

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

Annie Bolitho

Doctorate of Creative Arts
University of Technology Sydney

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.

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.

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
ABSTRACT	vi
PROLOGUE	vii
INTRODUCTION	1
1. TAKING TO THE WATER, AT HOME WITH WATER LOVERS	19
≈ A deeply watery situation	44
2. DWELLING ON WATER, NEW DIMENSIONS IN WATER CONVERSATION	45
≈ A pre-school song	71
3. GANGA, OR PROBLEMS OF TRANSLATION	72
≈ A consumer's thermal experience of drinking	102
4. TO MOUTH, TO MOUTH, TO MOUTH, WATER RELATIONS	103
≈ Anti-prejudice role for Miss Drip	141
5. WATER RUNNING TO US, MAKING CONTACT	142
≈ A dream in September	181
6. WATER/STORY TESTING, UNEQUAL PERSPECTIVES	182
≈ What does a lot of water look like?	221
7. A NEST OF WATER; MEDIATIONS, TRANSLATIONS AND WEAVING	222
≈ Precious Liquids	256
8. NO FLOW, THE CONSEQUENCES OF DISAPPEARANCE	257
≈ Kids perceptions of water conservation	294
9. CONCLUSIONS	295
≈ So how was the week?	308
APPENDIX 1	312
APPENDIX 2	314
BIBLIOGRAPHY	322

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.¹

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 H₂O 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 tetrahedral² arrangement of neighbours around each molecule, which forms 'the central

¹ This summarised description draws on Philip Ball's inventive elaboration of water's molecular structure in *H₂O, A Biography of Water*, pp.165-168 (all underlinings mine)

² 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. H₂O. 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.¹

¹ 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',² Melbourne's ten day loss of gas supply³ – something of a water crisis since there was no hot water – and the Auckland electricity crisis.⁴ 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.⁵

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

² 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)

³ 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.

⁴ 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.'⁶ 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.

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

⁶ Toby Foshay draws attention to this similarity between Derrida and Dogen, legendary 13th 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,⁷ 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

⁷ 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.'⁸ 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 water⁹ and where rules are inappropriately formulated.¹⁰

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,¹¹ water conversation. Yet the title

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

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

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ 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.¹² 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.'¹³ 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'¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ Finally, within a capitalizing logic, my research project in the Northern Rivers is not parochial or 'buried in one locality.'¹⁶ 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

¹² Rose, *Nourishing Terrains, Australian Aboriginal Views of Landscape and Wilderness*, p4

¹³ Derrida, op. cit. p29

¹⁴ *ibid.* p69

¹⁵ *ibid.* p38

¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ Here there lies a responsibility, that of 'inventing gestures, discourses, politico-institutional practices' in response.¹⁸

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.¹⁹ 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.²⁰

Derrida refers to hospitality throughout his work²¹ 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

¹⁷ Derrida, *The Other Heading*, op. cit. p44

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ *ibid.* p66

²⁰ This story is expanded on in Ch. 3

²¹ 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.'²² 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.²³ 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.

²² *ibid.*

²³ *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.'²⁴ Like water, it is intrinsically cross-disciplinary. As a form of writing it can

²⁴ 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.'²⁵ Derrida too has drawn on the image of confluence, speaking of material he has written over the years as a 'confluence of small texts'²⁶ 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

²⁵ Serres, op. cit. p122

²⁶ 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 wandering²⁷ 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.²⁸ 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.²⁹

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.

²⁷ Serres, op. cit. p103

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

²⁹ 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,'³⁰ 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.'³¹

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

³⁰ 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.³² 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 ...³³

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'.³⁴

Whose story?

³¹ 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

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

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

³⁴ 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.'³⁵ In relation to the distinction private/public, which this thesis addresses, its rigour will always be threatened by language, by language alone.³⁶ Thus the central interest: 'Whose language, whose story is it anyway?'³⁷

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.³⁸

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.'

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

³⁶ *ibid*, p93

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

³⁸ 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.'³⁹

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

Flow running ...

³⁹ Stuart Kauffman, *Investigations*, pp 119,120