's exploration of Aboriginal country as a 'way of being', contains an extraordinary account of a moment from the nineteenth century, in which life depends on doing that. I relate to it strongly because it features George Grey, who belongs to South Africans as well as Australians, as one of the more benign British colonial administrators. Webb's record is from Western Australia and takes Grey right out of the frock coat in which I would imagine him, and puts him with his bum up and his feet in the air, apparently without any head. The lost head is buried in a mud hole, sucking in water. He and his party have been saved from dying of thirst by an Aboriginal man named Kaiber, and survive through giving up their heads and western rationality to moist mud, and drinking the land.<sup>36</sup>

Western rationality makes for an unexpected commonality between Lismore and Johannesburg, where I grew up. Lismore was sited 'to get cedar away', as old locals put it, on the Richmond River. Johannesburg was sited on the highveld for mining gold. The colonial emphasis on setting up places specifically to exploit resources was central to their siting. In any other terms, it would be a case of 'having lost your head' to build

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<sup>35</sup> Annie Bolitho, *Dwelling on Water, Notebook 4*

<sup>36</sup> Hugh Webb, 'Aboriginal Country, Not a Construction, a Way of Being' in *Western Australian Wetlands*, 1996, p72

a sub-tropical town at the centre of a floodplain, or to have a city in a dry climate grow up on a plateau without a water source.<sup>37</sup>

I grew into knowing qualities of ‘naturalness’ in water on the yellow South African highveld through water in dams: the artificial Zoo Lake, the mine tailings dam, Wemmer Pan, and the effluent dam, Mac Dam, which was most significant, because it was pretty much ours. Our family went there, year in and year out, on special Sunday afternoons. It was part of my engineer father's vision which we knew as ‘the farm’. Through effluent irrigated pasture stocked with prime Charolais, Herefords and Afrikaners ran the water from Johannesburg Sewerage Works, into a series of seven dams. The last dam was Mac Dam. Here Val Bolitho, my father, and a fellow engineer stood at the water's edge and confidently drank a glass of purified water on the opening of the Northern Works project in 1959, as the water ran on beneath their feet to join the little Jukskei River, which finally would meet the Orange and go on to the sea.

There is a contingency which William Kentridge points out is ‘built in’ to the landscape round Johannesburg<sup>38</sup> which throws a lack of certainty over my memories of Mac Dam, with its masses of egrets flying home to roost in skeleton trees at sunset. A shifting, unstable quality marked the environment to the north in which I soaked up the sense that a city's purified water was part of me. It marked the monumental pale gold mine dumps to the south, which were taken away in the 90s in a slurry, to be reprocessed for the remaining gold, when the right technology appeared. This provisional quality appeared natural, and indeed one's bodily experience of nature was informed by the way landscape had been put in place by ‘the tractors of civil engineering.’<sup>39</sup>

My father's defiance of the conventions of what constituted potable water was held in a firm ultra-rational understanding that went beyond the respectful to the sacred, and infiltrated the family's bodies and belief system. It inflects a slight element of caution in the face of my mother, a young woman sitting sideways on to her brood, brought in under the thorn tree for a photo at the concrete picnic table. She drew the line at

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<sup>37</sup> In the 1990s more water for Johannesburg was needed, resulting in the construction of a major dam in neighbouring Lesotho

<sup>38</sup> Kentridge in Conversation with Okwui Enwezor, in 'Truth and Responsibility, in *Parkett 54*, p165

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*

swimming. We accepted this, and were satisfied with playing for hours in the steadily flowing spillway water, examining algae where they built up, and making daring crossings over slippery patches to the dam wall to look out at the veld.

When I tell a friend who used to work at Sydney Water's Malabar plant the story of the engineer drinking the outputs of his scheme, he says categorically, 'I would never drink treated sewage.' But on second thought he says, 'If I've drunk from certain rivers, I've certainly drunk re-used water.' We share a certain culture, as part of the tribe of children of engineers, each with our own peculiar interests in 'works.' My own is quite apparent in my ready acceptance of the Nightcap operators lessons in water. Rosslyn Prosser talks of her father's interests having been handed down to her 'through absorption.'<sup>40</sup> She names the specialists engaged with the visions that sent tractors into action to build the large Australian water storage dams of the 50s, *Water Dreamers*. In a sun-drenched text, she subverts Bachelard's *Water and Dreams, an Essay on the Imagination of Matter*<sup>41</sup> to invoke a sense of the concrete nature of Australian water imaginings of that time. Here I find a companion across colonialisms.

Hi Ros, I met you a number of years ago I think. An oral history conference in Brisbane? A dinner in a Turkish restaurant? Do you remember we talked? – my father was a Water Dreamer too, the Chief Sewerage Engineer of Johannesburg. Reading what you wrote was a great pleasure, a reminder of fathers and water, construction and distance. Above all it is a reminder that I do not understand, in the knowing way that you do who grew here, the subject of water in Australia. The piece allows me to feel again a complete outsider from that sun, that drought and flood-prone country. The identity myths I am steeped in are seemingly different. What grew on us was the myth and unsustainability of the political ideology. You are concerned with the myth and unsustainability of the agricultural and economic vision. They are equally to do with European interventions – measuring and containing and constructing and ordering. I not only feel you as part of the land, but as the land observing the certainties and madman qualities of the engineer. I am led through his obsession to what I found

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<sup>40</sup> Rosslyn Prosser, 'Water Dreamers,' in *Republica* 3, p193

<sup>41</sup> Gaston Bachelard, 1983

a wonderfully understated point, the bit when he turns his back on the fringe-dwellers and the camp. In that silence I found the Australian legacy which quietly separates people and land to deliver the vision. Although you say nothing about the Murri people's without-European-orderness, this and the clutter of personal things from his gladstone bag, that you document, sit strongly together for me. Where is the meaning and where is the dream? Thanks for these water dreams  
Ros – so beautiful. Annie

PS Post-structuralism takes on a literal quality in the era of the demise of faith in mega-dam projects, doesn't it? The news headline when Cahill came to set off the explosion for the excavation of the outlet tunnel at our local Rocky Creek Dam was *Minister Calls For Unity Against Forces of Iniquity*<sup>42</sup> – I think there were coal strikes on at the time. Dams, so much associated with unity, and the idea that the only way unity might ever divide was into opposites. And now small farm dams are being given prominence in water management for the way they impact on the hydrology of rural NSW!

During the time of my thesis research, my childhood 'farm' becomes part of a global mega-corporation.

>>From: news <[news@awa.asn.au](mailto:news@awa.asn.au)>

>>To: annieb@om.com.au

>>Subject: AWA water news for w/e 8 April 2001 (MA)

>>Date: Tue, 10 Apr 2001 18:23:09 +1000

Operation of JOHANNESBURG'S 6 wastewater treatment plants has been let out on a 5-year contract to ONDEO SERVICES, previously Suez Lyonnaise Des Eaux.<sup>43</sup>

I had a kind of baptism in spillway water which was beyond the pale of social acceptance. Now I am drawn to invite people to experience the *jouissance* of finding a language for it in all its forms, an experience outside control by mega-corporations,

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<sup>42</sup> *The Northern Star*, 12 Aug. 1949

<sup>43</sup> Ondeo covers upwards of 70% of the world's water supply systems, with business in the region of \$300 billion US per year

governments or single individuals, and beyond ideologically bound ideas. Roland Barthes points evocatively to the way in which texts become erotic through eluding a tendency toward certainty and the ideological bent of society. Water comes to us in an 'enclitic' language (the language produced and spread under the protection of power) which is 'statutorily a language of repetition. All official institutions of language are repeating machines ... all continually repeat the same structure, the same meaning, often the same words: the stereotype is a political fact, the major figure of ideology. Confronting it, the New is bliss.'<sup>44</sup>

In one of the early sessions of *Water! an Everyday Subject* everyone introduced themselves via a water word. The incongruity of slipping into the language of water for the sake of itself, made the activity 'unexpected, succulent in its newness.'<sup>45</sup> The words 'glistened.'<sup>46</sup>

*flourish/river/ precipitation/ flush /slippery (as in slime slippery)/ aqua / drip/living waters/flow*

Ursula le Guin speaks of the way in which naming allows us to claim aspects of reality.<sup>47</sup> Here, people commented on how simply producing this list, and the fact that the list then existed as a written collaboration, had a refreshing effect upon them. 'It's funny, says le Guin, 'by naming a thing, do we think we get control over it? I think we do. That's how magic works.'<sup>48</sup>

### **Speaking of water, rumour and code**

*Hartz / Splitrock Still / Splitrock Lightly Carbonated / Down Under/ Mountain Valley/Fresh/Vittel*

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<sup>44</sup> *The Pleasure of the Text*, p40

<sup>45</sup> Barthes, *ibid.* p42

<sup>46</sup> *id.*

<sup>47</sup> Ursula le Guin in an interview with Jonathan White 'Coming Back from the Silence', *Whole Earth Review*, Spring 1995, p80

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*

What is involved for those in the water conversation group wanting to make 'healthy' decisions about drinking water quality? Post-modern realities have expanded the public health interests of corporate water suppliers and the choices of those they supply. At one time there was apparently a single story. Rous Water's Operations Manager, Wayne Franklin, tells the old 'progressive' public health story<sup>49</sup>:

*It's strange that people are so much hung up on drinking bottled water, when the greatest advance with human health was a clean water supply.*

It is in the nature of regulation, Julia Kristeva reminds us, that since it is always potentially falsifiable and is born out of a desire to standardise, that it supposes and generates breaches and transgressions.<sup>50</sup> The standardised 'new world order', may have advantages, such as being protected from injurious effects to health. However, 'we no longer speak of guilt but of dangerousness, no longer of fault, or accident, for example, but of compensation and hence of liability and security.'<sup>51</sup>

Rous Water meets its fair share of regulatory criteria. In a single fragmentary conversation, Wayne Franklin moves quickly into describing an essential ingredient in the discourse of 'the new public health'<sup>52</sup>:

*Risk management is on everyone's lips these days. In the old days you accepted when things went wrong – people took a more philosophical point of view. These days we're required to assess risks and build in safety measures to guard against them. The new*

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<sup>49</sup> Alan Petersen and Deborah Lupton, *The New Public Health, Health and Self in the Age of Risk*, 1996, p2, go into detail about this 19<sup>th</sup> century tradition of reform

<sup>50</sup> Julia Kristeva in 'What Good are Artists Today,' p29.

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> Petersen and Lupton, *op.cit.* p18



*treatment works at Emigrant Creek – the first thing we’ll do is a risk management strategy.*<sup>53</sup>

Sociological theorists such as Beck and Giddens have drawn attention to risk as an ever-evolving leitmotif of the contemporary world, and the impact this has on everyday practices. ‘As experts identify new sources of risk, the norms for risk-avoiding behaviour change, and new forms of intervention are called for ... For the individual, it would seem, part of living in the ‘risk society’ is to be always aware of risk; to build risk appraisal into one’s “life planning.”<sup>54</sup>

*Jay: I don’t drink the water out of the tap here.*

*Liz: Oh you’re lucky, you’ve got tank water have you?*

*Jay: No, I buy it.*

*Liz: Do you? Rather than drink Rocky Creek water?*

*Jay: Yeah from the machine up at the Square – yeah it’s really cheap.*

*Liz: And is it really good water – filtrated?*

*Jay: Yes it’s gone through a whole process – it’s really nice*

*Liz: I’ve never seen it.*

*Jay: You know where Coles is, you know where the ATM machine is – it’s next door there. It’s a big vending machine. I think it’s 60c for two litres. It’s a water machine. You go and take your container.*

*Annie: If we had another week, we could not only go to Nightcap Water Treatment Works, we could go up to the Square as a group to the vending machine.*

*Jay: And watch me fill my water bottle!*<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Wayne Franklin, *Water Conversation Records*, op. cit.

<sup>54</sup> Giddens 1991 in Petersen and Lupton, op. cit. p20

<sup>55</sup> Liz Chandler, Jay Schell, *Water Conversation Records*, op. cit.

The sounds of the water conversation. Some call it 'idle water talk.'<sup>56</sup> Laypersons and specialists make themselves heard. No-one speaks from a recognised centre.

Connections float between various outlooks on water, between people and place.

*As a former detective senior constable working in the wilds of Sydney's western suburbs, Ian 'Hoops' Hooper became au fait with all the lurks and scams tried on by all sorts of scoundrels. He knew the worst and the best of them – both scams and scoundrels. Ian also worked out winning 'scams' and reckons he has come up with a beauty bottler of a business venture – selling sparkling clean and refreshing drinking water. Ian has installed a huge vending machine at Lismore Shopping Square, where it dispenses Nature's Best purified drinking water.<sup>57</sup>*

At some distance from ockerdom, the writer John Berger dwells on the question of how he represents a range of voices and perspectives in his work. He talks of a critic recognising one of his pieces for its a-synthetic form, and terming it 'a requiem.'<sup>58</sup>

Requiem has a suitable solemnity for the collective voice-form of these water times. An article in Lismore's *Northern Star* about a cyanide spill from the Esmeralda gold mine into the Danube, not long before contaminated through the bombing of oil refineries and chemical and fertiliser plants in the Kosova conflict,<sup>59</sup> sits alongside an article about similar risks of cyanide pollution into the headwaters of the Clarence, from Timbarra gold mine.<sup>60</sup> However, a requiem is something sombre and on a large scale. I prefer another idea which Berger alludes to – a collection of voices which does not speak from any kind of centre, or from conditions of 'the minimum of security'<sup>61</sup> – here, 'everything is makeshift, nothing is controllable, everything is inexplicable, the only voice is the *voice of rumour*.'<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Suggested by Barbara Miller

<sup>57</sup> 'I'll Drink to That', *Northern Rivers Echo*, 29 Apr. 99

<sup>58</sup> Berger is talking specifically of what is left in and left out of *The Lilac and the Flag* see interview with Nikos Papastergiadis in 'The Act of Approaching,' in *Dialogues in the Diasporas, Essays and Conversations on Cultural Identity*, pp 25,26

<sup>59</sup> 'Cyanide Spill Keeps Spreading', *The Northern Star*, 16 Feb. 2000

<sup>60</sup> 'Bishop Seeks Review', *ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> John Berger, *op. cit.* p26

<sup>62</sup> *ibid.* pp26,27. Berger is speaking of the Turkish writer Latiffe Tekin's *Tales from the Garbage Hills*, a story of an ever-shifting world.

The voice of rumour particularly suits a time in which information on water quality is taken up from various sources – anecdotes, newspaper reports, advertising, friendly advice and warning, websites, local government leaflets. It played a huge role in the Sydney Water Crisis. It gives the sense of a time when lay people have legitimate claim to debate the social assumptions and models framing expert knowledge.<sup>63</sup> It reflects the tone of confidence and confidentiality that comes into talk about choices and decisions on drinking water, and the anxiety that may colour discussion on the implications of information.

New information is equally part of the world of water provision. Donna Harraway shows how increasingly, the western scientific and political languages of nature, from which other discursive practices flow, have been 'translated from those based on work, localization, and the marked body, to those based on codes, dispersal and networking...'<sup>64</sup> The sense of 'what is behind the tap' is spoken of from different perspectives by workers at Rous Water. Amongst some older employees there is a nostalgia for identification with what is visible and localised:

*Rous is Rous because of Rocky Creek Dam, without it you haven't got Rous, or you didn't have Rous. Now Rous is much bigger than Rocky Creek Dam ... I don't know whether you know it, it's going out into different other things ... still ... That's the core, that's what we do. We're water. We've got these other things now, and ... I'm not saying that they may not become a major part of our lives, but virtually right through the 60s, 70s, and up until the 80s, Rocky Creek Dam was used and we supplied out of that ...*<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Brian Wynne in 'May the Sheep Safely Graze?, A Reflexive View of the Expert-Lay Knowledge Divide,' in *Risk, Environment and Modernity*, p59

<sup>64</sup> Donna Harraway, op. cit. p207

<sup>65</sup> interview with Dave James, 14.03.2000. Dave James followed in his father's footsteps to work at Rous. Christopher Sheil, in *Water's Fall, Running the Risks with Economic Rationalism*, reports that many of Sydney Water's operators too are descendants of 'several generations of families who have produced and maintained Sydney's water supply' – see analysis of the corporation's make-up, p13.

At the same time, screens become the major reference point, as workplace practices now revolve round computer telemetry:

*Software*

*Hardware*

*Electronic sensors*

*Digital and analog inputs*

*Radio transmitters and repeaters*

*Electronic commands ...*

*Remote monitoring of reservoirs*

*Digital coding*

*Trend graphs*

*Electronic trend recorders*

*Remote flow meters*

*Level transducers*

*Signals being processed into code ...*<sup>66</sup>

The process being described breeds in this whole workplace a new air, a disembodied freedom – from now on something will happen, in a sense, for nothing. A movement between, a knowing of, a recorded entry of a state of affairs will come to pass without anyone going to have a look – 'nor eye to see, nor ear to hear.' The far reaches of the north coast will 'come home' to a number of computers. Everyone who needs to know will know, if needs be, at once. The meeting-between to process information will feed in to a transducer as sound waves, and be transformed to electrical pulses, and in turn feed out as readable digital detail. Signals being processed into code.

Signals being processed into code, the water conversation will bring people, as bodies, to the task of making sense of moments, via eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind,<sup>67</sup> intending to feed through and back impressions, dreams, information, energy, doubt,

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<sup>66</sup> John Thomas, *Water Conversation Records*, op. cit.

<sup>67</sup> The Heart Sutra, regarded as the essence of Buddhist teachings. See Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of Understanding, Commentaries on the Prajñāparamita Heart Sutra*, p1.

surprise. José Gil characterises the body in its capacity to translate signs as transductive,<sup>68</sup> and speaks of the way in which, beyond, say the language of dance or sophisticated gesture such as mime, articulated language fully realizes the role of code translation. 'Of all languages ... it is the only one that can render a color by a shape, a gesture, a sound, a taste or a smell; or a smell by an idea; or an idea by a color ... it can handle all the codes, create metaphors, move from one domain to another, assemble them and pull them apart.'<sup>69</sup>

Which will come to be found more enchanting? The transducers that translate squarks into beeps to allow for a flow from water supply outposts like Pineapple Road and Convery's Lane to Rous Water headquarters, or our common bodies? Each makes known the character of things, the qualities of water, through instantaneous readings of signs. In the water conversation – on the basis of listening, looking, perceiving, speaking, all capable of infinite refinement and subtlety – we add, appreciate, suggest, smile, turn down, discuss. We turn the subject around. Should a catchy rumour be articulated the transductive effect will be obvious, and see us reactively spun around in an instant.

'Our bodies are embedded in the axes of the world; the world is that with which we perceive.'<sup>70</sup> An axis of the contemporary world is the notion of 'optimisation'.<sup>71</sup> By way of example – despite the influence of naturalistic perceptions that see consumers looking for 'perfection' along the lines offered by mineral water companies, we have the same interest in 'optimisation' as any engineer. Perfection in a water might fulfill desire for the perfect mineral components or the perfect source. However, optimised water is reliable, since it is the best product of the available technology.

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<sup>68</sup> José Gil, *Metamorphoses of the Body*, p110

<sup>69</sup> Gil, *ibid.* p111

<sup>70</sup> Alphonso Lingis, *Foreign Bodies*, p13

<sup>71</sup> In 'The Biopolitics of Post-modern Bodies,' Haraway contrasts perfection and optimisation amongst a variety of binaries to highlight contestation between late 19<sup>th</sup> century and late 20<sup>th</sup> century constructions of the body, acknowledging the limits of binary dichotomization as she does so. See Haraway *op. cit.* pp205-6.

*Jay: It goes through about ten different filters and it's treated with UV and ozone.*<sup>72</sup>

Consumer sensibility influences the technology and practices which come to be put in place. Rous Water's refurbished dam outside Ballina will make for an optimised product. At Emigrant Creek, Rous has a dam in a rural residential catchment with associated outputs. Led by Wayne Franklin's risk management analysis, the board will agree to the necessity of introducing new technologies, such as continuous microfiltration and ozone treatments. Optimisation in turn influences subjectivity. As much as it is the case for a water supply, a person can sense the risk of failure to act, of being left behind.<sup>73</sup> As much as technology makes information available to the water industry influencing its choices and development, the range of choices available to the average consumer increases on an everyday basis.

### **Water – a narcissistic drop?**

*Perrier/Organic Springs/Plat'eau/Pureau/San Pellegrino/ Pellegrini / H<sub>2</sub>O Go/Blu  
bottel/ Adam's Ale/ Misty Mountain / Oasis / Crystal Rock*

To increase an executive clientele's access to specialist services, a large Asia Pacific-based hotel group launches a Harvard University-based health program. Major hotels keep guest dossiers. 'Sydney's *The Regent* notes whether a guest prefers barbells in the room to the gym, ... or Evian or Perrier water (to stock the fridge accordingly).'<sup>74</sup>

*All around the world, Evian is brought to you in its Original Perfection. Untouched by Man. Perfect by Nature.* Stress management consultants, personal trainers, aerobics teachers, dieticians and psychologists take their place as part of the broad public health

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<sup>72</sup> Jay Schell, *Water Conversation Records*, op. cit.

<sup>73</sup> Sennett, op. cit. p132

<sup>74</sup> Rowena Stretton, 'The Guest is King,' *Australian Financial Review*, 25 Jul. 97

picture, with significant implications for individual subjectivity.<sup>75</sup> There are a whole lot of experts to consult on the 'open-ended project' of body management:<sup>76</sup>

*Julian is determined to show me the place where the water purifying equipment they put in at Norwood can be seen on the shelf. We go through the vegies and cheeses and skinnily bottled South Australian olive oils of the Adelaide Market to the Boutique Water Shop. I'm no longer as naive as when Andy told me that there was such a retail outlet for upwardly mobile water drinkers in Paddington, and that they held water tastings there. Here there are all sorts of filters, including the Ecovortek, and a complete range of bottled water, including a row from overseas. The man behind the counter sits on a stool like a shepherd amongst his flock. Because it's a beneficent shop.*<sup>77</sup>

Going to the 'bottle shop' shows up some aspects of the contemporary water and public health scene that are concerned with what could loosely be called 'taste' or an aesthetic dimension. From a critical standpoint, aesthetic discourse is a specialised and universalised dimension of values discourse, or in Bourdieu's terms a 'practical social ideology'.<sup>78</sup> There is a circular philosophical logic inherent in trying to prove the existence of a distinctive, universal aesthetic faculty. Who decides boutique water is aesthetically perfect? I do. What I decide reinforces my sense of identity as the discerning subject, and my sense of my own value increases. The reflection goes back and forward. This shows up not only an individualist orientation, but a 'narcissistic structure'.<sup>79</sup>

I have a dream where plastic water bottles as symbols of healthful choices and as singular, indestructible pieces of trash<sup>80</sup> are juxtaposed:

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<sup>75</sup> Petersen and Lupton, op. cit. p26

<sup>76</sup> Shilling 1993, quoted in *ibid.* p23

<sup>77</sup> Annie Bolitho, *Dwelling on Water, Notebook 6*

<sup>78</sup> Tony Bennett, in *Outside Literature*, 1990, p.150

<sup>79</sup> *ibid.* p151

*I dream I've got a job to do on Wyrallah Road, heading out to Evans Head and Coraki. I'm making a thirty-metre mound of once used water bottles, the large and the small, a kind of message-in-a-bottle installation. It is an unstable and fragile nest on a large scale, as porous as the crack from which mineral water springs. It's the middle of the day and it shines clear, except for blue glass bottles creating emphasis, like hand grenades, within an unshatterable plastic fullness. It's a mound of contradictory fears and desires for health. Here, 'the body is plastic, malleable, a text that may be written over and retraced ...'<sup>81</sup> There are scraps of diffuse uncertainty floating around, intuitions, facts, stories. It is a performance of acknowledgement, like Mierle Laderman Ukeles' 'Touch Sanitation'.<sup>82</sup> People come to the site and add to the tower of recycled signs. But suddenly the whole thing becomes stagnant and sits looking like a rubbish heap. No one who has come is not privileged. Life expectancy is assured. In a propitious moment, someone sets water moving over and through the heap, so every ridged area on every bottle runs and there are multiply magnified small waterfalls. It spurts and bubbles, trickles and splashes, creating a delightful sense of how water keeps running rings round us. The magic is obvious. There is a pool at the bottom, and it's good to know that round here there are still ferals, who will let their kids paddle.<sup>83</sup>*

### **Ambivalent water relations**

*Mangrove Mountain / Bowen Mountain / Peat Springs / Deep Sprinkle*

The phenomenon of bottled water appears to me to lie outside a rational choice model of human behaviour and response. Brian Wynne does not discount a sort of magical logic amongst people seeking to construct working rationalisations when their trust in expert systems is conditional and somewhat ambivalent.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> a \$20 billion industry in plastics, see Ch. 1 p

<sup>81</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, 1994, quoted in Petersen and Lupton, op. cit. p24

<sup>82</sup> Patricia C. Phillips discusses Ukeles' project in which she shook the hands of 8,500 sanitation workers in New York City in 'Maintenance Activity: Creating a Climate for Change' in *But Is It Art? The Spirit of Art as Activism*, 1995, pp178-189

<sup>83</sup> Annie Bolitho, *Dwelling on Water, Notebook 4*

<sup>84</sup> Wynne, op. cit. pp52-55



On a visit to Sydney, walking down King Street, Newtown, displaced on a street out of its depth with car traffic, I start seeing mineral waters, hand-carried and in bright shop fridges, presented to reflect light through bottles and stop eyes on labels, as having a magical effect. Amongst the people and the windows and the coffee culture they seem to make visible the clarity of water, in an ever-present private/public water installation. They hold to them cool, lush words, endlessly reproduced to insist on water and water sources. They are a reminder of the sensuous secret that water holds, which may contradict instructions to be *Waterwise* and to *Make Water Saving Our Business*.

And when I converse about water, I find contradictions in new forms, and am reminded that water drinking practices and rituals stem from a personal experience that can never be separated from the collective. Whilst Sydney Water might do regular formal consultations with its customers, those drinking their water have their own informal ways of problematising their relationships with expertise and information, as part of their negotiation of identity:<sup>85</sup>

*Fun talking to a girl in Café Joy. She sat down next to me whilst I was eating slightly sour Soto Ayam. She comes from Thailand, Bangkok exactly. But she likes Indonesian food. She's here doing the English course so she can get a good job in an office – which you can't without English language skills.*

*What do I do? I'm a student at UTS. I'm doing a project about water. Is it interesting? Very. For example I'm interested in what her favourite English words about water are? 'I don't know,' she says smiling, 'I just like to drink capuccino!'*

*And I wonder what Bangkok's major river is? 'Mmmm,' she says, 'I don't know. We keep our water in big ... what do you call?'*

*Reservoirs? I suggest. Yes. Most families in Bangkok get their drinking water from a bottled water company. Her family used to collect rainwater, but now they just get it from the water company. 'Maybe we are worried about pollution.'*

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<sup>85</sup> *ibid.* p50

*'In Australia,' she says, 'I always boil the water before I drink. I don't know why. Maybe it is not familiar. In Australia they have something in water, fluouride, I'm not sure about it.'*

*Her lunch arrives. It's got chunky hybrids of poppadum and corn chip on top. PLEASE PAY BEFORE YOU DRINK says the fridge door.*

Looking into water drinking as something that deeply involves feelings and intellect would not have been as rewarding before the 'Sydney Water Crisis' of 1998. Before headlines like *END OF AN ERA FOR RELIABLE, SAFE WATER*,<sup>86</sup> going to the tap was a habit which went unnoticed. So much so, that in order to make its water stand out, Sydney Water had a go at putting it in bottles at that time. *Good Enough to Bottle. Too Good to Waste.*

It is unlikely that the 'crypto' scare was a real crisis in scientific/technical terms.<sup>87</sup> But this is not to say that it was not influential on people's everyday feelings about water. The McClellan inquiry into the crisis revealed a conflict of interest between commercial interests and public interest in relation to disclosure of information.<sup>88</sup> In an increasingly litigious society, the crisis was also impressive in the way it gave visibility to compensation as a powerful signifier for an inconvenient alteration of circumstances. *BOILED WATER CRISIS \$33M AND STILL RISING.*<sup>89</sup>

The event was emblematic of the tension between scientific/technical and lay public, in that management of the crisis was taken up entirely by experts. Experts and expert institutions have their own particular cultural responses to risk, which are, as we have seen, increasingly framed in an idiom of scientific risk analysis and management. Wynne points to some problems here: 'Their rationalist discourses ... *tacitly and*

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<sup>86</sup> Murray Hogarth, Paola Totara, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 Aug. 98

<sup>87</sup> Lyn Carson and Stuart White, 'Sydney Water Contamination Crisis: Manufacturing Dissent' in *Science and Public Policy*, vol. 25, no. 4, p266-271

<sup>88</sup> Christopher Sheil, *Water's Fall, Running the Risks with Economic Rationalism*, p173

*furtively impose prescriptive models of the human and the social upon lay people, and these are implicitly found wanting in human terms (by the lay public).*<sup>90</sup> He speaks of how over-emphasis on physical risk distracts attention from the social risks involved when expert institutions 'obscure the "social structure of effective causes" or responsibility, thus concealing their own agency and responsibility.'<sup>91</sup> Indeed, only certain information about the 'Sydney Water Crisis' came out at the time. There were silences regarding levels of contamination, and political interests in strategic areas. Australian Water Services (AWS), an Australian-French consortium, a private operator and possible competitor for the Sydney Water license, then on notice for renewal, never came under scrutiny.<sup>92</sup> At that time there were significant tensions between Sydney Water – the regulated, and the Department of Health – the regulator.<sup>93</sup> As Wynne suggests, silences and concealment amplify a 'diffuse but powerful sense of (social) risk on the part of publics who appreciate their own dependency on expert institutions to control the (physical) risks.'<sup>94</sup>

A nest of comfortable understandings about water fell to the ground in the ribbons of black and white Sydney postcodes which indicated the suburbs where people needed to boil their water. Beyond the media-hype, the public's 'confusion' could be seen to be as much about germane relational risks in relation to expert institutions, as about the perception of the risk in ingesting the public water supply. Thus the 'Sydney Water Crisis' situated drinking water in the indeterminate context of the post-modern, as a historically specific terrain, the product of 'global and local politics, ... prize-winning research, heteroglossic cultural productions, ... developments in business and technology and personal and collective experiences of embodiment.'<sup>95</sup> The impact of the event sent ripples way outside Sydney and the Warragamba Dam-supplied world.

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<sup>89</sup> Linda Doherty, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 Mar. 99

<sup>90</sup> Wynne, op. cit. p57 – my parentheses, author's italics

<sup>91</sup> *ibid.* p51

<sup>92</sup> Carson and White, op. cit., p266,268,269

<sup>93</sup> *ibid.* p267

<sup>94</sup> Wynne, op. cit.

<sup>95</sup> see Donna Haraway on the overlapping discourses within the study of the immune system in 'The Biopolitics of Postmodern Bodies: Determinations of Self in Immune System Discourse' in *American Feminist Thought at Century's End, A Reader*, 1993, p201

ROUS COUNTY COUNCIL

ACTING ENGINEERING MANAGER'S REPORT TO COUNCIL MEETING 19<sup>th</sup>  
AUGUST 1998

SUBJECT: CRYPTOSPORIDIUM AND GIARDIA

Members will be aware of the extensive press coverage given to the detection of Giardia in Sydney Water's potable water supply ... These bugs have only been identified as possible pathogens in the last twenty years, and due to their small size, 8 to 12 micrometres for Giardia and 4 to 5 micrometres for Cryprosporidium, there is great difficulty in determining if these pathogens are present in water ... The risk of infection by Cryptosporidium and Giardia in the water supply is currently extremely low.<sup>96</sup>

Sydney Water's displacement from a previously stable position of 'water authority' also revealed a somewhat 'carnavalesque' quality, to the extent that a value system was inverted. New reference points came into conversation:

*It's like Calcutta with an Opera House down here.*<sup>97</sup>

Bottling firms have increasingly taken up their place in the context of consumer ambivalence. Bottled water has annexed a domain, of water that is not troubled. It has a restfully naturalistic status. It is a confabulation which includes the romance of 'babbling brook' and a regularly reproduced claim to depth and integrity. In a sense it is bottled imagination. Near this picturesque stream, a writer might hole up in the wilderness, recording her observations of the changing European seasons. The desirable source is out of reach of human activity. It is not tested for 'natural' inputs like wombat poo. It offers a magical space, far away from chlorine smelling tap water, where a person can drink outside the grasp of 'the risk society.'

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<sup>96</sup> Rous County Council Meeting Papers, 19 Aug. 1998

<sup>97</sup> Comment from Gina Baker from a phone call with a friend

In our very local water writing gatherings, there were new bottled water names to bring to the composite list.

*There's one you don't have. Adam's Ale is one you've missed!*

In a water conversation held in Mullumbimby, a voice called out from the group looking at water books and display board, 'You haven't got Pete's Ridge. Pete's Ridge used to be my very own water source.' I heard fragments of a renting story with all the contingency of not-owning – of being for a magic period of time in a magic place with all its material inadequacies. A place with its very own spring. A few years ago the owners decided to bottle the water.

*Peats Ridge Springs*

### **Chlorine, the trace of a residual**

*Hepburn Springs / Homebrand*

When Phil gives us the first lesson in bulk water treatment he says: 'The beauty with chlorine is that you can trace a residual – you can say chlorine has been here, chlorine is here. So you can be sure that the bugs have been killed.'<sup>98</sup> The residual elements can be tested for at the end of chlorine's journey through the pipe. This, he says is its best quality.

*A visit to the waterworks brings the distant close up. The word chlorine is situated in place in an order of operations. On the Nightcap tour, chlorine is much discussed. It's THE much discussed thing. Around the model. Up at the floccing area. Over the tanks which are blanketing up. I would rather have chlorine than some pathogenic disease, Phil says. It's reassuring you say? queries Will.*

Chlorine gets up people's noses. It puts them off their water. A US study on 'odor problems' found 'chlorinous' to be a primary cause of dissatisfaction for 64% of respondents.<sup>99</sup> Complaints about water odors are of concern to the water industry, because they are associated with poor drinking water quality by consumers.<sup>100</sup>

Chlorine features in this perspective from Barbara Miller, another spokesperson on *Water! an Everyday Subject*, which tells of an influential personal and public moment in the South Australian water story, when water genuinely became pathogenic:

*The town's lifeblood was carried in that pipe – which was a metre thick, grey and obvious in its presence. Travelling in either direction from Port Augusta, you were accompanied by the pipe, running parallel to the road, but not noticeable, almost blending in with the silver-grey saltbush that flanked the bitumen.*

*We knew its importance from an early age – yet it was our plaything. As we waited for the Buddcar to carry us to school, that pipe became our castle, our dragon, our steed. Airways bags flung to the ground, we rode astride the pipe. We giggled, whispered earnest secrets and fought on the pipe. To straddle it, to feel the cool, cool, cool of that pipe was bliss in the scorching heat. And to hear the rushing, flushing water within, to feel the vibration of that force on our bare thighs was thrilling. Yet with life came death. In the early sixties, a series of child deaths occurred each summer. The town's parents were gripped with fear and anxiety, and wild rumours spread about the cause.*

*When it was finally identified, the cause shocked the town. Our lifeblood, water, was the relentless killer. On that long hot journey from the Murray River at Morgan, conditions within the pipe grew ideal for amoeba to flourish. In that outback climate, in a town lacking a freshwater pool, most families had small wading pools, and children gleefully revelled under sprinklers and hoses. As water splashed into the noses of children, the amoebic soup quickly found its way to their brains, and so amoebic meningitis became established, with its often fatal consequences. The solution was*

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<sup>98</sup> Phil Littlewood, *Water Conversation Records*, op. cit.

<sup>99</sup> Janette Khiari, *Identification of Taste-and-Odor Compounds in Drinking Water*, p12

*simple, swift and effective. Chlorination, and with this new measure, the deaths stopped.*

*The fear also stopped, leaving in its wake a vague feeling of betrayal, that something thought to be innocuous, precious and life-sustaining could prove to be a devourer of children. And you know, to this day, I retain a residue of anxiety with water in its raw form and take comfort in the knowledge of the chlorination and filtration processes that our drinking water passes through.<sup>101</sup>*

Nearly forty years later, South Australia Water distributes bottled water to a whole town of holiday makers.<sup>102</sup> 'SA Water Chief Sean Sullivan said that while authorities were dealing with a new strain of algal bloom, it had been detected at an early stage and chlorination was proving effective.'

*It's reassuring you say?*

More recently chlorine has taken on a new aspect, becoming a factor in a risk profile, an element of the 'problematic of public health.'<sup>103</sup> Surveys since the 80s have revealed chlorination byproducts (DBPs) in the form of mutagenic compounds, particularly in treated surface water, with implications for health. Various experts are looking at a complicated interaction between the type of water source – ground or surface – treatment processes and health effects. Investigations point to taking up a judicious approach to the problem, since inadvertent risk-risk tradeoffs might be made in relation to protection from DBPs on the one hand, and protection from microbial pathogens on the other. The US Government's EPA sees the task as massive. '... health risk data are not yet available or capable of providing definitive answers. Interpretations are likely to

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<sup>100</sup> *ibid.* p1

<sup>101</sup> Barbara Miller, *Water Conversation Records*, op.cit.

<sup>102</sup> Terry Plane, 'Chlorine Clearing Toxin From Water', *The Australian*, 22-23 Apr. 00

<sup>103</sup> Petersen and Lupton, op. cit. p5

remain broad, and the range of health issues to be considered will also widen to encompass short-term health effects as well as cancer risk.<sup>104</sup>

*Amanda: Kath, I really liked your piece on the word you pulled out of the hat – it was written with such passion. I want you to put it up somewhere.*

*Charly: I think Belinda should do the same.*

*Will: What did you get Kath?*

*Kath: I got a phrase actually, 'fate and transport of pollutants.'*

*Amanda: What were the others out of interest?*

*Annie: Modified flow regime, sweet water, raw water, seepage face, comprehensive flow package and hygiene. (see Ch. 5 for the script of which this is an excerpt)*

The 2000 Productivity Commission report on drinking water states that current Australian drinking water standards are unnecessarily stringent.<sup>105</sup> It identifies that pushing up standards, for example by bringing in more sophisticated treatments that would lessen reliance on chlorine, would mean new infrastructure spending, and investment outside the economic realities of non-metropolitan communities.

Chlorine's position is unstable. Yet as a kind of master narrative it has power, even in the process of displacement, to speak across distance. It will go on and on offering disinfection, with the kind of authority that I associate with Alistair Cooke's *Letter from America*. It will always be valued for the fact that it is possible to trace its residual elements.

### **Between friends – what is this water?**

*Country Springs / Earth's Natural / Blue Mountains*

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<sup>104</sup> Rosemarie Odom et al, 'Benefit-cost analysis of the Stage ID/DBP Rule, in *AWWA Journal*, vol. 91/4, April 1999, p147

<sup>105</sup> Ian Henderson, 'Quality a Hard-Earned Thirst' in *The Australian*, 22-23 Apr. 00.



The brand-name waters that thread through this text, and the aesthetic considerations they evoke have been around for a long time. The concluding story is evidence that drinking water has been a perennial subject of good humoured cultural commentary. It comes from Ming Dynasty China, in the 1500s. The poet Yuan Hung-tao's friend returns from the country, his servants following behind, carrying thirty jars of the finest Hui Mountain water. Pissed off with the weight of the load, they dump it in the Yangtse and refill the jars with local streamwater closer to home. The water is later served to a group of connoisseurs from the city. Each is given just a few drops of water in a porcelain cup. 'The connoisseurs savored the water's bouquet for a while, and only then did they sip lightly and swallow, producing gurgling sounds in their throats. They looked at each other, sighed out loud, and said, "What superb water!"'<sup>106</sup>

The poet takes up the subject of water connoisseurship for the joy of it, one story emerging from the other in the tradition of writers as friends, peers and social commentators. He stands on the sidelines laughing at his own account of refined sensibilities going to town on the local water. To him the so-called aesthetic knowledge this brings to light is, 'really useless "knowledge".'<sup>107</sup> Yet Yuan has a practical interest in the qualities of local waters, and says later, '... in actual fact, Hui Mountain water is far superior to water from Chung Leng, let alone the Tao-Kuan River! Since coming to the western area myself as magistrate I have tasted the waters many times and I am now able to distinguish among them.'<sup>108</sup>

Speaking nearly half a century ago of contemporary culture, Susan Sontag remarked on the way the conditions of modern life and its material plenitude and crowdedness 'conjoin to dull our sensory faculties, and it is in the light of the condition of our senses, our capacities ... that the task of the critic must be assessed. What is more important

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<sup>106</sup> Yuan Hung-tao, *Pilgrim of the Clouds*, 1978, pp73-75

<sup>107</sup> Tony Bennett op. cit. chapter title

<sup>108</sup> Yuan Hung-tao, op. cit. p75

now is to recover our senses. We must learn to *see* more, to *hear* more, to *feel* more.<sup>109</sup>  
To taste more:

*Metallic aftertaste*  
*This clear characterless water*  
*Held a promising scent of apple sweetness*  
*Only borrowed,*  
*A faint memory of fridge.*<sup>110</sup>

At our shared table we have elected to drink together. Over time putting out the little glasses draws people out. They no longer stick rigidly to individual water bottles. In an apparent paradox, since the conditions of contemporary life suggest that solitude is what nurtures imaginative work, we dream more:

*I was eager to fill her mouth, surround the tongue, to sharply*  
*remind her of the river world. To remind her to float and sing. I*  
*was eager to flow down her throat, ready to quickly be ingested,*  
*to dissolve all that stuff. I took comfort in my place of repose – a*  
*lake under her heart.*

*I send her baby frogs to wait by her window, to tell her that it's*  
*okay. And I know she tries. Makes plans and breaks them. She*  
*lets me in to do my work of comfort and joy. And she dreams in*  
*a distant way of the sea.*<sup>111</sup>

Momentarily we are held. We float and sing. Response is the nature of an at-home-with-oneself that brings wandering to a halt.<sup>112</sup>

I invoke the wanderings of water, moving on a mammoth, yet infinitely subtle scale across the continents and the ocean and the unexpropriated sky, pushing the winds and pursuing the currents, doing its timeless meandering in the closed system of the water

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<sup>109</sup> *Against Interpretation*, 1961, p14

<sup>110</sup> Kath McMillan in 'Twenty Tastings' *Water Conversation Records*, op. cit.

<sup>111</sup> Gurunam Saraswati, *ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, op. cit. p92

cycle. In this non-country of water, drops from the Murray River at Morgan and from Mac Dam's dry thorn tree country may come your way in a wet season. In the non-country of the imagination, there is momentary repose in a lake under a friend's heart. This is not any corporation or instrumentality's water. They cannot keep it for themselves. What our group set out to explore 'has come to tremble'<sup>113</sup> at the edge of the glass. The enigma of water is that it appears signless, yet invites an infinite range of markings, including borrowed smells and faint memories. The group water drinking experience has simply turned this enigma around as we savor 'whispering, swilling conversations and stories, of all the places it's been.'<sup>114</sup>

Now which would you prefer?

*Summit? Clear Blue?*

*Rapid?*

*Neverfail?*

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<sup>113</sup> *ibid.* p119

<sup>114</sup> Phoebe Havyatt, *Water Conversation Records*, *op. cit.*

## ANTI-PREJUDICE ROLE FOR MISS DRIP

For actor Ningali Lawford, it is a badge of honour to be nicknamed Miss Drip. It's her husband's epithet or her ever since she became the smiling public face of a water-saving campaign by the West Australian Water Corporation.

You come face-to-face with the Aboriginal actor if you pull up behind a bus at traffic lights, her white teeth flashing as she invites you to Reduce Your Use.

'It's sort of given me celebrity status in Western Australia,' Lawford says. 'I went out with my niece to a bar and everyone came up and wanted to shake my hand.' ...

In a way the advertisement is a milestone in the state's commercial recognition of its indigenous culture ...

Lawford thinks such gestures are important. 'I come back to Perth and people are still very scared to come up and talk to an Aboriginal person,' she says ...

Lawford and Kelton Pell, her co-star in the Perth Festival play *Solid*, have done their bit for opening up Australia's theatre and film scene to Aboriginal perspectives. Lawford's autobiographical play *Ningali* introduced audiences to her Kimberley life story (in three languages); the solo piece won plaudits both here and overseas, including first prize at the 1996 Edinburgh Fringe Festival.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Victoria Laurie, *Australian*, 4.2.00, 'Anti-prejudice Role for 'Miss Drip'

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WATER RUNNING TO US<sup>1</sup>; MAKING CONTACT  
with Annie Bolitho and Northern Rivers Water Writers

### DEDICATION

*Diana Roberts*, you're laughing! Well, in the old days they used to dedicate things to Earl so-and-so, so why not dedicate to Councillor Roberts? I want to have you standing at the head of a kind of script I've written about making contact with water. Or you could see it as a record of the way I made contact with the water providers and water users in our region whom you saw represented at that 'One-off Splash of Water Celebration', the culmination of the *new dimensions in Water Conversation* project.

When I emailed you asking you to speak I wrote: 'I would rather this project be seen as a limited but innovative attempt to come at water from a new community-based angle within a very complex environment, than be given an unqualified woosh of enthusiasm.'<sup>2</sup> I knew that you were critical. I also knew that you wouldn't say no, and that you would give it your best. You'd been on the board of Rous Water, as a Lismore City Council member. You hadn't been Chair of the Richmond Catchment Management Board for long.

You were there at the start of the water conversation, on the night I came to Rous in public access time to put forward the proposal. I'd dressed purposely in a t-shirt saying *Fish*, to remind myself that I am a Mermaid, and the black jeans of a competent, creative Flow Engineer. Rous was still in Carrington Street. Don Harvey was Chair. As I came into the board room, I was immediately struck by what I saw as a 'thinking through the body.'<sup>3</sup> You and Ros Irwin had seated yourselves opposite each other at that massive table, and seemed

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<sup>1</sup> Kath McMillan, *Water Conversation Records* 1999/2000

<sup>2</sup> Pers. Comm. 08.11.2000

<sup>3</sup> Jane Gallop titles her book on a gender influenced reasoning *Thinking through the Body*

to create a purposeful bridge across the unconscious masculine majority of that typical local government/water authority committee.

State Forests were in the process of getting agreement from Rous to log compartments 69 and 79 in the water supply catchment. I'd recently read an EPA survey of environmental attitudes and knowledge which noted that people in small country towns have a disproportionate confidence in their level of understanding of how to protect the environment – 'They feel they understand a lot more than other people.'<sup>4</sup> A number of those who spoke confirmed this. You talked about specific gradients and run-offs, and contradicted an ad hoc approach with resource-oriented values to the fore. I think it'd be fair to say that your arguments and values reflected an environmental education that equips you 'with the capacity to *see* where you live.'<sup>5</sup>

When my turn came you didn't pretend to find my proposal worth pursuing. Don was very much behind me. Ros spoke in my support. I left, in awe of the way you two keep hanging in. The following morning I read that Rous councillors had accorded themselves a wage rise on the grounds of an increased workload. The votes against the decision were your objection.

You were too much for them. You do keep upsetting a certain status quo. You represent the position 'The Levee is a Lemon.' You and Ros have put in the research about levees. There are problems with the \$10 million plan to build a stone and concrete wall around the Richmond to hold out the one in ten floods. The calculations on overtopping are problematic. And at three metres high in the CBD it will block out even the idea of the river being there.

I think there's a North Coast flood resonance in the following story fragment from the T'ang Empire – that's around AD 813. One summer, after a shocking flood, the reigning monarch

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<sup>4</sup> *Who Cares About the Environment, Environmental Knowledge, Attitudes, Skills and Behaviours in NSW*, p73

<sup>5</sup> George Seddon is speaking of the evolution of Australians' perceptual attitudes to land in *Landprints*, p 71 (my emphasis)

was persuaded that the disaster was the result of an excess of yin, the feminine aspect of the cosmic duality, soft, wet, low, flowing. 'Because the imbalance could be corrected, partially at least, by human activity ... on July 21, the sovereign responded by expelling two hundred wagon loads of superfluous women from his palace. Women represented metaphysical water in human form.'<sup>6</sup> The conservative political majority in our local government, who jeer at your ideas, do not have 'cosmic' or 'yin' in their frame of reference. Nonetheless, I think they also invest you with a great deal of power.

It is gratifying to know that your questions about this story will be about where these refugees expelled from the floodplains were taken, what conditions they lived in, and how they supported themselves. You are logical and straightforward. You will want to know whether, for climatic safety's sake, the women were taken to a place in a rain shadow. And I am absolutely sure that if you had been one of those rain women, you would have gone into action on your wagon, working out sensible collective arrangements for the future, on a solid economic and social basis.

You're something of a Flow Engineer. I'm not sure that you would speak up for the idea of feminising the way water is seen in the public arena. Some who took part in the water conversation and in the 'One-off Splash', spoke strongly for the way it made visible a more female perception of water than would normally be associated with a water instrumentality. Whether or not this was the case, I can say that I am committed to a poetic approach to water, and that '... it opens ways for my [our] imagination to try ways of thinking, ways of seeing the world, under the rule of play ...'.<sup>7</sup> Your aspirations for water quality are couched in terms such as objectives, values, indicators, standards, guidelines, benchmarks, reference points, goals and targets.<sup>8</sup> Yet scientific characterisations of the reality of various 'scientific' problems are partly founded upon prior and deeply entrenched cultural narratives.

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<sup>6</sup> Edward Schafer, *The Divine Woman, Dragon Ladies and Rain Maidens in T'ang Literature*, p6

<sup>7</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Poetry and Possibility*, p455 (my parentheses)

<sup>8</sup> see the *Independent Enquiry into the Hawkesbury Nepean River System* on the issue of choice of terminology for environmental values, p60

Paula Treichler, a feminist researcher has come up with a number of questions which are pertinent when there are contests for meaning in areas that are generally characterised as scientific. The first is one which I imagine you have often asked yourself in meetings:  
*How and why is this knowledge ... being produced the way that it is?*<sup>9</sup>

You are highly committed. I realise that the idea of play may seem frivolous. Yet perhaps people exploring together outside 'the burden of making a decision' and of having to take a stand, are 'opening an element of commitment.'<sup>10</sup> Lay water lovers might be said not to have the necessary specialist knowledge to be involved in decision-making. Does this mean they should be increasingly distanced from the discussion? When water is 'a whole community problem'<sup>11</sup> who might that community be? Here I suggest that it's possible to 'expand the public's expectation of what they may get from public forms, to provoke thought, and help people look around them with fresh eyes.'<sup>12</sup>

#### **THOSE WHO APPEAR:**

Italo Calvino: Italian writer, late resident of Paris. At ease on the Rue St Germain and in international symposia. A man of logic, as well as letters. Out of this propensity, he takes an interest in Flow Engineering, and appears as a kind of Deus Ex Machina, facilitating the flow of this North Coast water production.

Community Writer: Annie Bolitho

*new dimensions in Water Conversation* reference group: Roe, Gina, Jan

Writers: Elena, Kia, Kath, Jay, Charly, Amanda, Catherine, Will, Liz, Belinda, Barbara, Linda

People involved in water provision: John, Phil, Dave, Elisabeth

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<sup>9</sup> Paula Treichler is specifically examining biomedicine when she formulates a range of questions, of which I have chosen one. See 'AIDS, Gender and Biomedical Discourse, Current Contests for Meaning' in *American Feminist Thought*, p319

<sup>10</sup> Ricoeur, op. cit.

<sup>11</sup> A term frequently used in the framework of the NSW Water Reform Agenda

<sup>12</sup> Lucy Lippard is advocating here for the role of the progressive artist, in 'Moving Targets/Moving Out', p209



Daughters: Jan, Margot

Correspondents: Jonathan, Mary, Suzy

Regional Gallery: Lynn, Alan

Caroona: Grace, Mary, Kath, Kath, Chris, Bobby, Joan

A Flow Engineer (a professional who tends to come through on her own terms)

A Mermaid (not a Little Mermaid-lookalike)

## **PROLOGUE**

Calvino: This piece is set around the year 2000, an important time to be speaking of water. It is an element after my heart, associated as it is with all kinds of flowing. As a flow device here, I will be referring to a series of essays I wrote in the mid-1980s, which appeared as *Six Memos for the Next Millenium*. In this production, 2000 has already arrived. So let us examine some of the values I highlighted in anticipation of this over-confident time. First of all, here is one of my claims about *lightness*:

I have tried to remove weight, sometimes from people, sometimes from heavenly bodies, sometimes from cities; above all I have tried to remove weight from the structure of stories and from language.<sup>13</sup>

So you see, I have come to consider lightness a value rather than a defect.

I'll slip into the background now, and play my part in making sure that weight is removed from water.

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### **Projection: The first sign of water**

To: annieb@om.com.au

From: wilddbug@nor.com.au

Re: ausco fellowship – I got it!

Annie you fuckin' star! My heart is palpitating, my eyes are filled with tears!

Roe

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## SCENE 1

*Over lunch on a north coast veranda in the year 2000. Water writers talking.*

Annie: I'd like to talk about how you want to be credited.

Kia: I'm not sure. What do you mean?

Annie: Well, this water conversation is something I started and heaps of people participated in, so it's a collaborative thing.

Kia: My interest in participating was to express myself in another medium. This is one of the results.

Annie: I need to be clear with everyone that when I write it up, those who participated are properly credited for their work.

Kia: Well, I don't know.

Annie: What I've suggested to the university's ethics committee, as you would have seen in that letter, is that I'll put: *Annie Bolitho and Northern Rivers Water Writers*.

Kia: When I sent back those forms I decided I wouldn't include *Droplets*.

Elena: But it's wonderful ...

Kia: No, I realised I'd have to think twice about people seeing that.

Elena: About the credits – I'm thinking of something really wanky. Maybe you could have a drawing of a river with a caption saying something like *Water has flowed ...* with the river starting small, getting wider and wider the more people come in, with a sort of calendar of when the people joined. The people could be like rocks or islands. The river is all of these people, and it has their names. It'd be a creative way of crediting everyone.

Kia: I think *Bolitho and Water Friends* or *Northern Rivers Water Writers* would be fine for me.

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<sup>13</sup> Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the New Millennium*, p3

## SCENE 2

*A summer's day in Byron Bay in 1999. Four friends are lying about in a large windowed lounge room talking. One is the focus of attention.*

Annie: Gina, what does riparian mean?

Gina: It's an edge – I mean you could say it's the bank of the river, but it's more to do with the fact that the river and bank come together and create an environment.

Annie: Thanks. I think I'm trying to represent that kind of edge. I'm trying to blur the line people draw when they think about story and writing in community – which is often defined by interviews and oral histories. And I'm also wanting to challenge the boundary between specialists and ordinary people on water.

Gina: *Riparian Writings?*

Annie: A bit abstruse don't you reckon?

Roe: The way you work is more to do with montage. I like the way a group can create a piece of writing by putting a line in – I remember in the Women Writing group, it was great not to have to make a huge commitment, and yet come out with a piece of writing we'd written together.

Jan: It's definitely collective, people take part in a process. They discover common ground. Or common water!

Roe: It's interesting from an audience point of view too. I was looking at the exhibition in Lismore, *People's Forest*.<sup>14</sup> It's really interesting, but oral history doesn't bring out that commonality – it doesn't show relationship.

Jan: It's two dimensional.

Roe: In some way I think what you do is to open a space where we're making sense of who we are, and for the reader that's got a voyeur quality – you get a chance to make your own observation of people in different contexts and make your own impression.

Gina: So here you're working with relationship to water. And writing. Glug glug.

*(Sound of Glug glug glug glug repeats, getting faster and faster)*

Roe: Yeah it'd be good to have something very watery like that in the publicity. And something which lets people know that in these groups they will find the courage to speak – 'what you have to say is as valid as anyone else' – something like that.

Jan: Can I get anyone a glass of water?

All: Thanks Jan, that'd be great.

Roe: Annie I've been reading your manuscript *The Water Exercise Books*. I loved the way water gave your emotional breakdown context – it took it away from being self-indulgent or a total mess – there was a whole story in there, of the fluidity in one life, quite apart from the travel aspect of it.

Annie: That piece of writing gives me confidence that this water project will work. I'm just very uncertain of what's going to emerge.

Gina: Let it flocculate. Throw the alum in and wait.

Calvino: This moment suggests an inlet. May I bring to your attention one of the beauties of writing?:

The word connects the visible trace with the invisible thing, the absent thing, the thing that is desired or feared, like a frail emergency bridge flung over an abyss. For this reason, the proper use of language, for me personally, is one that enables us to approach things (present and absent) with discretion, attention and caution, with respect for what things present and absent communicate without words.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Gregg Borschmann, collector/author calls this collection of oral histories 'a white fella dreaming' of the Australian Bush. See introduction to *The People's Forest*, p(vii). It toured regional NSW through Visions of Australia in 1999.

<sup>15</sup> Calvino, op. cit. p77

### SCENE 3

*Magellan Street, Lismore, a semi-pedestrian mall. Young rainforest trees in planters. The building on the corner has something of a heritage air. Stairs ascend to a portico and glass doors. A figure crosses the road and walks towards the building in a humid heat haze. It's a woman with a briefcase over her shoulder, lugging a box.*

Calvino: Look, she's going into the Lismore Adult and Community Education – ACE – building. But what is in that box? Are there any elements of the original vision from which adult education developed? I'm remembering Raymond Williams – he played such a significant role in the emergence of Cultural Studies. I can't help thinking that the woman with the box here resembles his 'public educator',<sup>16</sup> yet she seems unaware that this persona might be unfashionable.

Look at this brochure – the things people are studying! Computer, hospitality and aged care training. Ah well, nowadays I'm told vocational trainers are in the ascendant. When Williams was involved in the early worker education movement, you would have found a lot more literature and politics. More history too. He and Hoggart and E.P. Thompson truly wrestled with what was involved in 'doing adult education',<sup>17</sup> and bringing together the values of adult learners, teachers and programs. There was a clash between 'industrial trainers' and the 'public educators' inherent in the agendas of the movement itself, and a potential double exposure in anything that involved public and education. I suppose we can only wait and see whether this woman with the box is good- hearted 'moral rescuer' weighed down by porridge ideas about community.<sup>18</sup>

Let's go in. There's a very strange smell in the foyer here – the locals tell me it's gone through quite a few floods over the years.

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<sup>16</sup> Raymond Williams, one of the founding thinkers in adult education, saw educational thinking in Britain as comprising three strands: the 'Old Humanist', the 'Industrial Trainers' and the 'Public Educator.' See Tom Steele, *The Emergence of Cultural Studies*, pp183-184

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.* p180

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.* p184. Williams recognised the negative and potentially conservative element that was part of a public education vision, characterizing it in the form of 'the moral rescuer.'

*The slogan YEARNING FOR LEARNING which features on a poster near the front door suddenly appears in neon, pulsating to the rhythm of questions:*

*Who is yearning for learning? What are they yearning to learn? How are they yearning to learn it? Does their yearning imply they have no knowledge? Does this place lend itself to imagining learning, struggling with it, finding pleasure in it?*

#### SCENE 4

*A writing class at ACE – Week 2*

Calvino reads course information (with an air of surprise):

'WATER! AN EVERYDAY SUBJECT' A course for people who might not see themselves as writers, people who do, and those who fall in between. These down-to-water meetings will engage people in an individual and group writing process, in a way that is refreshing to say the least. Tues 12, 19, 26, Oct 5, 12, 17 Nov

*Pause as people begin to look up from desks in horseshoe arrangement.*

Annie: I like this phrase I found in a report I was reading: *The 99<sup>th</sup> Percentile Flow Condition*. Can I read you a bit?<sup>19</sup>

*Time-lapse*

Kath: I was so relieved when it got back to ordinary language.

Jay: Reports have no heart in them. When they're talking in technical language about water like that it tends to become more of a thing ...

Charly: That's inevitable when people use technical language.

*Calvino appears briefly behind the group and seems to call for their attention, but no one notices him.*

Calvino (to audience): Ah, yes, it has been my experience that writing using images typical of myth, can grow from any soil, even from language farthest away from any visual image, as the language of science is today.<sup>20</sup>

Kath (preoccupied): They talk about megalitres – as a measurement that doesn't have a great deal of meaning to me. What is a megalitre? I have no concept. The size of this room?

***Will sketches a megalitre in the air and it turns out to be a good corner of the room.***

Annie: As water writers, I'd like to invite you to tune into the particularities of language that come through different kinds of writing we read over the coming weeks. I think what appeals to me about the *99<sup>th</sup> Percentile Flow Condition* is a certain neatness. Clearly it's a condition that can be predicted. It's in such contrast with water as I know it. I've got a feeling that phrase could come into things I write later on, because I'm interested in that instrumentalist way of thinking about water, and how people use language about things is how they think about things.

Kath: Or the other way round.

Amanda: Would anyone like some water?

***(sound of water pouring)***

Annie: Let's go on. For those who weren't here last week, during the six weeks we've got together I'd like to invite everyone to write a few 'windows' into their personal experience of water. Somewhere water touched you. In each of you there's a story that would give a glimpse into your experience of water. We've all started by writing a list. This is mine:

***Reads:***

Playing on the dam spillway, knowing this was purified water  
When Jillian's father used to float in their pool – his amputated leg  
Water glasses on the table with wheat pattern as we said grace in Afrikaans at Pete Hamman's  
Putting snails on leaves as boats to float on stormwater puddles  
At Eygalières we drew water from a well  
The tank at Araluen – being caught there for five days when the Deua flooded<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Healthy Rivers Commission, *Independent Inquiry into the Hawkesbury Nepean River System*, p82

<sup>20</sup> Calvino, *op. cit.* p89

<sup>21</sup> Annie Bolitho, *Water Conversation Records*, *op. cit.*

*People begin writing, and as if on a light breeze, these writings start to rise up and gently flutter between different people, and rise up again, to settle on display boards, on the photocopier, and in scrapbooks*

Calvino: This notion of community arts is one I thought at first I was going to fail to mix with. But some of my reading has been of interest. Take this for example: Community artswriters have been described as creators of exchanges, forms and contradictions.<sup>22</sup> And here Bolitho's collaborator Hutchison talks about how community writing practice can produce a 'site-specific' approach to changing the look and feel, or storylines, of certain discourses. I would say she is speaking specifically of the dominant forms and processes of textual production, and of the way unsettling these in turn challenges the way certain story lines define the site.<sup>23</sup>

#### *The Scene: Week 4*

Calvino: I've been asked to consider the words of another contemporary theorist here. Judith Butler. The way she puts it, a momentum starts to develop when characters begin to perform the 'acts and utterances that put into effect the relation that they name.'<sup>24</sup> This momentum obviously involves water. It would be rather static if people only spoke of their relationship with it. It is far more dynamic to establish a place of hospitality where their speaking of it is informed by their serving it, looking at it, drinking it and comparing notes on it.

Kath: Anyone want any more water?

Annie: Who's going to begin?

Catherine: I'll go. This is one of my windows. **Reads:**

*'Look, I'm smoking,' I said, as big puffs of smoke poured out of my mouth. 'I can do smoke rings,' said Susan. 'Breathe on me, keep me warm,' said Ruth. There we were, all huddled together. The smoke was our breathing, as the hot air came out of our mouths,*

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<sup>22</sup> Mary Laine in *Memory and Imagination, Community Arts: Community Development Study Guide*, p1

<sup>23</sup> Mary Hutchison in *I am the Amazon Who Dances on the Backs of Turtles*, p126



*waiting in line at the Maryhill Baths. Freezing cold misty weather. Scotland's best. 'Quick get the tokens ready!' Cold blue little hands all holding the shiny coins, waiting for their turn as the promise of warmth approached. Inside now, steam filling the air. Shadows of bodies looking like ghosts, clamouring for a spot to jump into the hot welcoming liquid. Goose bumps as high as mountains on my body. One, two, three in I go. Ahh, like a blanket, the warm water calms my soul. The waiting is over. My mountains disappear.*<sup>25</sup>

Jay: I was with you all the way!

Will: It's a bit different to yours Liz!

Liz: What a contrast to mine.

Kath: So opposite to the Australian ones. Whereas ours were shimmering in heat haze, hers was lost in steam.

Annie: Can we have yours again Liz?

Liz: Actually I've written it again.

Jay: Why?

***Liz turns away. Time lapse.***

Jay: I like the first one. The one you wrote at home is very mature, like an adult looking back, but the first one is the child's experience – 'Last one in's a rotten egg!' I'd like to hear that one again.

***Liz reads:***

*The Baths*

*Heatwave Melbourne suburban days with a haze on the road and the oasis of the Balwyn baths quivers into view, the diving tower gleaming, whoops and shrieks splashing the air. Thonging it over asphalt going soft and sticky, armed with a coin for the turnstile. Claiming a patch of lawn with a throw of the towel, t-shirts tugged over heads on the run, last one in's a rotten egg, one final yelp of searing concrete as we race to the deep end of that shimmering aqua oblong and its long promising cool. A shock of bubbles explodes before my eyes.*<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, p224

<sup>25</sup> Catherine Whiteman in *Water Conversation Records*, op. cit.

<sup>26</sup> Liz Chandler, *ibid.*

Annie: I love the complete subjectivity of the original one too, in the re-write there's a distance, though I like that observing quality as well.

Liz: It's interesting, I like them both.

Belinda: It's a difficult thing, with writing you get ambitious, and you've got to be able to handle being ambitious. When you've done hours of writing, you can't get into yourself and tear it up.

Kath: That's why the feedback is good, it's definitely my favourite department.

Amanda: Kath, I really liked your piece on the word you pulled out of the hat – it was written with such passion. I want you to put it up somewhere.

Charly: I think Belinda should do the same.

Will: What did you get Kath?

Kath: I got a phrase actually, 'fate and transport of pollutants.'

Liz: All in all my water consciousness is raising.

Kath: It's good to hear people's work.

Amanda: It's increasing my knowledge all the time – the way I do things and the way I think.

Charly: I'm getting a lot out of it. Maybe I'm not putting in such a great input as I could. I just like listening to everyone. It's enthusing – so I thank you all.

Annie: Thanks Charly – since you're here as our Stowaway, do what feels right for you. I enjoyed today a lot. When the group came together at the beginning we were strangers and everything was inside people. Now we start to see this out-ness. All the out-ness is being seen by everyone, as well as the reflections between people. It's magical to me.

Liz: When you hear what someone else has to say, you realise just how many takes there are on water.

Annie: I was convinced you'd all be watered out this week, but nobody is.

Will: We've only just touched the surface.

Annie: I'm going to meet with you next week at Nightcap Treatment Works. Are you travelling out together?

Will: Yeah, and we're going to have morning tea at Amanda's place afterwards.

Calvino: I'm on unfamiliar territory here. What does my script have to say? "The imaginative use of language opens up alternative ways of being and knowing 'me', says Hutchison. She goes on to quote Haug: 'Artistry in language' is a linguistic competence which produces 'greater self-consciousness in our actions,' and on this basis, the possibility of taking up agentic subject positions – 'practical political action.'<sup>27</sup> The term political, as Hutchison uses it, is deployed from a feminist position, which makes its challenge 'to denaturalise the traditional historiographic separation of the private and the public – and the personal and the political.'<sup>28</sup>

## SCENE 5

*After the waterworks tour. At Amanda's place. Group at table in sub-tropical garden. Amanda picks up tape recorder.*

Amanda: Everyone we are recording right now. Boomerang Creek's down there – you see that really flat bit – the creek runs down there – we've got two swimming holes. You can't go down there, it needs brushcutting, and there are snakes.

Calvino: Faites attention!

## SCENE 6

*By the river at the bottom of Wotherspoon Street, North Lismore. Charly arrives and looks for Belinda. She's waiting by the swings.*

Belinda: Why did you choose this spot for me to interview you on your experience of the water group?

Charly: It's by the river, and it's the only decent parky spot I know in Lismore. It's quiet during the day and there's shade. Depending on the time of the year, you can pick mulberries and macas.

Belinda: What were your first impressions on the name of the course?

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<sup>27</sup> Hutchison, op. cit. pp. 135,136

<sup>28</sup> Linda Hutcheon in *The Politics of Postmodernism*, p143

Charly: I'm a Piscean and I feel a connection to water. I was born in Britain near the sea. So the water thing appealed to me. I was also attracted by the fact that it was a freebie.

Belinda: Out of the pieces you wrote, which affected you the most?

Charly: *Lovely Bloody Water*. The humour was ongoing from the title to the end, but it was all about the changing nature of water, water's variability, and saying that our use of water is powerful, eternal and cyclic.

Belinda: Do you see yourself as a person to contribute to water, by changing others' views or caring for water yourself?

Charly: I believe that all of us can care for water by stopping trees being cut down. I also feel that drinking water is safer from the excursion we did to the water treatment plant, and I suppose that could influence other people's use.

Belinda: How did the course affect your writing?

Charly: Well, I think I've become more impulsive. I'm a poet and I feel that if I can get the first line right, then it flows.

Belinda: Did the course affect your feelings about water?

Charly: I became more aware when I went up to the dam.

Belinda: That's all the questions I've got – let's go for lunch now.

***Calvino has been sitting on a park bench immersed in the Weekend Australian.***

***Suddenly he looks up.***

Calvino: We live in an unending rainfall of images.<sup>29</sup> I would like to remind you of a time, when the world was *visible* to people in an entirely different way. In the days before printing, let alone a media-saturated society, a person's visual memory was limited to the heritage of their direct experience and to a restricted repertory of images reflected in culture.<sup>30</sup> In light of all the watery imagery that finds its way into your Australian advertising – the pure, the exciting, the dark and moody, the Territory water, the sea and so on – would you agree that is it fair to think that, even at a park by a river, it is more and more unlikely that any one form among so many will succeed in standing out, and that it might be more difficult to *see* this water in its own right?

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<sup>29</sup> Calvino, op. cit. p57

<sup>30</sup> Calvino, ibid. p92

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**Projection: correspondence**

Dear Jonathan

I'm a part of the Johburg Spider Writers' wider audience! – *Finding Mr Madini* was given to me when I revisited SA for the first time in 18 years, last October. I love the book – there are so many threads in it. Above all I just bask in it being in MY LANGUAGE! I'd like to talk to all Spider Writers, but my professional interest in the way you undertook the project and your email lead me to you.

I was recently awarded a two-year fellowship to do an investigation of water through community writing. A book I co-authored, *Out of the Ordinary* came out too. To celebrate, I made the trip to South Africa, where people actually remembered me!

I love the way the Spider Writers project gives form to things so that we see IN, and I was influenced by these ideas in working with groups on water. Now I'm looking over all that material and remembered I wanted to contact you. The 'windows' idea worked particularly well – people were able to see the point of working in this way very easily.

Giving form to intensely collaborative work is much more messy and infinitely more full of potentials than something monologic – at every stage. This process comes through the text of *Finding Mr Madini*. I just want to know more – like Valentine taking over from you as the 'main point of view character' – what was involved in the actual transaction? What made you decide not to call it something by both of you? What guided you in the overall editing?

All the best – Annie B

Annie

What a great response to *Finding Mr Madini* – thanks so much!!! Do you live in Sydney? I fought hard to have everyone's name on the cover but lost, so everyone else got to be only credited as the great african spider writers. It is also true that I did about five thousand times as much work as anyone else, even tho this was a luxury and mostly as a result of my posi of privilege, and what seemed like smaller contributions may in fact have been bigger ones than mine – its all a bit complex. Anyway this was not the reason their names did not appear, the publisher outright refused – cover becomes too busy, etc etc. Check out 1999 issue of Dulwich Centre on homelessness, an article on the process in there.<sup>31</sup> I am also curious about how you use writing and workshops as a tool of resistance or whatever, it seems a little more possible or encouraged where you are than here. FMM was an unfunded spontaneous project. From what you wrote it seems this kind of thing may be recognised and supported where you are, correct me if I'm wrong. Please let me know if your book is available in Australian bookshops?

Best wishes and totsien's etc - Jonathan

## SCENE 7

*Rous Depot – Kyogle Street. 4.30pm. Three white utes have come home to roost. Picks, gemmy bars, gummies, shovels, eskies, pipe joints lie on the trays. Inside the entrance to a double storey pre-fab, a small office. A number of large tomes on the shelf: 'Basic Electronics,' 'Electrical Fundamentals and Current Analysis,' 'American Waste Water Association Water Quality and Treatment,' 'Standard Methods for the Examination of Water and Wastewater.'*

Annie: John, thanks for making time to see me.

John: That's okay mate. Can you find a spot over there?

Annie: Could you cast an eye over these pieces just to get an idea of what some of the guys have contributed?

John (laughing): Who's this? **Reads:**

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<sup>31</sup> see Morgan, 'Malunda: Someone Who Sleeps Just Anywhere; The Great African Spider Project', in *Dulwich Centre Journal*, 3/99, pp55-66

*We're water water-keepers. Water-treaters. Water directors  
Providing safe and aesthetically pleasing water  
In the first section of the operators course that's what you learn  
You put your hand on your heart for that*

Annie: Phil from Nightcap.

John: And this one (*reads*) – *OH and S would fry you for that nowadays!*

Annie: Dave James.

John: Geez that Dave's a funny bloke – the things he comes out with.

Annie: Yeah we had a good session. We talked about all the dogs they have to get past to do their jobs. This is what we put together: (*reads*)

*There's a couple of Rottweilers out at East Hill  
This one time I got out there  
I thought they were in their compound  
Walked out bravely, shot across the fence  
I soon found out they weren't  
Had to run and dive straight through the left hand window*

*I've only been bitten once by a dog– on the leg.*

*There's another Rottweiler out at Dorroughby  
I had to hold the shovel out for it to chew on the handle  
Till I got back to the truck  
Buggered me best shovel!<sup>32</sup>*

Annie: It reminds me of the River Styx and the huge dog that guards Hades.

John: There's a couple of typos here, do you want me to mark them? And just let me know what you need – I'd like to help. I'd like to improve the image of the water we provide. It

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<sup>32</sup> Rous Water Operators in *Water Conversation Records*, op. cit.

gets me down the way people smoke and eat Mars bars and drink coke and then they go on about how the water's going to kill them.

## SCENE 8

*The Mecca Café – Magellan Street. Zentfeld's Coffee umbrellas on the pavement.*

*Inside 50s style booths. Pale green scenes of Lismore at that time. But from the dogs tied up, and the kids adventuring around, its clientele has changed over the years.*

*(Music from record store: Emmy Lou Harris, 'Looking for Water from a Deeper Well.')*

Jay: How are you going?

Annie: Fine. I've got the letter for you – I'm really glad you've decided to try the writing course at uni.

Jay: I enjoyed the water writing group. Only we talked a lot about people drowning and floods and that – we got stuck in the reality part of water and we didn't explore the adventurous side, the enchanting side enough. We all know that with water when we were kids, creeks were oceans, a fountain occurs from the water sprinkler when its super hot – water isn't serious half the time is it?

Annie: Yeah, I was probably always trying to steer people a bit in the functional direction.

Jay: Water nymphs and fairies inspire me.

Annie: You were one of the enthusiasts on the trip to the dam though. We're about to go on another dam tour – I'm doing another group at ACE. And I wanted to let you know, we'll be having a Water Celebration in November – a big exhibition of everyone's writing, Kath singing, some high school kids dancing, readings – a community gathering at Rous Water.

Jay: I wrote a little poem after I'd been to the dam. Do you want to see it? *(pulls scrap of paper out of folder and reads)*

*Little house,*

*Quiet as a mouse,*

*In the middle of the lake.*

*Life wakes ...*



*The personality of*

*The petite*

*Creating a special magic*

*Of the unique<sup>33</sup>*

Annie: Tell me about it. That's the intake water tower isn't it?

Jay: Yes, that little house. It reminded me of how a lot of people are. They're all alone, a long way from the land. And they don't know how to be more together with people, to let out who they are.

## SCENE 9

***Lismore Crematorium. Fire is the element. 739 degrees centigrade. Advice on the noticeboard in the behind-chapel area. 'Gardening: Spray roses.' Tiny little fire-red window glows. Three women take turns standing on a chair (because two of them, the daughters, are small, like their father) watching the father's body burn.***

Annie: This reminds me of being in India. As part of the cremation, the oldest son smashes his father's skull with a stick. It's a big thing to put your dad in the fire.

Margot: I'm glad we've decided to do it this way.

Jan: Yes, it's a good thing that we're here.

Annie: Thanks for asking me to come and be with you two.

Margot: It's amazing how the fire's hardly touched his hips yet.

Crematorium worker: Yes, he's going to take a long while yet. You could come back in an hour or so and by then there'll be another twenty minutes or so before we scrape out the bone fragments and put them in the one down here that operates at a lower temperature.

Jan: Okay, we've brought a picnic. We'll go and sit in the garden and see you later.

Calvino appears wearing red cloth as shawl: (*reads*)

*We're all going to die, the great Ganges boat with its load of four square stacks of middle-sized firewood for the burning ghats, reminds me. We are all going to die. Varanasi*

*openly reminds with its shattering gold-red cloth covers for the dead, with its passing funeral parties, with its smoky sky.*

*Would I feel fine to go and buy a splendid death cover for myself that they could put over me when dead, keep till then with my will? Saving up this reminder till death comes, because there are so few reminders on my streets? To have that cloth in my cupboard and catch sight of it when I go for my linen?*

*Yet its shimmering red-gold glory might simply become an unnoticed shade in my spectrum of possessions. I might forget I bought it for a reason. I might remember I bought it for a reason and gradually forget what it felt like to see the bamboo bier-borne corpses, the charring skull beneath the burning logs, the young boy in white wraps circling the pyre five times before lighting the fire that burns his father's body. Perhaps I might not be able to recover the quality of this place by this river – the marigold garlands discarded in the water, the sacred fire beneath the yellow building whose clock always stands at 2 o' clock, the children on the periphery flying their kites. Even here it's hard to bear this knowledge. I am to die of death.<sup>34 35</sup>*

## **SCENE 10**

***ACE Lismore. Winding behind like a huge snake, visible to the audience, but not to those involved in the action, is the River.***

***A breeze drifts through the space. What is it in the air? The weather is changing. It is almost safe to say that the wet season is over.***

***In the classroom Barbara has already arrived. She's put a jug of iced water on the table. Annie seems disconcerted, as if she's landed in the wrong place. Does water really trump fire? Kia and Elena arrive together.***

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<sup>33</sup> Jay Schell, *ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Raja Rao, *On the Ganga Ghat*, p12

Barbara: I brought water from my fridge at home today.

Annie: I don't know what's happened to Peter?

Kath: Sorry I'm late, I've just been arranging childcare.

Linda: I just made it! I've been so busy, getting over to Ballina every day for work, I haven't had time to write anything.

Barbara: I've been mulling over things I've never thought about about water. I've written something that I'd like to read – it's a bit listy.

Kia: I just have to say ... before we started this water program I had a dream about water. I was travelling in my blue Camry, and it was by the sea, and suddenly there was this huge wave, and the car was just washed away. Then last Tuesday, I was parked on Ballina Road, and I was literally stepping out of the building, and heard this slamming noise, and I just knew! My car was being wiped off the road by these youngsters in a car out of control, just as it was wiped aside by the ocean in my dream.

Annie: That's wild.

Elena: So that's why she's travelling with me.

Barbara: I'm so sorry to hear that Kia.

Annie: It'd be good to start with some readings I think. What have you titled this piece  
Barbara?

Barbara: *A Body of Water*.

Annie: Let's hear it.

**Barbara reads:**

*Human bodies consist mainly of water. Every living cell is made up of between 5 and 95% water. This water is not always recognisable in our bodies, often not looking at all like water. Some of the fluids in our body that are predominantly water include blood, cerebro-spinal fluid, tears, saliva, urine, synovial fluid, bile, mucus, gastric juices, semen, amniotic fluid, and the whimsically named aqueous and vitreous humours. Water is vital for all cell function and chemical processes in our bodies, for diluting, moistening and digesting food, regulating body temperature, and transporting hormones, antibodies and water soluble vitamins ...*<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Annie Bolitho, *Water Exercise Books*, unpublished ms

<sup>36</sup> Barbara Miller, *Water Conversation Records*, op. cit.

Kia: I learnt so much from that! It's packed with information.

Kath: It's quite a process.

Barbara: I hear the extraordinary in other people's writing but I can only hear the ordinary in my own.

Elena: I love what you write.

Linda: So do I.

Elena: But if it was that good we'd be published writers.

Kath: I'm enjoying what I hear here so much more than a lot of what I see published.

Annie: I'm not sure that it matters that much how good it is. We're having an amazing cultural experience here – seeing where the writers and the waters, and the ideas about writing and the ideas about the waters, come from. In the readings there's something unique about sharing others' experience as they've shaped it. And it's about pleasure. So let's make the most of this unusual opportunity.

Elena: I find the listening a real sensory pleasure. I like the feel of the words. I like the idea of words being used to create beauty.

Calvino: Ah! here is exactitude. It leaps out of the text 'at a time when it seems to me that a pestilence has struck the human race in its most distinctive faculty – that is, the use of words. It is a plague affecting language, revealing itself as a loss of cognition and immediacy, an automatism that tends to level out all expression into the most generic, anonymous, and abstract formulas, to dilute meanings, to blunt the edge of expressiveness, extinguishing the spark that shoots out from the collision of words and new circumstances.'<sup>37</sup>

## **INTERVAL**

**Projection of correspondence goes up – a long piece which is there to read for those who decide not to leave the space.**

**re: things**

Dear Annie

...

>in about mid-June in a back to back kind of way. How is water?

Water is huge. Interestingly my acupuncturist told me recently I should not be drinking nearly as much of it as I have been. I heard what she had to say in a disbelieving way. I have taken it for granted for a while that there is a lot of water passing through me one way and another. It is a relief at least to limit my physical intake. The groups have been great – my focus on connecting the writers with the technical scientific bods mean I'm particularly interested in what has emerged from taking people up to the waterworks. The writing has been varied in texture and degree of development. A woman from South Australia wrote a piece about the pipeline at Port Augusta which was very vivid for me, having visited there so recently. Her childhood imaginative world and specialist viewpoint (she's worked in public health for a long time) come together in an interesting way too.

Did you ever look at an article by Raymond Williams in the course of your researches, *The Tenses of Imagination*? I'm interested in the way he posits imagination as a historical and social phenomenon, and identifies an 'ambiguous valuation' surrounding it,<sup>38</sup> since 'much that is valuable has been imagined, and much that is worthless and dangerous.'<sup>39</sup> He concludes by giving attention to the future tense, stressing that we need to be aware of how rationalised processes of reproduction claim to be 'imaginative'. This is rather nice: 'There are periods in a culture when what we call real knowledge seem to have to take priority over what is commonly called imagination ... But now ... there are other deeper forces at work, which perhaps only imagination, in its full processes, can touch and reach and recognise and embody.'<sup>40</sup>

I've been re-looking at your thesis, on the question of 'becoming the subject rather than the object, or the "other"<sup>41</sup> of one's story in community writing, or any other writing for that

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<sup>37</sup> Calvino, op. cit. p56

<sup>38</sup> see *Writing in Society*, p260

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *ibid.* pp267-268

<sup>41</sup> Hutchison, op. cit. p124

matter. I love that bit where you quote Margaret speaking of her story emerging as part of the Homefront process.

... I could never write because I kept thinking, how will people read this? Will they hate it? ... But once you shift from that position of defining yourself from an outside position or perspective to writing because you've got something to come out, rather than describe something external, then you get a fundamental change of sensitivities. Or subject matter.<sup>42</sup>

She says: It's like bringing it out into the light ... Because you make it another – not just another story.' And you say: 'But part of world of stories. And she repeats: Part of the world of stories.'<sup>43</sup>

In this time where Leunig reminds us that 'We must make do with scraps ... A tiny flake of beauty. One teaspoon of enthusiasm. Off-cuts of each other, A skerrick of community ... A bit of a kiss,' there is a risk that water will influence me to lose sight of 'discursive struggle for power/knowledge'<sup>44</sup> and that I'll simply drift off.

Barbara (Port Augusta) said at the end of the six weeks. 'This kind of work around water needs to be done in schools. So kids can really get to THINK about water. I mean I've never really THOUGHT about water till now.

>

wonder if you got to see that document in Mortlock when you were in SA?

annie<sup>45</sup>

## SCENE 11

### *Lines spoken by chorus:*

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<sup>42</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.* p125

<sup>44</sup> Westwood, 1991, quoted in Hutchison

<sup>45</sup> Mary Hutchison, pers. Comm. 15.3.2000

Have you heard how influential the Snowy River is becoming in the Victorian election?  
Did you see that program showing the loss of fish on the Mekong?  
Did you hear how the Minister of the Environment rubbished the move made by ACF and the National Farmers Federation on salinity?  
Did you hear about the flooding in Queenstown in New Zealand? – it seems that it wasn't just a normal flooding, that it was the beginning of a response to global warming.  
Did you read about that farmer on the Namoi who used to be a stockbroker? And he's holding 80,000 megalitres of water in off-stream storages?  
You probably saw – the World Bank has told BHP and the PNG government to close down Ok Tedi gold mine, the environmental impacts are so severe. But the PNG govt can't afford to close it down because it's the source of 10% of their gross national product.  
I watched a program on the Three Gorges Dam on the Yangtse – I cried.  
Did you hear about the meteorite that came down in the waterworks at Guyra?  
I was reading about the Aral Sea the other day – it's shrunk and turned to salt. Would you like me to find the article for you.

***Space goes quiet. Single voice speaks from within chorus.***

*My source is behind my tap  
which is a spring  
which rises on this land.  
The run-off is only from forest  
There's no agricultural or human products going into it  
I know that it's perfectly pure.  
How that much water appears up there  
And just keeps running year after year  
is a mystery to me!  
The infinity of it –  
Even in droughts it's never dried up  
There's always been a trickle.*

*I feel very privileged  
I go up there and wonder at what I have  
Just coming out of the ground  
That people go to shops and buy in bottles.*

*And I remember how frightened I was in Kosovo of water  
Knowing that NATO had used depleted uranium in the missiles  
The tap seemed such a scary thing.<sup>46</sup>*

### **Projection**

*Costrel: a large bottle with an ear or ears by which it could be suspended by the waist; a pilgrim's bottle.*

### **SCENE 12**

***Rous Centre, Molesworth Street. An executive office with large glass windows, recently moved in to. Some books on Management Strategy still on the floor. Certificates leaning against the wall. BSC ANU, MA in Management, University of Central Queensland. Real estate advertising on foamcore board PERRADENYA.***

Elisabeth: Would you like a coffee?

Annie: Sure, that'd be nice.

Elisabeth: So if you could just send me another proposal based on the proposal you gave to the Art Gallery stating the objectives. It just needs to detail what you want to do with the idea for the art – you can include everything about the final event in the same one. I think the paintings would look nice hanging behind the large glass window in the foyer.

Annie: So you think it would work for you to have about five pieces from the gallery that feature water, on display, with the stories from the Caroon people alongside them. I'll get on to Irena at the Gallery to get a proposal to you, and to clarify about the insurance.

Elisabeth: What you're doing is quite unusual, even pioneering.



Annie: Thank you, I'm glad you think so – a lot depends on how we work this out together. For the final event in November, we'll need a largish space. About seventy people have contributed so far.

Elisabeth: I'm not sure how it's going to work out time-wise, but behind that glass window there's a huge space which we're going to be converting into a water testing laboratory. We've got to knock out a few walls to start with. But I can't make any guarantees – the builders may be in there by then.

Annie: With building there are usually delays. I suppose if they are in by then we could always use the smaller space and spill out on to the street. We could blow up some of the texts and hang them on the outside of the building.

Calvino: The accommodation is an unrenovated space. In the future it will be a laboratory. Hutchison has spoken of the way events as performances or 'doing of community' can have an impact in the moment on what would otherwise be exclusive and dominating social relations.<sup>47</sup> Will this laboratory-to-be provide the kind of ground on which those who have made contact in this collective, inter-subjective experiment show themselves and find each other in a different way? Will it make visible community, not in the sense of self-protective closure,<sup>48</sup> but as a form of hospitality, a performative problematisation of the various dimensions of this water conversation?

### SCENE 13

*Home office. Sign FLOW FLOW FLOW beside desk. Faint sound of trickle of creek beneath window. Phone rings.*

Voice: Hi, it's Lynn from the Gallery.

Annie: Hi Lynn, how can I help you?

Voice: Well, we have your original proposal here, but we need something from Rous. Could you get them to put a proposal to us, outlining their insurance position. Get them to

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<sup>46</sup> Carol Perry in *Water Conversation Records*, op. cit.

<sup>47</sup> Mary Hutchison, *I am the Amazon*, op. cit. p192

<sup>48</sup> John D. Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell, A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, p110

list the artworks – the ones you picked out, and their dimensions. And we'll also need a proposal from Caroonna.

***Paper spiral arises from the ground and is held in motion.***

Calvino: A contemporary community writer organises *by* writing, I understand. You could say that '... writing and the division of labour go hand in hand; social relationships reflect the micro-logic of the writing process. Intrinsic to this process is the necessity of control, and specifically the idea that division ... *includes* the writer and his/her social world.' In this case the social world is one in which new connections are being made where they have previously not been considered. In order to bridge what might be seen as a natural division in the social order, the community writer, must respond within the micro-logic of the bureaucracy's writing processes. 'Writers of every kind are compelled to write within the socio-technical structures that writing creates.'<sup>49</sup>

**SCENE 14**

***In a small lounge room with white longitudinal blinds. The breeze catches them – tek, tek, tek – and strips of sunlight flap in. A lot of bubblewrap lying about. A maintenance man and a volunteer from the Regional Gallery lean on a handrail, looking at the painting they've put up. They are holding hammers and picture hooks. One picks up cards with title details and fixes the right one to the wall beneath the painting.***

Alan Waters: How are you going to interest them in these pieces?

Annie: Well first we'll get them up on the wall!

Alan: And then?

Annie: We'll gather. I'll tell them about the water project and say that they are in it with a lot of others ...

Neville: Will this be enough chairs?

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<sup>49</sup> Robert Cooper in *Modernism, Post Modernism and Organizational Analysis 3: The Contribution of Jacques Derrida*, p499

Annie: I think so – there are about fifteen people altogether, but I think they're coming in two groups.

... and that their stories will be displayed beside the artworks at Rous Water in November and that they'll be invited down ...

Alan (facing a small piece): This is very much of their era, life on the river.

Annie: I like this photo a lot – hippies in an outdoor shower.

Alan: Will you talk about art at all?

Annie: Yeah, I think we'll talk about art a bit. I'll invite them to look. They'll look closely, and perhaps not see if their eyesight is fading. I'll say sometimes we can have pictures as clearly and brightly in our imagination as any painting. There'll be lots of associations.

***Women begin arriving and having a look***

One (laughing): I'm pleased there's no nudes!

Two: I like that end one – the barge on the Richmond River.

Three: Good old cane cutting! The waterlilies are nice – very peaceful, calming.

Four: That's a beautiful one – I like the bush, I come from England and the trees of the bush are more interesting to me than the sea.

Five: Have you got any Aboriginal paintings? I'm interested in them.

Six: That one's of an outdoor bath – I wonder if they do have a bath in the house? – in the old days when you lived in the country, the houses didn't have bathrooms.

Seven: I like the big one – it puts me in mind of when I used to go fishing ...

***Time lapse***

***The group is talking. Annie is scribbling, looking up occasionally to check a detail.***

Grace Butcher: The big boats from Sydney used to come up the Richmond to Lismore. My brother worked for years on the wharf, loading them up. And unloading. It was the only transport bringing things into town then. Gee they were big boats used to come up there!

Mary Swancutt: You know Grace is 98?

Kath Wynne: When I was nine or ten we were on the land, the Goulburn side of Crookwell – the best spud country in Australia. In a dry season I had to drag water from a 40 foot well. It was a stark operation. You had the rope, you had the bucket and you had two hands – there were planks across the well and you'd have one foot on one side and one on the other and you'd hope you didn't fall in! But the water wasn't nice – that kind of soil, the deeper you went, it became nearly offensive, the smell of the water. We boiled it. After a while we discovered a spring coming out of the side of a hill a long way from the house – beautiful water. But again we had to do it primitively – I'd carry water in a big billy for my father to drink when he was working.

Chris Priest: Didn't you have a furphy?

Kath: No, not at that stage.

Mary S: What's a furphy? You know I thought it was a furphy ... like in parliament.

Kath: It's a big cylinder on wheels.

Chris: We had a furphy. It carried maybe 40, 50, 60 gallons of water. On a wooden frame. You hitched a horse to it.

***(Sound of water boiling, steam rising from an ignored urn turned to high)***

Bobby McDonnell: I grew up in West Hallam in Derbyshire – it was a brick bungalow style of house. Our toilet was outside – the coalhouse was to the left – you had to order in coal for heating then – and the toilet to the right. In winter when you went down the step, there'd be snow and ice, and you could slide across to the toilet! When you went to pull the chain it was frozen and of course it wouldn't pull! That happened quite a lot when it was cold – you just didn't go till it thawed.

Kath Wynne: An outstanding thing in my mind is that when we moved to Tweed Heads, we had three corrugated iron tanks – of course the water is plentiful on the north coast and it was very nice water. All of a sudden the councils around said you have to get rid of those tanks. I think that was a real shame – reticulated water is great for convenience, but in any kind of crisis we no longer have stored rain water.

Chris: We had tanks to catch the rainwater on the Murrumbidgee irrigation. I learned to swim there in a muddy dam – a real old station dam. We were ten years there and then we went to Barellan – that's Yvonne Goolagong country. Drought stricken country it was then

– sixteen inches was the average rainfall. The water was from a muddy dam – we cleared it with alum – made the water very hard.

You had a dipper of water and you stood in a basin, washed yourself over with sponge and soap, then poured the water over. Then you took that out and put it on your favourite plant in the garden – that was in the days of real sport.

Kath W: I remember one very tragic situation, two little boys ran up to our back door and said Mister come quickly! Our mate's gone down! It was muddy water. A primitive dam for stock – no lining, just earth – the muddy water had asphyxiated the child and when the police came it was too late to revive him.

Joan Moss: We were on a farm see, at Fairy Hill ...

Calvino: Among the values I have celebrated, there is one which has started to work its magic here. Multiplicity. Without swamping us – far from it – look how the matter in hand spreads out and out, encompassing ever vaster horizons, and if it were permitted to go on further and further in every direction, it would end by embracing the entire universe.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Calvino, *op. cit.* p107

## SCENE 15

*Car pulls over under stand of camphor laurels. Bloke with backpack looks in.*

Bloke: Lismore?

Annie: Yeah, hop in – is that enough room?

Bloke: That's not all – I'm going to town to pick up some stuff I left at a friend's place.

Annie: You're Will aren't you? Do you still perform at the Standup Poets?

Will: No, I'm not doing that at the moment, I'm producing a contemporary version of Richard III I've written, at the Nimbin School of Arts. What about you? I've forgotten your name.

Annie: Annie – I'm doing a writing project on water with Rous.

Will: Oh I saw about it in the paper. Nice subject. Had a good response?

Annie: Yes, I think people like finding a channel to express their water loving.

Will: Channel. Ah hah!

Annie: There are a few poets in the system at Rous.

Will: Yeah, you get poets working with water – like Robin who runs the wastewater system at Nimbin.

Annie: I haven't followed her up. I spend all my time trying to come to understandings with Rous.

Will: Why doesn't it surprise me? Aren't they the rearguard action of the Northern Rivers?

Annie (laughing): Sometimes I get so frustrated I could weep ...

Will: The tears of the world are of constant quantity, as the Bard said.

### **Projection: correspondence**

Dear Melissa

*dwelling on water, new dimensions in WATER CONVERSATION*

Good to talk to you about your possible participation in this project. I'm enclosing the information sheet which gives an outline of its intentions.

What I would like to propose is that a group of your dance students might look over various texts that have been created during the course of the project, and develop work in response to two or three of them. The final exhibition of work will be held at Rous Water in Molesworth Street – the date is tentatively set for Wednesday 15th November – and the students dance would be part of the event.

Please get back to me with any questions or suggestions – it'd be fascinating to see what the young people make of various stories and accounts people have contributed.

Best wishes

Annie

## **SCENE 16**

*Caddies Coffee Shop. By the water jugs.*

Slapp: Haven't seen you for a while. Having any luck with Rous Water?

Annie: No, not much luck – it's pretty hard to get to speak to anyone.

Slapp: They're a monopoly. You can't expect vision. There's nowhere else you can buy your water. They don't have to talk to people. All that rhetoric about customers ...

Annie: I heard the word pioneering once, but since then ...

Slapp: It's hard. Like working with Sydney Water – I was just so glad when they stopped ringing me.

Annie: I'm meeting Melissa from Trinity – her students are going to interpret some of the water writings.

Slapp: I'm off to Sydney for four days to catch up on movies.

## SCENE 17

*A jacaranda tree in bloom fills a large low window entirely in purple. It's the changing spring time of year in Lismore. Pieces of writing are laid out in a circular arrangement all around the lounge room floor.*

Annie: Are you still enjoying your new lifestyle?

Barbara: I love it. As a matter of fact I was up at Caroonia doing a shift the other night and one of the women showed me the booklet of their water stories. They're so pleased with it. Oh, hi Kath! Find a bit of floor.

Annie: I've put just about everything that's been contributed in a tentative order. Can we go round and see if the pieces fit where they are? See which ones should be left in and which left out? Get a sense of whether the titles are working?

Barbara: Have Rous let you know about the room yet?

Annie: No, they don't know what the builder's schedule is. It's a bit difficult to get across that we need to send out invitations now.

Kath: And are they putting in any money? What did you ask for – \$500?

Annie: No, it's not within their policy guidelines.

Barbara: That's disappointing. You'll just have to have a gold coin donation.

Kath: As far as the program goes, you've got Don Harvey and Diana speaking, then me singing the flood song, and then the Trinity kids dancing, then ...

Barbara: I think it'd work better for the kids to dance first ... as a way of getting people in, focussing everyone on what's happening. It'd be good to have one of those rainshakers – have you seen them? They sell them through the Australian Geographic catalogue.

Kia: And there'll be water and watermelon – no wine or anything?

Barbara: That'll save some money!

### **Projection: correspondence**

Dear AnnieB

It was lovely to talk ... and I went to Paluma and heeded your counsel and did no big Talk.



I'm sending you a poem and if it can make any contribution that's lovely. But it's sent really with love and Rarara and huzzah and good on ya, and go for it Annie! for the big Water Party ...  
Love Suzy

### **Ireland '59**

Who remembers the well?  
it was hidden,  
a purl of braided water  
in a sandy scoop  
in the hedge.  
Tight bodiced and bowed I stood  
Rubbing one leg against the other  
Like a mute ecstatic grasshopper,  
Holding my father's hand ...  
Did I drink?  
Too timid to risk a further privilege ...  
now  
it hardly matters  
I drank in deep  
The lapwing calling across the moss,  
the waterfogged fields  
(Poor farmland, he'd say  
and catalogue the well-remembered dead  
who'd drunk the stock away);  
The water  
bulging between my hands

and the invisible constraints of the meniscus.<sup>51</sup>

Calvino: There is no problem with supply here. The water conversation cannot help being accumulative. '... the manifold text replaces the oneness of a thinking "I" with a multiplicity of subjects, voices and views of the world, on the model of what Mikhail Bakhtin has called the "dialogic" or polyphonic," or "carnavalesque" ...'<sup>52</sup>

*At the mention of the word carnivalesque, lights come up on two characters on a larger than life size video projection. A Mermaid and a Flow Engineer are seated in the foyer of a Flow Organisation. They are right beneath a large board indicating current dam levels. Ruffled front desk staff are just visible. The Mermaid takes out her comb. She is apparently enjoying looking beautiful sitting in the foyer. The Flow Engineer, appears impatient and seems to take it badly that she is wasting time.*

Flow Engineer: How does cleaning fit in your scheme of things, preparing surfaces for action?

Mermaid: I'll give anything a go once.

Flow Engineer: When I looked in that room downstairs there was a lot of cabling hanging out of the ceiling and all sorts of broken furniture and papers ...

Receptionist: I'll just try her on her mobile. You say you have an appointment ...?

Flow Engineer: Yes.

Mermaid: There's a senior engineer here – he's very nice, isn't he? Wouldn't you say he has a quiet influence? I'll mention the room to him. What date are we talking about?

Flow Engineer: The 15<sup>th</sup> November. I told you that this was a ridiculous thing to do. There's no one in the Organisation who is in the least bit interested. There's this look they give you – have you noticed? What was it that I said ... about needing to be within the province of science to influence anything where water is concerned ...?

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<sup>51</sup> Suzy Gilmour in *Water Conversation Records*, op. cit. Suzy's participation was an influence on her developing *Splish Splash ... I Was Taking a Bath* with La Luna Youth Arts, an event which 'spread evenly over the Museum of Tropical Queensland,' young actors, dancers and water. (YAQ News, pp14-15)

<sup>52</sup> Calvino, op. cit.

Mermaid: I'm sorry. I was preoccupied. I'm thinking about the well in the poem that came from Townsville. Wells are such an interesting example of water places with a culture of people gathering around. I've heard that they've fallen out of use and that they are rather neglected now, but that even today, in some places people still bring votive offerings of ribbons and cloth to tie to nearby trees. Let's think of the event as bringing people together round the well again.

Calvino (looking into copy of *H<sub>2</sub>O and the Waters of Forgetfulness*): Ivan Illich wrote on water. Let's see. Despite others having failed, he says here, there is no reason not to try and reveal the stuff of matter, in particular water, in its historicity.<sup>53</sup> Perhaps the writer, Annie, knew she could only fail. And that to fail would reveal something important. That water is not to be revealed, only the people who use it, its tendencies and associations as they see them, and the vitality of their connection.

Let's watch shall we?

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<sup>53</sup> Ivan Illich, p4

### **A DREAM IN SEPTEMBER**

I dream that I am floating on the current of the Ganges, in the centre of the stream. As I glide down I am being interviewed by a reporter. He is asking earnestly: how do you do this unusual thing? I answer languidly, knowing how extraordinary it is to be able to bathe safely at the height of summer in India, saying how much I love the water. That this is above all, above pollution and the problems of water.

## 6.

### WATER STORY TESTING, UNEQUAL PERSPECTIVES

#### **Flash Mixing**

An interest in what might be termed sense and the sensible, or 'matters of value' and 'matters of fact' run as intersecting currents, with pulls and cross-movements, through this chapter: in relation to the cultural memory of a water authority, in relation to the place of a cultural experiment in a future water testing laboratory, in relation to story itself, and in relation to my approach to a bureaucracy to support a community cultural development project.

It was in the nature of the water conversation to put different belief systems in dialogue and include 'new dimensions' of interaction among those concerned with water. In Bakhtinian terms, it introduced an element of 'living into another's consciousness,' of 'going out to the other in order to come back with a self.'<sup>1</sup> The degree of surprised mingling which occurred might be likened to the first stage in water treatment, in which water and suspended particles are rushed into a froth and a polyelectrolyte introduced, with the promise of making clear water, a process known as flash mixing. The conclusions which I draw here about water/story testing are based on the discourses which came into play, and the presences which they caused to appear, as different ways of thinking, talking and acting in relation to water were given expression.

#### **Laboratory without a science?**

Rous Water offers a laboratory-to-be, as yet unrenovated, empty of benches, taps or test tubes, to be the venue for the final event of a public 'water conversation'. Let us say that where this water authority is concerned, there is a culture in place. Certain activities proceed from it, such as techno-scientific operations of supply and demand and water

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<sup>1</sup> Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, p78

quality monitoring. Certain forms and ways of doing things are normal to it, such as operating within structural and technocratic constraints and providing reports to a board. These are regularly validated within specific frameworks, such as the NSW Local Government Water Directorate. Thus the word laboratory suggests the kind of thing that would usually be put to the test under the aegis of a water authority. Yet here a writer receives an offer to make it the site of a community-based cultural expression and experimentation which will put an accumulative water/story to the test of a heterogeneous audience.

The contemporary philosopher of science, Isabelle Stengers, regards it as important that the generalised concept of science with which laboratories, experiments and water authorities might be identified, should be brought down 'to discernible size and sciences which are singular ...'<sup>2</sup> This involves being aware that whilst a water authority is 'imbued with tradition, in the sense of received authority, dogmatic commitment and "mechanical solidarity"'<sup>3</sup> any local engagement with it will reveal a particular story. Various insights in previous chapters will have set in train a sense of Rous Water's particular history and politics. To review and expand at this point, Rous' unusual conglomerative situation puts it in a strong position:

Rous Water happens to be in a very fortunate financial position and this has been assisted by the extension of its role into Ballina/Lennox head in 1988 and a further extension in 1997 to Alstonville/Wollongbar. The benefit of this cooperative approach is that Ballina Shire was saved the huge cost of augmenting their existing supplies from within their own boundaries by effectively purchasing a share of the Rous system which had been financed by the Lismore/Byron/Richmond River community since 1953 ... the infrastructure is paid for, is in good condition there are no impending upgrade costs which are not funded ...<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Isabelle Stengers, *Power and Invention, Situating Science*, p120

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.* p47

<sup>4</sup> *Rous Water Minutes*, 20.10.99, pp.12-13

It is of particular interest that within the context of National Competition Policy, Rous Water's obligation to operate as a business with appropriate lines of accountability,<sup>5</sup> puts it in the running to undertake various entrepreneurial ventures with associated risks, such as the development of Perradenya Estate.<sup>6</sup> Political tensions between board members from different constituent councils regularly play out. A 1982 public referendum said no to fluoridating the water supply – today the political differences between councils make it unlikely that this decision will ever be reversed. In 1999 State Forests looked set to log compartments in the water supply catchment (see Ch. 5). Byron Shire carried a resolution within its own council on this, requesting that Rous Water and State Forests review their agreement in the interests of catchment and water supply.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, when it comes to considering the future water testing laboratory, on the one hand it is simply water, nutrients, pathogens and trace metals that will be the object of investigation there. On the other hand, since this lab will not be replacing Rous Water's existing in-house testing, the intention appears to be to capitalise on the business of end-use water testing in the region. The testing function will be 'sold' to various councils. People in white coats seen from the entrance to Rous Water's building, will increase its water authority. Thus the lab will in some sense put to the test new ideas about Rous Water in the current political context. Nonetheless, what we call science is still influential when it comes to thinking about laboratories in the context of a water authority, where some councillors and staff operate on the basis of a 'realist concept of scientific knowledge'<sup>8</sup> and at times identify technical/scientific approaches with reason and rationality itself.

The poet Adrienne Rich captures the sense of a laboratory being a potentially uncomfortable arena for a poet or layperson, when she says: '... you and I are caught in a laboratory without a science.' The image suggests the likelihood of being subordinated to

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<sup>5</sup> *ibid.* p13

<sup>6</sup> see for example, 'Rous Blow-Out, Model Subdivision runs \$1million over Budget, *The Northern Star*, 4 Nov. 00, and 'Rous Denies \$2.3million Loss', *The Northern Rivers Echo*, 28.03.02

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.* 15.12.99, p65

<sup>8</sup> Brian Wynne, 'May the Sheep Safely Graze?', in *Risk, Environment and Modernity, Towards a New Ecology*, p45

expert processes and outcomes.<sup>9</sup> Here I feel trapped. In an increasingly technological world, I am part of a laboratory with an unceasingly active experimental agenda. Some would say I am without the necessary science to comment or make known my limited critique, or to have an influence on the currents of decision-making.

It was within what I saw as rapidly changing socio-economic, political and techno-scientific relations surrounding water, that I responded to what I saw as an exclusion of the lay public from water affairs, and a disinterest in people's perceptions of their own management of water. I am not a poet particularly, but a community-based writer. I used my skills to create a water conversation, a forum for appreciation of water which was not deferential to experts.<sup>10</sup> In a localised engagement, I piloted an approach to tapping into collective knowledge from the informal non-expert domain. Both process and outcome provide examples of how seeing and knowing water in the face of a variety of perspectives and influences makes for knowledge that is culturally rooted<sup>11</sup> and related to the resource itself. This shows up the fact that a neglect of the cultural construction of scientific/technical knowledge may constrain the imagination of 'alternative ... and legitimate forms of collective public knowledge – and of a corresponding public order.'<sup>12</sup>

To return to the image of being in a laboratory without a science and put it in a fuller context is to see it in another light. It is a line of advice about being a poet, part of Rich's *Letters to a Young Poet*. It continues: "I will not touch you further, 'your choice ... to say, you and I are caught in a laboratory without a science.'<sup>13</sup> By not speaking directly for an insecure and possibly indefensible position, Rich asserts that the experience of testing reality in an intensely singular way is what will be relevant to the aspiring poet. Although Rich is a much celebrated, award-winning, socially engaged poet, she is not in a position to do more than touch on important questions of commitment. She cannot offer an objective

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<sup>9</sup> Adrienne Rich, 'Letters to a Young Poet,' in *Midnight Salvage, Poems 1995-1998*, p46

<sup>10</sup> Wynne, op. cit. p45

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.* Wynne critiques the sociological analysts, Giddens and Beck's, analysis of the relationship between lay publics, scientific knowledge and the theory of risk, on the basis of their uncritical conception of science.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.* p46

<sup>13</sup> Rich, op.cit. p25



analysis to someone looking to her as a mentor. It is the younger person's choice to grapple with her relationship to these issues, and the relevance of her poetry practice.

Equally, it was my choice to make an Australia Council for the Arts fellowship the occasion for new work<sup>14</sup> and experimentation, in which I sought to create an interface with the regional water supplier to draw out a fresh representation of water. I chose an environment in which I was frequently to encounter a model of rationality in which science is seen as 'the central government, and poetry and philosophy as minor agencies.'<sup>15</sup> I chose to try and find a footing in the 'wetland'<sup>16</sup> of unequal perspectives:

Annie Bolitho ... outlined a proposal which contains elements varying from obvious to obtuse when compared to Rous' role. That assessment is in no way meant to detract from her intent to undertake research as part of a personal education exercise ... Ms Bolitho's proposal presents to me as being a high order intellectual approach to water matters and its ability to tap into the views of direct consumers should be a basic requirement by Rous Water ...<sup>17</sup>

It is hard to speak about risk today without referring to the terms of the new science or cultural construction of risk analysis and management (see Ch. 4). However, in its thrilling sense, in the sense of taking a wager on what is and can be known, risk has long informed the work of scientists and poets, as Isabelle Stengers points out.<sup>18</sup> It is a passion for working with an openness to risk to produce new views of the world which these careers have in common. Stengers is not impressed by the peremptory judgements a generalised scientific authority appears to authorise. What she prefers to insist on is the power of analytical approaches, openness to risk and a refined and specific engagement on the part of particular scientists.<sup>19</sup> In this spirit, she commends both the scientist and the poet in their

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<sup>14</sup> 'The purpose of this category is to assist artists and community cultural development workers with a solid record of achievement to develop their practice and/or create new work.' *Australia Council Grants Handbook* 1998

<sup>15</sup> Mary Midgeley, *Science as Salvation*, p59

<sup>16</sup> Rich, op. cit..

<sup>17</sup> *Rous Water Minutes*, 16.6.99, General Manager's Report

<sup>18</sup> Stengers, op. cit. pp163-166

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.* pp5-6

commitment to creative work, to making fabrications<sup>20</sup> in order to bring newness into the world, and to practising responsibly with the particularities of evidence that comes to light. Neither science nor poetry can follow from a formula exactly, and this means being prepared to hold one's own ground.<sup>21</sup>

A quintessential change to Rous Water culture was introduced in 1996 when the organisation began tentatively exploring an involvement with demand management. The particularities of evidence which an independent researcher, Stuart White, confronted in his study of water management led him to question why it was that Australian water authorities would go to the financial and ecological expense of putting in new dams, when there would be considerably less outlay in investing in means by which consumers could use water more efficiently. At this time, the culture of water authorities had been intimately tied up with dams and their construction for well over 50 years. In addition, local, state and national political culture had leaned heavily on large scale water projects for short-term advantage. Furthermore, it is in the nature of an economy which highlights the importance of financial independence and hard work, to insist that individuals should not be rewarded with new taps, showerheads or toilets if they have not worked to pay for them.

When White came to put his proposition to the Water Authority of Western Australia and the (then) Rous County Council, it was on the basis of an experiment. 'What if we chucked out the dams idea or put it right on the backburner, and tried this instead?' Initially his proposition seemed as likely to fail as to succeed. However, gradually analysis of evidence that these projects may provide benefits saw the proposition taken up, so that it now enjoys an increasing legitimacy amongst Australian water authorities.<sup>22</sup> What started out as an unrecognised and risky research project has subsequently become a broad-scale demand management program with attendant pedestrian features. Thus science comes to be used in a broad application, which in Derridean terms is programmatic, or in Deleuze's

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<sup>20</sup> *ibid.* p167

<sup>21</sup> see Stengers, pp123-132

<sup>22</sup> see Stuart White, 'Wise Water Management: A Demand Management Manual for Water Utilities', Water Services Association of Australia Research Report no. 86

reproductive, leading through its analysis to 'exactly the outcome that was expected from the beginning'.<sup>23</sup> It is concerned with repetition, outside any 'event'.<sup>24</sup>

The arena of science and its sites of experimentation necessarily influence contemporary cultural values as to what constitutes adequate evidence of new and valid knowing. Thus, Adrienne Rich, the young poet and I work in the shadow of the increasingly powerfully regarded arena of science and technology. The young poet's commitment to questioning and experimentation, Rich warns, may not be seen as of much use to the world at large. Yet Stengers suggests that 'relevance designates a relational problem. One speaks of a relevant question when it stops thought from turning in circles and concentrates the attention on the singularity of an object or situation.'<sup>25</sup> 'What are the "right questions"? What is the "relevant" point of view? Stengers would remind young scientists – who might well write poetry late at night – 'this is the fundamental question of experimental science.'<sup>26</sup>

The two aspects of my reading of being 'caught in a laboratory without a science' strongly inform my study. Each reading has a bearing on my decision to assert the relevance of general, 'big-picture' questions rather than stick to the specialised problems of a single discipline,<sup>27</sup> to challenge the idea that technical/scientific models are divorced from cultural frameworks and set rippling hard and fast ideas about subjectivity and objectivity, poetry and science, theory and intimacy.<sup>28</sup>

The first person point of view which Rous Water's General Manager points to in my study is important. So are the other first person points of view within it. However the question arises: how are they to find a place in conceptual schemes that were never meant to accommodate them?<sup>29</sup> Issues of relationship within experimental frameworks increasingly inform the social sciences, the life sciences and investigations of complexity theory, and

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<sup>23</sup> Bruno Latour, Introduction to Isabelle Stengers, *Power and Invention, Situating Science*, p.xviii

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Stengers, *op. cit.* p6

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.* p6

<sup>27</sup> Isabelle Stengers (with Ilya Prigogine), 'The Reenchantment of the World' in *Power and Invention, Situating Science*, *ibid.* p51

<sup>28</sup> Jane Gallop, *Thinking Through the Body*, p6

<sup>29</sup> Miggely, *op. cit.* pp8-9

scientific studies of consciousness. It is not my intention, except in fictional terms, to claim that my study and experimentation is strictly speaking scientific. However I believe it is of value to assert that its questions, its evidence and its conclusions are not purely accidental.

### **Backwash**

Story, as much as water, is the stuff of my life. Whether or not it is true that I am *caught* in a laboratory without a science, the phrase opens an invisible valve, a reminder of my relation to society and cultural values. Having a South African start to life represents an eternal hubris. However conscious I would like to be, one way and another, I cannot avoid taking up society's values and living within them. To some degree the stories they give rise to, live me.

Water is regularly defined in public contexts as a resource to be manipulated, and as such an object of strategising and possibly even a cause for fear. To me, passivity in the face of this view is not an option. I will not swallow it. I am certain that is worth experimenting with the possibility of uncovering a different story of water. This is to go against settled, or dare I say, stagnant understandings. For I cannot be convinced that it is in the laboratories of scientists and technical specialists alone that water will be healed.

Furthermore, if stories are the stuff of other lives than mine, and the larger stories we tell about who we are have distinctive outcomes through our performances of these cultural values, it is obvious that a dispassionate approach is required to examine those stories. For the purposes of my argument here I would like to bring in a reminder of an archetype central to the project of science, the mad scientist, the experimenter who is not unduly moved by being regarded as an oddball. This person takes the liberty of situating what is given within a much larger set of possibilities. This researcher asks: 'And if?'. In my case I ask: And if the way we treat water is not normal? And if we only *appear* to be so independent, in our interdependence upon water? And if there were to be a way of inviting people to be responsive, within an environment of gradual and very significant changes in water relations?

The scientific "And if?" is, by nature corrosive. It attacks what we judge to be normal and commonsense. Or, more precisely, it expresses the fact that, at a given period, the judgement – this is normal – has become a little more shaky; it expresses and invents a positive meaning for the fact that it became possible, at a certain moment, to resituate an aspect of the familiar reality within a much vaster imaginary reality where what we know is only one story among others.<sup>30</sup>

In this study the investigation is based on people telling stories about water and listening to each other. However much a conscious subjectivity informs any sensitive experiment, it must equally be informed by its own objectivity. The mad scientist asks: What is built in to our self-perception? What claims do we make as a result of these ideas? What claims will we make in future? To take the 'and if ..' idea further: and if, down the track, we were to have a public commission on how it was possible for our water relations to have arrived at such a sorry state, would the large majority of people say they hadn't had any idea what was going on?

Believing that it is worth slowly accumulating evidence about these questions requires a certain equanimity. To bring an eccentric critical outlook into involvement and relation with others, equanimity is necessary. In a community project based on a water conversation, it is a certain objectivity on the part of 'the scientist' that allows groups of people to see stories through, thus encouraging their fullness. In this sense it nurtures intimacy and balance when gathering evidence. Where complexity is concerned, 'the issue is not the imposition of a question but *the growing awareness of a problem*, an "awareness" that may have been provoked, but was not imposed, and thus can easily be denied by those who fail to see the point of it.'<sup>31</sup> The mad scientist takes the risk of considering her proposition of such value that she will stick with it despite being stereotyped as a fool.

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<sup>30</sup> Stengers, op. cit. p137

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.* p4

'Let us try to be foolish and in all seriousness demand change in the seemingly unchangeable!'<sup>32</sup> Vaclav Havel invites. His statement is based on the experience of bringing cultural values and literature to the fore in the process of social, historical and political change in Eastern Europe. His emphasis on folly brings in a note of affection, even of indulgence for 'us'. Here, the unlimited promise of human potential is balanced by the objective reality of human fallibility, a unique counterpoint which calls on us to act in awareness. It is not silence and obedience which is the hallmark of respect for the project of genuine political life, Havel reminds us, but a social experience of laughter and irreverence. As such, his statement is embodied in a material world. Yet his concerns extend beyond the immediate materialism of the socio-political. In a speech, made after he became president of the new Czech Republic, he comments on the limits of 'the relation to the world which modern science fostered and shaped.' To his mind, classical modern science described 'only a single dimension of reality and the more dogmatically it treated it as the only dimension, as the very essence of reality, the more misleading it became.'<sup>33</sup> He goes on to say: 'The universe is a unique event and a unique story, and so far we are at a unique point of that story. But unique events are the domain of poetry, not of science.'<sup>34</sup>

### **Domain of sense or the sensible?**

The investigation *new dimensions in Water Conversation* came to a conclusion at the One-off Splash of Water Celebration! at Rous Water's Molesworth Street head office at the end of 2000. It turned out to be a carnival of water, in which the instrumental touched the poetic, and the poetic the instrumental. The project fulfilled the promise of its title, and its regard for 'unpublicized speech,' in what Bakhtin sees as an intrinsic reversibility of symbolic order:

It is as if words had been released from the shackles of sense, to enjoy a play period of complete freedom and establish unusual relationships among themselves. True, no new consistent links are formed in most cases, but the brief coexistence of these words,

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<sup>32</sup> Havel, 'The Power of Folly, Acceptance of the Erasmus Prize' in *Crosscurrents* 6, p48

<sup>33</sup> Havel, 'Address of the President of the Czech Republic on the Occasion of the Liberty Medal Ceremony', p2

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.* p4

expressions and objects outside the usual logical conditions discloses their inherent ambivalence. Their multiple meanings and potentialities that would not manifest themselves in normal conditions are revealed.<sup>35</sup>

In retrospect it surprises me that I came to convince Rous Water of the value of my proposition, and of experimenting with the promise of both sense and the sensible, in the framework of water's place in our region. It surprises me that members of the executive came to the One Off Splash!, however reluctantly. I put it down to the combined powers of Flow Engineers who confidently exploit their knowledge and Mermaids who exploit their powers. I am also good at playing the fool. A risky position, as my documentary notes reveal:

*Oh the blues of it. The anxiety of showing and giving away the secret of my pleasure. How can I let it go freely in that daggy downstairs Rous space? The attunement there has been over water. Of us. Us with shortfalls. Us sluggishly ordinary, us fixed, us disjointed with mixed feelings about everything. How am I to share a taste of the mystery, to show a fresh destination? How am I to step out and talk of what I love?*

*I fear losing. Childishly, I am scared of being left high and dry, crying and alone, ridiculed for being a funny girl. Rationally I know that people are refreshed by what is different – they want to see inspiration and change. I want to see change. I want to step forward. John, Barbara and Phoebe and I will transform that space. Community arts is madness and I am a fool. I am a fool for water and for a culture involving arrangements, the intentions of placing and the collectivity of things.<sup>36</sup>*

Importing a sensual quality into the derelict old office space involved bringing in vacuum cleaners, damp sponges, river rocks, leaves, lights, and screens. At the exact same time, it turned out, Rous Water had invited thirty sensible contractors to meet there, as part of the tendering process for the strengthening of the Emigrant Creek Dam wall. Their uneasy

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<sup>35</sup> Bakhtin quoted in Stuart Hall, 'For Allon White: Metaphors of Transformation,' p291

<sup>36</sup> Annie Bolitho, *Dwelling on Water Notebooks*

glances made it apparent that there was no precedent for such a conflicting performance. Our river rocks and branches presented an indoor obstacle course for blokes with briefcases as they went about the business of inspecting impressive core samples, making notes on their physical properties.

Our expression of community culture rattled Rous Centre norms even as we prepared for the party. The contractors' uneasy glances informed the water conversation more powerfully than anything they might have said. Barbara weighed up the situation and left off vacuuming until they had sat down for their briefing in the next room. It was not in John's nature to regard other blokes' business as more important than his blokes' business, which was to find the right places for his heavy haul on loan from Batesons, the local landscaping supplier.

### **Taking up the position of guest**

When everything was ready and the Northern Rivers water writers opened the doors to 'hospitise their guests,' a scene of 'misleading interrelationships'<sup>37</sup> was staged. In its brief manifestation as a cultural site, Rous Water's laboratory-to-be took on a life of its own. The space looked good. To mediate between inside and outside and initiate a sense impression at the beginning, we had constructed a tunnel of strips of clear plastic and blue streamers through which guests swished down a corridor to emerge into the space of arrival. Water, in an open copper bowl, lay in wait:

*I saw a touch of sacred at the door – water – that set the tone for me ... it helped to break the outside flow of rushing there, Woolies shopping ...*

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<sup>37</sup> A phrase from *On Poetic Imagination and Reverie*, by Gaston Bachelard, p6. He examines his parallel careers in the fields of literature and science, (pp 4-7) suggesting that 'the axes of poetry and science are opposed from the start', and that the best one can hope for is to make them complementary, 'to unite them as two well-chosen contraries.' This is his description of the unease that ensues when one attempts to bring the subjectivity of poetry together with the 'objectivation' of science.



*At the entryway I saw how the set-up related to the actual activity. I saw the line of stones that was laid out and I followed it. I saw my name at the bottom of quite a few pieces and at first I was a bit embarrassed ...*

In the carnivalesque moment, 'the cosmic social and bodily elements are given ... as an indivisible whole, opposed to severance from the material and bodily roots of the world.'<sup>38</sup> In contradiction to all that *head* office suggests, John's design brought people down to earth<sup>39</sup>, by setting up the first pieces of writing amongst river stones at the entrance. They crouched or knelt to read:

*Sweet Water – Elena's*

Sweet water, yes I remember. It was 1980. My boyfriend and I were on a motorcycle holiday for two weeks. First going west to Cowra and then south to the border of Victoria. The Murray River was so beautiful. Very blue but so many trunks of dead trees. In every direction. This river was so wide and the water tasted so very sweet. I don't remember water tasting so sweet before or since that adventure.<sup>40</sup>

*Sweet Water – Vern's*

I must walk over the mountain today to see how everything is up there. I'll travel light – maybe take an apple. It's promising to be a fine day, there's an early morning mist in the valley.

The rocky track winds up the steep mountainside, some ewes jump off the track onto the dew covered grasses. I'm now above the mist and the track ends. My boots are wet – soaked by the mountain dew. I look across the Towy Valley, a pair of buzzards glide on the thermals – the river glistens far below snaking its way through the boulders.

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<sup>38</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin in *The Bakhtin Reader*, ed Pamela Morris, p205

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.* p206

<sup>40</sup> Elena Janvicius, *Water Conversation Records 1999/2000*

The cloudless day warms up and by noon it's quite hot – I've eaten my apple and now I'm hot and thirsty. The flock are grazing peacefully.

I find one of the springs from where the streams cascade down through the rocks to the river below. I scoop up the crystal clear cool water in my hands – what a delight to be refreshed by cool pure mountain water.<sup>41</sup>

*Sweet Water – Annie's*

Sweet water you're a thing of the past. I know there's a few of you good ones left but would my granny recognise you for being sweet water? Could she sing with a voice strong and then falling *Sweet wa-ter, Sweet wa - ter!* Would she welcome in travellers and strangers because she was so proud to be able to offer sweet water? Would her garden grow gloriously because of an abundance of you – Sweet Water?

It's the day and age of suspicion and I'm asking. Of course she would have known by sniffing, back then, and she'd know now, if you were sweet water. She'd hold you up in a glass, swirl you around, breathe deeply and smell you, then put the glass to her lips and taste. I can see her swallowing with a smile or spitting out.

You'd better be what you say you are Sweet Water.<sup>42</sup>

*Sweet Water – Liz's*

There is a holy mountain in Sri Lanka known as Adams Peak. It is sacred to Christians, who believe it to be the birthplace of Adam, to Buddhists, who believe Buddha left his footprint there, to Hindus and Moslems alike. It is a mountain of pilgrimage and processions, of piety and prayers. I made my own less orthodox pilgrimage with a runaway Buddhist monk boyfriend whose vows had lapsed.

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<sup>41</sup> Vern Watkins, *ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Annie Bolitho, *ibid.*

Half the day we climbed, me weak with some tropical fever, he with a renewed religious fervour. The proprietor of a tea stall along the way gave me glucose from an ancient blue packet, reviving me for the final ascent where we hauled ourselves up carved steps with chains. I offered up a prayer at the little temple at the summit. On the downward journey the jungle took on a hallucinogenic edge, as one foot followed the other rounding turn after turn.

'This is the best water you will ever drink,' said Sugath. It was spring water, spouting from a rock face. It pooled in my hands like essence of life, an elixir lit with silver. It felt somehow thicker than ordinary water, more substantial, more concentrated, filtered through layers of sacred rock, the final distillation of a process of which ordinary water was merely a side product. It purred down my throat with supernatural quenching power, and its taste was purity, cold and clear, simple and sweet. He was right. It is still the best water I have ever drunk, even were I to drink from that same spring again.<sup>43</sup>

The multi-voiced framework of the project included names: Elena, Vern, Annie, Liz. It produced an interaction of dance and visual arts with the predominant form of community writing. Other ingredients at the celebration were: water and watermelon, speakers representing the water supply and the catchment, readings, jokes, and singing.

The event opened in an atmosphere of some suspense and ambiguity. It was an open question as to what we were all doing there:

*I sensed the Rous representative wasn't quite sure what he had on his hands there. I sensed him seeing possibilities ... 'There's actually a community out there, that's actually interested.' I sensed an opening of possibilities – the operator, the Chair, the school kids all doing their thing together.<sup>44</sup>*

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<sup>43</sup> Liz Chandler, *ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Jim Nicholls, *Water Conversation Records*, op. cit.

Water was brought forward in a way that introduced familiar contact among people usually divided by barriers of profession, specialisation and age, revealing a 'gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities.'<sup>45</sup> The most formal aspect of the One off Splash! was the speeches. Don Harvey, the Rous Water representative, addressed the unpredictable gathering by saying that organisation had found the proposition of doing a cultural project unexpected. He emphasised that this sort of thing was not a bulk water supplier's business, but that he was glad to see how well people had responded. Rous' business was with the technologies of water – pipes, pumps, reservoirs and water supply.

Within the fluidity not only of the event as a whole, but of the water authority's political structure, Harvey was in an awkward position. He had recently been 'spilt' from his position as chair of the organisation – his innovative style was not the current choice of the majority on the board. In addition, as I have shown in various ways throughout this thesis, water and story are intrinsic to hospitality, and hospitality is not a quiescent relation across difference. Thus the question arose of exactly who was providing hospitality to the guests and how. As the representative with the most status, was he there to entertain those people with hospitality? Or was he to take up his position as guest of those who had created the water conversation? Was he there to enjoy the position of guest, or to take up the responsibilities of hosting? Or were these questions irrelevant? Was water taking care of it all?

'...The "dialogic" does not refuse the idea of antagonism,' says Stuart Hall. 'But it obliges us always to think of antagonism as more or less than a "pure moment"'.<sup>46</sup> There had necessarily been tensions involved in working on the 'water conversation' and difference was at play in this final event. Now the space was out of the water bureaucracy's control, overflowing with the presence of water, frolic, music, chatting and connections. There was an excess of human fallibility – the MC, in an excess of spontaneity, declared all who had come to this laughable event, 'water wankers.' People laughed uneasily at her mockery.<sup>47</sup> Yet at the same time there was a greater degree of reverence and ritual than one would

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<sup>45</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *op. cit.*, p199

<sup>46</sup> Stuart Hall, *op. cit.*, p300

<sup>47</sup> Bakhtin, *op. cit.*, p203 comments that mockery, whilst humiliating, is reviving and renewing

expect to find in a head office. In other words, what stood out was an economy of excess, surplus and supplementarity.<sup>48</sup>

Underdetermination, absence and lack, were equally in evidence.<sup>49</sup> The Rous Centre, as generally determined, is a place of official water business. A public party there was difficult to fathom. No-one had ever been to anything like it before. In fact, anyone who considered coming along faced the uncertainties involved in attending an event they did not know how to define.

The space which Rous Water had designated as its future laboratory had turned into a site of cultural representation, and there were obvious lacks in a sensible instrumentalist sense. There was nothing about the event which spoke for efficiency. It is not in the nature of uneasy collaborations for there to be easy common ground in relation to measuring and judging, and this was true for the event and its possible impact.

There were absences and lacks as well. There were no councillors there, apart from Harvey. There was also little acknowledgement by the organisation of the contribution its employees had made to the project. There was a notable lack of tradition. Fletcher Roberts, who had given me lessons on water, was not there to welcome people to his ancestors' country and represent his tradition. He had decided that he was too old to go out at night any more.

Although I had been inspired by Tulsi Ghat, Varanasi, the event was a far cry from an environment where a laboratory sits alongside a temple, and every year since time immemorial, on the fourth day after Diwali, the Krishna Lila spectacle is staged, bringing together thousands of people on the basis of shared cultural values. This traditional story, in which Krishna as a young man removes a dangerous snake from a pool of water, is seen by the Ganges-based Sankat Mochan Foundation (SMF) as very relevant to Varanasi's situation where removing the source of pollution is what will purify the river. The SMF

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<sup>48</sup> Hall, *op. cit.*

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.*

makes this occasion the opportunity for some promotional messages about their project. Its campaign rests on the idea that it is the historical, cultural and religious associations with Ganga that have motivated and forced the government to come forward with programs to clean the river and it sees its responsibility as continuing to nurture the motivation of love and care in finding solutions to a complex problem.

### **Excessive play**

In a deconstructive sense, as Derrida points out, 'the centre not only orients, balances and organises the structure, but above all it serves to limit excessive 'play' in the structure.'<sup>50</sup> What makes for stability in water infrastructure is certainty of its eminently sensible mission and an 'under cover' operation since much of its business is with pipes and infrastructure people rarely take any notice of. In this context, each of the technical workers who stepped through the tunnel of clear plastic into the space which we had set up created a disorientation, upset the central idea that a water supply is something 'out there', invisible and only of interest in its smooth operation. They materialised the fact that water provision is a process, involving everyday perceptions, decisions and commitment – the work of many hands and the taking of many moments in individual lives to spread water from a single source over a very large land surface. Their renderings of water had little to do with a brand name product, replete with promotional image and strategies. Each man undid the idea of an anonymous link of pipes and water bill between supplier and consumer.

As the proponent of the Splash! I felt a degree of anxiety on their behalf. Perhaps because community cultural development is based on relationality, it is inevitable that the atmosphere at events which it manifests will remind some people of going to a school play. In this respect Phil might be seen to be crazy to have prepared for his part. What might the nudging his supervisor is giving him be about? Is it of interest in this performance, or of a more important work matter? How will his superiors relate to his bending of the

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<sup>50</sup> Robert Cooper, 'Modernism, Post Modernism and Organizational Analysis 3: The Contribution of Jacques Derrida,' p482

boundaries of a job description that is situated at a dam, not a head office. Thus although some workers had participated, because of initial encouragement from the management, it was easy to see that they might now appear to be troubling the waters, by having a role in something intimately related to a sense appreciation of water. From the organisation's perspective, it might appear that they had failed to maintain a sensible distance from water, from the performative spectacle, and indeed from myself. They were uneasy evidence of 'play' in the system.

Why would a water authority be so anxious about keeping what is fluid within boundaries? In the wake of the Sydney Water Crisis, in a climate where water suppliers found that orienting and balancing was of new significance, a public water authority's capacity to regulate must appear stronger, must take up any suggestion of risk and put it in the context of foolproof management. In this context, a water celebration was questionable: Why invite people without any defined status in the management of water to take up a position in relation to water at the Rous Centre? Why go to the expense of a risky relationship with a community-based project? At a time of guarding water business, there may have been an element of tempting fate in throwing a water party on the objective ground of Rous' own premises, especially when there were none of the conventional boundaries of a promotional event, such as trestle tables, over which Rous employees would hand out showbags, free balloons or free glasses of water.

## **Run Off**

When Vaclav Havel posits the idea that our relation to the world cannot adequately be defined by modern science, he echoes the theoretical scientist, Stuart Kauffman, who challenges traditional science's unwillingness to take account of 'the un-prestateable' or pre-specified.<sup>51</sup> He proposes that science today must investigate 'the initial and boundary conditions' of the biological world and consider a radically different 'configuration space.'<sup>52</sup> This space includes the work of autonomous agents co-constructing and propogating

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<sup>51</sup> Stuart Kauffman, *Investigations*, p5, p22

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*

organisations of work, constraint construction, and task completion that continue to propogate and proliferate diversifying organization.<sup>53</sup> Here our cultural practices – what we hold up and what we diminish – are deeply implicated. There is no end to the way these 'shenanigans' as he calls them, impact on the biosphere. On these terms he proposes that 'if story is not the stuff of science, yet is about how we get on with making our ever-changing livings, then science, not story must change. Our making our ever-changing livings is part of the unfolding of the physical universe'<sup>54</sup> On the one hand Kauffman's speculations are necessarily focused on a particular discipline's internal limits.<sup>55</sup> On the other they draw attention to the broader implications of those limits for science and society.

After the Splash! I received a letter from someone who had attended the event. To take up Kauffman's rather formal terminology,<sup>56</sup> this correspondent was an 'autonomous agent' who had entered the 'configuration space' and become part of a 'co-construction', through his contribution of 'embodied know-how' to the experiment. This account takes particular note of the way those who had been part of the water conversation had represented 'making their ever-changing livings' with relation to water:

Dear Annie

A few notes of thank you for your organisation of the Water Conversations last Wednesday, and to the writers, dancers and songstress, and funny man who contributed.

It was an inspiring presentation – the room had a real impact and sense of another world of sensibility. I enjoyed the overhead projections, found the Rous Water people's writing moving with a sense of peace and flow, and loved the interpretation of the pipes and reticulation systems by Trinity College – and I don't have much appreciation of dance generally.

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<sup>53</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> *ibid.* p119

<sup>55</sup> Kauffman's speculations take place in the context of the disciplinary models of the biological sciences, in this case in relation to complexity theory, and economics



The event was inspiring to me and has encouraged me no end to pursue the things that give me peace and flow. This is a beautiful gift.

Thank you to all involved,

Best wishes

Rob Garbutt<sup>57</sup>

If, as Kauffman suggests, science must change to take account of story, there are certainly 'risky constructions'<sup>58</sup> involved. They are to do with the unpredictable nature of 'the stuff' of research. The water conversation was concerned with people, their perceptions, memories and stories. This takes me back to the passage 'Humans as Instruments' which was part of the 'constraint construction' of my investigation:

Following is a list of factors that make using humans as instruments a very complicated matter. In general, signals from the sensory detectors to the brain for expression are confused with outside factors such as expectations, past experiences, and the like. A sensory response involves perception, awareness, classification, remembrance, description, and judgment, all of which are influenced by outside factors.<sup>59</sup>

Stengers contends that 'one should not eliminate from a discipline what constitutes its main source of uncertainties and risk ... susceptibility to influence in the case of human phenomena.'<sup>60</sup>

Within scientific parameters, modelization of 'complex objects' can only 'signify the identification of *simple* aspects of these historical objects.'<sup>61</sup> In other words, when one is

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<sup>56</sup> These terms occur in his Kauffman's discussion on pp119-120

<sup>57</sup> *Water Conversation Records*, op. cit.

<sup>58</sup> Latour, in Stengers, op. cit. p xv

<sup>59</sup> American Water Works Association. Water Quality Division. Taste and Odor Committee, *Flavor Profile Analysis, Screening and Training of Panellists*, p9

<sup>60</sup> Latour, op. cit. p xv

focussing on collective situations, relations and non-informationally closed systems, the experimenter must construct explanations for complicated histories. As a matter of 'knowing how to understand'<sup>62</sup> this will involve principles of narration.<sup>63</sup> This again is a relational issue – the inquiry into 'the production of *meaning* that experimenters subscribe to when they ask "how"'.<sup>64</sup>

### **Critique as a form of story testing**

Story testing implies story telling and storytelling always includes the audience, the listeners. In fact, in indigenous traditions, as Leslie Marmon Silko makes clear, 'a great deal of the story is believed to be inside the listener ...'<sup>65</sup> The stories, says Silko

are always bringing us together, keeping this whole together ... "Don't go away, don't isolate yourself, but come here, because we have all had these kinds of experiences." And so there is this constant pulling together to resist the tendency to run or hide or separate oneself ... This separation not only endangers the group but the individual as well – one does not recover by oneself.<sup>66</sup>

Community Cultural Development work could be seen to make the attempt to engage with collective stories within the framework of different artforms. To come to conclusions about the reach of this work, some argue, necessitates different forms of evaluation.<sup>67</sup> CCD's cultural and artistic ambitions call for critique. How did the artist's intentions come through the piece of work in question? What was the audience's response to what they saw? Evidence of this kind might be seen as anecdotal. CCD also implies community-based, social values which are best evaluated through qualitative and quantitative surveying. My approach was guided by the fact that the Australia Council's support was a

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<sup>61</sup> Stengers, p13

<sup>62</sup> *ibid.* p14

<sup>63</sup> *ibid.* p127

<sup>64</sup> *ibid.* p14

<sup>65</sup> Leslie Marmon Silko in 'Language and Literature from a Pueblo Indian Perspective,' in *Critical Fictions: The Politics of Imaginative Writing*, p84

<sup>66</sup> *ibid.*

unique opportunity to make the focus of my arts practice a critical one, and to explore dimensions of practice which I had not tried out before. For this reason I emphasised critique over evaluation, or from a 'scientific' perspective neglected evaluation in favour of anecdotal evidence.

After the One-off Splash!, I was most curious to find out whether those who came along had 'got wet.' In the absence of a critic, I took up a process of critique for CCD work advanced by Ian Maxwell and Fiona Winning.<sup>68</sup> They are seeking a critical language for CCD, which foregrounds specific details of observation and description rather than focusing immediately on 'gut-responses' that lead us to judge work 'good' or 'bad'. They offer a formal procedure which enables a critic to take note of the way 'component elements of a work of art come together to create an experience', to look into the process by which an analysis is reached.<sup>69</sup> The process as they elucidate it is taken up by a single critic consciously responding to a number of questions in the moment of seeing a performance or exhibition.<sup>70</sup> I broadened things out to bring perspectives from a range of people to bear on the One-off Splash!

'Now more than ever,' says Julia Kristeva we are faced with a necessary and inevitable osmosis between the execution of work and its interpretation.<sup>71</sup> The 'performance' of the Splash! had come out of time spent in the workshop of water, and I was curious to see if there was any evidence to suggest that the 'art and the equipment to grasp it' had been 'made in the same shop.'<sup>72</sup>

The framework of critical questioning I used begins with sense impressions:

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<sup>67</sup> Patricia Walton, Meg Simpson, 'A Model for Community Arts Projects, Three Responses to "Towards a Critical Practice"', in *Artwork Magazine*, issue 49, March 2001, pp21-24

<sup>68</sup> Ian Maxwell and Fiona Winning, 'Towards a Critical Practice – A Model for Talking and Writing about Community Art Works' in *Artwork*, *ibid.*, pp.8-20

<sup>69</sup> *ibid.* p11

<sup>70</sup> For a full outline of the Maxwell/Winning process, see 'Towards a Critical Practice,' *ibid.* p12

<sup>71</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'What Good are Artists Today?', p31

<sup>72</sup> Clifford Geertz quoted in Maxwell and Winning, *op. cit.* p11

*Annie: What did you see? Just describe what you saw as exhaustively as you can – don't try to guess what you were meant to see – just say what you saw.*

One audience member's response brings out strongly the effect this representation of water had on him. He paints a picture of something seemingly impossible, a room full of water, speaking strongly to my intention to bring water home from a far-flung objectified position:

*Alan: It tickled me to see aspects of water brought out in a place where there just wasn't water. It was quite a contrast to have a water theme in a water building, Rous Water, on the second floor and it felt like the room was full of it somehow, and we were all swimming round in it. It's quite ridiculous really. But it was so unexpected – the room was square and rectangular and rigid, and the way water was present was female and flowing ...*

He sees water not only as the element in which people moved, but as represented by the interaction of bodies. He concludes with a reference to people's intention not to remain separate. In watery imagery, he evokes the 'hospitality' the project set out to nurture, in Levinas' words seeing consciousness as 'the urgency of a destination to the Other, and not an eternal return to self'<sup>73</sup>:

*...Water is such a nebulous thing – it's not really there – you can only see its effect. And there it was represented by people who moved about and intermingled like water. All the drops. Each person wanting to be their own drop and see it melded with their neighbour.*<sup>74</sup>

To me, the subliminal intention to meld suggests the scientific description of a water molecule presented in the introductory section of the thesis, also part of the experiment's 'constraint construction.' Water's structure is seen as 'being brought about by the "stickiness" that binds the H<sub>2</sub>O molecules into a "dynamic ever-changing labyrinth."'

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<sup>73</sup> Levinas, in *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, p2

<sup>74</sup> Alan Waters, *Water Conversation Records, 1999/2000*

Another response also represents the idea of welcome and receiving, this time in the realm of the family. What makes it possible to meet water in this context? Relations.

*It's a story of introducing a new member of the family ... everyone's excited yet there's a sense of familiarity, because we're all sort of connected. We know this being water, like we know the baby in the womb, but we don't quite know it yet. I'm meeting it, but there are others meeting it too in a different way. Hearing from all these other people creates a sense of other people's input, to make it come to this point in time for us to meet it.<sup>75</sup>*

Language is one of many things that allow us to make sense of things. The Maxwell/Winning process acknowledges that other elements are also important, such as gestures and pauses and the way in which chance and influences between people play out. The scope of the questions is intended to broaden out rather than narrow people's perceptual response. This way of throwing open the enquiry was conducive to making the everydayness of water speakable and thinkable.

*Annie: What did you see? Don't exclude things you think you weren't intended to see.*

Here it brings out a heightened awareness of water, in the form of a small 'bodily drama':

*Michele: I saw ... jugs of water, water echoed in lots of forms, someone near the water jug dribbling, blowing bubbles down his chin!<sup>76</sup>*

This critical process meant I could take the water conversation a little further.

*Annie: What did you hear?*

*Nadine: The engineer's joke. And how interesting it was to have the engineer there in his gear.<sup>77</sup> It was a rough joke but it was a good joke. He spoke in unusually poetic*

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<sup>75</sup> Michele Wainwright, *Water Conversation Records*, *ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> Michele Wainwright, *ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> Nadine Hood, *ibid.* She takes Phil, the technical operator, to be an engineer.

*terms. I heard the main Rous man – I heard he'd come a long way to embracing the event.*

### **Story and hospitality**

'The aim of art is incarnation, the will to make people feel something, but it is also narration. It invites us to tell our own little stories, to commune with Being through our sensations and our stories.'<sup>78</sup> I was curious as to how people might interpret through narration. What would they see as having been staged, in trying to communicate between people, the suchness of water? Would what they had to say reflect the cultural world within which the water conversation itself had been produced?<sup>79</sup> I asked: If the event was a story what would it be?

*The event was a story connecting and communicating about water in a human sense and therefore people were educating one another. It doesn't always have to come up with the same view.<sup>80</sup>*

This response reflects the qualitative 'human-sense' nature of the project. It had been conceived outside an education format involving outcome-orientation and pre-determined objectives. It stressed subjectivity, multiplicity, and hospitality as an expression of difference, indeed welcome of the other:

At the same time the project had taken place by virtue of explicit negotiations within a number of different contexts. Again the value of difference and the demands of hospitality come out in the following responses:

*There was a kind of an Adult Community Education story there, a water story there, your story there of what you do, which interfaced with a fairly uncaring bureaucracy,*

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<sup>78</sup> Julia Kristeva, *op. cit.*

<sup>79</sup> Maxwell and Winning, *op. cit.*

<sup>80</sup> Phil Littlewood, *Water Conversation Records, op. cit.*

*which is probably the most interesting story. If I was the Chair of that organisation I'd be doing something with the material to demonstrate the relevance of their work.*<sup>81</sup>

*The story was of two communities meeting. One was the Rous out-in-the-world workers and the office workers who'd just come in after work and then there was the other community – intermingling. The engineer speaking was symptomatic of that – that he was a rough worker in an unusually arty situation speaking with the engineer's voice – it was a meeting of two worlds that would never usually meet.*<sup>82</sup>

*The story of the event would be people coming together in the name of water.*<sup>83</sup>

In the name of water. This form of expression brings to mind testifying and testimony, the idea that here people have had an opportunity to speak of what the name of water calls up.<sup>84</sup> Further, if the name evokes a sense of something or someone identifiable, by the face, I see this comment as making sense of the vocabulary of hospitality around which the water conversation moved. To bring back Levinas and Derrida: 'the face, welcome, tending toward the other, attentive attention, intentional attention, *yes* to the other' and the idea of a politics of hospitality, a politics of *capacity*.<sup>85</sup> Here the capacity includes the names of the individuals who took part and their attention to each other over glasses of water and vocalizations of water experience. A larger water had been evoked in these simple activities.

The One off Splash! does not arise from interests in 'keeping water for ourselves'. Each participant is a vehicle for bringing water alive. Somehow here, 'in the name', water's everyday mystery is available, but remains elusive since 'no interpretations can give form to it by leaving on it the schematic mark of their imprint and depositing on it the sediment of

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<sup>81</sup> Jim Nicholls, *ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> Nadine Hood, *ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> James Bennett Levy, *ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> Derrida in reference to the khora, *On the Name*, p96

<sup>85</sup> Derrida in *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, op. cit. p18

their contribution.<sup>86</sup> 'In the name' is an intimation of force, of water relations, a recognition of a beyond and within the individual.

### **What was the event saying? A-capital!**

Here I return to Derrida's deconstruction of 'capital' and democracy. He asks, in relation to broaching the passage from the political toward what he calls the 'beyond of the political' or 'the already non-political': 'Where are the borders between the 'already' and the 'not yet', between politics and the non-political?' To my mind this is an interesting question at a time when capital interests in water exceed the legacy of the heading 'water conservation,' when 'stressed rivers' exceed healthy rivers and water consumption is on the increase. It suggests the effort that is required to take up water negotiations when stress on water is severe. It confirms my interest in creating an approach to treating water that is in the sphere of 'the beyond of the political.'<sup>87</sup>

Playing around with water might not be seen to be political. However the nature of the Splash! and people's participation in it provokes the following comment:

*The event was saying that there's another way to think about, work with, be with, make decisions about water.*<sup>88</sup>

*The event was saying ... well it demonstrated the relevance of stuff we take for granted - in so many ways we've got our act together we're almost asleep - we even take democracy for granted which is the worst.*<sup>89</sup>

There were a range of telling views of what people had experienced as the substance of the project's intention:

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<sup>86</sup> Derrida, *On the Name*, p95

<sup>87</sup> Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, pp76-82

<sup>88</sup> James Bennett Levy, *Water Conversation Records*, op. cit.

<sup>89</sup> Jim Nicholls, *ibid.*



*It was a flowing together of many different people and expressions around water. There was the written work and what that represented, and then there was the event, and there were so many different modalities and streams that had come together in one moment.*<sup>90</sup>

*The event was saying we've got something precious and not to abuse it. We don't really know what we're holding in our hand.*<sup>91</sup>

*It was a celebration of water ... yet it was like a big birthday party – people were happy to be there – it wasn't particularly formal.*<sup>92</sup>

*The event was saying: 'Water – what is it?'*<sup>93</sup>

### **The generative power of misunderstanding**<sup>94</sup>

Where performance criteria and performance are concerned, each are distinctive, yet indistinct in the light of unequal perspectives. In speaking of performance, Phelan talks of the way we walk a rickety bridge towards the other. In this precarious situation, the same difficulties arise for each party. This is each giving it their best. She does not regard misunderstanding in negative terms. Rather she proposes it as something fertile, as 'the *generative power of misunderstanding*.'<sup>95</sup>

Rickety bridges may suggest uncivilised terrain. One way and another, it proved difficult to attempt any kind of 'baptizing'<sup>96</sup> of *new dimensions in Water Conversation*. An evaluation conducted with the major stakeholder, Rous Water, included categories I imagined might reveal the impression of the project in recognisable category areas. In

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<sup>90</sup> Nadine Hood *ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> Alan Waters, *ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> Michele Wainwright, *ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> Phil Littlewood, *ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked, The Politics of Performance*, p74

<sup>95</sup> *ibid.*, my italics

<sup>96</sup> Trinh Minh-ha in *Cotton and Iron*, p17. She speaks of the way in which critical work can baffle and displace and show up 'frenzied attempts at "baptizing" through logocentric naming and objectivizing ... 'By displacing, it never allows [this] classifying world to exert its classificatory power without returning it to its own ethnocentric classifications'.

Phelan's terms I was acting out of an established western faith, in 'the acquisitive model of power knowledge'<sup>97</sup>:

**Please rate key benefits of this project to Rous Water:**

- promote importance of water resource
- raise awareness of bulk water supplier and its activities
- develop documentary material on water workers
- create people-friendly text for promotional purposes.

On a rating scale 5 high – 1 low, the project was consistently rated 1.

Where valuing aspects of the project were concerned, *documentation of site visits to Nightcap Treatment Works; opportunity for Rous Water workers to have a say about their work and public event at Rous Water* rated 2.

There were no areas of the project – from *public display of workers stories with photos* through to *site visits to Nightcap Treatment works* and *public water tastings alongside other pleasurable activities* – seen to hold potential for further development.

In particular, what the water conversation failed to realise for Rous Water had to do with questions of scale. Here it is obvious that to take as an assumption the idea *that our perception of water is deeply influential on the way that we experience and use it, and to suggest that querying these perceptions has as much value as the project of education*, strongly contradicts a model which assumes that efficiency is a pre-requisite not only in the use of the resource of water itself, but in developing efficient and concentrated programs to heighten awareness of its value:

*Project too small scale to have any significant benefit.*<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Phelan, op. cit. p173

<sup>98</sup> Rous Water evaluation, *Water Conversation Records*, op. cit. This evaluation, as part of a project which was handled by the Business and Promotions side of the business, was taken care of by this particular manager. (see Chs. 5 & 7 for accounts of our dealings over the project as a whole, and writing in particular)

Derrida talks of the way elements of concentration and fractionalization, accumulation and privatization inform a kind of censorship today, and of the way this depoliticizes. Here perhaps a small regional water conversation might be seen as part of a larger global fight '... against all quantitative phenomena that might marginalize or reduce to silence anything that cannot be measured on their scale.'<sup>99</sup>

In his response to my critique of the *One-off Splash!* Don Harvey, Rous board member now displaced from centre to margins, and the fictional Flow Organisation's director, is cautiously optimistic. He provides a key to what I am interested in, speaking from within perspectives of shifting power:

You were very much an outsider coming to an organisation which hadn't considered doing what you wanted to do before and that was reflected in the energy of some people. I was certainly glad of the experience, and I thought you did an excellent job. I was enthusiastic at the start and I'm not sure what happened to the energy in the process. One of the problems was I went from being the Chair, to not being the Chair and the energy of the enthusiasm generated by someone like the Chair influences the staff. But I don't know. Even if Rous doesn't realise that it's been enriched by the process, I think it has.<sup>100</sup>

Those who put faith in quantitative evidence may question why I did not extend beyond the Rous Water evaluation. Was it to do with scepticism where poorly constructed and statistically inadequate evaluation is concerned? Or was it because I saw the project in watery terms, and that like waste water it had gone down the drain? I will simply say that I remain confident that the way *new dimensions in Water Conversation* influenced people is, in terms of the ideas about scientific parameters which I have explored in this chapter,

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<sup>99</sup> Jacques Derrida, in 'Call it a Day for Democracy,' in *The Other Heading, Reflections on Today's Europe*, p99

<sup>100</sup> Don Harvey, *Water Conversation Records*, *ibid.*

incalculable at this stage. 'The incalculable, *if there is any*, never *presents* itself; it is not, it is never, the theme of some scientific or philosophical objectification.'<sup>101</sup>

I hope I have made it clear that it is not possible to examine *new dimensions in Water Conversation* on a basis of equality with a science underscored by Popper's falsification criterion. Popper's philosophy of science might have been well adjusted to the political task of the 1930s, but as Stengers avers this does not yield an understanding of how we should live now within and without the limits of science proper ...<sup>102</sup> This is to invite the question which the water conversation attempted to address:

How do we invent a positive sense for the fact that humans testify for themselves and are, in principle, capable of being interested in what one says about them, that is, of inventing themselves in the dynamic of the testimonies in which they are at stake?<sup>103</sup>

### **Within and without science**

Was this experiment worth its salt? Did it constitute an adequate science/fiction? Let's go to the expert first:

Flow Engineer: There was certainly risk involved in this experiment. The investigation is outside a disciplinary mould. There is no formula for bringing out the connections between a contemporary water instrumentality and a loose grouping of water lovers, in the interests of representing the 'stuff of water'. And I can assure you, there's no doubt that there is the risk that you will be kicked out of your standpoint!<sup>104</sup> I would also see a risk in maintaining connections between people over time. This involves an alertness to the conditions in evidence, rather than being blinded by illusions of what the proposition might show up. There is risk also in resisting the controlled and isolated 'the social irrationality of the sciences.'<sup>105</sup> As far as the evidence is concerned, there was an opening to the world of

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<sup>101</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Call it a Day for Democracy,' op. cit. p105

<sup>102</sup> Latour, in Stengers, op. cit. p.xvii

<sup>103</sup> Stengers, *ibid.* p149

<sup>104</sup> Latour, in Stengers, *ibid.* pxix

<sup>105</sup> Stengers, op. cit. p130

water. It came to the classes and groups. It spoke within the research. It is only through a chink, but a bigger world of water finds voice in this experiment.

Mermaid: There was salt alright – salty tears came into it. And there was risk. Some people in the Flow Organisation felt 'the astringent effects' of putting a Mermaid alongside a Flow Engineer and the way this blend stopped thought from turning in self-satisfying circles.<sup>106</sup> Wasn't it terrific that the Organisation took the risk of making a bit of room? They opened their door and for a moment set new limits on what constituted the world.<sup>107</sup> There is the risk, in this experiment, of depending on the 'singular quality of the one who undertakes it'<sup>108</sup> however plural the perspective. Anything involving a Mermaid in these literal times is going to have a quality of marginality and that's risky. There was the associated risk of a link with the 'alternative culture'. I couldn't help finding that lot delightful – what wonderful power they've exerted to protect forests, dunes, wetlands, wildlife, rivers.

Flow Engineer: Your reputation was a risk altogether.

### **Test of Faith**

When, some years before in India, I had come over the heavy railway bridge at Allahabad at the sangham with its collectivity of rivers, seen and unseen, forming such a powerful confluence that wishes made there have every likelihood of manifesting, I had not had any grounds for belief that it was possible, here in Australia, to see water and to celebrate it in the unconventional dimensions brought to life at Tulsi Ghat with Mahant-ji and the Sankat Mochan Foundation. I had first tested the idea of exploring people's idiosyncratic understandings of water immediately upon my return, in a project called 'Elements of Life'.<sup>109</sup> At that time I was smart enough not to single water out. To do this, it became apparent that I needed the assistance of the Mermaid and the Flow Engineer. They stepped in to become part of my practice in the process of experiencing the tensions involved in

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<sup>106</sup> *ibid.* p5

<sup>107</sup> José Gil in *Metamorphoses of the Body*, p219

<sup>108</sup> Stengers, *op. cit.*

<sup>109</sup> *Elements of Life, Memories of the Real Back Days*, ACT Department of Health.

articulating a cultural proposition to a technically based organisation, and seeing it through to a conclusion:

Flow Engineer: Coming to a conclusion is a good thing. New developments flow out of a good project.

Mermaid: I don't want to go near a Flow Organisation again. Write this report and get it out of my hair. (Picks up comb)

Flow Engineer: Do you mind if I say something? In a funny way, I think it's *you* people get along with. You're curious. I know that we have all got more used to you over time. But I think the Organisation is still getting over the fact that they let you in. I think you can rest assured – no-one has a thing against you.

Mermaid: So much for the formal objectivity of the structure. I've found it so unreliable as a starting point for my learnings on this subject. People see me as strange for combining scales and skin. But from what I've seen I'll bet there's some personalized scheming that gets concealed in the costume of these formal organisations.<sup>110</sup> You're the Flow Engineer, you said before that you have the power of belonging within the province of technology and science. You are part of the 'discipline of professionalism.'<sup>111</sup> You are at home in the world of 'knowledge talk,'<sup>112</sup> and reductive operations. Go and speak with them. I've been living for too long in a barrel of water.

Flow Engineer: Keep your hair on!

## **A Funny Photo**

22.02

*I presented the final report to Rous Water last night. They had taken down the portrait of the Queen – in her place an abstract blue acrylic with a girl's face floating in it.*

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<sup>110</sup> Robert Cooper, op. cit. p499 speaks of these problems as versions of a deferral process in which theories of bureaucracy cannot settle on any sure foundations in relation to questions of subjectivity and objectivity.

<sup>111</sup> Cooper, ibid. p498

<sup>112</sup> Bruno Latour in Stengers, op. cit. p.xviii

*My arrival was to an informal tour of the spanking new lab. The laboratory manager, Business and Promotions Manager, and a couple of councillors stood around exchanging political banter. Taps goose-necked out of lab benches, cream lino covered the floor and a strong blue was in evidence on every interior frame. The whiteboard was the only piece of equipment that remained from the night we had held the One-off Splash! there. The words I'd written – 'THE 54 WAS THE ONE IN A HUNDRED, THE 89 FLOOD DIDN'T REALLY CUT IT' were still there, and had in fact been added to: 'WHAT ABOUT THE 74?' it said. AND DON'T FORGET FEBRUARY 2001.' I smiled. I like the way traces of writing invite further writings, and the way traces of floods stick to traces of the floods that went before.*

*Interesting that February 2001 has been something of a disaster in the scientific way of doing things flood-wise. In Sydney, the experts were working away at the Flood Warning Centre to keep track of rainfall around the state. In Lismore the SES could see that the rain coming down was not showing up on the automatic river gauges – the water had 'gone missing.' Not good news when there is no town of our size in NSW that floods more frequently. At the City Hall on Monday, the audience apparently clapped when someone suggested a return to manually reporting rainfall and river levels. The Bureau of Metereology expert was on the spot. He defended the Bureau's role saying they were 'not just academic boffins in ivory towers in Sydney'. The SES fellow suggested that there was 'some rusting up' of flood readiness after 12 years. The Bureau guy sort of contradicted him by saying that despite the best technology something as simple as a twig could jam a gauge and make it send a wrong reading. Together they spoke for a system that would maximise local input on top of the science, whilst various audience members denounced 'the garbage from Sydney.' There's a poem in the Echo this week advising: 'Add half a metre to the height they give, and listen to the ants and the locals.'<sup>113</sup>*

*Up in the board room public access time was first off. The size of audience does not matter, says the Malian singer, Rokia, it is only whether the people in it are listening to you with pleasure. I think she is right and I always try to act as if this were the case. Since I*

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<sup>113</sup> 'Many Lessons to Learn from Flood', *The Northern Rivers Echo*, 22 Feb. 2001, pp1-3. This was the first real test for the electronic modelling system in Lismore's 'fast catchment'.

*was facing the chair and the GM who were uncomfortable and impatient, I took a look around the group. The Byronites took an interest, so did the one woman councillor. Those closest to me, the previous Chair and the current vice-chair were more difficult to see. The engineer was quietly engaged with what was going on, the Business and Promotions Manager was bright and enthusiastic. I'd thrown a lot across her path over the time. Almost all of it had slightly jolted her, but she'd always come up putting a positive face on things. I remembered when she'd come across Davina, swathed in marigolds, carrying cups out of the staff room. It was the only time I'd seen the person who had nothing to do with her job.*

*I finished my recommendations. As I spoke the last words, the Chair called out brusquely to announce the next person waiting his turn. Someone with business interests to lobby for I guessed from his pile of pamphlets. I was not going to make moves to retire, and the good graces of the vice-chair were troubled. 'Questions?' we suggested in the same voice. 'It'd be polite,' I said. The Chair apologised.*

*Both questions were a gesture towards gaining some small patch of political ground. The idea that had informed the project, that a conversation about water could entail voices other than their own, had made no impression. If I hadn't been rather worn out, this would have warranted a direct response. I was relieved to come out of the building into an early night sky with long dark grey-pink clouds sitting strong and soft over the river. I had amused them and myself in leaving, by insisting on taking their photo. Not everyone would fit, but there was definitely a vision, their heads slightly out of proportion in the frame, of everyone smiling, because that's what you do for a photograph.*

Roland Barthes examines photography as a science, seeking to learn what it is 'in itself'.<sup>114</sup> 'When we define the Photograph as a motionless image, this does not mean only that the figures it represents do not move;' Barthes says, 'it means they do not emerge, do not leave: They are anaesthetized and fastened down like butterflies.'<sup>115</sup> I had clearly planned to take

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<sup>114</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p1

<sup>115</sup> *ibid.* p57



a photograph – I had carried my camera with me. But what exactly motivated this unexpected photo shoot? It was not only that a photo would authenticate the existence of this regional water authority going about its monthly business around a table populated with fluted water carafes. It was not simply because it would fulfill a documentary role with a certainty that writing could never give.<sup>116</sup> Barthes speaks of the essential gesture of the operator (photographer) being to surprise something or someone, and that surprise obeys a principle of defiance.<sup>117</sup> Was it that in this moment these 'objective' people would pose and become subjects before me? A high degree of arrest or 'scientific control' had not been a feature in the production of *new dimensions in Water Conversation*. In this situation, it was unlikely that the people before me would struggle, more likely lend themselves to the social game.<sup>118</sup> Was it that I sought to watch this active transformation in which, if only metaphorically, they would derive their existence from me, and I would in turn watch subjects become objects?<sup>119</sup>

'Without adventure, no photograph,'<sup>120</sup> says Barthes. In examining what brought this photograph into being, I realise that what I had originally seen as a simple investigation had turned out to require a certain daring. I had not set out to denounce the inadequacies of a technical scientific orientation to water, but rather to attempt to align interests between different water lovers. The complexity of the water conversation had underlined the problems raised by various specifics, which insisted that different knowledges coexist. Even I was surprised that this generated so little sense of opportunity.<sup>121</sup> It was embarrassing. The photograph brought into play an acquired Australian attribute, that is of relieving pressure by taking the piss:

Learning to laugh in the name of the singularity of the sciences, ... at those who give an identity to science, who say they know what the scientific method is, what the conditions

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<sup>116</sup> *ibid.* p85

<sup>117</sup> *ibid.* p32

<sup>118</sup> *ibid.* pp10,11

<sup>119</sup> *ibid.* p14

<sup>120</sup> *ibid.* p19

<sup>121</sup> Stengers, *op. cit.* pp118-119.

of objectivity are, and what the criteria of scientificity are is a proposition that is in no way neutral.<sup>122</sup>

I had shown that a process of culture brings water to us, involving an ordered system of relations and power relations between specialists and non-specialists. These relations reflect cultural values, for example, the high status which Western culture gives to rationality. The rationality of measurement by which water management operates does not have to do only with exactness, but also in a sense with non-reality, since it is an ideal,<sup>123</sup> a vision of what is desirable. It leans heavily towards the atomistic and mechanistic, and may be a vision of which too much has been expected.<sup>124</sup>

The connections within the system which I operationalised showed that the public comes into the private and the private into the public. It animated a dynamic involving active relationship over experience, memory and imagination. It allowed people to make a claim on their own sense of things in a form of verification of what is ultimately a subjective interaction with a public world.<sup>125</sup> The genius of any conscious system of water relations is to show up the reality that the notion of people having any kind of authority over water, is itself a fiction.

At a time when there is growing awareness of the urgency of the world water situation, interest in water has to be encouraged in a way that is fresh and alive. This involves taking up 'the urgency of a destination to the Other'. This local exploration proves it is possible to do this, and to make water visible and thinkable in a public space. Bruno Latour points out that wisdom is a technique of survival.<sup>126</sup> For a generation or two in the west, we have lived in confidence that our survival depended on knowledge and technical achievement alone.<sup>127</sup> Today, we are at a time of profound transition where morality is concerned, since there is a growing necessity to take a role in the responsibilities pushed forward by our

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<sup>122</sup> *ibid.* p143

<sup>123</sup> Midgeley, *op.cit.* p37

<sup>124</sup> *ibid.* p11

<sup>125</sup> Brian Wynne, *May the Sheep Safely Graze?*, p49

<sup>126</sup> Michel Serres with Bruno Latour, *Conversations on Science, Culture and Time*, p170

<sup>127</sup> *ibid.*

domination of the planet. It would be wise to protect water. Those who participated in *new dimensions in Water Conversation*, rather than simply thinking about water, actualised it together, created a presence for water rather than dreaming about doing something alone. Their contribution emboldens me to call on others. Let us be fools, and in all seriousness imagine that forums can continue to be imagined, which acknowledge that uncanny innovation is needed to address the problems at hand.

Flow Engineer: Why have I felt so entangled in this relationship? Why have I felt so unusually confused?

Mermaid: I have asked you to look beyond fixing, beyond data and devices. Your attitude to mermaids was guided by the idea that we are rich in mythologies and fictions. I kept showing you that this is equally true for you. You tried to convince me that it is your privilege to unlock secrets which will bring us closer to solving the problems of water. I have tried to show you the secret of following, of looking for the gaps, the cracks and the fissures, the unordered network of channels and flowpaths. Now have a look in my mirror would you?

Flow Engineer (surprised): I was expecting to see the condition of the world's water, the urgency of our situation. Or that in this mirror there would be a picture of the solution you have been trying to work towards.

Mermaid: And all you can make out is that simple reductionist charm, 'IS ONLY',<sup>128</sup> fading out on the flow of the water. Since being on dry land I've noticed that this 'is only' business leads you into explaining your failures in rather a strange way. One is led to believe that if you had more knowledge, more methods of calculation, more facts, you could nail down a solution in terms of the reductionist problem you've defined. This seems to block new and relevant questions.

Flow Engineer: Well I know a lot more about your charm now – mermaids never give everything away, they always keep some little secret.

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<sup>128</sup> Stengers, op. cit. p7 & p137

### **WHAT DOES A LOT OF WATER LOOK LIKE?**

A single one-inch rainfall falling on a 160-acre farm delivers 4,356,000 gallons or 36,300,000 pounds of water. To transport this 18,150 tons of water would require 544 tank cars operating as four trains, each over a mile long.<sup>129</sup>

or in metric terms:

25.4mm of rain on 64.8 hectares delivers 16,447,008 litres of water weighing 16,447 tonnes. Six trains, each over 1km long would be needed to transport it.

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<sup>129</sup> *California Water Atlas*, p1.

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## A NEST OF WATER; MEDIATIONS, TRANSLATIONS AND WEAVING

### **Mixing things up**

Flow Engineering. A brand newcomer to universities and institutes. Its source? In the headstream of the crisis in Flow worldwide. A vital and energetic discipline, it is the product of a transitional time in which existing values and institutions are not seen to be addressing the problems at hand. The preservation of fresh water is of critical importance globally, and growing awareness of the problem demands new approaches. Flow Engineering puts a high value on forward-looking solutions. It brings with it a comprehensive specialist language: laminar flow, low flow, nonequilibrium flow, one-dimensional flow, open channel flow, outflow, overflows, overland flow, peak flow, porous flow, potential flow and turbulent flow are elements of its vocabulary. It is a rational, systematic and organized approach to a challenge, the magnitude and complexity of which no earlier generation has had to face.<sup>1</sup>

All that I have said about the discipline of Flow Engineering is made up. None of it is true. Do not believe a word of it.

As for the Mermaid, do you believe anything that I have said? Or do you see mermaiding as a fiction, something slapdashly quirky, at best a performance? If so, might I remind you that mermaids were an object of peculiar interest to science in the nineteenth century, when scientists were trying to take the measure of them, so to speak.<sup>2</sup> Here is correspondence addressed to the naturalist Joseph Banks, concerning a mermaid sighting. The letter is dated May 1869 and covers six pages of closely observed detail:

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<sup>1</sup> *Water Security for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century – Innovative Approaches, Final Overall Conclusions, The 10<sup>th</sup> Stockholm Water Symposium, August 14-17, 2000*, p1

<sup>2</sup> Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, p113

... walking by the sea there on the 12<sup>th</sup> Jan about noon our attention was attracted by seeing three people who were on a rock at some distance. Showing signs of terror at something they saw in the water. On approaching them we discovered that the object of their wonder was a face resembling the human countenance which appeared floating on the waves. At that time nothing but the face was visible. It may not be improper to observe before I proceed farther, that the face, throat and arms, are all I can attempt to describe. All our endeavours to discover the appearance and position of the body being unavailing – the sea at that time ran very high as the waves advanced ...<sup>3</sup>

In the modernist and postmodernist periods, the Mermaid has variously been accounted for as a factor either of society's beliefs, symbols or the unconscious. She has tended to feature in the disciplines of literature, history and anthropology.

Bruno Latour's proposes that defining time in pre-modern, modern and post-modern terms carves a groove that is simplistically linear and progressive. What if instead we look at the Mermaid and the Flow Engineer for the ways they combine elements of different eras? The Mermaid harks back a long way for sure, but reappears in a new street advertising technology to charm people into drinking Evian mineral water. The Flow Engineer works with technologies like dams and weirs, which would be recognisable to all pre-modern cultures and Venturi meters which date from the modernist era, as well as computer telemetry. When examined this way my characters can be seen to reactivate time in a non-uniform flow, in which the past is not exactly past. From now on, let us refer to these hybrids as being amodern, in a sense available to inhabit any era.

Although there is no doubt that boundary conventions define Western metaphysics, and specific frameworks make for agreed categories of Western intellectual culture, globalisation and technology sustain broader and more diffuse systems. What has been a recognised classification of knowledge is in the process of changing, and our concepts of it transformed.<sup>4</sup> Nowadays, to open the daily newspaper is to be confronted with an-ever

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<sup>3</sup> *Banks correspondence*, M469, p1

<sup>4</sup> Michel Serres with Bruno Latour, *Conversations on Science, Culture and Time*, p106

multiplying range of hybrid issues and 'articles that sketch out imbroglios of science, politics, economy, law, religion, technology, fiction.' These 'mixed up affairs' are outside the disciplinary categories which are the strongholds of the modernist worldview. Latour suggests that we pay attention to the way these imbroglios weave our world together.

When you do the everyday thing of turning on the tap, as I have shown in Chapter 4, you are heading not only for your city's dam and water treatment process, but for political investment in risk management and CEO's going down the drain, for international standard setting bodies such as the US Environmental Protection Authority, and for global economic stakes in water privatisation. This connectivity Latour terms

... a thread of interwoven stories ... [which] will be broken into as many segments as there are pure disciplines ... By all means they seem to say, let us not mix up knowledge, interest, justice and power. Let us not mix up heaven and earth, the global stage and the local scene, the human and the nonhuman.<sup>5</sup>

### **A Generative Relation to Language – Fictions and Percepts**

What are the fictions of Flow Engineer and Mermaid doing in this thesis after all? Perhaps it is time to look back at the setting of their scene, and the water story as it has developed around them. Each character is a story and an argument in herself. Each exceeds the notion of metaphor, and could be better described as a percept. Together they are a textual strategy which draws attention to the relation between conceptual and perceptual processes of thinking and knowing. They are the product of research which invokes a particular kind of water hospitality, and steers towards 'the other heading', that is, Water Conversation. Water hospitality and Water Conversation are a way of perceiving water relations, and are themselves percepts which support a conceptual argument.

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<sup>5</sup> Latour op. cit. pp 2-3. I have extrapolated on Latour's use of examples to highlight the relevance of my own case study

In Chapter 1, I spoke of my decision to bring in these fictional characters, or percepts, as a response to the high tide of information and ideas on the contemporary water scene. For over a decade, a broad range of interest groups have been taking up a global overview of water issues through ongoing water symposia convened by the Stockholm International Water Institute (SIWI). The 10<sup>th</sup> Symposium co-convened by SIWI, the Global Water Partnership, IWA Foundation, and World Business Council for Sustainable Development in 2000, addressed the importance of radically improved, *non-crisis driven* water governance for water security in a world under rapid change. One component includes looking to story telling and good metaphors to promote physical understanding of changes in expectations and behaviours in relation to water realities.<sup>6</sup>

By adopting a generative relation to language to do just this, I have exercised a fundamental human quality, the capacity to sort.<sup>7</sup> By choosing to develop percepts with their story/argument dimension, rather than 'rational' arguments, I have also exercised the power of weaving. This could also be seen as a form of mediation, or of translation.<sup>8</sup> The mediation is between places, institutions, people and things, between ideas and the ways that they are classified. It is much concerned with the local as the global, viewed not as extremes, but as 'intermediary arrangements.' For as Latour argues:

... there is an Ariadne's thread which would allow us to pass with continuity from the local to the global, from the human to the nonhuman. It is the thread of networks of practices and instruments, of documents and translations.<sup>9</sup>

Here I would like to refer back to Chapter 3, which takes up this thread. I relate a story centring on a water project in India, and its transcultural practices. It highlights the way in which putting different classification principles – the sanctity of the Ganges River and the value of accurate scientific water testing – alongside each other, gives rise to multiple perceptions of time. I concluded that the project demonstrates the value and difficulty of

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<sup>6</sup> *Water Security for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Innovative Approaches*, op. cit. (my italics)

<sup>7</sup> Latour, op. cit. p141

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.* p3

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.* p121



putting paid to categorisations which define things as either 'outmoded, up to date, futuristic, atemporal, nonexistent, or permanent.'<sup>10</sup>

As characters in a contemporary water story, the Flow Engineer and Mermaid are regularly called back to the waters and the problems they face, and in the many dialogues these water lovers have, they begin to notice that there is one thing they are constantly at odds about. Time. Making advances and going forward are at the heart of the Engineer's understandings. The obvious problem of conceptualising time as one-dimensional closed conduit flow – ageing and death – are not currently part of her life calculations.

'You could easily bring this work to a standstill by holding fast to the idea of time as a continuous progressive flow,'<sup>11</sup> says the Mermaid. 'And I do find it strange the way you separate yourself from things.' A cyclical time surrounds her. In her first meeting with the Chair of the Flow Organisation she pointed out that she would always be calling into question the organisation's notion of things fitting. It's quite obvious to her that the strong impression in the Engineering mind, of living in a new time that breaks conclusively with the past, is generated by the way it binds together the cohort of elements that make up its day-to-day universe.<sup>12</sup>

'What about retracing your steps?' the Mermaid keeps insisting, 'what about thinking a bit less about moving on?'<sup>13</sup>

## **Mediations**

By way of retracing our steps in this story, by late summer 2000, the Water Conversation as I had conceived it was over. I was finishing up my fellowship, writing reports and thinking about what might come next. Then Brian Slapp, another cultural worker on water who had done many promotions for Rous Water, died unexpectedly. He had come up with the

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<sup>10</sup> *ibid.* p74

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.* p72

<sup>12</sup> *id.* – here in his argument against 'the beautiful order' of modern temporality Latour draws on Deleuze

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.* p62

image of a tap shedding gold coins and the slogan 'How to Save a Bucket of Money'. He had no time for the idealism of water conservation. He always appealed to the hip pocket nerve in promoting demand management, and his work had a terrific impact. At that time he had just finished a swag of work for the Murray Darling Basin Commission.

Slapp no longer haunted Carrington Street or came down to the Rous Centre for briefings with the Business and Promotions Manager. He was not to be found in Caddies Coffee shop, at the table just inside the doorway. I was the celebrant at his funeral and it was huge. As well as working on water promotions he'd given generously to activists and non-government organisations who wouldn't otherwise have had the wherewithal to promote their campaigns. Now his heart had burst, and he had died. Under a demand management showerhead. You could say that this was just a coincidence. Yet those closest to him, who were definitely not supernaturally or mythically inclined, found it hard to pass over. Perhaps around death, the forms of individuals and things are not isolated as strongly as in everyday life, and the fabric of a continuous exchange of forms between them becomes more apparent.<sup>14</sup> Water was part of the story of Slapp's death, and with it went quite a bit of repartee about all the water that had gone down the drain that night.

It was in this context that I concluded my research with Rous Water, by delivering my final report. I had not been as successful as Slapp in negotiating the realities of the bureaucracy. For one thing, the writing he had been contracted to do had high status in the organisation. His production of TV and print media advertising put out the Rous Water message, his colour choices informed the text on their letterhead and the fact that when they hired chairs for public events, they always insisted on white not green. His writing made them what they were by being articulated with other powerful institutions, the media. It encouraged people to install water-saving devices.

In the case of the writing I had put into practice with Rous Water's support, it could not be traced to a singular author or source. Nor was it 'linked in' with a consuming and paying

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<sup>14</sup> *ibid.* pp137,138. Latour broaches at the value of a 'redistribution' of humanism, by situating humanism in a closer relation to the nonhuman, along the lines which a premodern society would.

public. The closest I'd come to offering a recognisable writing was in the form of proposals. These proposals had always taken a particular route to the side of the business concerned with promotions. I had often been present when they were read. At first I took the manager's response to them personally. It seemed odd that her subjective judgement of my writing, however favourable – she always said, in a teacherly way, 'Good writing!' – should be the main factor in my relationship with the organisation. However I came to see this in terms of a form of 'supplementarity'. By this logic, the unfamiliar content made it difficult for someone in her position to comment on in any 'objective' sense. However, she was able to respond subjectively to the fact that there was no trace of anything like it in her filing cabinet, and in turn not much likelihood of it begetting further traces. It made sense, therefore, that the manager was subjectively 'moved' by my proposals. However it was not just that she acted sympathetically towards me, but that she moved what I presented to her into her cabinet, in what was effectively a strategy of containment.

### **Hoarding the textures of water**

'The myth of the soulless, agentless bureaucracy ... offers the mirror-image of the myth of universal scientific laws.'<sup>15</sup> Rous Water is an organisation which represents itself as thoroughly 'objective' and concerned with 'distinguishing between values and facts, ends and means, desire and performance,'<sup>16</sup> in the light of being firmly based on categories of instrumental rationality.<sup>17</sup> Yet, as the example of the examination of my unorthodox proposals suggests, 'bureaucratic objectivity includes within its meaning the need for bureaucratic subjectivity,'<sup>18</sup> and in some sense I'd found myself at its discretion. Now, whenever I saw the Business and Promotions Manager she wondered, with some concern, what I would be doing next. As the Rous Water evaluation in Chapter 7 makes clear, their appraisal of the project did not include future activities under their auspice.

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<sup>15</sup> *ibid.* p121

<sup>16</sup> Robert Cooper, 'Modernism, Post Modernism and Organizational Analysis 3: The Contribution of Jacques Derrida,' p497

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *id.*

I thought I might become more of a funeral celebrant, but I sensed that speaking so intimately about death was outside the objective perimeters of our relationship. However, it seemed necessary to reassure her that, foolhardy as the investigation I'd undertaken had been, I was not at a loss. So I said I'd probably be doing some work at Southern Cross University. I did not say that I had in mind a 40 year arts project,<sup>19</sup> in which people would express themselves in the name of water, with all the waters and rivers of Australia, and that in the interests of water security, I planned to see this material hoarded in the State Library – the stories, the writings, the clippings people chose to clip, the songs they wrote and the photos of where they did it.

The electronic era has challenged the whole notion of archiving and the archivable. Yet in light of the materiality of water, I continued to be drawn to the idea of it having a material record. My concern with dialogic relations was as much about an inter-relation between the 1999/2000 discussion and an open-ended continuity, in the diachronic sense, as it was about inter-relations between self and other, and interactive process and social evaluation in the synchronic dimension.<sup>20</sup> The thinkers and thinking of the water conversation might produce meaning in the future, in the contemplation of the contemporary problems of, say, 2050. An archive could make people and water full of possibilities. I wanted someone in future to handle the scrapbook in which people wrote at the 'One-off Splash of Water Celebration!' with its drawings, various handwritings and Ian's saucy title *Now here's a thing*:

*Met Rob Crosby, boatbuilder, sailing on the Clarence River near Iluka! I do Youthwork with young Gooris in Lismore. We dreamed up a tin canoe workshop and made four out of corrugated iron, wood fulaprene 303, roofing screws, bamboo, strips of inner tube and chainsaw, axe-carved outriggers. Now my young friends are fishing, paddling these canoes on the river. \$50 tin canoes.<sup>21</sup>*

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<sup>19</sup> Inspired by The Friends of the Los Angeles River's decision to make their work a Forty Year Arts Project, *Whole Earth Review*, Spring 1995, p62-65

<sup>20</sup> Pam Morris, draws out this dimension of the dialogic in the introduction to *The Bakhtin Reader*, p5

<sup>21</sup> Ian Gaillard, *Water Conversation Records* 1999/2000

followed by a different Rob's reflections on his water origins:

*Confluence*  
*My mother's family*  
*Working the rail bridges*  
*from Byron into town*  
*My father's family*  
*Working the land*  
*from Tuncester, Leycester Creek*  
*down to Dungaruba*  
*Confluence*  
*Wilson's Creek*  
*Leycester Creek*  
*Born at the confluence*  
*in Lismore.*<sup>22</sup>

I wanted these things to be available to offer a texture, as well as a text of water and people's perceptions of it. I noticed that my suggestion of preserving the record of the water conversation historicised it, and made some people uneasy. It made them think about water in 40 years' time. It prompted them to speculate on what reflection of our current social relations people will find in the materiality of rivers and water at that point in the not too distant future.

An organisation like a water authority, however inventively structured or restructured, is necessarily limited by institutional demands and a hierarchical nature. Its employees are required to do their forward planning within technocratic and structural constraints. They are responsible for making sure that bureaucratic processes balance up for this year's annual report. If they cannot resolve this problem, their jobs are on the line. It is not difficult to see that my interests in mediation and translation on the subject of water made little sense

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<sup>22</sup> Rob Garbutt, *ibid.*

to Rous Water, whose responsibility is to have the water supply flow as smoothly as possible today.

### **Dissolving, de-learning**

The 11<sup>th</sup> Stockholm Water Symposium in August 2001 continued to seek alternatives to crisis driven approaches to the global water situation. The recommendations identified *cross-sectoral bridge building through dialogue* as key to changing an outdated water agenda:

Despite having preached the advantages of integrated water resources management approaches for more than three decades, water professionals still tend to keep their compartmentalized thinking and behavior. This makes the building of bridges through dialogue between interdependent societal sectors particularly urgent.

In re-examing the forces influencing future water security, the symposium concluded that a major issue is the compartmentalization of water management. '... a great challenge is to break intellectual and institutional barriers.'<sup>23</sup>

The Stockholm Water Symposium the previous year had introduced the concept of hydrooptimism, perhaps to move out of the shadow of the depressingly large and complex agenda of problems with water worldwide. They had come to the conclusion that *perceptual change* would, in some cases, give a better foundation for hydrooptimism than the past's largely technical perspective. Under the heading 'No Water Security Without a Radical Shift in Thinking,' it stressed that whilst innovative approaches call for education and learning, *de-learning* is of equal importance in some areas.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> *Water Security for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century – Bridge Building Through Dialogue, Final Overall Conclusions, the 11<sup>th</sup> Stockholm Water Symposium, August 13-16, 2001, p1*

<sup>24</sup> *Water Security for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century – Innovative Approaches*, op. cit. pp2-3, my italics. The emphasis in the text is on consultants and loan and aid officers. However I see the point as having broader application.

The Flow Engineer is an innovator willing to learn. She gets stuck into yet another new report. But she would have to become a new kind of non-compartmentalized specialist, to do more than touch in on the debate on the influential World Commission on Dams (WCD) 2001 final report. There are some hundreds of web pages relating to this single document with its engineering, economic, environmental, social and institutional relation to dams.

'Will we be meeting the chair of this commission, Kader Asmal?', asks the Mermaid. 'Do you realise he comes from South Africa?' 'Yes,' says the Flow Engineer, 'I believe he had a bit of a reality check on water storage when he became Minister of Water under Mandela.' The Mermaid's impressed with his capacity to retrace steps. 'Our healing must emerge, ... through a complex coherent and cohesive argument that shows clearly *where we have been, what happened, why we're in conflict ...*,'<sup>25</sup> he states. He attempts to dissolve stereotyped images:

Instead of my archetype I saw: dams built of dirt and dams generating no electricity; dams praised by ecologists and dams despised by engineers; dams used for centuries by indigenous peoples, dams boosting fisheries, dams causing deadly floods; dams changing river chemistry or increasing net greenhouse gas emissions. I saw dam benefits by-pass thirsty adjacent communities en route to the city, dams ...<sup>26</sup>

The WCD comes close to Latour's vision for a 'parliament of things,' which takes the form of patching together constituent elements and properties of situations, rather than a glamorous, revolutionary programme of action.<sup>27</sup> The image of stitching is one that both he and the WCD make use of. In a world that breeds scepticism, the term 'stitching up' is often apposite for agreements between incommensurable stakeholders. Nonetheless Latour seeks an attitude that 'deploys instead of unveiling, adds instead of subtracting, fraternizes

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<sup>25</sup> Preface, *Dams and Development, A New Framework for Decision-Making, The Report of the World Commission on Dams*, Kader Asmal, WCD Chair, p2 (my italics)

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.* p3

<sup>27</sup> Latour, *op. cit.* pp142-145

instead of denouncing, sorts out instead of debunking,<sup>28</sup> and on the commission beginnings are described as follows:

... the first stitches came, perhaps, as a woman who risks her life opposing a large dam threads the eye of the needle with an engineer who built his career designing them. Or when the leader of one of the world's most powerful technology companies engaged with the leader of the world's proud but dispossessed peoples.<sup>29</sup>

Asmal goes to some lengths to highlight the report's value as a collaboratively written document, emphasising that he is not its author. Its integrity is presented in terms of its process, and the way in which its writing was shaped by the expertise of authors originally separated by the cultural and philosophical divides of the dams debate.<sup>30</sup> Thus the group writing of this product, like the writing of Northern Rivers water writers, is grounded in fluidity of relations, in negotiating, modifying, summarizing and testing ideas. Here authoring might be seen as the effort of making something grow, as much as the work of certain originators.<sup>31</sup> Thus, not only the document, but its writing and formulation, represents the tentative development of a thin thread of mediation in global water policy and development.

### **Unrealised Water-Loving Potential**

To reassert the Australian, Northern Rivers landscape of the water conversation, I had imagined many ways of extending its threads and opening up new local mediations in the pursuit of hydrooptimism. Given my interest in the sounds of water talk, I would have loved to have had a musician playing water on a thumb piano at the treatment works, the writing groups, or the One-off Splash! In the classes I read about it. This passage is set in colonial Southern Rhodesia:

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<sup>28</sup> *ibid.* p47

<sup>29</sup> *Dams and Development*, *op. cit.* p2

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> see Serres, *op. cit.* p81 on authoring and authority



... each patient has his or her 'bottler' by the bed, a relative who sits there simulating the sound of water with his thumbs on a little hollow-boxed water-piano. The liquid sounds of Africa flow in ... The whole Umtali district is crisscrossed by the upper tributaries of the Odzi ... and the river people cannot sleep without the patter and gurgle of running water. Not just any water but their own familiar stream. So each bottler plays a special rhythm ... As days pass it dawns on him that the African bottlers are speaking in water. Speaking in the many sounds of water to the patients and each other ...<sup>32</sup>

Water tasting had been very successful in the groups. I'd suggested to Rous Water the idea of commissioning a small publication in conjunction with *The Northern Star* with essays by writers of the north coast, like Ruby Langford Ginibi, Deb Cox, Jean Bedford, Di Morrissey. I could imagine a thought-provoking diversity as writers sipped in their own sense of place and of time, and that this would reflect widely on water. I had also wanted to do a radio show where Rous Water workers and people from the writing classes read each others' work. They were all enthusiastic, but it didn't work out for the local ABC.

Through my research I came across an amazing range of water facts, which I would find myself posing to the 'water conversationalists' in the form of quiz questions. I liked the idea of holding a trivia quiz, perhaps with the board and executive of Rous Water joining other water lovers for an evening's entertainment, as a fund-raiser for a community somewhere else, having more difficult water conversations than our own.<sup>33</sup> The trivia quiz might seem trivial, yet it has become an increasingly popular form of knowledge dissemination. Its facts present a kind of supplementarity which led me to see them as akin to Derrida's *pharmakon*. Where the *pharmakon* is simultaneously medicine and poison, the myriad facts associated with a trivia quiz all have the potential both to fascinate and bore, to promote understanding and to kill off critical interest. It is both one thing and the other, but not one or the other.<sup>34</sup> (See Appendix 3 for nine rounds of trivia.)

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<sup>32</sup> Robert Drewe, *The Drowner*, p164

<sup>33</sup> As the 2002 Stockholm Symposium highlights, where countries of the 'north' have water storage facility per person of several thousand cubic metres of water, many African countries have less than one percent of this

<sup>34</sup> See Leonard Orr, *A Dictionary of Critical Theory*, p110

I had also dreamed of water writers reading what they had written to the river. I can see the spot where I imagined this happening, near the Winsome Hotel, down near by the neglected metal park bench that overlooks the confluence of the Wilson and Leycester Rivers. There was something a little animistic about this. Perhaps it was the suggestion that we might directly reinforce the force of the river,<sup>35</sup> at present so diminished, and I didn't persuade anyone into it. I'd persuaded people into a lot of mad stuff already, which is what you do in a community writing project.

### **Marigolds, A Story**

The following story from the conclusion of the project relates to networks of local and global across different senses of time. It is impossible to give it adequate hospitality within frameworks of reasoning which are not hospitable to the non-rational. However, it leads back to the source of my interest in mediation and translation of water realities. It also has a relationship to my interest in percepts and a softer language that might contradict prevailing models of communication on water.

Up to now I haven't mentioned the morning session of the One-off Splash! water celebration at Rous Water's headquarters. In the general publicity for the day's events, I had described the influence the experience at Varanasi had had on me. But I made no mention of marigolds, an everyday attribute of that place, a factor of that cultural riparian environment. If you have ever visited the ghats at Varanasi, you will know the way squiggles and curls and dots in marigolds are written on the water of the Ganges.

The morning session involved people who weren't very mobile, and the serving of tea. At the last minute I couldn't do without an assistant. Then in a flash of inspiration, it came to me that I must call in someone I knew very little, Davina, a local dancer and turner of heads, her name closely implicated with the divine. The water celebration was to be a carnival of a kind, and she thrived on performance. People were putty in her hands. I can't remember who had given her the flowers which she wore to the Rous Centre. When I came

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<sup>35</sup> see José Gil, *Metamorphoses of the Body*, discussing force as a 'floating signifier,' pp 92-100

to pick them up at five minutes' notice, Jenny had the gear. Davina was glowing. She was wearing a dense mala of orange marigolds. I was absolutely astonished.

She decided not to take it off when she got into the car. All the way to town, she sat slightly forward so it didn't get crushed. There isn't this kind of peril to a marigold mala when you buy it from a street vendor and walk it down the steps of Tulsi Ghat. There, where everything says marigolds, malas hang off every stall, are laid on shrines, offered to the river and eaten by the goats. There, where the Foundation continues to work on plans to dig up the centuries' old infrastructure of the ghats, to put in place the only workable solution to preventing pollution into the Ganges.

I told Jenny and Davina what we were in for as we drove into town; twenty people coming to have a look at their stories on display with the Regional Gallery's water works. They were to be welcomed by Rous Water's Business and Promotions Manager and the gallery director. Our challenge was to give them all a cup of tea and a biscuit without a kitchen. 'No worries', said this competent four-year old. I smiled as we drove on to the bridge. It was so Indian to be engaging child labour.

As the old women arrived, they fell in love with Davina. It appealed to them that she was wearing flowers. But before five minutes were up she went and laid them, in an unobtrusive ceremony of her own, in the copper pan of water at the entrance. Her admirers cajoled her, 'Put your flowers back on sweetheart, they're so pretty' and 'Come on dear, go and get your flowers and put them back on.' Davina smiled and served their teas like an accomplished waitress. But it wasn't till they had all left that she went quietly back to the entrance and lifted the mala out. I drove her and Jenny on to Lismore Heights. I paid them both. Davina got ten dollars. The day had dropped into a time-knot.<sup>36</sup> Without the marigolds I would have forgotten about the bigger time, the non-rational time, the time that does not fly.

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<sup>36</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincialising Europe*, p112 uses the concept of time-knot to speak of that which 'makes the present noncontemporaneous with itself.'

## **Katar and critical fiction**

It was in India that I was the first-time water writer. It was my practice to record, and I took my foreign exercise book with Tarzan on the cover to meetings and to the temple, where Mahant-ji invited us to join in learning Indian classical music. I listened as Mahant-ji told of a river which gives people poetry and stories, composed over a thousand years. The sound of the patient harmonium and the unexpected ease with which I sang configurations of a foreign scale turned me into someone I hadn't thought I was.

In the morning meetings of our westerner working group, I used to read out pieces from the work and meetings of the day before, and in turn record new ones which gave me a sense of the vitality of our interaction with place and people.

*Nice boat trip today - we saw some girls who'd brought their dolls down for a bath.*<sup>37</sup>

*There's a conflict in me between the statistics and the reality of people's experience as they perceive it. People do drink tap water. And a lot of people drink river water. Baijnath the boatman drinks it every day. When he drinks he pushes anything on the surface of the water away. He doesn't like seeing dead animal bodies and sewage coming into the river and he is aware of these things – but it has no effect on his wanting to drink the water.*<sup>38</sup>

*I'm very affected by women staying inside. It works my nerves.*<sup>39</sup>

Much of what I scribed was fragmentary. I looked at these pieces and wondered whether they might stand alongside other pieces and together speak a story of water, and of understandings of waste and purity associated with it. I hoped to piece together realities which ordinarily might not seem to fit, in a way that could shift the perspective of an audience towards what I was seeing in action: water as the business of an intercultural multi-disciplinary group of activists and citizens, rather than as the official business of

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<sup>37</sup> Tavis Eddy, in Annie Bolitho and the SMF, *Ganga, Written in People's Hearts*

<sup>38</sup> Stuart Anderson, *ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Rhiannon, *ibid.*

exclusive, anonymous, specialist authorities. I kept groping for a way I might create a representation of our collective experience. I wanted the record to be intrinsically related to the work I was writing about, in which we were living out in one episode, an Indian non-government organisation's understandings of a river and its situation, the American activist Fran Peavey's insights into the importance of open-minded collective invention of a new way of going about things with water. Within this collectivity were the ordinary cultural assumptions that the whole group brought to its workings.

There came a time when I saw what I was doing as a confused mess. Unexpectedly, Kris, one of the team's attorneys, told me in a morning meeting that she was not baffled at all by what I was doing. She was drawn to the fact that the material did not impose, and would allow people to reflect on the situation in their own way. It reminded her of an Indian form called a *katar*, something she learnt about when studying in India as a young woman. She couldn't explain it properly. 'Ask Mahant-ji,' she said. And I did in the evening at the temple. In Chapter 3, I mentioned that Mahant-ji's spiritual portfolio includes being the custodian of the shrines of the poet Tulsi Das, who is intimately associated with the Ramayana, the most popular Hindu religious text.

*The actual meaning is that you deliver a lecture but that it should be designed in such a way that it touches the heart and mind. When quoting verses of the Ramayana they should be recited melodiously, in such a way that it influences your emotional faculty. When the body and mind become soft, at that point you say what you have to say. The belief is it will just sit deep inside you. It is said that the Vedas speak like a king speaks – with authority or purana, whereas the Ramanayana speaks with 'kantasamadi', as if the wife is whispering into the ear of the husband. This voice can be more effective than the voice of authority and command. Simple. That is the way katars should be presented. With a lot of arguments, questions and answers, angry altercations, perhaps nothing happens.<sup>40</sup>*

I took Kris's reference to *katar* as a thoughtful affirmation of my aspiration to find a way of speaking and writing on water. I have kept working towards a critical fiction. I have

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<sup>40</sup> Dr Veer Bhad Mishra, *ibid.*

persisted because of my sense that porous flow and multiple authors represent something distinctive. I have settled for something that is more like a filmic conjugal whisper, than a thesis with the positivity of authority and command. I remember being surprised that Mahant-ji was not at all perturbed by the secular nature of my interests in katar. I believe that if I were I to propose the Mermaid as a character representing important spiritual interests he would do no more than let out a mild chortle.

### **Writing, power and dynamics; the adherence of modernist expectations**

Global and local are not so far apart seen as intermediary arrangements with longer or shorter networks, suggests Latour.<sup>41</sup> In the context of the Northern Rivers of NSW in Australia, site visits to a water treatment works and a party at the head office of Rous Water and the development of a performance including collaboratively produced writings can be seen as attempting a translation with a view to making visible the 'mixed up affairs' of water. At the same time, as I point out in Chapter Two, writing is something to which modernist expectations cling; ideas about where and how it is done relate strongly to influential systems of classification.

As the interaction with Rous Water's Manager and Rous' institutional demands suggest, there are definitely tensions between 'water authority' writing, what poses as a water conversation, and what might be considered 'just talk'.<sup>42</sup> 'Different languages ... and different texts ...,' Stephen Muecke points out,

predispose writers and readers to certain interpretations ... In addition to this, the circumstances of the production of the texts, for instance, if they are published or 'just talk,' will invest them with a power, or lack of power, quite unrelated to what the text is trying to say.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Latour, op. cit. pp117-121

<sup>42</sup> Stephen Muecke in *Textual Spaces*, op. cit. p66 uses this term within the context of the relations of production and consumption which frame indigenous writings

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.* p67

Putting the focus on water appreciation in a non crisis-driven atmosphere was something people were taken by and opened to, acknowledging an interdependence based on water. I call this water-loving. In my desire to capture a sense of its dynamic, I have referred to a broad range of activities as a water *conversation*. In fact, a central dimension of these activities was *writing* on water. It was the word 'writer' in the promotional literature which people responded to, and over a period of time we worked together as writers and readers of texts. Later we came together around them at the One-off Splash! At the time, I was making my living by writing, and the fact that I had been awarded a fellowship from the Australia Council lent the endeavour a certain respect.

The title of the groups where we writers talked, wrote and read together was *Water! An Everyday Subject*. We made meaning of this subject, and proposed our meanings to each other. Some of them came and went, some came to be recorded on paper. For example, a number of women, coming face to face with the bulk water supply for the first time, were taken aback by the degree of control over water:

*I had no idea what to expect of the visit to Nightcap Water Treatment plant ... Moving from the reception area through to the water's entry point brought home to me the total power of water. I was overawed by the odour, colour and force of something I had for too long taken for granted ... I was shocked at the control over massive volumes of a vibrant living resource. Standing above the flocculation tanks looking down, the red-tinged aggregated particles of dirt and other collected matter on the water's surface held my attention for a long time ... I was amazed at the areas of the building which were dry and vacant. I don't know that I expected leaks, drips or stalagmites, but I kept looking for traces of water's escape!*<sup>44</sup>

Here putting her ideas in writing allows one water writer to refine her thinking about large-scale operations on water. In our culture writing carries weight as a way of formulating and presenting an opinion. Thus – since lived experience tends not to count as evidence for the historical record, unless in the form of oral recordings brought into the field of writing

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<sup>44</sup> Linda Lutherborrow, *Water Conversation Records, 1999/2000*

through transcription<sup>45</sup> – writing about water suggests the author's intention of making a mark. The mark-making of numerous water authors is represented in this thesis. However informal, the process of writing around which *new dimensions in Water Conversation* revolved differed from simply speaking out as water conversation might suggest. For example in this response to what he saw at the One-off Splash!, an audience member refers to numerous media, all involving written texts:

*I saw historical newspaper cuttings, going with kids projecting overheads, going with written pieces on the wall, going with dance and the whole thing. I saw that the idea of writing as exhibit could be made to work.*<sup>46</sup>

### **Water Writing – Enchanting or Disenchanting the World?**<sup>47</sup>

Water writing as exhibit, with its dynamic flow between different media and positions, could be made to work. But could it be made to work as thesis? To start with, it must be forcibly channelled through standard university ethics committee practices. Luckily the north coast culture of which I am part has a penchant for figuring things out collectively, (see Ch. 8) and I am part of a cross-disciplinary group of friends. We meet regularly to lay out problems that bear on work we are writing or presenting, to invite each others' clarifications, skills and insights, and eat good food together. 'Collaborators' is our name.<sup>48</sup> Our differences in worldview are often helpful in working things out; at the same time, communication sometimes breaks down over philosophical differences. The assumptions of social science and its enterprise, that is, studying human subjects, scientifically and objectively, are generally most strongly to the fore. The burden of social science's mission is that of disenchanting the world. The Collaborators' motivations were not unkind when

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<sup>45</sup> Stephen Muecke op.cit. p75: 'Transcribed speech is a kind of writing, a conventional representation of spoken language which elides the non-verbal gestures and the intonations which modulate it.'

<sup>46</sup> Jim Nicholls, *Water Conversation Records*, op. cit.

<sup>47</sup> Chakrabarty, op. cit. p111 refers to the principle of 'disenchanting the world' in relation to the practice of historicising, positing it as a principle which underlies knowledge in the social sciences. However, he specifically distinguishes knowledge from practice.

<sup>48</sup> At Collaborators' meetings we have discussed members' papers, chapters and abstracts, a work-related injury, ARC grant applications, personal uncertainties and numerous schemes and ventures. Our members' interests are in economics, pedagogy, deliberative democracy, Russian politics and history, cognitive psychotherapy, community consultation and writing.



they tried to disabuse me of the idea of combining arguments and fiction, of enchanting readers through a katar into dissolving rigid understandings about water.

The requirements of a Doctorate of Creative Arts thesis are seen to allow for a serious but non-traditional approach to writing. The Collaborators and various PhD writers who looked at drafts of my thesis found it refreshing, and would often qualify their response by saying: 'We are not allowed to write that way.' Naturally the Collaborators felt anxious that a thesis which strayed outside conventional boundaries would ultimately suffer on meeting the institutional realities of academic power relations. They wanted me to be fully aware of the implications of situating myself outside the economies of intellectual capital associated with academic productions, particularly PhD theses, by having no discipline-based claims or position. Thus to look back over these meetings is to be faced with evidence of me challenging the idea that I must have a place in which to stand. 'Where are you coming from?' they would insist. 'How can I limit myself to a single position,' I'd respond, 'water doesn't stick in one position. My study is about making it easier for people to engage with a subject that is closed off because its so tightly bounded by positions, disciplines and frameworks.' They would press me to put my case for writing as performance representing relations and the threads of networks. I would try to convince them that narrowly focused water writing was primitive in that it failed to represent a bigger picture, in terms of interests, places, times and interconnection.

Despite our disagreements, the Collaborators could see no match between the ethics committee forms and my research process. Ultimately a collaborative document shaped by our mutual expertise developed:

### 3. AIMS/HYPOTHESES/RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Please give the aims/hypotheses/research questions of your proposed research.

*– I aim to suggest that there is a freedom that comes with creative and imaginative processes put to work in community settings and that this could reveal the way water circulates in each person's life across many lifestyles and across the spectrum of privilege, and ultimately through life as a whole. I am interested in whether these*

*processes will allow people to tap into a deeper curiosity and sense of connection to water than rational methods allow. Might this larger story and the poetic thread of varied voices, evoking the fluid nature of water – wet, cool, chlorine scented, splashing, dripping – have the potential to draw people into a subject that is often documented solely from the point of view of economic and ecological deficits? If it can make evident the fact that water is known and used by necessity, and that according to role, experience, access to supply and relationship to supplier it is a different 'stuff', will water as a whole be seen and appreciated differently? I aim to give attention to the nature of flow ... with a view to offering a direct experience of the philosophical tensions between a mechanistic instrumental and an ecological worldview.*

We noted the fact that the collectives, networks and mediated conversation of my project presented an asymmetry out of kilter with the ethics committee's symmetrical tasks which are at once to 'defend the purity of science and rationality from the polluting influence of passions and interests' and to defend 'the unique values and rights of human subjects against the domination of scientific and technical objectivity.'<sup>49</sup> The forms assumptions pushed apart 'subject' and 'object', 'participant' and 'data', 'natural' and 'social' as if there were no possibility of cross-flow.<sup>50</sup>

(a) How will you protect the confidentiality/privacy of your participants? (For example, will the data be de-identified and the codes stored separately?)  
*– amongst the aims of a community cultural development project such as this is the development in participants of a sense of the authorship of their work and pride in their collective achievement. Part of this is nurturing the capacity in participants to publicly identify with what they have created. As writers they identify the community in which they live, the particularities of the place and its water. They participate in a bringing to life of a world through naming – themselves, the details of their lives past and present. They open up the possibility of naming the future of water which as individuals they may aspire to, but dare not hope for alone.*

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<sup>49</sup> Latour, op. cit. p124

<sup>50</sup> ibid. p122

– *Procedures relating to ownership of material will be carefully followed and this will include offering the option of not including work, not putting their name to their work ...*

(e) To what extent could the respondents be harmed if they are identified in any way? Please describe, and justify the risk.

– *I cannot identify the potential harms which individuals may themselves be aware of. However careful procedures relating to ownership of material will enhance people's sense that they are the authors of their work, and that its reaching a wider audience has implications which are part of authoring. This will give them the opportunity to reflect on risk or harm.*

(f) Could the respondents benefit if they are identified in any way? Please describe.

– *Their voices may be seen to carry weight in a matter of broad community concern.*<sup>51</sup>

### **Community Writing, Running Across Interests**

Community writing, the awkward heading for a form of mediation involving stories and writing and different interest groups, could hardly be said to be a tradition in Australia at this stage.<sup>52</sup> Insofar as it has been developed and celebrated, Mary Hutchison and I have played a significant role through our co-authored handbook, *Out of the Ordinary*, which was published not long before I set up the water/story experiment. It made sense to seek out her perspective on my approach to writing on water. When I went on to water, Mary completed her PhD thesis. She has since done interpretive work with people's stories and histories, in public art and place-making, as well as in curating, drawing on her skills in bringing stories to audiences. From time to time we offer workshops that bring out the possibilities and practicalities of our approach to working with community stories. Thus we have enjoyed a long-term collaboration and an ongoing conversation.

### Speaking of interdisciplinarity, politics and distinctive positions

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<sup>51</sup> Annie Bolitho, *Water Conversation Records*, op. cit.

<sup>52</sup> see Bolitho & Hutchison, *Out of the Ordinary*, pp6-10

Annie: Going beyond a recognisable disciplinary framework has been a leitmotif of community writing, in the way we've developed it – do you have any comments on this aspect of my study?

Mary: I was impressed that you addressed interdisciplinarity in a way that acknowledged its difficulties. I liked the way you put it – that it would be easy to perceive as 'too watery'. This suggested a sense of running or thinning. I think some people would see it as a running over, a running across, a running away, that it must mean less rather than as much, or more. I've always seen interdisciplinarity as a joyous thing and don't immediately appreciate how many people find it – I'm not sure – perhaps unattractive or meaningless.

Annie: Or simply not rewarding enough to go out on a limb for, within the structure of existing disciplinary frameworks.

Mary: You speak of how what you're doing crosses disciplines and you also speak of community writing as being interdisciplinary, not only in terms of the different things that inform it but the artforms that it connects with. The way you speak about 'writers and people who don't think of themselves as writers' is an interesting way of speaking for interdisciplinarity – it could speak for someone who aspired to do some creative writing and equally for an engineer who writes regularly on specific disciplinary projects. In that way you moved things we alluded to in *Out of the Ordinary*, into the realm of interdisciplinarity in a way that stands strongly in the space in which you worked.

Annie: Another thing I'd like to talk about is the political dimension of representing a community water conversation. Here I'm interested in developments from *Out of the Ordinary*, and your thesis, which I've drawn on in earlier chapters.

Mary: When I wrote my thesis one of my main concerns was that people didn't get the politics of community writing. I tried to explain the politics from outside, using a quite overtly political discourse about participatory democracy as a way of getting at individualism versus collectivity. Because I was trying to talk about where community arts

had been and use other people's writing about it, I never could shake the modernist leftist discourse that shaped it in the early 80s. By sitting with a postmodern discourse you are more inside the thing. You have come at the politics in a different way that's quite simple and direct, without having to come at the politics so much! There's something about the way you work with individual/collective that just situates it on the inside, on the doing.

Annie: One thing that I've been struck by is that the context of a lot of your thesis material is the early 90s. *Out of the Ordinary's* context is the mid-90s. There are many things there that inform what I do, but it was difficult to draw on them. They don't make sense now, politically speaking. It's like another world. It would be unrealistic now to think in that way. And it'll be very different again in five years' time.

Mary: Yes, I think that when you do this kind of examination of individual and collaborative work, it is not only that the way you *do* things is different in the light of each person's individual and collaborative experience, but that *the places* from which you do things is different. So it's exciting to see you working in a current mode with your material. For example where you speak about bodies and codes and transducers, that's an interesting postmodern way of speaking about the connectivity we recognise in this kind of work.

Something else that ties in with the political dimension is the way you talk about the writing that is collective and writing that's made by you – it's an interesting development from *Out of the Ordinary*. In one of the early chapters you have a sort of running stream of instrumental and 'lay' perspectives, where you have pulled out pieces and shaped them into something. I have a strong sense of what is involved in that transformation into a representation of the tension you are bringing out in your thesis. I am aware that this representation is composed of pieces that could equally be made into something quite else. I think this is a logical extension of scribing, which in *Out of the Ordinary* we situated in a politics of encouraging the author, in the politics of the expression of community and of other voices. What you have done here and we have both done in our work subsequently is quite antithetical to that politics, yet it has its own collective purpose.

Annie: So how do we think about working with the politics of other people's stories, in a way that satisfies people, and isn't a programmatic 'ethics committee' politics?

Mary: You're talking about the making of a text like the one I referred to earlier? I think there are some circumstances in which people are wanting to grasp their own authority. Now it's less and less likely that we will work, with groups, say of older people who are wanting to tell their stories as a group. In the contexts in which we are most likely to work now, we are bringing these voices with us. We take a particular approach to collecting material. We want to keep multiple and other voices present and visible. In a recent public art project in Canberra, the Petrie Plaza Memory Quilt, I used material from people's stories, not necessarily exactly as the contributors had spoken, and not on the terms on which we had spoken, but in such a way that their perspectives are represented, you have a sense of those distinctive voices.

You could see it as the difference between distinctive and authentic. I think in *Out of the Ordinary* and the work that led up to it, we had a more simplistic idea of valuing authorship which could be expressed as 'authenticity'. You and I are not really working with that kind of essentialist authenticity. I see us as making writing that speaks for different positions and distinctive selves in ways that are filled with the imagination of the individual speaking in the moment.

I haven't tried to articulate this before, but now I feel excited about the work we are doing and how it draws on skills we developed and represented in *Out of the Ordinary*. Occasionally I have wondered recently: 'Have I gone off this community track?' but it is there!

### Speaking of the commonwealth

Annie: I've been looking at your part of the introduction to the forum 'Stories, Writing and Publishing for Cultural Action' we did at Pop Ed. You say: 'We ask how bringing

community stories to light through various forms of publication increases access to the cultural, historical and social commonwealth.<sup>53</sup>

Mary: That was your thing ... commonwealth ... you should use it here ...

Annie: No, it was yours – I'm reading from the introduction ...

Mary: No, it was yours – you took it up around that time and I think I just picked up on it.

Annie: I'll read the rest!: 'We have a strong understanding that this work does open up and create change in our sense of who we are, both individually and collectively. How does it do that? What practices might enhance or disable this intention?'<sup>54</sup> Firstly, how do you reckon I went with practices which enhanced or disabled the intention to open up the individual to the collective and so on?

Mary: I think the script gives a strong sense of that idea of invitation which we worked with in *Out of the Ordinary*. You extend this in more sophisticated processes, like using Jonathan Morgan's idea about people interviewing each other, getting the schoolgirls to dance people's writing ...

Annie: It was an interesting step for me: to represent the process as a script. It was like admitting: 'I can make this recognisable for a reader by bringing out the contexts and the people and various pieces of people's writing, in what is an easily recognisable form.' I could make something people could watch, rather than peruse. At the same time, it's interesting to remember here that so much of what I do in representing the politics and poetics of community I learned from your experience of writing for theatre.

Mary: Something that struck me powerfully was your description of that One off Splash! event. I like the idea of flash mixing. You give a very specific reflection of things which

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<sup>53</sup> *Stories, Writing and Publishing for Cultural Action*, A One-Day Forum held by the Centre for Popular Education, UTS, Sept. 2000, p4

<sup>54</sup> *ibid.*

in my thesis I generalised – where I talked about events in terms of multiple stories and theorised from that position. In the water conversation you developed a position where, by bringing things together around water, there is something concrete to interrogate. You specify very clearly what discourses you're crossing and this enables you to open out and elaborate and extend. I've learnt a lot from what you've got there.

From: Mary Hutchison <reddog@peg.apc.org>

To: Annie Bolitho <annieb@om.com.au>

Re: writing contexts

Dear Annie – another thought since talking to you ... I sensed from the script that the people you worked with were able to inhabit your thinking environment, or to see the world in the same way. This isn't something we found very often when we were working on *Out of the Ordinary*. My sense is that though you were working in a more risky spot in terms of the water authority context, in a way you were working in a more connected spot with the people.

love

Mary

To: Mary Hutchison <reddog@peg.apc.org>

From: Annie Bolitho <annieb@om.com.au>

Dear Mary – that's interesting. I do think it was the water-lover in people. I often sensed during those meetings and discussions and excursions, that there was something strangely magnanimous in the way people related to each other on the basis of their relationship to water. There was something there which often surprised me. So that whilst people may not have *changed* in any sense from coming together in that way, they were able to *see* something about themselves and others that may not have been apparent before – that there was a water lover in themselves and in the other. I think I framed my ambitions for the project in certain political terms, influenced by our work on *Out of the Ordinary*, of 'opening up and creating change in our sense of who we are individually and collectively.'



But its achievement was simply in a realisation, in passing, of the magnanimity of water loving. Change in some way suggests stasis, that there is a self which might shift, when really we are constantly changing, and doing things for a change, and today, as Kristeva puts it, we experience 'a multiple, splintered perception of time, which tosses us from fundamentalism and nationalism to biotechnology.'<sup>55</sup> Thanks for bringing this to my attention Mary! It's answered something I couldn't have articulated before.

love, Annie

### **Stakes or shelter in water**

In Chapter 1, I draw on Levinas' argument for a mode of relationality which draws together ethics and politics, as a form of hospitality. I highlighted Derrida's reference to it as a *politics* of hospitality. Levinas wrestles with questions of hospitality as a Jew, in the light of the Middle East and the competing claims of 'the religions of the Book'. Today, each new development in the Middle East region highlights how global enterprises, institutions and ideologies bring about a relationality in which people around the world are pulled in willy-nilly. We are tied to the fate of Middle East and those who live there.

It goes without saying that access to water is potentially a thing of immense contest, without solution within current understandings of politics, all over the world. The Middle East is a focus of particular attention because it is the first major region where there is almost no uncertainty about it running out of water. 'The Tigris-Euphrates riparians have not yet fully utilized their water resources but will do so in the coming decades. Similar problems are envisioned among the upper riparians of the Nile.'<sup>56</sup> Some years ago a new term was coined by SIWI's Malin Falkenberg. *Hydrosolidarity*.<sup>57</sup> It emphasises common responsibilities and interests in the commonwealth of water.<sup>58</sup> The term can be used to describe transfer of water-related products such as grain, to areas where the scale of water

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<sup>55</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'What Good are Artists Today?' in *Strategies for Survival, a Global Perspective on Ethnicity, Body and Breakdown of Artistic Systems*, ed. Chambert, p32

<sup>56</sup> J.A. Allan, "'Virtual Water': An Essential Element in Stabilizing the Political Economies of the Middle East' in *Yale F&ES Bulletin*, p103

<sup>57</sup> *Stockholm Waterfront*, A Forum for Global Water Issues, no. 4, 2002, p18

<sup>58</sup> Arundhati Roy in her polemic on dams speaks of water in terms of the 'greater common good.'

deficit is such that water allocations for irrigation are avoided by a high level of food imports.<sup>59</sup> In Egypt, for example, politicians are able to defer the political price of admitting that water resources are no longer adequate. They are saved from having to implement new and potentially abrasive water policies and negotiations, because of the support of the global trade in staple cereals.<sup>60</sup> This relationality is termed *virtual water*. It highlights how important it has become important to see what we did not bother to look at before.

The Middle East is an ongoing reminder that the question of survival cannot be envisioned in terms of contemporary politics and tolerance. It has to entail *seeing*. We need to find a sustained way of keeping our eyes open, not only to relations between humans, but between water and food, and also between humans and other beings. Hospitality suggests a fertile space of relations, a practice of seeing the Other, seeing oneself *as* the Other, and oneself in the Other *as* oneself. It evokes the risks and demands of living on uncertain ground with those who are not known friends, without ambushing each other, literally or metaphorically speaking.

*Hydrosolidarity* was coined as an alternative to 'hydro-egoism' or self-interest amongst stakeholders in the water sector. To date, it does not appear to have been used in discussions of the feminisation of water management, although this topic regularly recurs on Water Symposia agendas. The term has mainly been taken up in relation to virtual water, and to refer to approaches to potentially conflicted upstream/downstream water sharing arrangements. Today 261 watersheds cross boundaries of two or more countries.<sup>61</sup> Writers with global interests from SIWI are also responsible for the term *green water flow*. Here water associated with rainfed agriculture, including soil moisture and vapor flow through transpiration, is distinguished from *blue water flow*, that is, surface water and groundwater withdrawn for irrigated agriculture. The value of this distinction is that

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<sup>59</sup> Allan, *op. cit.*

<sup>60</sup> *ibid.* p104

<sup>61</sup> SIWI, *Water and Development in Developing Countries*, p2

assessments of these flows leads to quite different policy paths.<sup>62</sup> This is a practical demonstration of the recommendation for improved water governance identified at a Stockholm Symposium some years ago, the generation of 'good metaphors'.

It is in the global interest that we continue to explore a generative relation to language. This could involve broadening out from 'good metaphors'. 'Percepts' employed with critical intent could offer a more complex way of talking about ensembles of factors involved in difficult water situations. They might reveal the dilemmas of water managers at all levels and offer an undogmatic way of looking at them.

Since reading an account of water relations amongst the Yolngu of north-western Australia, I have been drawn back many times to a potent image of affiliation to water. A song from a clan of the Dhuwa moiety refers to water as the *nest* from which the singer and her relatives are born.<sup>63</sup> To take this as a percept, is to imagine myself and those around me as being born from a water nest. It immediately attunes me to the protection and comfort that I am at a loss for without water. This image brings home how close water is to being, and how close to home. Nests are fragile. Our cultural attentions and technical exactitude and efficiencies must return and return and return again, to remedy currently unworkable structures, putting twig after twig in place. At the same time, nests are lined with knowledge of our weakness. In Michael Serres' words:

Humanity makes progress most often thanks to small children, women, old people, the sick, the simpleminded, and the poorest. Our flesh is weak, our spirit is frail, and our advances fragile ... And everything else deafens, through the publicity of the strong, who believe they make and do everything ...<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Malin Falkenmark, Harald Savenije and Rohan Rockstrom, 'Feeding Eight Billion People: Time to Get out of Past Misconceptions', p1. Blue water flow options lead to attention to water storage, green water flow options to mulch.

<sup>63</sup> This image is drawn from a Yolngu song referred to in F. Magowan, 'Waves of Knowing: Polymorphism and Co-Substantive Essences in Yolngu Sea Cosmology,' in *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, vol. 29, no. 1, pp22-35

<sup>64</sup> Michel Serres with Bruno Latour, op. cit. p122

Today people have little difficulty talking casually about future water wars. I am often reminded that throughout the 1960s, 70s and 80s a bloodbath was predicted for South Africa, as if violent hiatus were the advance that was most likely to bring in political change. The last decade has seen very different developments, significantly mediated by the constraints of neo-liberal capitalism. Thus visions of a new South Africa, initially idealised, are seen nearly a decade on tempered by the realities of the scale of the project and of obvious inadequacies and compromises within global politico-economic structures. Nonetheless it is obvious that Mandela and Tutu and others' generative and generous use of language and percepts played a significant role in negotiating complex issues of power, blame, responsibility and human anguish in the time of transition. It is no coincidence that Asmal came to chair the World Commission on Dams and Mandela to launch its final report, given the power and impacts of power associated with dam politics and technologies, and South Africa's reputation for processes of reconciliation, however flawed. The WCD report speaks against the idea of water scarcity inevitably giving rise to self-interest amongst people, regions and nations. 'We see water as an instrument, a catalyst for peace, that brings us together, neither to build dams nor tear them down but to carefully develop resources for the long term,' writes Asmal. At the same time he admits that intellectual honesty, vision and understanding are the most difficult aspects of the process which would make this possible.<sup>65</sup>

Where do the main disciplines of science, social science and humanities stand in relation to questions of intellectual honesty such as this? Instrumentalism is an all too human tendency. The experience of problems and pain leads almost universally to the search for a way out of it. Science and technology arise from this motivation and take on resolving problems of uncertainty, scarcity, and excess amongst other things. In the west we have now achieved a high degree of control over what were previously seen as inevitable causes of suffering. Control and mastery now dominate our experience of what were considered mysteries of unpredictable weather and climatic patterns. Yet this becomes the source of misfortune, since in the grip of instrumentalist knowledge and expertise we have no way of controlling our unlimited appetite for comfort and power.

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<sup>65</sup> *Dams and Development*, op. cit. p1

Mandela addresses this issue in his speech at the WCD launch.

It is not too productive to simply blame the industries that build, the governments that authorise, the agencies that fund, the engineers who design the large dam. The problem, though, is not the dams. It is the hunger. It is the thirst. It is the darkness of a township ... It is the time wasted gathering water by hand. There is a real pressing need for power in every sense of the word. Rather than single out dams for excessive blame, or credit, we must learn to answer: 'It is all of us!' All of us must wrestle with the difficult questions we face.<sup>66</sup>

Serres contends that it is important not to forget or wipe out the deposit of cultural resources which tell of failure, tragedy and despair, moaning, weeping and lamentation.<sup>67</sup> I would add in those that tell of lightness, freshness and joy. The evidence which the humanities have available can connect scientists with humanity and encourage a science that is humane. All the requirements of reason are not met by science. The social sciences do not exhaust the content transmitted by the humanities.<sup>68</sup> Writers, artists and people with an interest in literature and culture have a role to play in opening out people's perceptions of what is undoubtedly an escalating global water crisis.

We all spring from water nests, into a huge variety of worlds, where influences and conditions lead us into ways of knowing and knowledge-cultures that sometimes seem so complex as to be incomprehensible to one another. In these writings I have introduced a Mermaid and a Flow Engineer, who have spent time together through an offer of water hospitality. They are both water specialists, but they see wetness, slime, froth and flow completely differently, because of the places they know best, the values they've been taught, and how they live with water. As their relationship has developed, it has become apparent that it is impossible to ignore the influence of conceptions of time and progress in the pursuit of water security objectives.

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<sup>66</sup> *Address on the Occasion of the Launch of the Final Report of the World Commission on Dams*, p2

<sup>67</sup> *Michel Serres with Bruno Latour, Conversations on Science, Culture and Time*, p182

<sup>68</sup> *ibid.* p183

My katar is coming to a close. A moral percolates through the characters, writings and interests mediated in my study: water is not accessory to human life. Crises, which shock momentarily, will provide growing clarity to those buffered by dams and an average of five sets of indoor taps. However we must allow for an inter-penetration of many cultural forces in understanding of water relations. Hospitality in water, hospitality to the Other cannot rely on incentives and motivations. Rather it is a way of inviting and tending that has to be patiently learned and passed on, otherwise we would forget that we have no other option. It is this that enables us to admit that we don't really know what to do, even though the situation calls for a response. Yet at any moment hospitality can surprise us out of our limitations, into seeing that we are bigger than we imagined we were.

## PRECIOUS LIQUIDS

The contemporary artist Louise Bourgeois talks with Pat Steir about her work:

Steir: The piece you displayed last year in Documenta is titled *Precious Liquids* ...

Bourgeois: Here we are dealing with bodily functions; when we are in a tense state, our muscles tighten; when they relax and the tension goes down, a liquid is released. Intense emotions become physically liquid – a precious liquid. That's where the title comes from. So it is all a matter of being in touch with that flowing of liquids. I could give you a dozen examples – if you are terribly hungry, saliva comes at the sight of a lamb chop.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> 'Mortal Elements, Pat Steir Talks with Louise Bourgeois,' *Art Forum*, Summer 1993, p86

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## NO FLOW, THE CONSEQUENCES OF DISAPPEARANCE

*This chapter was written in drought, in October/November 2002. At this time Rous Water's bulk water supply was down to 32%. Some months before small flows had been restored to the Snowy. In November, the Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists brought out a report 'Blueprint for a Living Continent', highlighting the importance of returning flows to the Murray, and the need for a National Water Policy.<sup>1</sup>*

### **How to remember?**

A river runs beneath all my processes and activities, endlessly. Its curving camphor and privet softened banks go round and back towards the forest. Still I know Mahant-ji's query: Have you taken time to dream with the river? My daily writing outlook drops away to Terania Creek. Above what I can only just see, but hear distinctly, I write and make books. Have I dreamed with those shining, tripping, watery sounds, those immediate here and now sounds?

When Mary Hutchison and I were making *Out of the Ordinary* and running out of time, we included a short section on one-off handmade books. It is far too short. It simply says that these singular productions might be large, small or tiny. 'They may be made of new or recycled materials. They might sit inside boxes or fit into pouches. They may be computer printed, handwritten or composed of found text ...'<sup>2</sup>

In practice I make the books that I desire, and so do other people. For example, during a project with carers of people with dementia, the makers of books had never dreamed of doing such a thing before. In a group they brought out photos and letters, and told the stories of the people in them. They then undertook a more private process, opening their

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<sup>1</sup> *Blueprint For a Living Continent, A Way Forward from The Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists*, pp6-8

<sup>2</sup> Bolitho and Hutchison, p79



hearts into the making of albums and folders which remembered the lives and experiences of those they loved. Each highly individual book had drawn others in, to consider form and content, and to grieve for a loss of hold – on a husband or wife or parent or friend – no longer able to conduct the daily living out of the details of a rich ordinary life. The people of whom these books offered testimony were no longer there to 'dream with their families' in the sense of participating in a vision, however loosely held, of a shared future. I remember being touched at the time by an expansive line often repeated by a man who was by then quite socially isolated by his illness. 'Do drop round, we live by the water.'

In returning to the simple artform of handmade books, this time in workshops with others from my valley and beyond, I also explored ways of representing a complex process of remembering and forgetting, in relation to rivers. In looking at the subject under the heading, 'The Water Closest to You', I was interested in the question of what might link the element of historicity that is implied by remembering my own river, to responsibility, in order that the connection might 'remain open as a problem ... never to be resolved.'<sup>3</sup> This problem came to include other rivers beyond my immediate place, and provoked quite a number of books.

*Registering Water Reform*, is an account of a trip, and reflects on the phrase 'sacrifice of tributaries':

*Perhaps near highways was where they were most often given away, by the RTA for the sake of a bridge or a road or an embankment for run-off. Or did the people of a town, or the men and women on the land decide to say goodbye to them, a bit like seeing your eldest son off to the army? Who said goodbye to all the rivers I crossed or had people just forgotten, and sacrifice is too active and conscious a word for the letting go?*

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<sup>3</sup> The ideas about history and responsibility in this chapter draw on Jacques Derrida's examination of Jan Patočka's 'Heretical Essays on the Philosophy of History' in *The Gift of Death*. For his argument on European historians' misunderstanding of what links history and responsibility, see pp3-5

It is a combination of the boredom and interest of driving, of scrapbook and alphabetic register, of the names which are laid into the ever-evolving landscape of the New England highway:

*Millimbri Mary's Mount Landcare Group Mulvalla Milchengowrie South Pacific  
Agriculture Co Ltd. Merringle Mirrabinda Merribungle Murray Mowers  
Mumblegum Maroon Creek Moonbah Creek*

The most compelling book I made in the course of the workshops is situated in my immediate context. It is called *Escapism*. The title is found lurking beneath a transparent plastic glove filled with the transparent, wind-light seeds of balloon vine, a common local tree-shroud. It begins:

*Have you spent time dreaming with the river lately?*

and ends

*Forget, forgetting, forgetting, forgetting, Forgotten.*

What intervenes in the creek coloured pages? Why does a sharp piece of fencing extrude as a binding, and curly spirals of further bindings tangle it into a difficult-to-open challenge to the reader?

*privet jasmine camphor loquat madeira vine balloon vine morning glory lantana<sup>4</sup>*

## **Correspondences**

The South African artist William Kentridge, speaking of the contingency of the Johburg scene, reflects on the process of recording landscape where history is being grown over:

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<sup>4</sup> Annie Bolitho, *Escapism*, 2000. In the time that has elapsed since making this book, this river bank has also come to host moth vine and catsclaw.

It's a way of asking: how does one draw that process of forgetting? Forgetting is the natural process, remembering is the unnatural effort one makes ... There is a correspondence between how landscape erodes and how our own sense of history or understanding becomes something else.<sup>5</sup>

Here the effort to draw a process of forgetting is one of responsibility, in which there is an element of *bearing witness* to change. Thus the artist's work is not simply an act of memory, but is undertaken in the manner of a political and ethical act.<sup>6</sup>

In the wake of my return from my first visit to South Africa in twenty years, Mary and I are presenting *Out of the Ordinary* community writing workshops in regional South Australia. We are driving on cruise control in a government car from Goolwa towards Renmark. I suggest to her that it must be time to give up the name Murray. She says we couldn't. She grew up in South Australia and Murray is part of her understanding of the world. I say why not start the search for new names? I am thinking of thousands of changes in names. Street names, provinces, bureaucracies, towns, positions, stadiums, services – 'a form of vertigo produced by looking around and seeing all the old familiar landscapes and battle lines so utterly shifted and changed.'<sup>7</sup> This dizzying newness in South Africa is something many Australians waited for, confident that they knew what it would take for another country to transform. Now I feel a little unreasonable. Why not renegotiate names in a localised relation to this Australian icon, this broken down river? Why not go to the limit and give up the old white name? I am very simplistic. Our conversation gets quite heated.

We could not do that here. For 'to name spaces is to "name histories" and also to create them,'<sup>8</sup> as Tony Birch says in his examination of the politics of 'name restoration'. His study concerns the Grampians, where the idea of undoing white names was a rather opportunistic move initiated by the Victorian Tourism Commission in 1989. The poorly

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<sup>5</sup> Okwui Enwezor, 'Truth and Responsibility, a Conversation with William Kentridge', in *Parkett 54*, p167

<sup>6</sup> Derrida, *op. cit.* p35

<sup>7</sup> William Kentridge in 'Felix in Exile, The Geography of Memory', *William Kentridge*, p127

conceived process did not include consulting the Koories of the Western District about 'the marketing of the heritage they had managed to maintain through 150 years of oppression'.<sup>9</sup> This caused considerable distress. Birch summarises the range of opposition to taking up the Gariwerd names, which included the local shire government's successful lobbying of other local governments in Victoria and a petition of protest to the Victorian Place Names Committee which included 60,000 signatures. It is of interest to me both from a South African perspective, and in view of my water interests, that the Balmoral Golf Club's objection was based on their concern 'with the effect the name restoration would have on its greens: "Our Club is close to the Glenelg River and uses the water for irrigating the course"' and that a shire councillor 'expressed similar concerns about Horsham's water supply' in the local paper.<sup>10</sup>

The outcome of this name-changing story is that it could not be a story of social change.<sup>11</sup> In fact, the first publication to promote the newly named Grampians (Gariwerd) National Park concluded:

"There's a place in Victoria where time seems to have stood still. A place of Dreamtime legends." The booklet tells of the Koories who "roamed the area", the coming of Mitchell ... Visitors to the park can experience 'the same panoramic views Major Mitchell marvelled at in 1836. Nothing has changed.'<sup>12</sup>

Birch points to the way the final decision to give dual names means that the Koori name is "handcuffed" in parentheses: The Grampians (Gariwerd).<sup>13</sup> This linguistic subordination<sup>14</sup> is a sobering reminder of the extractive use of names, places and the Murray itself.

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<sup>8</sup> Tony Birch, "'Nothing has changed' The making and unmaking of Koori culture,' in *Race Matters*, Gillian Cowlishaw and Barry Morris (eds.), p18

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.* p13

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.* p14

<sup>11</sup> Geoff Clark quoted in *ibid.* p28

<sup>12</sup> Birch, *ibid.* p28

<sup>13</sup> Birch, *ibid.* p27

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*

*Last night watched a water program on the Murray-Darling on 'Four Corners.'<sup>15</sup> Before the titles were through I could see it was going to be a what-is-taken-out-is-flooded-back-on-and-mobilises-salt kind of program. The real cost of maintaining water infrastructure and then providing the water, says a perky young economist, is something only governments would underwrite since it is not profitable, and too risky for private investors. It became clear later that it is for this reason that government has offloaded unwieldy over-exposed irrigation infrastructure to consortiums of farmers at bargain prices. Murray Irrigation, one such company in western NSW pulls out more river water than the entire South Australian water allocation.*

*We saw Watertable Watch, subsurface drainage via pumps, trees planted to draw down the water table. We saw again and again how irrigation lifted and moved salt. We saw irrigation living down a bad name. We saw it not as farmers, but as an industry drawing off 72% of Australia's water, the bulk of which lies about in drains evaporating or is thrown on to leaky soils. We saw the nervousness of engineering solutions to address symptoms, from scientists looking for definitive causes.*

*'Farmers would like to see salt leaving here in truckloads,' said one expert, standing by an expansive depot of salt removed by pumping from irrigation excess on ricefields. Of course they would. Especially if it involved 'full cost recovery.' \$1000 a ton is what it costs to remove a ton of salt from these effluents. 'Salt will get you in the end', said yet another specialist, of Queensland's unwillingness to regulate. Irrigators turn against irrigators where governments have promised 'more water than falls from the heavens.'*

*'People living on rivers are in deep sorrow at the path we have taken,' said a man who had been pulled in from the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS). He was standing on the ferociously green banks of a flow-diminished river overloaded with nitrogen.*

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<sup>15</sup> 'Water Pressure,' *ABC Four Corners*, 12 Mar. 01

*As a landholder who looks down on a different set of conditions, I am one of them.*<sup>16</sup>

The more bleak the picture of the Murray presented, the more I find myself drawn to the words of historian Bill Reschke. He invokes a kind of Murray River secrecy, describing a childhood initiation into knowledge of the faraway tributaries, at the lower Murray town of Mannum. Fishing 'depended on the colour of the River which changed miraculously when new water came down. That always used to happen at night. We would wake up and there the River would be – brown, yellow, orange, green or whiteish. Our elders and betters would say, "That's Bidgee water" or "That's the Goulburn," or "the Darling's arrived," and in would go the nets. So we came to know the colour of the tributaries.'<sup>17</sup>

### **Healthy Rivers(ix)**

Have you taken time to dream with the river? And how might this dreaming sit with moderating extractive behaviours through education via promotion and promotional texts? Consider the stimulating, disordered and energetic environment I returned to in South Africa, where there is little in the way of promotion. There, there appears to be nil everyday awareness of water or any other kind of conservation. Yet consider the reality that people in Australia know the promotional messages backwards, and often fail to act on them. That there can be a failure of responsibility within the 'civilization of boredom produced by techno-scientific objectivity'<sup>18</sup> and its absence of disorder or mystery.

Time, or perhaps more accurately temporality, that is, the production of time as a cultural force, runs throughout this thesis. What if I were to fly in the face of promotion of healthy rivers, and suggest a heresy:<sup>19</sup> that dreaming with the river might be responsible behaviour in a new kind of vigil, involving looking out over the life of rivers?<sup>20</sup> At the heart of healthy rivers campaigns is urgency. Large-scale, quick outcomes are desperately needed. Dreaming with a river runs the inevitable risk of being thrown out of court as a time-

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<sup>16</sup> Annie Bolitho, *Dwelling on Water Notebooks*, 13 Mar. 01

<sup>17</sup> Reschke, river historian, in *Community History, The History Trust of SA Magazine*, vol. 9, no. 3, p8

<sup>18</sup> Derrida, *op. cit.* p36

<sup>19</sup> Derrida, *ibid.* p27

wasting affair. It is an act of dissidence.<sup>21</sup> It is not an act at all, it is naïve irresponsibility, a neglect of the details of management with which degraded rivers are choked.<sup>22</sup> Unlikely as it is, if my critics were to concede that dreaming with the river had some merit, they would point out that people are too busy to dream. They, like the rivers, are severely over-allocated.<sup>23</sup>

Is it a dream that I take handmade books dreaming a river to a rural health conference chokka with promotion and promotional messages? Surely it is not in Australia, but in places like South Africa and India, that degraded river systems influence the health outcomes for rural populations? Here in Australia it is a matter of changing understandings of water in order to make complex decisions about it. *Allocations, trading of allocations, flow regimes, modified flow regimes, stressed rivers*. Could making time to dream with the river be said to promote health – if, in Australia, to think about rivers is to reflect this stress?

I dream that people admire the books. The one I made is appreciated for evoking 'the torn river', for the corrugations in cardboard giving a material sense of my bumpy experience of the creek. The blue foam of the cover may not be real rubbish from my real river, but it gives a tangible feel for my rubbishy sense of the riparian environment. I dream that an artist whose job is in health promotion carefully unwraps another book about a well-nurtured tributary, and says 'Oooh this is a concertina book, beautiful paper! Isn't it wonderful how the materials people choose reflect the quality of the river where they are?'

*Little creek in paddock*

*Drumming through the small culvert*

*Chanting through the gully ...*<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Derrida, *ibid.* p15

<sup>21</sup> Derrida, *ibid.* p26

<sup>22</sup> Derrida would argue to the contrary. Totalizing and naturalizing questions of historicity implied in investigating responsibility for river health leads to *losing oneself* in the details, *ibid.* p4

<sup>23</sup> Wentworth Group, *Blueprint for a Living Continent*, p8

<sup>24</sup> Carol Perry, *Water Teacher*, undated

I dream someone loves fragments of text as I do, and moves from a watercolour depiction of a row of kids wearing ill-fitting raingear and holding broken umbrellas by the creek in flood, to the caption: *Geoff, Chimmie, Xanthe, Morgan, Petra, Shilo and Gail at Pooh Corner, 1988.*<sup>25</sup> She lays that one down and unwraps another. 'This is an intense one,' she says, reading out a collage of found and handwritten text: *RISK and how real is environmental illness???* *But now I worry - what are the unknowns. I didn't feel confident of the water quality to swim while pregnant or to put my baby in.*<sup>26</sup>

I dream I fall in love with the chicken pox vaccine pen I pick up from one of the drug company stalls. *Twinrix. Engergix. Havrix. Typerrix.* This promotional message comes in lolly green and purple, with a shave of orange and a clicker of light yellow. Maybe if we put *ix* on the end of curing or preventative strategies for rivers they would seem more instrumentally effective. *Desalinix. Landcarix.* People might think that something more magical was involved than just men and women, land, learning and time. In its present compound, Landcare appears to apportion no mystery.<sup>27</sup> It suggests nothing of what it takes to live responsibly within a specific ecology, say the subtropics, where the river bank regeneration battle involves highly individual and contested approaches to weed control and Roundup. *Landcarix* would be taking this further, denying the specifics at different localities and the arguments which can never be closed. I'm sure though, that Terania Creek Landcarix would always resist this totalizing summary.<sup>28</sup> *Regenerix.* It would be a relief if things could be causally altered by the injection of a vaccine to prevent clearing at a more rapid rate than planting.

What coalesces to hide under the convincing heading 'Healthy Rivers' is rather dated. It says nothing of 'what we are to do today.'<sup>29</sup> The Snowy, Murray, Hawkesbury Nepean, Clarence and Richmond River systems are some which are over-allocated, degraded and neglected. Health in rivers is being sustained against the odds. Healthy Rivers refuses to take an *ix*.

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<sup>25</sup> Patty Jacobs, *The Water Closest to Me*

<sup>26</sup> Katrina Shields, *The Junction of Terania and Tuntable Creeks Where I Live*, undated

<sup>27</sup> Derrida, op. cit. p9

<sup>28</sup> Derrida, *ibid.* p4



## Elements of the Conference Paper

I'd like to invite you to have a look at the books on the table after my talk. They are fragmentary impressions of a tributary fragment of one river system. They were made by people – some with identified visual arts skills, some with more interest in writing, some simply with an interest in water – in the vicinity of Terania Creek, which is categorized as the healthiest creek in the Richmond/Wilson River catchment. As such, what they represent is in no way a general picture of relationship to a river system. Rather, it is a highly particular reflection of people's perceptions of the health and unhealth of one creek, and its contribution to their own wellbeing. It is a representational response to the question 'What's the Water Closest to You?'

It was revealing that in the first workshop, though people came from around Terania and Tuntable Creeks, many chose to make books about other waters, which in a sense made them who they are. The statement: *Water, like hope must spring eternal* emerged on the pages of one book. Yes, water will spring eternal, but what kind of quality will it be? someone responds. Must it? others ask. A truism gives rise to questions about conditions under which water might not come forth as it always has. What about the demands being placed on the Great Artesian Basin? What about the impact of damming and clearing on the hydrological cycle? What about the effect of global warming on the source of the Ganges? It is clear from talk in the bookmaking workshops that for many people today, the fact that water may not spring eternal is a source of anxiety.

At the same time a bookmaking workshop is the chance to inhabit an exceptionally promising space. The Native American writer, Leslie Marmon Silko, whose book *Sacred Water*, started out as a handmade text which she regularly re-made in sessions at the photocopier, says that working on a handmade production like this, she is 'magically

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<sup>29</sup> Derrida, *The Other Heading, Reflections on Today's Europe*, p79

transported back to the blissful consciousness of a fifth-grader'.<sup>30</sup> I often observed this delight as people considered how to represent the water closest to them.

In making *The Water Closest to You* books, there is the opportunity to talk about the immediate river system and people's observations of it:

*Carol:* Simon saw a wallaby swimming in our creek recently – most unusual.

*Katrina:* Despite the dip-site and all my ambivalence about the creek, there's still a platypus in the junction.

*Sue:* ..... and they don't just live anywhere. I cross the creek every day taking the kids to school and it's always a beautiful creek colour – even when it's flooding the mud settles quickly even down at Blacks Road where we are.<sup>31</sup>

### **Living Interpenetration**

Deborah Rose describes the way in which amongst Aboriginal people,

Consubstantiality with country is not generalised as earth and humanity, but is pre-eminently local. Rather than substance monism posited as a cosmology, Aboriginal thought and practice rests on a plurality of consubstantialities: this country, this group of people, these Dreamings.<sup>32</sup>

The idea of consubstantiality with country is one which can readily be seen to involve water, with its capacity to transport bodily substances, and ultimately the rotting and dissolving body itself, to earth. In what is rather a down-to-earth way, having made compost, and done as the experts advise and aided the process with my own pee, I have experienced a degree of consubstantiality with land, an exchange of substance between person and place which contributes to fertility. Thus, a gardening practice has in my own

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<sup>30</sup> Leslie Marmon Silko, 'As a Child I Loved to Draw and Cut Paper' in *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit, Essays on Native American Life Today*, p172

<sup>31</sup> Annie Bolitho, *Dwelling on Water Notes 1999/2000*

case, as a migrant on foreign soil, contributed significantly to my sense of mingling into the land fabric of Australia. Thus, for me it is a 'settler metaphor of nativisation.'<sup>33</sup>

Rose notes that other metaphors of nativisation, such as a place 'getting under one's skin', 'attribute agency to place, and speak of place pulling people into relationship by penetrating the body and becoming part of the person, of place changing the person as it permeates them, of people being managed by place.'<sup>34</sup> I am not able to express my relation to any specific locality in Australia in this way. I sense this might have been different if I had not carried with me from South Africa a heightened sensitivity to the question of land ownership, and a frequent sense of trespass in my attempt to find a place here.

Rose describes the way in which, amongst the Bilinara people in the Northern Territory, strangers who come from far away must be introduced to the country by the owners. The ritual, which she describes as not being restricted to these people, includes these steps:

... first the owner brings the stranger to water, calling out to the country as he approaches; secondly, he or she wets the stranger's head or arm and gives them water to drink ... once a person has been introduced to the country through this means the country knows the person's smell.

Further she relates that this ritual 'identifies owners and signifies their assumption of responsibility for the person they have introduced. It also marks strangers as people, who while no longer at risk simply by being there, are dependent, since their knowledge is limited and the country has no real responsibility for them.'<sup>35</sup> A ritual like this one is an enactment of a heteroglossic dialogic relation with country.

## **Culture at Stake**

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<sup>32</sup> Deborah Bird Rose, 'Dialogue with Place: Toward an Ecological Body,' in *Journal of Narrative Theory*, in press

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.* p16

<sup>34</sup> *id.*

In Lismore, only the carless walk the bridge into town. It's spring and I've dropped mine off at the mechanics. On the middle of the bridge, I stop to look down. Water is going on by. *Grey, green, and greasy* is understating the case in this dry time. Perhaps only contemporary terminology can properly describe what I see: *accelerated sedimentation, algal blooms, high turbidity and poor EC thresholds*. Nonetheless, I can't resist mingling myself with the river. I spit. It strikes me that this water is not going from nowhere to nowhere. Some of it has come all the way from Terania Creek.

*My Richmond River*, Fletcher used to say of the river. Crossing this bridge. Near Wyrallah. At Ballina. We watched a dolphin submerging and popping up again, playing amongst the boats on the river down there. He told me about how he'd had a certain car – he was always telling me about different cars and utes he'd had – and they used to put the tent on top and take – I think it was honey drums ... when they went fishing at Burns Point. The warmer weather brings the old fellow strongly to mind. He reckoned my Honda was a good little car – it was just a pity it didn't have 'air'. My sentiments exactly.

I remember a little exchange with him just after the new year in 2000. There had been the big public build up centred on Y2K and its possible impact on systems, and the risks for public utilities like water. Perhaps there was a small sigh of relief in the days after 1<sup>st</sup> January when nothing drastic happened. I was over at Fletcher's place and we remarked on this. Things turned to a program he'd looked at on New Year's day, that had progressed with the new millenium as it came in, all round the globe. There had been spectacular fireworks in so many cities and he'd seen them all. To his surprise there had been some footage of Byron Bay.

He turned to me. 'I suppose you been there a few times,' he said. 'Sure, once a week or so.' 'Hmmm,' he said, 'I been there once, many years ago.' It was when he'd had the truck and he'd left the farm with 40 boxes of mandarins, and the greengrocer in Ballina hadn't wanted them all, so he thought – and the look he gave me implied something quite out of the ordinary – 'I'll go up to Byron Bay!' It seemed as he spoke, that Byron, in its past and

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<sup>35</sup> Deborah Bird Rose, *Dingo Makes us Human, Life and Land in an Australian Aboriginal Culture*, p109

present manifestations, had nothing to do with him, that it might as well have been another country. Perhaps to him, it was another country? Throughout his 86 year life, he began and ended here, in the places he went back to and told stories about.

*Fletcher Roberts, Oldest of the Wiabal*, it said on the funeral program. *Closer my redeemer to thee*. In a sense he was still in charge, since he had planned the service, which honoured a man of profound faith. It was a faltering rendering of 'What a Friend I have in Jesus', since most people only seemed to know the first lines, and many purposely held the words they did know at a distance. In fact it was as if the funeral's unconvincing remembrance of him was an attempt to redeem *him*, since it was unthinkable that he was no longer there to remember himself. How could we remember him and the cultural tradition he encompassed without him being there to remember what he remembered? Nothing in the program unfolded smoothly. In fact it unravelled in a way that seemed to acknowledge that it could not find a way of acknowledging that he was now gone. We were at a loss. The graveside was a space of more spontaneous expression, where younger members of his community, who knew him as Uncle Blue, moved into an unequal command.

We'd had our spats, but I think Fletcher liked my company. Since I had had the old testament thoroughly inculcated in me through a South African nationalist education, I enjoyed a yarn about the bible. I'd say psalms I knew off by heart, and he would read me the modernised version in his latter day bible. 'He will not suffer thy foot to be moved,' was the line that came to me up at the cemetery, but since he'd always said the same thing to me on parting, I said it to him as I dropped earth on the coffin.

'Drive steady Fletcher.'

Now, thinking about what I learned as we discussed the fat and the lean of the land, I find a psalmic quality in a piece of research I read about a wonderful form of water. 'Mallee root water' seems to me to gush out in the midst of a parched land, full of references to culture and water.

Throughout the arid regions of Australia, Rose points out, there is or was a finely detailed knowledge of water sources, including springs, wells, soaks and plants which hold water.<sup>36</sup> Thus, arid Australia was, well into the late 1800s, a world in which water could be found in bucketfuls. Indigenous people, used the water to best advantage, 'by working from the most arid places with the most ephemeral waters in toward the more well-watered areas with more permanent waters.' This style of management was in marked contrast to the European.<sup>37</sup>

In 1889, Giles describes the practice of getting water from mallee roots:

A white man would die of thirst while digging and fooling around trying to get the water he might know was preserved by the tree ...; while an aboriginal upon the other hand, coming to a mallee-tree, after perhaps travelling miles through them without noticing one, will suddenly make an exclamation, look at a tree, go perhaps ten or twelve feet away, and begin to dig. In a foot or so he comes upon a root, which he shakes upwards, gradually getting more and more of it out of the ground, till he comes to the foot of the tree; he then breaks it off and ... breaks the root into sections about a foot long, ties them into bundles, and stands them up on end in a receptacle, when they drain out a quantity of beautifully sweet, pure water.<sup>38</sup>

A culture of stories and practices supported the presence of a permanent source of water. Now no amount of applied western science can establish the complexity of what has been cut away. The trees themselves supplied steam engines and workmen with firewood. Aboriginal people's relationship with country and stories was severely undermined. A hundred years later, the 'water relations' of mallee trees come to be an object of study – of the morphology of the root systems, the root water contents and stem xylem water

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<sup>36</sup> Deborah Bird Rose, *Nourishing Terrains, Australian Aboriginal Views of Landscape and Wilderness*, p52

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.* pp52,53

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in James C. Noble and Richard G. Kimber, 'On the Ethno-ecology of Mallee Root-water' in *Aboriginal History* 1997, vol. 21, p198

potentials – and a collaborative reconstitution of root water data with 'Aborigines in South Australian mallee country near Yalata.'<sup>39</sup>

The scientific paradigm I have drawn on in Chapter 7 demands 'risky constructions'. Here it is possible to draw the connection between indigenous observational practices and science. It is obvious that the risky nature of survival heightens and sharpens observation, intruding to such a degree that 'life must live' the drinker, the gatherer, the hunter. In contrast, the control of laboratory conditions and scientific practice determines the boundaries of investigation in a very different way, so that what is noticed depends on the controlled conditions that have been set up. However, since science has 'the vocation of knowing everything',<sup>40</sup> it becomes the work of another science to find out *how* people know what they know.

Whilst it is possible to see specific observational procedures which were previously thought of as being 'archaic' as unostentatiously 'scientific', it is equally the case that contemporary collective cultural practices surrounding water which we now see as unquestionable reality, will not inevitably survive. This is not only to do with our unwillingness to see prevention as better than cure, or the expense involved in coming up with technological solutions that might maintain or restore rivers to ecological conditions which nurture intimate social and cultural connections with them, such as are embodied in swimming, fishing and birdwatching. It is equally to do with the fact that:

... science, unlike formations of a religious type, does not propose a system of individual or collective conduct. Humans run the risk, for the first time, of finding themselves without culture, a risk all the more likely in that science's very program inscribes its primordial task: the analysis of the contents of all thought, therefore of all cultural codes. In this way the whole world becomes, in principle, the object of science. This "scientific imperialism" will make up for the lack of culture – aided in this by the parallel development of the history of techniques, which will impose new activities.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> *ibid.* p171

<sup>40</sup> Jose Gil, *Metamorphoses of the Body*, p220

<sup>41</sup> Gil, *ibid.*

Unlike indigenous people we do not start off from the point of collective sophistication where it is possible to see the flow-diminished Snowy River as part of our family. We cannot experience the relief when small flows are restored, of knowing that our ancestors are no longer suffering thirst.<sup>42</sup>

Perhaps Gil's is an unduly rational and pessimistic perspective on things, which falls into the trap of proposing a catch-all conception of science. As Mahant-ji constantly reminds activists and water lovers, ideas and views should not take us away from exploring, however amateurishly, the question *Have you taken time to dream with the river?*

### **Connecting as Reason**

Derrida and Levinas take up the practice of hospitality, configuring it as something which exceeds exemplarity, to speak of reason and reasoning. Stephen Muecke speaks of indigenous connectedness through land as reason,<sup>43</sup> in a way that suggests hospitality as well, in that this connectedness extends outward to embrace broader social relations within itself. Here, the process of connecting itself, the talk that goes on over meeting up with place, is reason in practice. Connections are ascertained and ascribed that bear on the establishment of new relationship forged in *this* place. Being a practice in place, it responds to the question 'Why do you do as you do?' in such a way that the answer the local gives is not a cut and dried reason within the framework of a universal language of rationality,<sup>44</sup> consonant with 'capital' interests, but a land-appropriate response. This reasoning is a hospitality beyond humans as instruments of hospitality, reason, responsibility and gift, since it arises from 'country', the interconnection of land, water, Dreamings, a particular group of people, plants and animals.

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<sup>42</sup> Nanna Rae Stewart, Gunnai elder, speaking on the occasion of the 6% restoration of flow on the Mowambo Weir. 'Not a Dry Eye in Sight as Snowy Splashes Back to Life,' Paolo Totara, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 Aug. 02

<sup>43</sup> *No Road, Bitumen All the Way*, p185

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*



Why do you do as you do? A guy called Mark comes to our settler or 'new settler' community and I take him to Protesters' Falls. Rattling down the road, I hear about the world he lives in. Cincinatti seems far removed from this valley. Chatting as we follow each other up the path, I hear of work that he has done with Sulak Sivaraksa, the Thai exponent of engaged Buddhism. The creek comes into view. Time to stop to dip our fingers in the water and sip some. Yes, Sulak has walked through the bangalow palms with us. But where are the red cedars I read about, Mark wants to know? He learns they are deeper in, in the northern part of the basin. We sit for a while on a rock watching the water. It's strange. We have been given to believe that a screensaver which features our children splashing in water is a miracle. Far from it Sulak would say. Touching and tasting water, *this water*, is the miracle.

Nowadays in regional Australia, tourism is increasingly seen as the universal language of value creation and small economic miracles. The Northern Rivers attracts its fair share of 'eco-tourists'. The idea is that eco-tourism can make tourism sustainable, being characterised by local operators who will put money back into the local economy. What visitors are seen to be motivated by when they undertake eco-tourist activities is a search for meaning.

In this sense Protesters' belongs to the NPWS, the Lismore City Council's Tourist Information Centre, and tour operators like Eco-Explorers, who make their way over from Byron Bay. In the light of visitors' search for meaning, it is interesting that at this stage Protesters' remains an uninterpreted site. 'To name spaces is to name histories, and also to create them', and it is no coincidence that there are no plaques or one-version stories of the contested histories that heralded this name, supplanting previous names and histories. Derrida would see the absence of plaques as being 'tied to *responsibility*, to *faith*, and to the *gift*',<sup>45</sup> and I believe some of the original protesters would see it similarly. If this were not the case, it would be to do with not being able to bear 'the ... ordeal of the undecidable'. Say, through consultation with stakeholders, the problem were resolved in favour of the

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<sup>45</sup> Derrida, op. cit. p5

protesters, and a sign was put up. Then it is likely that Protesters' would become not a processual history but a heritage product.

Protesters', in its form as waterfall, sends down a steady spray at a constant velocity into its pool and over a litter of blocks of volcanic rock. By drops and spray it makes that deep pool. As a small body of water it streams on from its elevated clearing into its course and creates the centre of a riverine corridor of bangalow palm, rock and root, and occasional rainforest giant. Down it burbles through successive pools, until, from the protected environment of its unique palm forest and forest floor nursery of a thousand bangalow seedlings, it slips into the broad daylight of the access road and the start of the walk.

Since the protesters' actions involved a responsibility which arose from the experience of 'absolute decisions made outside of knowledge or norms,' a faith which involved 'risk beyond knowledge or certainty,' and a gift which has subsequently held them in a kind of marriage between responsibility and faith, why would they want to close this off to themselves? For as Derrida points out, 'any history worthy of its name can neither be saturated or closed.'<sup>46</sup> Thus, it is being part of the perennial activity of impermanence of Protesters' that takes Stuart Anderson and I to Varanasi, and brings me his response to Chapter 3, *Have You Had Time to Dream with the River*:

You have been able to highlight the different ways of being with Ganga and I now have much more understanding and respect of the cultural ways we were living with at Tulsi Ghat. Thank you. ... Just reading it has changed me, nudged me out of my habitual Western lock. I particularly liked the parts on language and how it is impossible to represent some realities in English. This is what I am inspired with in my counselling work at present.<sup>47</sup>

It is accountability to Protesters' that plops Terri Nicholson's email into my inbox from Cochabamba, Bolivia, site of the 2000 water riots, where she is practising herbal medicine.

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<sup>46</sup> *ibid.* pp5-7

<sup>47</sup> Stuart Anderson, personal correspondence. Stuart is the director of Lismore's Anti-Violence Project, with whitefella and Koorie MEND programs

Her imagery shows me the atmosphere that was disturbed when International Waters of London, the Bechtel subsidiary, put up the price of water by 35%:

....the smell of ritual incense and aromatic plants in the consult room  
....the cholitas with their hoard of donkeys on the roundabouts selling fresh milk  
....the sound of the guards on rich people's corners blowing their whistles ... so everyone knows they are doing their job....  
....the brightness of the womens' polleras, the many pleated skirts, their hats, and braids, and strong legs and wide smiles....  
....the kids and old people crashed out in shop front steps, wounds oozing, pleading eyes....  
....Cocoliso the dog moulting white hairs everywhere, besottedly in love with the cat  
....the sound of Quechua language floating through the house  
....the glowing figure of Christ ( biggest in the world) beaming from the top of the hill all night...  
....the markets filled with so many different coloured corn and spuds  
....the house covered in pots of medicinal plants, herb-drying racks always full, tinctures in preparation....  
....the voice of Analía singing Alegria<sup>48</sup>

### **Protesters' – Interconnected Influences**

It was in the light of my relations with Terania Creek water, and on the ground of my ambivalence about contemporary eco-tourism developments, that I took up a position at Protesters', or rather at the start of the path to the falls, one July school holidays. My intention was to create an inter-subjective exchange over water. The sign I'd made said WHAT'S THE WATER CLOSEST TO YOU? By going twenty minutes down the road with the 'water conversation', I was able to engender a response that showed water as an element of the cosmopolis. The scrapbook held immediate evidence that no imagined barrier or border can make water only our, or other people's business. The stories ranged

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<sup>48</sup> Terri Nicholson, personal correspondence, 5 July 2002

into places across the country and the globe, across age and across dreamy and very practical orientations.

Close to where I live is a lake called Sundermansee. Originally it was a quarry which was developed when they started to dig that area because of a new highway and they needed new sand and gravel. So they dug and dug and dug and one day this waterhole was there. Year after year it's grown bushes, shrubs and trees. Now it's very beautiful. As I remember as a child of six or seven years old there was absolutely nothing there but a bit of a swamp. Quite dangerous. Starting in the early 90s they've talked about preserving this area as a conservation area.

I spent a lot of time there as a child. In winter you could walk over the frozen ice and it makes a very strange sound when you hit it with a stick. A sort of deep echo. You could swim there, catch these little frogs, camp. There was nobody who would say this is private. Now if I would go there, someone would say Go away! because it's owned by a fisherman's club. That's a sad point.<sup>49</sup>

Engaged tourism? Dialogical tourism?

The water closest to us? The Lachlan River where we come from. It's getting saltier. In the last 20 years it's got a lot saltier.<sup>50</sup>

There was a beauty to being there to connect. Perhaps people don't really want to make pilgrimages to exquisite and remote places without having a framework to put the experience in. Perhaps it helps to have one's experience placed alongside or within a bigger picture. I had suspected that connections might spring up. The different world waters sat alongside the waste water from Sydney factories in the scrapbook:

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<sup>49</sup> S P, *Water Conversation Records, 1999/2000*

<sup>50</sup> J, *ibid.*

The water closest to me? My work ... We make sure small industrial waste water treatment plants are making dirty water clean. The satisfaction of most industrial workers when they make clean water is universal – it is really motivating for me and them. They've been lumbered with this stinking thing. It's not their main business. The managers don't often think of waste water because it's not their bottom line. It's just the last part of the business before the sewer. Typically they get the least trained person down there. Yet they've often got good equipment. They just don't know how to use it.<sup>51</sup>

It surprised me that the tourist pilgrims were not reserved. People were happy to see us. They were on holidays. I was in my little green hat. Christabelle was taking photos and Marisa being the tourist from Western Sydney. The performance of 'The Water Closest to You' fulfilled Christabelle's desire to have a chai shop. On the card table we had a contemporary stainless steel and an old-fashioned checked thermos – not that we offered tea to anyone, only biscuits on a red cedar plate. Everyone was so glad of a macadamia nut biscuit. No-one even suspected they had been trucked from Sydney and picked up at the freight centre in Kyogle Street, and then trucked all over the region to masquerade as rainforest nibbles.

'I may not have seen a koala or a kangaroo or a wallaby or a wombat,' said a leather-jacketed American woman, 'but I found a pixie in the forest!' She and her party stayed with me for nearly an hour, listening to readings from the scrapbook and talking. Who knows exactly where they were from? The young men couldn't have been more different. One was a product of bush and Triple J, his hat crocheted in land-rights colours. The other defied a match to anywhere, but perhaps some street of the Quartier Latin. He had a quiet Middle Eastern culture-bearing quality which I found endearing, his black leather hat like a squat shiny bollard pointing upwards, his eyes behind glasses and smile suggesting an

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<sup>51</sup> M.O., *ibid.*

experience in the palm forest. The older man smiled often, affirming the idea of this exchange by the NPWS sign *Thinking of Swimming?*<sup>52</sup> and the weedy-edged forest.

The water "closest" to me – beyond the fluid in my mother's womb, beyond the Nile banks where I was conceived, beyond the Swan river by which I was born, that "closest" water right now is or are the tidal branches at the Great Hudson delta system – the East River and the Hudson.<sup>53</sup>

Others came. Little Simon and his brother barefeet, running way ahead of the family party of Mother, Father and numerous siblings. People in vans, cars and utes. From Queensland and Sydney and just up the road, from Western NSW and overseas, all doing their level best to find a park on the closer side of the creek so as not to get their feet wet crossing. 'Thank God for the protesters!' many of them said, as they returned down the track.

The process of connecting can be seen as a form of reason, as Muecke proposes. Equally in Levinas' words 'reason itself is a receiving.'<sup>54</sup>

Never a river without a community. Never a community without some kind of water source. Never a river? the existence of Protesters' Falls seems to say. What is the memory of the history of the Terania Creek actions, *as* history of responsibility?<sup>55</sup> Nan Nicholson, in an unpublished manuscript written in the immediate wake of the Terania actions, proposes a reason-of-connectedness which bears some similarity to what Muecke draws attention to. Instead of 'Why do you do as you do?' the question posed is: 'Why did it happen?'

The four people who were the first to discuss the possible opposition to the logging of the Basin all looked directly into it from their places of abode and were reminded of its

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<sup>52</sup> The NPWS sign invites responsibility to the frog population, by not swimming and introducing insect repellent and sunscreen to the water. This sign has contributed to the falls becoming a more reflective spot, since people no longer splash and shout in the water.

<sup>53</sup> L.P., *Water Conversation Records*, op. cit.

<sup>54</sup> Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, p27

<sup>55</sup> Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, op. cit. pp3,4

presence unceasingly. No political reasons or ideology could have given such impetus to opposition as the sight of such a valley night and morning.<sup>56</sup>

Further, it was 'the very localized origins of almost everyone who contributed with their physical presence' which later made for a strength of the camp, and meant the blockade could continue as long as it did.<sup>57</sup> Nicholson situates the history she writes within a complex dialogic configuration. She describes the core group's meetings between 1978 and 1979, as 'always hilarious ...' and intentionally presents a heterogeneous range of alternatives – women, men and children – stating that their only common attribute was that they had all lived in the area less than ten years.<sup>58</sup> Interestingly, she is equally concerned with the influence of police, politicians, city-based conservationists, locally-based business people, specialist ecologists and biologists, foresters and sawmillers, on the eventual outcome. There is a strong sense of the interaction between blockaders and media and the suggestion that the media's focus on Terania Creek saw the loosely-bound, diverse and politically dormant group labelled as "alternatives" begin to tighten up and give meaning to the supposed cohesiveness attributed to it.<sup>59</sup>

The commitment of the alternatives is attributed to the same source as the Forestry Commission's determination not to yield: 'it was just human obstinacy.'<sup>60</sup> Nonetheless, Nicholson makes it clear from the start that those involved 'had a self-conscious awareness of "making history."<sup>61</sup> This does not mean that she is willing to draw conclusions about actions' impact. 'Best just to be glad that Australians really can get excited about some things some times'<sup>62</sup> she says, cautiously steering clear of the fervour of victory. For it is evident in her conclusions that 'the triumph of life' which Terania represents, 'retains traces of a struggle.'<sup>63</sup> 'No area of economic value, untouched<sup>64</sup> and beautiful, will ever be

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<sup>56</sup> Nan Nicholson, unpublished ms. p5

<sup>57</sup> *ibid.* p15

<sup>58</sup> *ibid.* p13

<sup>59</sup> *ibid.* p14

<sup>60</sup> *ibid.* p10

<sup>61</sup> *ibid.* p2

<sup>62</sup> *ibid.* p20

<sup>63</sup> Derrida, *op. cit.* p16

<sup>64</sup> In 2002 Nicholson has a different sense of things. 'The Kooris had been "touching" it for a long time,' she says.

completely safe,' she says. 'National Park or not, Terania Creek and all the other rainforest will need continual defence in the future.'<sup>65</sup>

John Seed, a Terania Creek activist whose 'historical conversion to responsibility'<sup>66</sup> during the protests is something of a leitmotif in international rainforest activism, speaks locally about the event, in the face of later developments:

The public have become jaded and it's much harder to gain attention for actions to save the environment compared to the time of the Terania Creek rainforest logging blockade in 1979, Lismore-based rainforest activist John Seed told Southern Cross University students last week ... At the time society hadn't built up any antibodies against those kinds of actions, it was so new, it was on the front page of the paper all the time," he said. "Everyone was talking about it. When we went around collecting money in Lismore for food for the protest camp, people would say things like: 'The hippies are the conscience of the world'...

So it was a very empowering start to a career as a citizen to see that things could really change, not because we had any authority or education to begin with, but just because of the intensity of our commitment and that feeling of being called by the forests. The momentum of what happened then has been with me ever since.<sup>67</sup>

Seed's evocation of the early 80s draws attention to the problems of knowing what to expect, of knowing in advance. For a start, it involves denying openness to possibility, in favour of pre-determined understandings or priorities. This is not only true of the public's reception of things. Those who responded to what is often described as a 'call' to go down to Terania did not exactly know what they were doing. Many were able to respond because they were living in conditions of 'extravagant simplicity.'<sup>68</sup> Yet many were skilled, one as a copywriter, one as a draughtsman who could produce accurate maps, others as naturalists,

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<sup>65</sup> Nicholson, op. cit. p61

<sup>66</sup> Derrida, op. cit. p9

<sup>67</sup> 'Apathy the Biggest Danger, says Activist', *Northern Rivers Echo*, 10.10.02

<sup>68</sup> Gai Longmuir, personal conversation



artists, botanists, photographers, teachers, typists and caterers.<sup>69</sup> Those who were unemployed were not mutually obliged to a job network provider. I think it would be true to say that they saw their participation as 'a new experience of secrecy and a new structure of responsibility.'<sup>70</sup> Twenty years later thousands of people appreciate their work, their sense of an imperative in the matter of ecological justice for the Nightcap Basin.

### **Unknowning; Culture Continued**

How not to imprison Protesters' in one megabyte of text? How to speak of and yet keep inside me its gift? Derrida's systematic negations of the adequacy of conceptual determinations take the same direction as the Zen tradition's invitation to return to 'beginner's mind'. This is an orientation towards un-knowing, not for the sake of anything in particular. It leads Derrida to declare: 'If only we lacked sight and knowledge so as to see, so as to know, unseeing and unknowing ...'<sup>71</sup>

Today, shall I relate this way to the rainforest and the creek which streams out of it, running on to not-forest, not-Big Scrub as far away as Lismore and Burns Point Ferry? Will I be able to not-know the sheer cover of the land by trees, planted by those who came to be identified, by the old settlers who had cut trees for a living, as rainforest lovers? Yet how can I not-see the equal influence of invasive camphor, desmodium, cat's claw, which generate so much weeding fervour, such a plethora of signs, slogans and slandering of those who would allow them to persist rather than poison them? Will I be able to know, in the space of un-knowing, echidna, currawong and night-time green frog?

How can I not-know the practice of putting language and words, writings, readings and invocations of other realities in the way of strangers? How can I not-know the me who takes pens and scrapbook and the hospitality of the red cedar plate, and re-replaces them all in a context that is not really waiting for anyone to come? How can I not-know the me who knows the weeds, and would set to weeding, except that this is not what I have come here

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<sup>69</sup> Nicholson, op. cit. p9

<sup>70</sup> Derrida, op. cit. p9

<sup>71</sup> Derrida quoted in Toby Foshay, *Denegation, Nonduality and Language in Derrida and Dogen*, p3

for? How can I not-see this valley? This green farmy-oriented place, this backwater providence?

It is when I do not-know it and see it – in the eyes of the other who has never seen it before – when I take a visitor down to Protesters, that it appears to me again. I know this place's distinctive culture which attracts young people to stay, and young people to come, to enjoy a form of dialogical relationship with place, to creek and forest, and with those older and younger than themselves. To live what, by many people's standards of roads, shelter and index of personal material fortune, constitutes a precarious not-knowing.

JJ writes his water story for me:

*The ocean's sister River lives next to me. And sometimes I walk to her, for if the truth be known, I fear that if she visited me at my house, it would be to tell me of my doom. So I visit her.*

*The other day, Leigh, Jack, Bodhi, Ra and I visited the river, and rolling with us was BB, the enormous tractor tyre inner tube. The River's splash was silver, and by the journey's end, the silver and the sun had sucked all of the colour from our faces, leaving them white-blue, chilled and smiley numb.*

*Along the way we saw the remains of a cow. It had died only feet from fresh pasture in one direction and the freshly flowing water that carried us in the other. It had walked too close to an eroded bend of the river and slipped with the collapsing bank. All would have gone better for the cow if a tree growing from the sheer eroded wall a few feet above the flood water level hadn't broken its fall and held it trapped like an archaic and doomfilled cattle crush. The five of us saw the bones as we rushed underneath, and I joked about the dog Ra, who was riding with us, and how fine she would look with a patch over one eye and a huge cow leg bone wedged between her jaws. The tomb of the cow was forgotten, for with a veritable woosh we were gone, the river was very definite in this.*

*We were carried on toward a tree-filled rapid, with water starting to lap BB in a desiring won't-you-come-down-and-lay-with-me kind of way. Our hearts danced in our chests and giggles and squeals of 'battle positions!', 'lean upstream!', 'what are you doing?', 'hold on!' and 'watch out!', thundered downstream with the white water. Branches lashed our bodies as BB bounced between broken branches and the dog looked as worried as a dog would on a storm-tossed creek.*

*A fallen tree had had come to rest mere feet above the fuming water. Bodhi saw it and with an excited 'nah I'm getting off' left BB bouncing a few centimetres higher on the water's braided surface. Ra the dog was encouraged to do the same, with a less than graceful shove and splosh. And the tree was upon us. Jack was the only one who managed to stay on. Lee and I met him on the other side with a new bruise or two for our efforts. Bodhi and Ra met us at the end of the rapids.*

*And then as we floated onwards the tight neck of the river started to open out into a slow-flowing channel, and a small piece of flotsam started to move with purpose. It was quickly confirmed and quiet spread over BB. As we came closer the Platypus popped under the water's surface, and our eyes followed its line of bubbles, until it popped back up. Its body was a nondescript brown, that looked like a hundred pieces of floating wood might. Up close its body seemed as the water. Soft-looking and dry in a strangely wet sort of a way. The Platypus did no tricks for us, but continued with its business, as if the privacy of its space had not been disturbed by such an awkward craft and crew. And so the river flowed on.*

Peach brings Mali to the bookmaking workshop – a girl who is her not-daughter. Mali makes a book in large flourishing text. It is inspired by Tumble Creek, down from her house:

*... made a medium sized dam up a bit from the main swimming part. It was very fun.*

Sam has just arrived on the North Coast. At the end of the workshop he reads Sophia's book. It is a wild production and reveals a young woman of daring:

looking from above the caps worm their own  
patterns into a bloc of cobalt. My mother  
won't leave me alone up here: she thinks I  
might leap to see what it is like to join the sea  
from a very great height.<sup>72</sup>

His own story, of rain, is one of displacement. The water splattered on the red text and the spine binding made from a branch and jute thread suggest African materials, Kenyan soil.

How to speak of this water, this writing closest to me, and create the movement of 'synthesizing without synthesis.'<sup>73</sup> Only by taking up the koan 'Have you taken time to dream with the river?' Only through creating fragile books as non-containers for water. Only through a reason which gives force and usefulness to 'the value of the strangenesses of others.'<sup>74</sup>

### **No Flow**

Have you taken time to dream with the river?

I go up the creek bed, which is dry, on my bicycle. It is something I have neglected to do for a long time. Suddenly, I realise. This is a track. Terania Creek no longer flows.

Momentarily, in remembering this dream, I can embody something strange. I can say: imagine if Terania Creek ever stopped flowing. Imagine there ever not being the light and movement of water down that darkling channel. Imagine it being a track.

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<sup>72</sup> Sophia Elek, *Water Conversation Records*, *ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> Derrida, *I Have a Taste for the Secret*, p33

<sup>74</sup> Muecke, *op. cit.* p182

Imagine Fletcher's family members and other Lismore Kooris, and the managers of the regional bulk water supplier, and all those who responded to 'The Water Closest to Me', and my friend the lecturer in Resource and Environmental Management and his doctoral students and me, all looking on this reality together. Which of us could say we were justified? Whose contribution over time, whose passion would be significant and worthy of speaking to the circumstances? Imagine us calling out to others and not knowing what to say – just stretching our voices up the bank and the hills to bring others down.

The whole world would not be 'in his hands' at the moment water stopped flowing in Terania Creek. How dry would it have to be, how dire ecologically speaking, for the healthiest river in the Richmond River Catchment to become as other rivers round the place, to fall into the category *stressed*, and lose the innocence that is so strongly associated with it? And gradually over time, peter out. Imagine making a place for the nothingness of the name Terania. Imagine the changes that would have happened over time, for such a river to run dry. I don't think it is necessary to imagine the green hills taken into the mainstream of production. Interpenetrating factors beyond the source of the falls would make for the unusual quiet – the calling of birds and the small fractions of silence between them, given over to something else.

It was working on the handmade book I describe in this chapter, its plastic nature, that stimulated my stark dream, its covers suggesting another stream completely from Terania Creek – the waste stream. It enables me to say: imagine this stream as a significant aspect of how we live. The products of cars and roads – rubber off tyres, petrol leaking between bowser and fuel tanks at the shop and running off, blue metal and dirt – all finding their way down to the bottom of valley and creek. Imagine the dipsite, the cows and the horses. Imagine the run-off and seepage from on-site systems.

Imagine a contemporary community in a single small valley without any significant productivity, a rural place with a non-rationalised river running through.

## Managers in Hiding

One of my 'Water Closest to You' books concerns a contract I signed with Lismore City Council in 2000. In a process initiated by the NSW Local Government and Shires Association, landholders who live within cooee of a creek become part of a new structure of compliance which aims to tackle problems caused by sewage contamination. These are of particular concern in an area with high and sustained rainfall, where flushing of pollutants through the soil mairix to drainage system and river has adverse impacts. The A4 format of *When You are The Manager of Your On-Site System*<sup>75</sup> means that it can include the promotional package,<sup>76</sup> and my rather desperate response:

*When you're given the title manager, you should realise you're important. But when you're the manager of your on-site system who is actually in charge? Is it just a dream that you've been persuaded to sign up for a major responsibility?*

*You're being told you can contribute to the improved health of a whole region's Rivers. You want to. Of course you do. It's a privilege. It'd be a pleasure if you didn't feel so alone with your on-site system. The concrete bulk of a lid that'd slide off if only you had a serious crowbar and your ex-partner present. The disguise of it beneath decking, bromeliad and fern. The untoward steaming of it on cold mornings – are these what one calls vapours?*

*When you are the manager of your on-site system you are managing on behalf of a bad job, a phenomenon that's historic. For the sake of the Rivers its day should be done. Your system is archaic. You should embrace advanced technologies with pumps and evaporative sprinkler systems. The keen, upbeat, profile-producing, vanguard staff of your local council would prefer you to be moving in that direction. They would catch you out if they could, which is why managers go into hiding.*

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<sup>75</sup> Annie Bolitho, undated

<sup>76</sup> Lismore City Council, *Sewage Management Approval*, included contract, Certificate of Approval to Operate a System of Sewage Management and several brochures on septic systems and greywater management.

*When you are the manager of your on-site system you are ashamed. Even if you happened to be an idealist with all eyes on the health of a River System, you'd become a disgusting realist once you plumbed the depths of your priorities. You're a manager but nobody's given you a budget! You can't pay attention to your system when there's the paint peeling, the roof rusting, and paying the mowing man and the plumber.*

*Did you say the word plumber? A whiff of the name of the trade evokes greywater and septic, and where the hell are your trenches anyway? Numerous are the managers of on-site systems whose trenches have never been discovered, who once every now and then conclude that trench location is vaguely obvious by soggy patches, or the smell going up a few notches, or by the indication of certain trees having tripled in size in a mere couple of years. Is your mandarin tree bearing exceptionally well? You look down at your weedy gully knowing that you have no desire to deal with the position of your trenches.*

*Did I hear the word gully? Gullies go down. They're so many minutes from a river. A gully greedily feeds effluent to a River. When you are manager of your on-site system you hide grave doubts about tank and trenches from the world. You know you are not being a proper middle manager. Standing between effluent and Creek and Catchment.*

*If you are the manager of your on-site system there will be no management training. Poo Bum, as the kids say. No lurks or perks. No team building. You may simply hope by a miracle of money coming your way, to make good one day. One day you could become a manager in your own right rather than in your uninformed wrong. One day you may, simply by spending a few grand on the domestic front, contribute to the National Future of Freshwater Ecology.*

## **Flowing**

Have you had time to dream with the river? Up in the rainforest. Dry. Crackling leaves under footfall. Mud dried up, but for a minimal softness underfoot in the boggiest areas.

Bangalow palms falling out of the dryness of ground, tipping over. Rod and I walk comfortably together up to the escarpment and the only sound is the snap of twigs and the dryness of leaf litter shifting. Some slight wind. We find our way across beneath the escarpment, over and across and down, into gullies normally wet, beneath rock normally dripping, place feet on footholds normally slippery. No slime, no leeches. Birds sound different in the paperyness of the place than they do in lush, dripping green. Magnificent brush box trees reach to the top of the known world.

We stop for a slug of cold tea then plunge back down towards the creek, following gullies and not being held up by bushes and logs, following lines, like tracks, talking now about sustainability, and getting to the point where I hear myself thinking and feeling our old dynamic has come into play. I am the foil to each sphere of his enthusiasm. I watch it arise and stick. But now there's a sense that we're close to the water's edge, can negotiate the terrain at bank level, rather than on the steeper slope. The sight of water is steadying. I feel the relief of it. Not just living in dryness now, but in the memory of my dream. Thank goodness Terania Creek is flowing as it always has! Red quandong leaves are lining up in a queue to drop over the edge of a small waterfall. The call of dark cool water is immediate, personal and eternal.

I stay at a spot which I declare to myself mine, and don't follow Rod further down. I don't want to undress there and stand alongside him shivering at the thought of diving. There's nothing stopping me from walking silently into the exquisite water completely on my own terms and letting it take me. The freshness is complete. I drop in and put my head down. My hair floats up. It is cold. The wetness is singular to here. Terania Creek has not stopped flowing. In renewing, constantly renewing its channel, its pools, its upper organic soil horizons, it renews me.

### **Potentialities**

I wanted 'The Water Closest to You' and the handmade books to open out the realm of dreaming with the river in one locality. In this dimension of 'water conversation' they



provide stories of relationship to justice, to place and water, that enlarge our thinking.<sup>77</sup> They bring to light 'how we get on with making our ever-changing livings' as neighbours of a forest that tells the story of thirty million years of co-construction of an ecosystem.

I believe that the books themselves might later stand in a dialogic relation to now, as 'exquisite relics of the pastness of the past.'<sup>78</sup> They were made in the face of powerpoint, websites, and an infinite range of perfectly laid out texts, all with high production values. It is apparent that in the current milieu they stand to provoke distrust as slim and lightweight subjective responses. It is likely that their non-standard, inventive and generous presentation will be seen, not as a representation of the vulnerability of the river, but as an inferior and childlike awareness of the problem. In some sense they are not inauthentic enough to claim to show authoritatively, the nature of Terania Creek.<sup>79</sup>

Here I put forward Peggy Phelan's challenge to various institutions, that they must 'invent an economy not based on preservation [conservation], but one which is answerable to the consequences of disappearance.'<sup>80</sup> Dreaming with the river is part of the living performance of the life of any river. Today, in the same way as ridiculously small water savings, negotiated by the states, must be given back to the river to increase flows and bring rivers alive, dreaming with the river, however clumsy it is, must be engaged. Otherwise there is a way in which, on a social and cultural level, we fail to notice that our behaviour is changing, or the extent to which it has changed, to the point where it is embarrassingly difficult to recognise the features of the water that is presently closest to us.

Despite the evidence, we are sneaky and deny our condition, seemingly not able to examine the polemic of an exemplary 'first world' European logic<sup>81</sup> which we repeat over and over and over. Yet where our grasp on water is concerned, our interaction and reasoning in the immediate presence of rivers is painfully limited and uncertain. We are fearful of

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<sup>77</sup> Deborah Bird Rose, *Connecting with Ecological Futures*, p10

<sup>78</sup> Susan Sontag, 'A Mind in Mourning, WG Sebald's Travels in Search of Some Remnant of the Past, *TLS*, no. 5056

<sup>79</sup> Derrida, *op. cit.* p35

<sup>80</sup> Phelan, *Unmarked, The Politics of Performance*, p165.

interaction. Is it any wonder that Aboriginal elders and ecologically engaged 'third world' leaders, who have expansive and connective concepts of the relationships between humanity and biosphere,<sup>82</sup> feel helpless as they watch this process? Is it any wonder that they see 'whitefella way' as a form of dementia, as we become more and more inward-looking and more prone to making unreasonable demands on a closed system? They grieve for the clarity which we have lost, and attempt in many ways, usually metaphorical and story-based, to remind us of the fundamental nature of our membership in a larger ecological body.

By speaking about the permeability of my own body with Northern Rivers' land, in various performative enactments of water, I have suggested that things and people are mutually transformative:

the place changes according to *who* comes to occupy it and *what* they do there; the people change as a consequence of the place, which is itself defined not just by its form, but through the potentialities introduced in the intervals in its territory.<sup>83</sup>

In this, I make manifest my vulnerability within change and my sense of potential:

*I am unsure right now, as one sometimes is in a valley where heat and humidity rise slowly not fast. What have I made of this borrowed experience, this collecting together of pieces and people around water? Of course this uncomfortable state will pass – of steam seeming to have nowhere to go, and transformation appearing inordinately slow – and I will rise. Again and again, to subside slightly maddened by the moisture of this place, the sweat-hot horrible heat of it, the heavy air of 'warm' days. To the call of kooka and kids, the smell of overripe bananas, mango and new morning, I will rise, to dream with the river. I will think yet again of leaving my writing and grabbing my bushknife, which Sam found under the shed at the bookmaking workshop, and whacking those weeds on the river bank.*

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<sup>81</sup> see Michael B. Naas, 'Introduction: For example, The Other Heading,' pp(i-lviii) for a discussion of the logic of the example in Derrida's work, in Derrida, *The Other Heading*, op. cit.

<sup>82</sup> Rose, op. cit.

<sup>83</sup> Stephen Muecke, 'Devastation' in *The UTS Review, Cultural Studies and New Writing*, Vol. 7, no. 2, p127

*Instead I will stop and listen. I do not take this listening lightly, for ripples move outward when any of us gets intimations of a fresh call.*

*Have you anything to say to me little creek?*

*Anything to report Terania Creek precious water?*



**From Sydney Water, *School Children's Views on Water Conservation and Related Environmental Matters*, Research Report, May 1998**

*Conservation and Reuse*

- While water conservation is not a top of mind concern, when children are asked to consider the topic they express mild support for conservation practices.
- A much smaller proportion of children than adults believe they are doing something to save water, but children are also undertaking a variety of conservation practices.
- The large proportion of children who are unsure whether they are doing something to save water illustrates the potential for further education on this topic. The most effective conservation messages will be those which focus on the possibility of future water shortages.
- Children are less supportive than adults of the use of reused water for virtually any purpose.
- The use of reused water for remote and non-personal purposes attracts much higher support than personal purposes.<sup>84</sup>

*Views on the future*

- Children have mixed views regarding future water shortages – while some have faith in technology to alleviate future supply problems, others believe that serious water shortages will occur.

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<sup>84</sup> Sydney Water, *School Children's Views on Water Conservation and Related Environmental Matters*, Research Report, May 1998

## CONCLUSIONS

'I think the dam at Rocky Creek has to supply Byron and Ballina as well as Lismore ...?' my hairdresser Nick says. 'You'd know, you worked with Rous Water.' As Lismore people gain a better understanding of the water infrastructure through the impetus of a growing water crisis, they are annoyed to realise that their water conservation practices are unlikely to offset the level of water use in the coastal tourist sector. 'All those tourists,' says a woman swathed around the body and the head, 'using the water for themselves, sort of thing.' She is unaware that her realisation of this problem brings her into relation with people and beings at Uluru<sup>1</sup>, the Carribean<sup>2</sup> and Majorca.<sup>3</sup>

Nick is a bit tired of water. It is the only topic of conversation in his shop at the moment. 'I think people are anxious,' he says, 'they don't know exactly what Level 6 restrictions will mean.' His apprentice chips in: 'And what happens when there's no water?' And soon she is off on the subject of back-to-back El Ninos.

Rous Water's TV advertising reminds us that we are on Water Restrictions Level 5 and must adopt what seem like ridiculously archaic practices such as catching the shower water to flush the toilet and saving washing up water to put on the plants. Four years ago, it seemed a little odd that I would hold a water conversation in a place where water was superabundant. Now it is strange to conclude my writings during a water crisis.

### **Deconstructions, twigs and sticks**

This study has been concerned with *new dimensions in Water Conversation*, and the notion of going in the direction of this 'other heading,' in the face of shifting water realities, which I did not see as adequately served by somewhat stagnant understandings of water conservation. I argued at the start that deconstructions stood to offer a fresh take on water

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Muecke reflects: 'Every day thousands of gallons of water are drawn up from the Earth for tourist baths, while outside the little nocturnal moles and rodents are so economical with water they scarcely piss.' *No Road*, p33

<sup>2</sup> See 'Tourists are Doing Well, but Resorts' Wells are Running Dry,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 May 2001.

and made Levinas' and Derrida's explorations of hospitality a central element of my theoretical focus. The various deconstructive ideas which I have investigated and included here were conceived of out of an interest in a non-crisis driven orientation, a way of 'taking ourselves up' in relation to water, from a motivation of care rather than fear. As Chapter 4's water tasting, Chapter 5's script and Chapter 6's testing activities demonstrate, I sought to allow in a multiplicity of decentered perspectives on water.

The performances I have presented here and the writing practice from which they spring are not products of a vision of smooth coherence. They do not have a kind of central point like those crisis water-saving interventions provide. Rather they acknowledge the importance of water in a much broader space-time dimension. As a small experiment, the water conversation itself was a performance of resourcefulness, a teasing out and sticking tentatively together of common experience, and each element I have included is a practical demonstration of people's interest in water flowing together with others'. This leads me to see it as a small 'nest' of water.

Community writing, the artform with which I have worked, is presented as a dynamic in which the writing, conversation and subject focus allow a diversity of people, interests and forms to be accommodated. Hutchison calls attention in Chapter 7 to the way it has enabled me to come at the political dimension of water access and management from an engaged standpoint. As a writing project, *new dimensions in Water Conversation* comes 'from people's work' and from nurturing a collectivity in the very act of the writing that was created together. I have extended a model of community writing which Hutchison and I describe in *Out of the Ordinary*, through situating the project with Rous Water and drawing in other artforms.

Community writing, as I have elucidated it, is unique in its capacity to generate texts and textures of water. When conceived of as a nest, it is one which lasts for long enough to investigate water hospitality, and one where each individual who joins in attaches what they notice, value and choose to represent. Confluences, the hardware of water supply, springs,

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<sup>3</sup> A pipeline has been run from Spain to Majorca to fulfill its water needs.

floods, pipelines, insights into bodily function and experiences of drought, all come together here. Towards this nest flow twigs and sticks, images, information, the findings of friends, impressions of journeys and different loyalties to water. Thus Dave James, a faithful employee of Rous Water, wishes to remind his audience of the organisation's mission by asserting: 'We are water', whilst Linda Lutherborrow finds herself searching a water treatment plant for traces of water's escape.

My thesis has focussed particularly on bringing out a new fullness in perception of cultural and instrumentalist interests in water. Thus a Mermaid and a Flow Engineer have come through many of the chapters as representatives of positions which are never fully spelt out, since it would be unrealistic to suggest that their interests are dualistically at odds. Rather, through the Flow Engineer I have tried to suggest that instrumentalism informs not only engineering and technology, but is well-ensconced in a much broader set of social values stressing goal achievement and efficiency. Through the Mermaid, I have wanted to speak for the importance of opening imaginatively to water as a different 'stuff' in different cultural and biological communities. She is also there to stand for an ease of 'going on being'<sup>4</sup> which eludes us in a reactive project-management orientation to life.

'Do not foolishly suppose that what we see as water is used as water by all other beings ...', says the 13<sup>th</sup> century Zen master Dogen in a passage quoted in the introduction. My study is a reminder that to celebrate water only for those values we feel at home with may be to exploit or idealise it. It closes the door on other worlds of water. The Sankat Mochan Foundation's relationship with the Ganges River and Indigenous perspectives on land and water show alternative ways of valuing water. At the same time each participant's contribution to the Northern Rivers project brings with it a particular life experience and conditioning. The project's involvement with Rous Water demonstrates that water management and policy, technology, treatment and remediation are very much part of today's water culture; water passes through the hands of an enormous number of specialists. *new dimensions in Water Conversation* shows this in localized detail. As I have shown in

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<sup>4</sup> Mark Epstein uses this idea of Winnicott's as a parallel to meditation in *Going on Being, Buddhism and the Way of Change*, pp30-32



Chapter 6, it also creates an occasion to look at specialist knowledge in the face of other interests which are more culturally complex than the term 'lay public' might suggest. This, I argue, makes it important to continue to bring different interests together, even if misunderstanding is the early result.

Can the Flow Engineer or the Mermaid make a rightful claim to water today? The particular scope of my study means that I have made only limited reference to the range of users of water, and almost none to the range of specialists with interests in water issues. However there are certainly exponents of many different discourses who would claim that water relies on their efforts as much as any Mermaid or Flow Engineer, most notably those in the fields of environmentalism and the law. As Richard White puts it in his examination of the Columbia River as organic machine, people may focus on reservoirs, on channels or on free-flowing water, depending on their orientation:

All stake a social claim to their part of the machine. None of them are concerned with the river [water] as a whole.<sup>5</sup>

### **Water relations, nest building**

This thesis turns on water relations. In choosing to represent the complexity of this dynamic I have explored the terrain of those global-local, space-time dimensions which challenge our everyday conceptions of place. Yet I have shown in Chapter 7 that we must do this to think adequately about water. The performances of water evoked in my chapters highlight this challenge: what is considered distant from my perspective living in the Northern Rivers Australia, is equally local for people in Varanasi or Johannesburg and vice versa, but involves radically different arrangements and practices with water. People in India, Europe, North America and South Africa have influenced my thinking about water writing. Global forces, including my own education, migration and activist explorations, contribute to a theoretical outlook that influenced the activities which I put in place in my

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<sup>5</sup> *The Organic Machine*, p110

local setting. Yet what I write about and do is by its nature a-capital, and related in many of its elements to the particulars of localities other than my own.

With globalisation as an aspect of this thesis, the nest of water which came into being in the Northern Rivers is part of a larger nest of water. Hospitality with water expresses an important ethical relation and highlights our common interests in water in all its forms. There is an urgency surrounding water, whether seen from the point of view of expedient responses to problems such as dams, loss of flow and salinity, or from the perspective of social and ecological justice. In confronting the urgency of response, I have argued for the value of opening up to broader perspectives. Thus water experts may pack regularly to take to the skies, sit amongst the clouds reading briefing papers, studying agendas and writing papers, land and enter into negotiations, before ascending and returning to earth again. Flight itself can offer perspective and the ability to cover territory at speed, though the view of what lies below is distant. I have shown that there is significant value in the process of expressing a felt sense of waters and rivers on the ground where we live. Engaging in imaginative work alongside others is uplifting and offers broader perspectives. In fact the relations which emerge might be seen as flight paths intersecting at random over childhood swimming pools, favourite water places and the clouds that move between people.

In Chapter 7, I argue for the importance of generating new language for relations to water and introduce various new terms coming into use in international water management. One of them is hydrosolidarity. As an oxymoron, it unleashes new notions of what solidarity might look like. Nonetheless I see the image of 'nest of water' as offering something unique. Firstly it brings to mind the unique and sticky construction of the water molecule itself. To reiterate: 'If water at the molecular level were not enmeshed in all the contradictions of cooperation and attraction, there would be no wetness, no flow and no water pollution. It seems that the sticky nest of water is woven in such a way that it expresses tensions which bear a resemblance to those of human communities which rely on it.'

A nest is rarely symmetrical. Put together with sticks rather than concrete, it makes visible the real difficulty of forming alliances and collectives across powerful interest groups globally, as well as in specific localities. A nest can include in its structure the views of hydrooptimists and hydropessimists. The image is sufficiently puzzling to engage the curiosity of children. It can contain family, localities and communities. Above all its life depends on the inclusion of specific knowledge, meanings, languages and cultural practices which tie people in to land and water. Keeping something quite tenuous in shape relies on the fragmentary labours of people everywhere.

Simply to think in terms of nest and of conjoined sticks and twigs, is to move away from radical decentering in which fragments speak for themselves alone. It is rather to speak for a fragile global construction. Michel Serres argues that we should take courage and synthesise, since there is a risk in moving away from the protectiveness of the fragment. Thus I claim 'the audacity of the frail.'<sup>6</sup>

### **On Community**

Yet deconstructions are at the heart of this thesis. Derrida rarely leaves his approach to questions exposed in 'monotheistic sentences',<sup>7</sup> and it is in the nature of his theory to make it impossible for anyone to identify with his argument and apply it. What does identification yield in his view? Security. Uncertainties are not kept as questions. On community, he is unequivocal: 'I don't much like the word community. I am not even sure I like the thing.'

If by community one implies, as is often the case, a harmonious group, consensus, and fundamental agreement beneath the phenomena of discord or war, then I don't believe in it very much and I sense in it as much threat as promise.

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<sup>6</sup> Michel Serres, *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time*, p120

<sup>7</sup> Derrida refers this way to a sentence which falls short of a compound in 'Eating Well' in *Who Comes After the Subject?* In this interview with Jean-Luc Nancy, Derrida extends the terms of the discussion on the subject into the notion of eating, of taking in, of consuming, an active rendering of inter-subjectivity.

There is doubtless this irrepressible desire for a "community" to form but also for it to know its limit – and for its limit to be its *opening*.<sup>8</sup>

In the face of contemporary socio-political questions, Derrida has expounded on this limit and opening by examining the tensions which exist in the practice of hospitality, as for example in *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, on Levinas' words: 'The face, welcome: tending toward the other, attentive intention, intentional attention, *yes* to the other.'<sup>9</sup>

With Community writ large in my endeavours, which were undertaken under the auspices of a Community Cultural Development fellowship, I have been bold to take up the challenge of rendering a response to some of Derrida's writings. The name Derrida, to me stimulating of debate and exchange of ideas, might trigger a get-real reflex in those grappling with short-term funding arrangements and pressure on community services. I have shown that the 'impossibility' written into his ideas, is in fact an affirmative challenge to regulation, a guardedness against getting too real.

Some may previously have considered Derrida's work to be housed in the domain of formal knowledge, removed from the life of everyday exchange. In my writings, I let in a sense of deconstructive possibility. The face softens the problematic of expertise, whilst bringing it close up, *yes* to the other invites me to weave a story around a mermaid and a flow engineer, who take up positions of host and guest in the water Organisation's bureaucracy. Attentive intention allows the reader to enter into the experience of a water project in India, aware that crossing a certain threshold of understanding gives substance to new tensions and will subsequently impel the crossing of other thresholds. Tending toward the other is the gift which emerges over water and water conversations.

At the same time water itself is deconstructive. It wets and swells the pages of Derrida when it leaks through my window in the wet season. In this earthy hospitality, Derrida is done over by mould and the prodigious growth of new organisms in a moist environment.

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<sup>8</sup> Derrida, quoted in Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell, A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, p107 (excerpt from *Points ... Interviews*, 1974-94)

<sup>9</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, p22

None of us is impervious to water activities and what they effect, any more than the cloud, the Mermaid or the Flow Engineer.

### **Various forms of reason**

Through its setting with Rous Water, my thesis brings out a certain preoccupation with techno-scientific values of supply and demand. This in turn exposes the predominance of scientific reason as 'a way of getting around'<sup>10</sup> today. My thesis shows that the transcultural reality of water as local and global resource demands forms of reason that put more emphasis on relationality. The central motif, the problematic of hospitality, calls for more than hospitality to ideas. Water in its material form must be brought to the table and to the party, as I show in Chapters 2, 4, 5 and 6. To bring water to life, we need constant reminders of the interconnection between people and glasses of water.

Through travel and welcome as guest in another cultural tradition, I made contact with a reason founded on the immediacy of observation and awareness, and the imperative of examining my own cultural expectations. A transcultural perspective necessarily shows up limitations in the forms of reasoning with which Flow Engineers are most at home. To be at home in Australia, engaged with the degradation of my own river environment, is to find more than adequate sense in the rationality of Indigenous relations with land.

In the context of academic disciplinarity, which is changing form all the time, my thesis speaks for the value of developing knowledges which draw specifically on different disciplines. At the same time it shows that it is definitely the case that the humanities' contribution is distinctive. Above all its interest in languages cannot be underestimated. Its concern with the deep-seated influence of perception on people's orientation to the world is equally important.

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<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*

In Chapter 6, I bring into focus a form of rationality that takes its place as an imaginative habit in a techno-scientific organisation.<sup>11</sup> This shows how relevant it is to give credence to the importance of fictions for science. As Isabelle Stengers suggests, this takes the focus off objectivity 'guaranteed à priori', and puts it on a dynamic 'in which the fictions that we become capable of risk proposing new bonds of interest and meaning between things and humans.'<sup>12</sup> Stuart Kauffman also makes the point that science benefits from refinement in the telling of stories. 'Biospheres demand their Shakespeares as well as their Newtons,' he says, putting emphasis on his view that at this juncture it is necessary to rethink science's relation with the humanities. He concludes: '... C.P. Snow's "two cultures," the humanities and science may find an unexpected, inevitable union.'<sup>13</sup>

For water, my study claims, new configurations of interest and rationality are needed. There is clearly a loss of value when rationality is reduced to favour only certain approaches to reason. The arts and humanities can bring to the fore questions of value which are not taken into consideration by instrumentalism and the market orientation of purely economic perspectives.

### **Spirit in Water**

My study highlights the fact that water management structures offer no channel through which non-specialist appreciation of water can make itself felt.<sup>14</sup> Scientists and social scientists have identified it as a resource, cut it up into categories, and missed the spirit of water. This underestimates the extent of water's influence on people's lives, and indeed in life itself. By rights, far more attention should be given to the spirit of water and to Indigenous perspectives which take it for granted.

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<sup>11</sup> Mary Midgeley is concerned that 'an unbalanced fascination with the imagery of atomism' stems from 'the imaginative habits of science.' See *Science and Poetry*, pp1-2

<sup>12</sup> Isabelle Stengers in *Power and Invention, Situating Science*, p149

<sup>13</sup> Kauffman in *Investigations*, p22

<sup>14</sup> This is equally true of natural resource management structures, where training in environmental science, or a desire to do hard labour are pre-requisites for participation.

There is definitely a vital direction for research which tests the spirit of water as a contact point for a porosity and flow between people that pushes against the limits of the loaded term 'water security' and the self-limitations which it implies. Spirit is invisible and impermanent. Yet it is a most distinctive mark of water. It is no less important to have insight into it, as into a spit of water a billion trillionth of a raindrop in volume. It may have the potency to unseal the potential of multiple motivations for increasing the well-being of water. In the process, as the testimony of my own journey highlights, lives can change, in ways which are impossible to foresee. As David Unaipon said:

Now in this story of the Gool Lun Naga a Green Frog which came into existence in the Spirit of Water. Water Spirit or the Spirit of Water is the most multiple Spirit of all, because from it and into it there is a continual change of organism taking place from one form to another; life coming from it may be in plant form or weed. A life goes into it and comes out quite a different body.<sup>15</sup>

And Lazarus Takawira confirms from the Shona tradition:

The Nzuzu [water spirit] has taken me into the water. If my parents do not cry out it will teach me many things and then return me to my family. I will be an important man in my community.<sup>16</sup>

Focus on instrumentalist and social developments gives us an important sense that something is being done for water. Yet alone, this repertoire will never do justice to water. Despite the enormous budgets they attract, consultations, reviews, their accompanying reports, projections and campaigns are limited, and may contribute to adding more weight to water.

## **Lightness**

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<sup>15</sup> David Unaipon, *Legendary Tales of the Australian Aborigines*, eds. S. Muecke and A. Shoemaker, p53

<sup>16</sup> Nzuzu, Sandstone Carving exhibition notes, Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens, Nov. 99

In Chapter 8, I argue that the healing of water calls for a subversive approach to questions of responsibility. It is this challenge that leads me to conclude by reasserting the value of Lightness, which has informed the writing of this thesis. At the outset I saw the possibility of removing weight from a water loaded down by reduced flows, countless remediation objectives and sets of comprehensive reports. I created performances of water with others, which I hoped would be refreshing.

The problem for myself as a writer undertaking this work is clear. Prevailing values and short-term funding arrangements make it difficult to articulate community-based cultural activities such as this with processes of consultation which are recognised by institutions whose responsibility is spelt out in a crisis-driven policy framework. It is understandable that a brief to create affiliation to water on the basis of Lightness stands to carry less weight than one framed in terms of the burden of water's problems. Yet the South African background that threads through this water writing constantly challenges me to re-examine prevailing orientations towards responsibility. As Derrida puts it, 'Mustn't responsibility always be expressed in a language that is foreign to what the community already understands only too well?'<sup>17</sup> My thesis affirms the importance of paying attention to the yawning gap that opens up when Lightness is overlooked.

The unique contribution of this thesis is to integrate the disciplines of the humanities with community writing. My theoretical interest in stories, writing, reading, histories and the imaginative use of language flows together with an interest in the way a group of strangers will take up these interests in order to present an individual and collective response on an issue of concern. My desire to query, destabilise and unsettle conventional understandings in theory, informs a group process in which people come together to write, tell and read stories, and make decisions on how they will bring them together for an audience. Theoretical challenges and risk-taking open out new spaces of possibility. In their translation into the 'politics and poetics'<sup>18</sup> of community writing, these ideas meet with people who identify to a greater or lesser extent with their own ideas about everything.

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<sup>17</sup> See 'Whom To Give To (Knowing Not to Know)' in *The Gift of Death*, p74

<sup>18</sup> See Ch. 2, for Hutchison's description of community writing in these terms.



Community writing makes for interesting collectivities on a small scale. In the case of the water conversation, in Chapter 6 I have shown how people brought the hospitality they had enjoyed in a classroom into a new and unfamiliar arena at Rous Water headquarters, and created water hospitality for a larger audience. Whilst there was nothing permanent about the alliance which came into existence through the stories we shared, it was one which had grown 'in the name of water'. Though influenced by theoretical interests, the 'One-off Splash! of Water Celebration' did not betray this other than in its freedom from conventions associated with water utilities and writing.

As a collaborative approach to writing, I argue ambitiously in Chapter 7 that community writing is not altogether different from the 'group writing' practice undertaken in an international commission. Quite realistically it is similar to group writing as undertaken in workplaces and educational settings. What distinguishes it is that people come to it because they elect to give attention to the subject under consideration – in this case water – as it relates to their own interests, and specifically to increase their own skills with language and writing. Through collaboration they come to see the limitations of images of writing as solitary endeavour. Ideas they may have carried about how writing must look, and what can and cannot be included are challenged. At the same time new ideas about a writing that involves giving and receiving feedback, considering the ethical implications of jointly produced writing, conceptualising outcomes, editing, framing multiple input and coming to agreement on layout, leap into the foreground.

In summary, at a time of some political soul-searching in the humanities, my thesis presents community writing as a performative engagement in 'a world of events'.<sup>19</sup> It comes across as a form which deserves the attention of academic writing programs for its collaborative focus: between practitioners, as my dialogues with Mary Hutchison demonstrate, amongst participants, and through the development of problematic alliances, such as that with Rous

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<sup>19</sup> Bruno Latour, in his foreword to Isabelle Stengers, *Power and Invention, Situating Science*, speaks of her as a philosopher who 'lives in a world of events, not in a prison of words trying desperately to represent an absent and faraway state of affairs', pxiii

Water. The fact that it makes interesting demands on a professional writer, and adds to understandings of issues involved in collaborative writing is equally important.

## **Flow**

*Flow flow flow flow*, says the sign on the Flow Engineer's wall. 'I could do with some of that,' say visitors to her office. There are no necessary connections between water treatment, Flow Engineers, plant operators and members of a water writing group, yet flow is a not altogether unexpected commonality. The operators speak of rates and patterns of flow from the plant. Flow and water imagery were pervasive in the way people described their writing and imaginative processes in early water writer meetings.

In my enthusiasm for water, I invited these people to engage with *Water! an Everyday Subject* and *The Water Closest to You*, hoping to engender a sense of the freedom and generosity I associate with water and writing. I have shown some of the forms this took.

I tell people that when they play around with books and writing in groups they already have an initial audience. The subject of water could hardly be more important. Where growing into it is concerned, there is something about taking up the authority of putting together a public exhibition like the *One off Splash! of Water Celebration*, or even making a one-off book. Both can be quite provisional in nature.

The *Water Exercise Books* represent my own first performance of water. Later, a handmade volume, *Flow Engineering Notes*, realised not only the Flow Engineer, but a Dam, a language and its tendencies:

*Reduced flow/very low flow/no flow*

*Flowed*

*Environmental flows/flow protection/flow implementation/influences on flows/estimation of flow/*

*Flow trials ...*

Like a water molecule, I aim to captivate people in a briefly shared collectivity. There is no need to worry about publishers here. A public event featuring water writings and performances is a bit like a story. It will almost certainly at some point transform into something else. The same is true of a one-off book. The makers can benefit from each other's input. They can decide on the experience the reader will have of the event's program or text.

'Nothing's set in concrete,' I insist, 'your writings can evolve in a similar fashion to an oral 'text'.<sup>20</sup>

Go for it!

Flow!

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<sup>20</sup> This passage draws on Leslie Marmon Silko's emboldening words in 'As a Child I Loved to Draw and Cut Paper,' pp169-172

## SO HOW WAS THE WEEK?

### How was the week Flow Engineer?

I putt-putted my boat across the week of my plans. I went to the office, looked at my flow chart and acted accordingly.

First thing on Monday, I met with 25 primary kids. Their hands shot up at any suggestion or question. Their teacher looked tired and collected, and sat at her desk. The young enthusiasts stood up and stuck their arms through their legs to catch their ankles, in imitation of a water molecule.

I read at the high school from Leonardo da Vinci on the nature of water. I am committed to inspiring people with his amazing curiosity and enthusiasm. This man planned hundreds of books in his notebooks. These are just a few:

Book of the twistings and bendings of the currents of the rivers.

Book of the different places whence the waters of the rivers are derived.

Book of the shapes of the banks of the rivers and their permanence.

Book of the perpendicular fall of water upon various objects.

Book of the course of water when impeded in various positions.

Book of ...<sup>21</sup>

Why didn't he write them? the Year 10s of W cried. When they realised how many artworks and inventions he *did* develop, and that he had painted, in detail, thousands of raindrops, they said, 'Oh.' But still, they are 15 and 16 and don't know anything about the problems of unfinished work.

I asked them if any of them ever felt like him: he always felt he could set down his thinking more clearly in drawings than in writing. Yet, had they ever found, like him, that

sometimes putting things in diagrams and drawings would not work – that they needed to find the right **words**?<sup>22</sup> What did it feel like to admit you had to write?

### **How was the week Mermaid?**

Did you know a fisherman led me to another fisherman who led me to another fisherman? I went in amongst a man's dusty relics. There was a large and commanding mermaid in shellwork against the wall, with great mouthfuls of nipples. He told me her story and how once she tried to lead him out to sea. There were hundreds of tales shut away in that man's stroke-touched body. He gave me a golden shell. I walked away from his house, full of the net hauls of his boat, the *Mary Ann*. It was one of the times I've felt most at home on dry land.

There was also a moment, far above sea-level, swimming in a crowded room of little kids. They wrote tiny and tentatively in pencil on shiny slippery paper.

A little lonely here, playing on my own, singing my own song. Half the days in bed dreaming and reading. Some afternoons in a rockpool, the seaweed scratchy.

It is hard to get used to how uncomfortable a mermaid can be inland. At 39 degrees, I swam forth with Year 10 at W. At first they acted as if determined to stay stranded. But I led them into the water. It was a spell for a dry mermaid indeed, to hear those subtle water nests spill out, in readings and in a song one of them had written herself ...

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<sup>21</sup> *The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci, arranged, rendered into English and introduced by Edward MacCurdy*, vol 2, p97

<sup>22</sup> Italo Calvino, *Six Memoes for the Next Millenium*, p78

Shall we continue our journey together?

I've got the water!

## APPENDIX 1

### WATER, ARTS AND COMMUNITY: EXAMPLES OF PROJECTS IN AUSTRALIA AND FURTHER AFIELD, 1988-2000

In Australia, some projects involving arts and community in water issues have been *Restoring the Waters*, initiated through the National Stormwater Forum (1995/6), *Waterworks*, with Country Arts SA (1999), and *sunRISE 21 Artists in Industry Project* (1995-2000). These projects all take up the subject of water in specific terms, that is of urban stormwater, state identity and irrigation. Projects which feature water in urban contexts have been *Drainwatch* at Byron Bay (97-99) and public art by Nola Farman at Claisebrook W.A. (c.97), and also *Waterworks* in the Shoalhaven (99) and *Dive Divas* (99) at Marrickville which both focused on swimming pools.

Numerous projects have reflected a river focus over the last 15 years: *Return of the Riverboats on the Hawkesbury* (late 80s), *Murray River Story* at Albury (88), *Big River* with ICI on the lower Yarra (mid 90s), *Two Rivers* in Tasmania (c.98), *Swan Hill River Precinct Project* (c.98), Castlereagh River related murals at Mendooran (98-00), Oxley Creek Cultural Projects (96-00), artist-in-residence programs with public art outcomes at Albury Wodonga (99), *Five Feet High and Rising*, on the Clarence River, a community radio based production featured on Radio Eye (99), *Festival of the Waters* at Port Adelaide (99), *Mananoa Water Project* with Rachel Apelt (c.99/00), and *Splash!* with Maroochy Waterwatch (00).

The use of oral testimony to broaden communities' historical appreciation of changes to river systems has been explored by various catchment management committees. One example is *Listening to the Lachlan* (96), and another on the Brunswick River is in progress. The Murray Darling Basin Commission made an initiative to develop the concept of *Reading the Land* through a forum and publication of the same name in the mid-90s. This idea was taken up again in 2000 as part of Southern Cross University's venture into a pro-active relationship between contemporary arts' practice and environmental issues, under the banner of the *Art and Landliteracy Forum*, including a cultural cyberventure *redreadwater.com*. Brisbane's multi-disciplinary Riverfestivals have all included an arts stream. The Gould League/Sydney Morning Herald 1999 Project Environment Competition invited entries in any artform medium from schoolchildren on the subject of water.

Many cultural organisers have specifically looked at water as a commonality of community in urban and rural Australia, and some river-focused water bureaucracies have tentatively looked at cultural strategies to broaden community awareness of water issues.

Overseas in Europe and the US, *The Rhinewater Purification Plant* (72), in Krefeld, Buster Simpson's *When the Tide is Out the Table is Set* (78), Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison's *Breathing Space for the Sava River* (early 90s), friends of the Los Angeles River's *Restoring the Los Angeles River, a Forty Year Arts Project* and Commonground's *Confluence* (99-00) are examples of collaborations between artists, agencies and communities drawing attention to water issues. In Asia, Tana Lauhakaikul and Kamol Phaosavadi's performance pieces *Mud Crab* and *Give Me a*

*Glass of Water* and Ichi Ikeda's water projects ritualise human and other beings' interaction with water. Chinese artist Song Dong began *Writing Diary with Water* as a performance piece in 1995 and made a performance of *Printing on Water* in the Lhasa River in Tibet in 1996. Zhang Huan created the performance piece *To Raise the Water Level in a Fishpond* with workers and fishermen in Beijing in 1997.



## APPENDIX 2

### WATER TRIVIA QUIZ<sup>1</sup>

#### Round 1:

1. What was Kevin Costner's most spectacular film failure?
2. What was the river negotiated in Humphrey Bogart's *African Queen*?
3. The title of one of Michael Rennie's films (50s) featured water. What was it?
4. Brian Brown and Sigurd Thornton co-starred in a TV series entitled ...?
5. Which legendary Australian actress spawned a genre of water movies?
6. In which film did the protagonist become aware that water was rushing down the stairs in his house?

#### Round 2:

1. What is the wettest town in Australia?
2. What Big Thing has been erected in the wettest town in Australia?
3. What is the most ancient streambed on the planet?
4. Which has the highest rainfall – Melbourne or Sydney?
5. What do these rivers have in common? The Richmond, the Clarence and the Condamine?
6. Which is the odd one out? Why? Canberra Albury Wodonga, Mildura, Bathurst Burke.
7. What river does the Birdsville Track make its way to?
8. Where would one expect to find the Min Min lights?
9. What prevents ingress of sea water into the Murray River?
10. George Chaffey made his name on the Mildura Irrigation Scheme. What did he christen the scheme he undertook in California?

#### Round 3:

1. 'Come Mama, come play with me, step out on the leaves of the waterlily?' Who wrote this poem?
2. What novel does floating a glass church downriver appear in? What river was it?
3. Which book in the Bible does this passage come from: 'One generation passeth away/and another cometh/but the earth abideth always .../All the rivers runneth to the sea,/yet the sea is not full?'
4. In what book did the extraction of water from humans take place?
5. Which river did Miles Franklin's *My Brilliant Career* feature?
6. What river is Arthur Boyd associated with?
7. What Richard Flanagan novel has water in the title?
8. Which favourite Australian novel uses water as a metaphor for overcoming obstacles?
9. What was the name of the springs in *We of the Never Never*?
10. What was the *Great Boomerang*? Who were its promoters?

#### Round 4:

1. Where does Nile Perch come from?

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<sup>1</sup> Much of the following information came from informal sources, although some more specific information is footnoted

2. What freshwater dwelling creature is closely associated with the Rainbow Serpent?
3. What is the most common invasive fish species on the Murray?
4. What dinosaur fish creature is found in North Queensland rivers?
5. How is the smile of a freshwater crocodile different from that of a saltwater croc?
6. What are two members of the Synathid family?
7. What is the home of the Big Murray Cod?

Round 5:

1. Complete the title of this Midnight Oil song: 'River Runs Red ...'
2. What does the Sirocco *Wetlands Suite* celebrate?
3. Where did the jolly swagman meet his maker?
4. Complete this line: 'The rain never falls on .....
5. Whose song? 'You can take a horse to water, but you can't make him see the view?'
6. Where will you always return if you cross the river Thompson?
7. What might calling someone 'a long drink of water' refer to?
8. The words 'fate bewailing' and 'banished from my native shore' were heard on the banks of what river?
9. Complete this line: My mouth is as dry as ...
10. As dry as ...

Round 6:

1. What was the first source of pollution on the Tank Stream?
2. What water experience sent Frank Hurley to Papua New Guinea?
3. What was the main Sydney water supply prior to the construction of Warragamba Dam?
4. What are the Prospect canals famous for?
5. What lake was Canberra originally to be sited on?
6. What street in Sydney does the Tank Stream run under?
7. What does MWS & DB stand for?
8. What inland river town was a customs clearance port?
9. What water feat is Tammy van Wisse famous for?
10. Where did Donald Campbell break the world water speed record?

Round 7:

1. Which country has the highest proportion of dams per capita in the world?
2. What is the number of dams in the world, that is, those with retaining walls of more than four storeys high?
3. How much water is drawn annually from lakes, rivers and aquifers worldwide?
4. How much was drawn annually in the 1950s?
5. What was a major water component in the construction of Warragamba Dam?
6. Where would you find a turkey neck dam?
7. What is the most conservative estimate of the number of people displaced by dam construction in India and China?
8. How many watersheds in the world cross boundaries of two or more countries?
9. Name two waterweeds which pose risks to water supplies globally.
10. Where is the source of the Mekong River?

Round 8:

1. How much water is there in an average hottie?
2. What percentage of water in Australia is reused annually?
3. What percentage of people would be prepared to use re-used effluent on their gardens?
4. What percentage of water is used to grow lawn?
5. What water savings are produced by installing dual flush toilets?
6. What is the length of the average Australian shower?
7. If someone involved in water management referred to 'daylighting' what would they be talking about?
8. If engaged in 'sewer mining', what would be being mined for?
9. What is the United Nations daily allocation of water per staff person?
10. How many litres in a gigalitre?

Round 9:

1. Name ten brandname mineral waters.
2. How many sewage treatment plants are there in Sydney's catchment?
3. If you had only salt water or your own urine to drink, which would kill you first?
4. What is Coke's mineral water brand name? Pepsi's?
5. When preparing water to add Coke, what ph must the manufacturers create?
6. What is faecal coliform? What are Australian drinking water standards for faecal coliform?
7. In order to provide safe sanitation to everyone in the world by the year 2025, how many additional individuals should receive services each day over the next 25 years?
8. In what city did Cryptosporidium actually kill people?
9. Name three waterborne diseases.

## WATER TRIVIA answers

### Round 1:

1. Waterworld
2. The Zambezi
3. Rains of Rangipur
4. All the Rivers Run
5. Esther Williams
6. The Last Wave

### Round 2:

1. Tully, Qld
2. The Golden Gumboot
3. Finke River
4. Sydney (1223mls vs 657mls per year)
5. All rise in the vicinity of Mt. Lindsay
6. Bathurst – not part of Murray Darling Catchment
7. Diamantina
8. The Channel Country
9. Goolwa Barrage
10. Imperial Valley (previously known as the Colorado Desert)

### Round 3:

1. Lawson
2. *Oscar and Lucinda*, Bellinger River
3. Ecclesiastes
4. *Dune*
5. Murrumbidgee
6. Shoalhaven
7. *Death of a River Guide*
8. *I Can Jump Puddles*
9. Mataranka
10. Scheme to divert the rivers of north west Queensland to the 'dead heart' conceived by Dr. J. Bradfield. Ion Idriss' book *The Great Boomerang* promoted it.

### Round 4:

1. Mainly Tanzania. The Nile Perch was introduced to Lake Victoria as a dense-fleshed high protein fish. It has subsequently overrun the lake, with far-reaching impacts on the environments and communities associated with the lake, for example it has become an export commercial resource with little available for the local population.<sup>2</sup>
2. The eel
3. Lungfish
4. Narrower
5. Seahorses, pipehorses, pipefish, seadragons
6. Carp
7. Swan Hill

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<sup>2</sup> [www.iucn.org/biodiversityday/100booklet](http://www.iucn.org/biodiversityday/100booklet)

Round 5:

1. Black rains fall
2. Macquarie Wetlands
3. In a billabong
4. The dusty Diamantina
5. The Whitlams
6. Longreach
7. Tall
8. Brisbane Waters
9. A cocky's cage
10. Sunstruck bone

Round 6:

1. Pig Farming
2. Shipwrecked amongst icebergs
3. Prospect Reservoir
4. Gravity feed accelerated by rollercoasting
5. Lake George
6. Pitt Street
7. Metropolitan Water, Sewerage and Drainage Board
8. Burke
9. Swam Murray River in 2001
10. Lake Dumbleyoung

Round 7:<sup>3</sup>

1. Spain
2. 45,000
3. 3,800km
4. Half this amount
5. Ice. An ice-making plant produced 170 tons of ice a day to go into the concrete mix and prevent cracking.<sup>4</sup>
6. In the cotton growing country on the Condamine-Balonne – they are the water storages 'which vary from big to colossal'<sup>5</sup>
7. 26 million
8. 261
9. Salvinia, Water Hyacinth, Azolla
10. Eastern Tibet

Round 8:

1. .751
2. 14%<sup>6</sup>
3. 59%<sup>7</sup>
4. Garden use of water in Sydney is 23%, in Melbourne, 35%<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Information in this round comes from the *World Commission on Dams Report*

<sup>4</sup> *Warragamba Dam, Official Opening* booklet, p13

<sup>5</sup> Amanda Hodge 'The Dams that Drink a River' in *Weekend Australian* 31 Mar.-1 Apr. 2001

<sup>6</sup> Senate Report into Urban Water Use, December 2002, p22

<sup>7</sup> Sydney Water, *School Children's Views on Water Conservation and Related Environmental Matters*, May 1998

5. 67%<sup>9</sup>
6. 7-8 minutes<sup>10</sup>
7. Recreating creeks where previously there were underground stormwater channels.
8. Water. This term refers to taking raw sewage from a sewer in proximity to a park, and treating it on-site in a mini version of a sewage treatment plant, e.g. King's Domain, Melbourne.<sup>11</sup>
9. 45 litres<sup>12</sup>
10. A thousand million litres

Round 9:

1. go for it!
2. 12
3. Salt water. Scientists know exactly what the effects of water that is salty on a cotton plant. However, it is not known exactly what the impact on people is, though neurological impacts, tuberculosis and gastric illnesses present as major problems, particularly in children, around the Aral Sea, where salination has overtaken drinking supplies.
4. Mt. Franklin, Acquafina
5. About 4, i.e. very acid
6. Faecal coliform are bacteria used as a scientific indicator of the cleanliness of drinking water. They are killed by chlorine. 0 per 100mls.
7. 460,000<sup>13</sup>
8. Milwaukee
9. Gastro, Typhoid, Cholera, Dysentery, Hepatitis, Polio, Salmonella

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<sup>8</sup> Senate Report, op. cit. p36

<sup>9</sup> ibid. p63

<sup>10</sup> Senate Report, op. cit. p64

<sup>11</sup> ibid. p109

<sup>12</sup> Ozgreen, World Water Day Poster 2003

<sup>13</sup> [www.epibiostat.cusf.edu/igh/pubs/taps\\_toilets.pdf+safe+sanitation](http://www.epibiostat.cusf.edu/igh/pubs/taps_toilets.pdf+safe+sanitation)

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