As much as fits upon an aibika leaf:
writing/reading fiction in a globalised world

Wendy Marrion Glassby
B. A. (English and Creative Arts) Hons.

This dissertation is presented for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
(English and Creative Writing) of Murdoch University.
Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work, which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

Wendy Marrion Glassby

Date
Abstract:

‘As much as fits upon an aibika leaf’ is a thesis of two parts: selected sections from a novel-length work of fiction and an exegesis. Both respond to the question of how we might differently represent other identities, cultures and experiences in a globalised world. The novel narrates the stories of a family of a blended culture and their experiences of being non-indigenous and non-western residents of the territories comprising Papua New Guinea prior to self-rule in 1975. The primary challenge of the creative work is the exploration of choices for form and content that do not limit the narrative to a definitive version of the world and its characters. Simultaneously, the creative work aims to demonstrate respect for and acknowledge a body of significant scholarly research that calls for responsible representational practices in order for a creative writer to meet her obligations to the (reading) community. The exegesis reflects on the challenges of representing the other in a globalised world and analyses two contemporary works of fiction. Both novels exhibit imaginative approaches and choices in content and form. The exegesis also assesses the impacts of the texts in terms of the possibilities for interpretation they open up, as it considers fiction’s significant role in crossing the borders of social difference while respecting those differences through imaginative creative choices.
# Table of contents

Acknowledgments ix

‘As much as fits upon an aibika leaf’: work of fiction 1

‘As much as fits upon an aibika leaf’: the exegesis 149

Chapter One: Introduction 151

Chapter Two: Representing strangers in a cosmopolitan future 160

Chapter Three: Ross Gibson, extractive realism and the subjunctive space of fiction 194

Chapter Four: Lloyd Jones’s elusive subjects 217

Chapter Five: Conclusion 246

References 248

Appendix A—Family trees 1 and 2 of Seeto family 253

Appendix B—Timeline 254
Acknowledgements

Along this PhD journey precious gifts have been bestowed on me, for which I am extremely grateful. They can be described by three words: collaboration, generosity, and sacrifice. All three apply to the wisest of wise, Anne Surma, who has guided me not only academically as my supervisor but also woman-to-woman, friend-to-friend (this a measure of Anne’s qualities both professionally and personally).

Collaboration and generosity were the gifts of my undergrad and postgrad friends and peers, especially the members of Murdoch’s Creative Writing Loop. I name a few in particular—Gerri, Michelle, Brett, Helena, Joanne, Kevin, Ellen, and Ruari Jack—and thank them all.

Most of my work was done at home and there the contributions of my family have been enormous: their sacrifice, in tolerating my absences (in mind if not in body); and their generosity in permitting, without complaint, disruptions to family life, only ever seeing my project as something that would ultimately succeed. How could anyone not respond to this? To Arthur, Karen, Cathie, Danny and Rosée, words of thanks seem inadequate but are humbly offered in love and gratitude. Out of the generosity of my sister Robin came rich insights into her husband’s (Ben’s) world; and from my extended family and friends, the fuel to maintain momentum. I thank them too.
‘As much as fits upon an aibika leaf’

Work of fiction
Wai na yu go?¹

Wai na yu go
Tru tumas mi laik dai
Dispela pen i wok long
Kilim mi wansait
Maus bilong mi pas
Na nek bilong mi sore stret
Mi karai dei na nait
Tasol aiwara i kam daun nating
Yu lewa bilong mi
Wai na yu go

Peles yu go long en
Em I long wei stret
Sapos mi go long
Maunten mi no nap long
Lukim yu
Wai yu go
Aiye wai na yu go
Yu brukim lewa bilong mi
Taim yu lusim mi na yu go

¹ Kalupio’s poem is offered in both Tok Pisin (one of three national languages of Papua New Guinea) and English. In many instances Tok Pisin can be phonetically read to imitate or approximate English words (for example, the first line: ‘Wai na yu go’ if spoken might be heard phonetically as ‘why now you go’, which might be loosely understood by an English speaker/reader as ‘Why have you left’). However, Tok Pisin is an entirely other language. Often the reading of Tok Pisin might not be so easily translated by the non-speaker. The Tok Pisin translation and resource website TokPisin.com might offer assistance in making sense of the Tok Pisin passages in the fiction.
Why have you left?
Why have you left
It's true I want to die
The pain
is killing me
My mouth is heavy
I am sore to the throat
I weep
teardrops fill my days and nights
my sweetheart
why have you left

The place you have left for
is too far
if I reached
the highest of mountaintops
I would not find you there
why have you left
Oh lover, why have you left
you have broken my heart
by leaving me behind (Kalupio 2003).
Sometimes miracles are possible

Maria Seeto


Oh sori, in tok inglis this word is ‘magic’. Me toktok yu: in Papua New Guinea olegeta man na meri are superstitious. Olegeta believe yu no can question how some things happen, like why me toktok yu when yu are reading this story. Yu tingting tispela impossible? Nogat. Me tok tru long yu. Magic can happen. Me believe if me toktok yu, it will halivim yu save this story. Yu not know this word ‘save’? Emi mean ‘know’ na ‘understand’. Me toktok long majik halivim me to toktok yu, na majik also halivim yu long save. Majik i ken. Magic is possible.

Taim long me toktok yu good: halo, oli kallim mi Maria Seeto. Bipor me live long ples i kallim Rabaul na Rabaul emi long PNG. That’s where me live bipor. Now, me hap (that is, me live) long Brisbane, Australia. Me kam long Brisbane in 1975, when PNG i born. Me, I old: lapun is the word we toktok in pisin for old.

Na mi like toktok yu at the same taim long yu readim this story. Olesam me toktok bipor—olesam Majik.

Me save yu no toktok pisin so me train toktok inglis. Oh, me ken toktok inglis. Me save inglish gutpela. And, oh, yu ken harim me toktok inglish long haus belong me, long children belong me, na long many ples long Brisbane where me live. Me toktok inglis long sampela me meet long market na storekeeper long the mall. Me toktok...
inglish long pipel long bus, na me even toktok inglish long neighbour belong me.

Tispela neighbour he come long samples emi kallim Yugoslavia. Pavle emi name belong tispela neighbour. Pavle nogat toktok inglis gutpela, but me toktok stret long yu: Pavle, he ken save me. Ah ha. Me tingting mebe me toktok gutpela Yugoslavian inglis, not Aussie proper inglis. Mebe, huh? Oh, yes, me toktok inglis gutpela, but mind belong me strong. Mind belong me emi paitim me and want me to toktok in pisin, like me learn when me pikinini. Mebe mind strong because this majik taim. Mebe majik taim is like ‘tingting’, olesam toktok long mind belong yu. Na me only ken tingting in pisin.

Aiyah. Now yu save big secret belong me. Secret me keep from my children.
Long my children me toktok little fib (or mebe big fib?). Long pisin we kallim this fib ‘gaimin’. Me gaimin pikinini belong me for many, many years. Me toktok em: ‘olegeta yu pikinini belong me, yu harim me tok tru: me always tingting long China.’

Yu save? Me tell my children me think in Chinese. Yu like understand why me do this? Me got face long Niugini. Me got brown face na crinkly hair, olesam Niugini meri. Na me want pikinini belong me to tingting me Niugini on outside, like face toktok me is, but inside me long China olesam papa belong me. Why me like to do this? If my children tingting me long China, me feel good because in my hometown when olegeta pela long Rabaul—Chinamen, hapcas (yu save hapcas? Emi mixed race, like me), and Europeans—tingting man na meri kam long China, olegeta kissim respect long tispela man na meri. Bigrpela samting to kam long China. Chinese in Rabaul, emi pipel long save—yu know, clever people—and also emi bigpela something long Rabaul—important people.

Olesam yupela, me tingting, why this majik i ken? Why I get chance to toktok yu while yu read? Me no save. Perhaps it is my ancestors halivim me to remember the things me lusim—oh sori—things me forget because me lapun. Na ating this majik
place is just before me dai pinis, olesam me sleepim. Not dai pinis, but klostu. Long just before God take me on high. Sleeping na dreaming, na my ancestors toktok me and everything clear. If clear for me, then me can make it clear for yu long readim story.

Long majik me can remember what me see when pikinini, what my familii toktok me, like when my nenek grandmother tell me how she kam long Rabaul, she first one in our familii to live long Rabaul. Ole kallim tispela grandmother belong me Koti Pereira na missus Pereira. Long me, she is nenek. Me tingting this word ‘nenek’ emi kam long Malay: nenek name belong grandmother and datuk name belong grandfather. Me save these words.

Nenek toktok me: ‘Maria, me kam long Rabaul, me liklik meri tasol, mebe fifteen kristmas, na me kam long lakatoi. Yu tingting me fib yu, Maria? Nogat gaimin. Me na five other meri long sampela village. Ole meri paddle canoe from island. This island, me nogat name in pisin, but tispela island emi long where my papa stap. Olegeta meri we paddle far, from papa’s island to ples emi kallim Hollandia. Ooh, masta na missus long Hollandia kissim plenty bigpela haus. Na plenti big ships. Plenti masta na missus emi laikim ole island meri i ken work long em. Na workim long haus, na long ship. Papa i kross me warkabaut, he not laikim me run away, but yu save why me leave island belong papa? Me no laikim long papa pindim husband long me. Tispela husband mebe my papa laikim, but me nogat. Mebe me tingting tispela husband lapun, or lazy, or ugly tumuchia. Me tingting olesam pikinini, long dreams na gaimin, na me tingting me wantim love. Yu save? But me nogat tingting tru long hard laip. Hard life is not always gut life. Samtaim what happens in real life, yu nogat pindim tru love. But, me tok tru, behain me do pindim love, na me do pindim gut husband, name belong em Josef. We marry na me kissim pikinini meri, emi mummy belong yupela, Maria.
Husband emi dai pinis so me kallim this pikinini Josefina, olesam name long dead husband.’

Tede me remember tispela story long nenek, but tomorrow, mebe me lusim again. Lapun makes everyone forget but majik help me to remember. Only long majik can me digim what was planted long taim bipor. Majik bring it back.

And gut too that this majik happen because me kranki long me. Me slek. Me klostu dai pinis and me tingting: Maria, yu not make enough effort. Yu save? Me cranky because me not do what me should. This kind of save—this special remembering—should be bigpela samting long me, not only now, when me klostu dai pinis, but oletaim. Me got brother and tispela remembering should be bigpela samting belong my brus, Henry, too. But, me tingting, we tupela stupid. Me tingting mebe Henry lusim, olesam me. Henry got different story to tell than me. Henry and me only togeta like familii until Henry small boy because when war kam long Japan, Henry mebe four or five, na he go long bush. But this no matter, because even if we only together like familii for short time, Henry and me we are blood, na we got stories long taim bipor. Nowhere else can we pindim tispela stories.

That war long Japan no gut. Me so sad after war. Mummy belong me na nambatu papa belong me, emi dai pinis long war. Mebe me should tok clear about tispela nambatu papa. Henry and me kallim tispela nambatu papa ‘daddy George’.

Tispela papa i kam long nenek’s haus after volcano go boom, na he be my daddy because nambawan papa (my China daddy) he no stap. Me only liklik pikinini long when numbawan papa he go long bush live with Niugini meri. Numbawan papa he kissim Henry go long bush, too, na Henry no kam back long me. Later, when war pinis, me hearim Henry live long bush with new Niugini mama. Mebe yu tingting Maria she gaimin again. If Maria na Henry no toktok for many kristmas, how Maria save Henry
no tellim story long familii belong em? Yu read story, na long majik, yu lainim. But
tupela important samting for me to say to yu. Wan ting: Henry and me, we mebe no
save each other for, oh so many, years, but we still familii; na tupela: me save strong
tumuch long Henry and me, we last ones in our family to save taim bipor. Soon Henry
na me dai pinis, na stories dai pinis too. This is how me save me and my brus both
stupid. What we tupela tingting? How our familii save if we no toktok? Familii no save
where we kam from or who we are if we no tok. Nuting make sense. And me tingting
majik no ken kam long familii, only long yu. Yu special.

Okay, then, mebe tispela gut taim long me toktok yu long my granddaughter
Francine. Francine special long me. Francine emi wan young clever meri, but she nogat
all the answer. Francine no save everything, like samtaim she tingting she does. But
Francine want to save, believim strong it is what she should do.

Laip not like that: ken only save what long own head, not other people’s head.
Olegeta pipel—everyone—lookim long samting, na save olegeta samting different. Me,
I lookim long samting wan way (traditional mebe, or lapun head way) and he not the
sam long Francine. Head belong Francine only save laip olesam what gut long young
people, or mebe long Aussie way. Francine no save Niugini way. But this is what makes
laip gut. Everyone being different and everyone making mistakes and needing to put
right. Me puttim right by telling yu stories through majik. Mebe yu tingting: why Maria
need majik to tell story? Just toktok tasol. Tispela story not only my story. Emi about
familii belong me and what we do, what we believe, and what we think. This story hard
to tell. Aiyah. Mebe me toktok yu why this story hard work.

Lookim me, na my beliefs and habits. Ole bits and pieces. Nenek lainim me to
cook Malay because she Malay. My papa long China na he lainim me toktok long
China. My Aussie grandkids lainim me computer (liklik tasol, olesam me pretend me
save, click-click keys and smile). Save? Bit of this, bit of that—oh, nogat, this kain
toktok not gut. Yu no ken save tis samting. Mebe best way, so yu save about my familii
and its bits and pieces, na about story and its bits and pieces, is to tok yu that my familii
is same-same how I cook mumu. Ah yes, gutpela way to explain, I ting! And gutpela
because my familii na this story he kam long Niugini, and mumu gutpela kaikai long
Umumum, yes. Gutpela.

First, yu need to save samting long mumu. Mumu, tispela, emi kaikai made from
anything—whatever yu have in pantry belong yu—bits of this and bits of that—and emi
ken be cooked long tis way or that way. Yupela only need save liklik long kukim na
wokim kaikai. What me say is yu no need know plenty because yu ken kukim mumu
whichever way yu laik: follow tradition or adapt it to suit new places, new ingredients,
new ways of cooking.

No matter where yu hap, long bipor yu kukim, yu need kissim ingredients. Yes?
Long Australia, self-serve long Woolworths or Farmers’ Market. Long Niugini, self-
serve when coconuts and cooking bananas grow on trees, na taro, kaukau, tapioca roots,
and yams grow in the ground. Just self-serve by pickim na digim up. Kumu—that is, all
our greens—grow everywhere. If yu long coast or long mountains, different ones for
different ples. Depends long hap belong yu. Kumu is aibika leaves, choko leaves, sweet
potato tops and pumpkin tips, oh, and plenti more. If yu toktok wanpela man na meri,
‘what this green vegetable’, man na meri toktok yu, ‘kumu tasol’. That is all yu need to
save. Ole kumu. Yu save which gutpela long yu or nogat gutpela long yu long kukim na
long kaikai em. Yu traim, yu save tispela no gut long yu, or tispela gutpela tru. Some
bitter, some sweet.
Oh, yes and olegeta man na meri tingting different long cooking kumu. Some like kumu that is mushy, some like it strong tasting, some like it peppery, and some like it bitter. Some like to cook it separate, and some like to cook kumu long abus.

Ah hah. Yu nogat save abus? Na me toktok yu long abus!

Abus is meat, fish and poultry. Long Australia, yu go long IGA or Coles or Woolworths or maybe butchers and decide which abus is cheap na gutpela, but long Niugini, again, which abus yu kaikai depends long hap belong yu, na, like every place, even long Australia, what’s in wallet belong yu.

So now yu save? What goes long mumu depend on wonem grow long garden belong yu, or grow or run round in bush, or ples belong yu. Also depend on how much money, na wonem abus na kumu yu can kissim. No matter wonem go long mumu, mumu gutpela na emi come long a bit of this and a bit of that, like me toktok yu bipor, same olesam long familii. Yu save?

Na me toktok yu long wokim kaikai, because how yu prepare food is important too. Yu got your kumu na yu got your abus, but how yu wokim, sori, how yu prepare, yu save long tradition. Tradition toktok kam long bipor, yu learn from old times, but tradition only makim road, only show the way. When yu need to, yu ken use tradition to find new way. Olesam me toktok yu: old tradition long mumu yu kukim long banana leaf and serve long new banana leaf. New (modern) tradition, yu kukim long alfoil and paper plate is new banana leaf.

But always tradition is there to guide.

So when we leave Niugini and come to Australia, as some of us did, we find other ways to wokim kaikai. We not changed. Tradition not changed. We just lainim new ways. Adapt is the word. Yes. Adapt.
Pinis tok long kukim, now me toktok yu long familii belong me. Samesame long familii. Tradition toktok long who yu be, but he no stap the same. For my familii, China emi numbawan tradition but this tradition i no stand on his own. He go togeta long Niugini tradition na long other traditions. We never forget tradition, even if our young people think they no save or lusim or mebe never knew. We samtaim nogat toktok long tradition, but tradition sit long belly, carried inside, na tradition emi passim long new ways. Olesam when wokim mumu there is new way long keeping kumu fresh when we nogat kumu growing long our garden. This way: passim (wrapping) laplap long kumu and put in fridge. Same-same new way long every part of our lives. Who we are today comes from who we were before.

Oh me tok, tok, tok. Me save. Yu tingting tispela long me: Maria yu lapun meri na yu toktok tumuchia. And still me got more to toktok long yu. Now I tell yu about me. Me explain why familii olesam mumu.

Me toktok yu bipor, name belong me Maria Seeto. Seeto name of husband, and Seeto name of father, but not same family. Just same name. Husband and papa both kam long China. First, me toktok long husband. Nem belong husband emi Seeto Tak Tam or Patrick Seeto. Next me toktok long papa. Nem belong papa belong me emi Seeto Wei or Leo Seeto. Tupela Seeto na neither one come from same familii and nogat from same village in China. So first ting long tispela familii, emi got some Chinese inside. Me, I lainim long China by hearing my papa. He lainim me his language, na long what me should respect. He not around much, but me lainim olesam. Na when me grown-up and kissim pikinini, me teach Chinese traditions long em and behind, pikinini belong me teach pikinini belong em. Tradition keep going.

But familii not only long China. My mama’s mama (my nenek) emi Malay. Nenek toktok my mama long wokim fish head curry na chicken in coconut sauce,
olesam kaikai long ples she born, liklik island somewhere—maybe dis ples emi kallim Indonesian. Nenek kam long Niugini, leavim this island, long time ago but she no lusim lessons from her papa na mama, na she teach my mama—how to dress, how to talk, and how to be respectful—na she laimim me, and so on. Me laik stap here for liklik taim, na me toktok yu long my mama. She lookim olesam island meri. Olegeta man na meri tingting mamma ikam long liklik island, olesam nenek. But, ha, mama (Josefina), she born long Rabaul. Me no save how come my face toktok me long Niugini. Olegeta man na meri nogat believe me long China; nogat believe me long island. Why face belong me not look like my mama or my papa? Why my face not like my brother Henry? Henry emi kissim face long China.

Ah, humbug me. Too late to worry long face. Toktok long my familii, tasol.

Mama’s papa emi got German papa, so me liklik German, na me liklik Niugini because mama’s grandmother kam long Madang. This big secret long familii, na me only save this long majik. Bipor, all my laip, me tingting datuk Josef grandpa belong me.

Still more bits and pieces. Tupela sons belong me emi married na sons’ wives also have their own traditions: wan belong Australia na wan belong Papua. Ole kissim own traditions na laimim pikanini belong em. So yu save? Familii nogat one samting: not Chinese, not Malay, not German, not Niugini, na not Australian (even if we kissim Australian passport). My familii i kissim liklik olegeta samting. So bipor, when me toktok beliefs belong me bits of this and bits of that, me toktok tru. These bits and pieces very important long me. Bits of China like red for good luck. Bits of Niugini, like good weather going to come when the wind blows in a certain way and this me lainim from the Tolai people of Rabaul (our home town). About feeding the ghost and being respectful of the dead, lainim long my papa (maybe too from husband belong
me—Patrick ole kallim—but toktok tru, no laik lainim anyting from Patrick). Me lainim what kaikai tastes best, where painim good kumu and abus and long checkim if gutpela or nogat, same-same as Niugini man na meri. Now yu can save: my familii olesam mumu. Yu nogat laugh, long what me toktok. Familii olesam mumu but yu no can kallim familii ‘mumu’. Good name for familii. But name not necessary. Name only say wan ting about familii. Family plenti more than wan ting. Each man na meri ole save what’s good na bad, what’s important and how samting makes em feel inside, so no need name. Belief kam long bel belong em, from how feel inside. Kam from living. Gut feeling belong me kam long living in Niugini and living long Australia. Na some tings just about me, Maria: my own way, Maria’s way; a little bit from before in Niugini and a little bit from later in Australia.

Now me toktok long tispela story. Story kam long many places, from long time ago to today. Olesam mumu dis story igat many ingredients and olegeta plenty pipel toktok, only tok liklik, only as much as can fit upon an aibika leaf, ha. But yu should remember, ole stories olesam aibika leaf: aibika got big leaves and small leaves. Big are bitter, small are delicious, olesam big and little of story. Story of my familii also kissim old tradition na new tradition: for bipo long taim (long when only save laip long Niugini na only kissim kaikai long bush na garden) na for tede (long when kissim kaikai long Coles na Woollies and long Brisbane). Same-same tispela story. Emi long bipo long taim and long tede. Yu nogat lusim: story long family, na tradition, and tradition everywhere. Emi long wokim kaikai, na what we ting important, na what we no lusim. Tradition no need samting strong because it part of us: belong inside us, long belly, long heart, long head. Yu ken lukim tradition long how we live our life, in the liklik tings we do as we go about living. Tradition kam long ancestors, long Niugini, long Australia, long gut na bad tings that happen, na long our stories. Past is past—na me believe past
inside us, past long man na meri, na past toktok long who we are, what is important. It’s in our blood.

Yu save?

No lusim wonem me toktok yu: bipo long taim and tede—the past and the present—olesam mumu—na workim togeta na make future, na ole kam long tradition.
January 1975—Rabaul, Territories of Papua and New Guinea, eight months before the Territories become Papua New Guinea.

Henry Seeto (Maria’s brother)

Saturday morning and, following long tradition, the Rabaul markets are open for business. He pulls into the kerb despite the No Parking sign, lets the engine idle as he watches his wife, Rachel, and his youngest child clamber out of the cab and lift the fruit and vegetables from the tray onto the ground. When they have finished, he pulls out, drives further up the street and parks. Casually he strolls back towards the market.

Ah yes. The bung! Gutpela ples long bung!

He leans against a concrete brick wall and lets the sounds and the smells of the bung wash over him. The bung services all the communities of Rabaul, so voices using Kuanua—the local Tolai language—mingle with Tok Pisin, Cantonese and English.

Traders and their customers spill out from under the shaded area into the sun. There’s a scent of ripened fruit. A truck laden with villagers arrives. Men, women and children jump from its tray to the ground and the truck roars away. Another takes its place. Babies sleep peacefully as they swing from string bilums hanging from their mothers’ heads. Old men take ropes of tobacco and strips of newsprint from their palm-frond pouches and roll them into long lengths of smoking pleasure. Children with hair peroxide-bleached by their mothers scratch their heads and bottoms, their large eyes unable to move fast enough to take in everything that is to be seen. Men and women,
already swaying from betel nut intoxication despite the early hour of the day, spit dialect at each other between their red, ruined teeth and roar loudly at each others’ jokes. Fine pumice dust rises and settles again, stomped on by hundreds of feet. Dust and noise: this is the bung, same as always.

Henry is distracted by a group of giggling pikininis. What seems to be amusing them is the white masta and missus trying to beat down the price of a basket of tomatoes, their limited Pisin causing confusion. He hides his smile behind his hand. Not that he cares, but it’d be a hassle if the Europeans notice and include him in their battle. A scrawny old Chinaman at the next stall is faring better. He says he will buy ‘plenti-more laulaus’ if the price is right but, despite his promise, walks away blank-faced with only three baskets of the red, shiny fruit.

Henry’s wife is setting up in the front row of tables. He watches as Rachel and his daughter unload the produce and organise the display. It’s been months since they were here. They need some cash. Rachel is hoping to sell her taro and bananas so they can buy a new cotton shirt and a laplap for him to wear to the wedding of his number one son, Ling, in a few weeks. He’ll buy them from one of the trade stores, not in Chinatown but along Malaguna Road, where he always shops. He squats down, folds his laplap between his legs, not ashamed of dressing differently to other Chinese or mixed-race people in Rabaul because he does not think of himself as one of them.

By mid-afternoon Rachel has sold nearly all her produce. He takes the coins she gives him and leaves her with her Tolai wantoks, chatting and laughing, chewing on betel nut. Already he can see from her eyes she’s falling under its spell. Often it would be him too, sitting there chewing and floating. Not today. He meanders along the street towards his favourite store. Past Seeto Brothers, past Leung’s, and Chan’s, to Wong’s. He wanders at a leisurely pace like other pedestrians. Maybe it’s the heat, maybe it’s the
character of the people, but there seems no reason for haste or worry. He weaves carefully around the gatherings at the front of each store. Men sit or squat upon the ground or stand on one leg, one foot tucked behind the standing leg’s knee, a habit so common, he barely notices. They smoke long cigarettes or watch the crowd or talk to wantoks. Women and children watch the men and wait. Who knows what they’re waiting for. It is as if time is endless. He convinces himself he has seen no Europeans, no Chinese, no mixed-race people. Where are they? Has something happened, something important that he didn’t hear about?

At Wong’s, he is surprised to find the double doors are closed, more surprised to see huge padlocks securing them. He can’t believe the store isn’t open. It trades almost 24-hours a day, every day of the year, except maybe New Year when everyone stops for the dragon. He cups his hand to shield against the glare and peers into the store. It is difficult to see through the arc-mesh window protection and the dust-misted glazing, but in the dimness he can see some stock still standing on the shop floor.

Wah? Me no save. How can this be?

He decides to try the next store. It’s identical to its neighbour, except that the corrugated iron external wall is green not blue. This store also has its guardians watching and waiting. One Tolai man watches Henry as he moves to the door. He has his shoulder braced against a post and, again, like the others earlier, one large foot propped against the knee of the other leg and he’s grinning.

What he’s laughing at? Does he think the Chinaman is longlong trying to get into Wong’s?

Henry does feel foolish about that, but the second he asks the question of himself, he feels even more foolish. His uneasiness is truly unsettling him, making him
forget what he has known all his life: for the Tolai, a grin is often a greeting. He turns back to the man and returns the smile.

Inside the shop an elderly Chinese woman is serving. He speaks to her in Cantonese, tipping his head towards the closed store: ‘Where's Mr Wong? Not doing business today?’

The woman’s eyes are empty. Does she understand Cantonese? Not all Rabaul Chinese can speak the dialect. Maybe he should speak in Pisin.

‘Lo missus. masta Wong, he go where?’ The woman continues to stare at him. He sighs but does not break eye contact. Eventually, the woman shrugs her shoulders.

‘Yu been bush longtime, mister? Masta Wong go to Australia longtime now.’

‘Masta Wong on holidays?’

‘Nah, he go-finish.’ She looks down at the counter and watches her own hand as it shuffles across to tidy something not needing attention. The changes that cross her face shock him. The Chinese people he knows pride themselves on containing their emotions. He begins to worry this is surely another sign that he has missed something important.

He moves away from the counter to the boxes where the packs of shirts are stored. He rustles through cellophane packs and selects a white one in his size, then moves to the rack that holds the laplaps, chooses a floral one, returns to the counter, passes over the coins without looking at the woman, and walks out of the store. When he looks back into the store, she is still watching him.

Olegeta tok tru: everyone’s leaving.

He had heard the rumours, but he had pushed the news aside as impossible or unbelievable. The muscles of his chest tighten. It’s not panic but something close to it.
Why everyone going along with this rubbish. Gaimin, this big offer that comes 
too late? Throw passports back in their faces. Been plenty tumuch years of totok long 
‘yu no gut, yu no belong’. Me save. Me save gut. Australia running scared. UN tok stre 
long Australia.

Henry waves his arm wide and flaps his hands. The smokers and loiterers pay 
him no attention.

He’s made his decision. He’ll choose to be a citizen of Papua New Guinea 
because that’s who he feels he is.

But inside, deep down, he’s not entirely convinced that there won’t be trouble 
for people like him, for mixed-race and Chinese, even if they choose to stay. The knot 
inside him grips tighter.

He wanders around the town centre, his bundle of shopping tucked under his 
arm. His sweat pools around the package, but he ignores the discomfort. He begins to 
notice more closed stores, fancies there are fewer familiar faces passing him by. He 
comforts himself by thinking of his home in the village with Rachel and his children, 
where he feels secure as a ‘local’ and can forget that his ancestors came from other 
Around Ah Chee. The street signs are unnecessary. Along these streets he has walked 
all his life: Mango, the big stores and the Palm Theatre; Kamarere, Chong Bros and 
Wong’s milk bar; Casuarina, its huge trees in straight rows either side, as it passes by 
Queen Elizabeth Park; and on Ah Chee, the sounds and smells of China. Every missing 
piece of pavement along the pathways, each aroma encountered in passing, every sound 
regularly heard, has been written into his memories since he was a child.
What if, as a Chinaman or, as some toktok, a hapcas man, he must leave, must
go long Australia? Australia doesn’t like brown men, Australia doesn’t like hapcas,
Australia doesn’t like Chinese.

Again, the tightening inside his chest.

What would it be like to live long Australia? Nogat bananas and pawpaw
hanging off trees for him to pick, no taro growing in ground, nogat good pis long
harbour. Different to Niugini. Long Niugini he save where to get kaikai when he has no
money. How he get work when he nogat save bipela business man, olesam he save em
long Rabaul? No work, no money. Long Australia, always need money. Here work
only when he wants or needs, and plenty taim no need for money, always Rachel’s
vegetable garden for kaikai long family. Na clothing—well, laplap and meri blouse not
cost plenty. New ones only long special occasions.

He pats the parcel under his arm.

Ating too much pain to leave, pain in heart and pain in body! Oh, Australia
rule, but no kiap—no government official—no ken toktok long Henry Seeto, yu go long
Australia. Nobody ken toktok yu no belong tispela ples. No one can say he not belong
long Niugini just because his papa come long China! Why should he go? This is his
ples, his home!

Needing to see himself as Niuginean, he flips through what makes him so:
Brigid, his stepmother, is Tolai; he’s lived in one village or another most of his life; and
his wife and children are Niuginean. He ignores that he has used his Chinese-ness for
advantages in schooling and hospital treatment, opportunities that a Niuginean might
not have. Nor does he consider what this might mean to his Niuginean family: if he
must leave, as he fears, what happens to them? His eyes narrow, his jaw tightens. It all
comes down to being Chinese: when he was a pikinini, he was sent away by his first mother because Japanese soldiers didn’t like Chinese boys, and now same trouble comes through independence.

But going into the jungle with his nambawan father brought him to Brigid. Brigid became his mother, his new mama, his numbatu mama, Brigid. A new life, a different life.

Forget old mama. Forget the lapun grandmother, forget numbatu papa daddy George, and forget his sister. Only save Brigid, his second mother.

He strolls along Malaguna, heading back to the bung, and surprises himself with a rare thought of his sister. Her husband, he’d heard, was one of those Catholics who’d be looking after his riches. Suppose she’s one of those gone south. That’s if Maria is still married. He’d heard the rumours. For a moment in his mind he lets loose his theory about the rich ‘Katolik Chinese’. Methodists—like he is—are just ordinary people. Not a coincidence, in his mind, that Catholic Chinese are wealthy, because wealth bends regulations. Been so for years. No different now, when trouble is ahead. Only the poor Chinese got problems; not Catholic Chinese, like Maria’s husband.

He clicks his tongue.

He’s back at the bung, wandering through the crowd, looking for his wife. A fight has broken out on the far side of the markets. The men’s voices are loud. The sound of their words warns him that the men are drunk. They are bickering about who has first rights to flirt with a particular meri. The woman is drunk too. The noise and the way such disturbances can quickly escalate remind him of the big fear that creeps into any talk about Independence—payback. Even Aussies worry that once Niugini gets to rule itself there’ll be retaliations!
He remembers, back—when was that?—late ‘fifties maybe, when the Tolai decided they’d had enough of colonial rule. The Tolai called themselves the Mataungans, and their leader, John Kaputin, stood in front of the New Guinea policemen and spoke, one Niuginean to another. He nods to himself.

Kaputin smart. Kaputin save olegeta emi policemen were mainlanders and that meant they would not save his Tolai language. Instead of toktok Kuanua, Kaputin, he toktok Pisin. He tok: wonem laws and wonem property yupela polis protect?

Nodding and approving of Kaputin’s wisdom, he concedes—it’s still, even now, the property of either the white man or the wealthy (Catholic?) Chinese, not the property of Niugineans, though it’s soon supposed to be their country.

Mebe these pipel who leave Rabaul—masta Wong and hapcas familiis or whoever—save something he doesn’t about the likelihood of payback?

His chest muscles spasm once more.

Until Kaputin, everyone thought Niugineans too easy-going to make trouble. Everyone hoped they’d forget the times they’d been fleeced especially by trade stores—by short weighing products, over-charging or selling shoddy goods—or generally being treated as idiots. Everyone knows about tribal payback—eye for an eye, wife for a wife—but after Kaputin, everyone wondered if Aussie law would be forgotten and tribal law might come back into practice. Tribal law includes payback. Everyone is scared of payback.

He sighs.

China face belong em bring him nuting but pen, pen long heart na pen long mind. Chinese-ness meant going away from home, from Rabaul, and no longer he gat sister, grandmother, mummy with blue eyes, and daddy George.
No daddy George, he repeats to himself. He fights to forget his losses, but the memories break through the barriers he has worked hard to build: of daddy George’s moustache tickling his cheek; in the space between daddy George’s neck and his shirt collar, where he had buried his own face, the smell of daddy George’s hair; a sensation of being held tightly against daddy George’s chest, so tight the rhythm of daddy George’s heart beat pulsed through his bones. Daddy George, the only father he knew, a father who laughed and played with him, who held him high and kissed him often, who showed his love for his ‘son’ in many ways, each and every day. Then, on the day he had to leave home, daddy George’s love was shown to be a lie. Daddy George, he was told, was not his father. His real father was that man, Seeto Wei, who was supposed to save him but did not seem to want a son. On that day, he became a boy without a father; a boy without a family. He clenches his fist, and pushes it into the place on his chest behind which his heart should be.

He could have gone in search of his family after the war. Why didn’t he? The answer can’t find its way out. Only more questions. Why did that blue-eyed mama send him into jungle? Why did she not send Maria? Does no one love him, except Brigid? He grits his teeth.

His only mother: Brigid.

He feels his stomach knotting, his muscles tensing and knows it is time to think calm thoughts. To think about his mother Brigid.

He clutches his stomach. Why do these bad things happen to him? Only explanation must be his Chineseness. Speaking Cantonese labels him Chinese. Time to stop speaking Cantonese. In PNG, in this new nation, Cantonese is not going to be special any more, like him being Chinese does not make him important any more. This is Niugini now. Tok Pisin is the official language. PNG government says so. Everyone
speaks Tok Pisin. No matter where they are in PNG: the government say you belong in Rabaul, then you can still speak Kuanua, or Sepik man and woman can still speak Sepik but officially for new nation, there’s only English, Tok Pisin and Papuan Motu.

Official or not, in his heart, for him it is Kuanua. For Brigid, and for Rachel, Kuanua is the language they speak every day. To other villagers; to their children. Kuanua brings him happy thoughts, of family and home and love because words in Kuanua have been what he heard in those moments when he most needed reassurance.

Time, now, to stop swinging back and forth, to stop being Chinese, to be only one kind of man: Niuginean.

2

November 1975, two months after the granting of independence—Lakunai Airport, Rabaul, in the East New Britain Province of Papua New Guinea.

Maria

All her life she’s been a good Catholic girl. She’s gone to the Fathers whenever she has needed to understand the complexities of life. Inside her, this crisis feels exactly like the one when, at an early time in her life, Father Gustav had explained to her Saint Benedict’s intention. Father had been trying to reassure her. Many years ago she had told him she felt as if there was no place where she felt she was truly herself, not even in the church. She’s forgotten his words, even forgotten the true meaning of the vow. All those years ago, Father had explained it to suit her dilemma then. But what she feels today reminds her, not of his explanation but of how she felt when she had listened to Father. She’s certain that Father would not agree with her interpretation, not as she understood him then, at the time of the telling, nor today, when she has recalled it for another purpose.
Home: the place where St. Benedict says God is found and, once found, where one should remain.

She does not understand why God does not let her stay in her Home? Why has God forgotten her?

Her feet lead her up the aircraft boarding steps. There’s wild flapping in her chest. Like the wings of a copra beetle speared to the ground by village children. She pauses at the entrance of the cabin, nostrils flared. Must remember this moment. Last smells: sulphur, rotting vegetation, aviation fuel. The steward takes her boarding pass from her hand, and repeats the words written on it. ‘Maria Seeto. G4’.

Yes, her name is ‘Maria Seeto’ but Maria Seeto is no longer the person she has always been. What will this Maria Seeto be like, when she no longer lives in Rabaul?

She turns back, the air shimmers, and she gazes over the tarmac towards the terminal, the capital letters R A B A U L painted in red across its corrugated roof. At the gate, hands wave. Slow, cautious, sad. The ones who are staying. A surge of envy passes through her. She doesn’t wave back. And there, to the right, on the edge of Lakunai airport, is the peak of The Mother draped in green, and the smaller, partly denuded, volcano Tavurvur with its wispy clouds hovering above its gaping mouth. It’s as if these mountainous guardians of Rabaul can’t believe she’s leaving. Grief fills her. No hope of ever coming back. One last look at Home. Except it’s no longer her home. Already it’s Papua New Guinea and belongs to Niugineans. She looks back at those still waving from the gate. Her heart softens.

Ole pipel sad olesam me.

It doesn’t matter if they are staying, like those at the gate, or going, as she is. Everyone’s worried about what’s ahead. Ever since the UN proved they didn’t understand everything about Niugini. The UN representatives think they speak for every
person who belongs to Niugini, but they only speak for the tribespeople. They aren’t speaking for those who have lived here for many, many years, like nenek. If her nenek had been still alive when independence came, where would she go if they told her she wasn’t Niuginean? She couldn’t go back to her island. Rabaul’s been her home for most of her life, and home for her daughter and her grandchildren. UN might talk to Australia: you do this, you do that for PNG, but UN didn’t say what the many other people who live in PNG must do, where they might go. UN has a big meeting, sits around in a circle. On the newsreel at Palms Theatre, everyone sees them meeting and talking talking, talking. Or people read about the UN in the newspaper. So everyone knows that trouble is coming. Everyone knows that they can’t say this is Home anymore. And those people who’re waving goodbye, they’re frightened about what’s going to happen to them here, in Rabaul, as much as she’s worrying about what’s going to happen to her in Australia. No one’s happy. Only thing that’s certain is none of those she knows, her family and friends, belong in Niugini any more. Niugini belongs to Niugineans. The rest of its people are only visitors, now.

She holds at bay her awareness that her husband Patrick and her sons—Andrew, Gabriel and Daniel—are ahead of her and already struggling up the DC3’s steep aisle from the rear entry door, pulling themselves forward by grasping the corner of each seat in the rows ahead of them, as they move upward towards their allocated places. She refuses to give in to her usual habit of mentally guiding their progress. Today they must find their own way. She enters the plane’s cabin and begins her own ascent to her seat, puffing and panting in the effort. Overriding the demand the ascent makes upon her body is a fear that is building inside her. She’s certain this journey can only end with her becoming an empty shell, a body without a soul.
January 1976—Brisbane, south eastern Queensland, Australia.

Maria

Weeks have passed since they came to Australia. Just as Maria didn’t want to come to this country, today she doesn’t want to be here, in Brisbane, in Patrick’s uncle’s car. She’s certain this journey today can only bring her pain. But for her husband this outing is only about regaining his good standing in life by acquiring assets here in Australia.

She sneaks a sidewards glance at Aunt on the other side of the car’s rear seat. Her ribs and arms ache from being held tight for too long. She tries shutting her eyes, tries to imagine herself in some other place. Nothing happens.

Lookim. Lookim samting. Kissim samting.

She needs to identify something—anything—that might fill the empty space inside. Is something out there, something that will replace what’s missing? She squints to focus as the world flashes by, but the contours of this strange city hold no meaning for her. She’s departed one place and still not properly arrived in the next, lost in the in-between.

She wants to pray. She remembers her childhood and the nuns at St. Joseph’s Malay School reassuring her. They’d said: He’ll accept all prayers, including those of sinners.

She doesn’t believe God’ll listen to a Catholic who’s lost her faith but, despite her doubts, she silently recites scattered phrases.

Grant me O Lord a steady hand and watchful eye that no one shall be hurt as I pass by ... Protect me and lead me safely to my destiny ....

‘What?’
Apparently not just in her head. Aunt’s catnap has been disturbed. She feels Aunt’s stare. But when she turns to look, Aunt’s head is turned away. She brushes her hand across her forehead. A migraine. A cup of tea would be nice. The mood inside the car is overbearing. Her thoughts turn to the past. She knows this is dangerous. Permitting her mind to turn backwards has already brought about her isolation during this journey.

Uncle’s car hurtles on. She clings to the seat belt, her body tense. The others are silent. It feels personal. The wind swirls in through the car window and dries tears she hadn’t noticed. This twisting and turning: no wonder she’s confused and bewildered. A child who’s lost grip of her mother’s hand.

She tries to piece together the jigsaw of Brisbane, its suburbs confined and stretched by the twisting, turning river. She’s lost count of how many bridges they’ve crossed. After each crossing, she asks Uncle, ‘Which river tispela?’ Each time he answers ‘same-same.’

The day’s hot and Uncle’s not-so-new station wagon is stifling. Her face is as stiff as Patrick’s white shirts had felt when Samuel (the haus-boi back home) over-used the starch. They pass old timber Queenslanders high above the ground, tiny fibro cottages, and ancient stone buildings. Now older suburbs. Established gardens. Her head turns, so that her eyes can keep those gardens in sight: foliage so old, so deep dark green they seem familiar.

This look olesam frangipani na hibiscus long Rabaul, emi grow fast. Weeks from pikinini to grandpa.

Her chest feels as if it is splitting open.
They pass new brick and timber buildings with well ordered gardens and, now, newer developments. A Martian plain with timber skeletons of half-built structures standing out from the bare red soil. Not even a weed. What hope here?

Uncle brings his car to a standstill alongside some almost-completed buildings.

First out of the car is Patrick. Keen. ‘Humph!’ he says, as if his presence deserves a special greeting when there is none. She watches as he plants his feet firmly on the roadway, fists on hips. This, all his to grab. A piece of the new country. Land is the key to wealth. She’s heard that lecture many times.

With no apparent alternative but to join the house-gazing trio, Maria opens the car door and lets her feet drop to the roadway. Heavily. Slowly she straightens her back and stands, arms dangling by her side, shoulders rounded, back facing her companions. A way of punishing them, if by chance they’d take notice—punishment for being so enthusiastic for her to settle, punishment for not seeing her pain, or if they do see, for treating it as ‘samting nuting’. Besides, she doesn’t want them to see her face. In case. She looks despairingly at what lies before her. Homes for her picking, yet none of them appeal to her. A landscape so bare, so empty, so hopeless, and so completely remote from the soft green she has known. Not one of these buildings is able to override the memory of her little house in Rabaul, snug beneath the wide sheltering spread of mango and casuarina trees. She suppresses a whimper.

Wonem tispela? Lukim. A liklik house. Not up here on hill, where these three are looking, but down there, at the bottom of the street.

That small house, partly completed, its skeleton timber still bare in places, stands out from the others on offer because of its small porch that faces the street.

This is a place that a person could stay in for many years.

A ples belong plenti pikinini, a ples long familii.

She imagines floorboards and herself standing on them. The image takes hold of her. Without a word to her companions, she begins walking slowly down the hill towards the verandah. Carefully she mounts the three timber steps. So small is the space it is really only a porch; from the top step, the doorknob is within reach of her fingers. She takes that last step onto the floorboards then turns towards the street and looks out, as a captain might from his ship’s bridge. Her head is high and because there’s no protection on the porch she finds herself squinting in the harsh Brisbane sun, and those thoughts begin to drag her into dangerous territory, thinking other places, other times.

Long Home, sun not so bright, long Rabaul sun softer and gentler. Clouds, bushes, trees filter its harsh rays, but nothing here to stop them …

She forces herself to concentrate on what is in front of her.

The others have followed her. Three sets of eyes are fixed upon her. Patrick wants this settled—he’s scolded her, several times, about her unreasonableness. Aunt and Uncle want their home back to themselves.

With Uncle, Aunt and Patrick on the porch with her, it’s crowded—but she doesn’t care. She says not a word, nor looks at the other three. She just stands with her hand resting on the rail, eyes intent. The other three look to the place that seems to have her attention and see nothing but bare earth. What she sees is all in her head. She sees herself older, surrounded by thick foliage, and she knows she’s planted and nurtured this greenery. Yes, this’ll do. She turns and lets her eyes speak to Patrick. He’ll take care of the practical considerations. Already he’s pulled the price list out of his pocket, and is running his finger down the numbers. His brow furrows. He leans over and speaks quietly in Cantonese to his uncle.
‘This one’s cheaper. Why do you think?’

His uncle strokes his chin, his eyes scan what can be seen of the building without moving, and then Uncle’s face brightens, as if he’s suddenly become wise. Nodding his head, he replies in Cantonese, ‘Not modern.’

Already she knows that this verandah is hers. Patrick won’t worry about style if lack of it makes it cheap. He nods his head to her. Aunt and Uncle smile. She can feel her body releasing, the corners of her mouth twitching. Not a home, she concedes, but a house.
3 am, December 5, 2010, outside Cezanne’s Restaurant, West End, Brisbane.

Francine Seeto (Maria’s granddaughter)

’Soo you do leave your ivory tower. Does that mean you aren’t a princess, after all?’

‘Michael Cosgrove! What are you doing here so late?’

‘Could ask the same of you. You are usually gone long before we floor people get to leave.’

‘Well, I must say fate moves in mysterious ways, Miss Seeto. I am very, very pleased that, on this late, late working evening, I have the chance to meet in person the legend of Cezanne’s. I can see for myself you’re not just a ghostly presence that hovers above us mere mortals slaving away at floor level.’

‘What? A legend? Why on earth?’

‘The girl who sits and watches.’

‘Oh, I didn’t realise you floor plebs discussed my hobby, my coffee break recreation. Caught out. I do nothing that can do harm—anyway, it’s just me imagining the restaurant floor as being part of Renoir’s The Boating Party, wishing I could be elsewhere and splashing paint to recreate the scene. Gets me through the day.’

‘Oh arty, are you.’

‘Oh, oh, Let slip there, didn’t I? Well, might I cut this conversation short by saying rudely that’s for me to know.’
‘Well, I am going to ignore you. I’d say: serious and arty. And I should declare myself here, before this conversation continues: I’ve got a thing for serious women.’

‘Bit late in the evening—sorry, bit too early in the morning—for you to be making a move on me, there, Cosgrove. No fraternising with fellow employees.’

‘No. Seriously. I like serious women. I admire women who know what they want and work at it. Don’t come across many. Not common among us Gen Ys. My dad says we all expect the world served to us on a plate.’

‘And what could you possibly know about me? How could you possibly know what kind of person I am?’

‘Well, I am observant—some of us are quick learners, you know.’

‘I thought you admired serious women. Surely, a true admirer would not indulge in teasing one such serious woman about her seriousness!’

‘And I thought you said I wouldn’t know you. I can only say to you that you’ve under-estimated my super powers! I know you. You’re a girl who’ll stand up for herself—and now you’ve proven me right, haven’t you? Not bad for someone who supposedly doesn’t know you, eh?’

‘Got a high opinion of yourself, is what I’d say. But how about, now, we let this conversation truly end, before it ends badly … where’s my darn lift? Flatmates. Can’t rely on some people, no matter what they promise!’

‘Sorry if I’ve made you uncomfortable—oh, oh, and there you go—looks like the wait is over. Headlights shining down the street, reckon they can only be your lift. No one else would be out here this early. Yours? Or mine, maybe.’

‘Gail! Where have you been! You promised to be here on the dot. I really can do with some sleep, got numbers swimming in front of my eyes! Get me out of here.’

‘Frank, you’re always so impatient.’
‘Yeah well, if you hadn’t been partying … Suppose I should ask, was it a good party?’

‘Yeah, party was great. Got some goss to share. But if you’re not up to it, the goss can wait until tomorrow. And hi there sexy Michael, my boy. Frank, you don’t mind, do you? Michael’s place is on our way home.’

‘You know Michael? Of course, you’d know Michael! You know everyone!’

‘Yeah, well, coffee last week with my workmates, and Michael was the best waiter ever! Come on, boy-oh. Don’t let old sourpuss put you off. Climb aboard.’

‘Tah, Gail. I am up for the goss if you are sharing. And this gal is Frank, not Francine? Wow. Frank the spy.’

‘Don’t you dare call me Frank. Only my friends call me Frank.’

‘Oh, you two gotta be friends already. Only “friends” get that kind of telling off, Michael. Can see you two are meant for each other.’

2

December 6, 2009, SMS messages between Francine and her friend Elisa

sooo Frank, wot’s this about the new guy at work?????? Gail blabbed. u got the hots, eh, babe? Lol 😊

prob covered in Southern Cross tattoos 4 all I know! u think im bogan-bait?

nah, I saw the bod, Frank. went for coffee this arvo. Simon Baker!

uni, uni, art, art. u can have him. urs, come get him.

2 white 4u Frank lol?

ur racist. live with u don’t I white bitch? btw u coming to our staff party? ur my date.

free booze? am cheap drunk. cu soon Frankie girl :)'
Francine’s visual diary

January 19, 2010, approx. 9.30 pm, at the Big Day Out side show (Lily Allen),

Riverstage, Brisbane Botanical Gardens,

Francine

On main stage the support act, Calvin Harris, is a dark silhouette that disappears and re-appears to the pulse of the flame red background lighting. His version of house music is an epileptic’s nightmare that is relieved periodically by triumphant jets of steam blasting upward from stage front, as if Calvin has a need to emphasise his claim to the words “I Am Not Alone”. The electronically produced rhythm accelerates just as Elisa turns to face them, with hands lifted high to halt their raggedy conga-line. Elisa’s smile is a declaration she’s sure she’s fulfilled her promise of finding the ‘perfect location’.

No longer driven with the purpose of moving forward, the five of them cluster together,
protecting each other from the bouncing and gyrating majority. As if an answer to the question ‘what’s next?’ has immediately come to them, Elisa, Gail and Gail’s new boy, Nedzy, begin to jump up and down and sway, like everyone else. Until this moment, Michael’s light grip of her hand has guided her through the crowd, but he too seems to have received the same message and, in his need to bounce, he lets go of her hand. Abandoned, unprotected, rapidly cooling, her hand dangles aimlessly. Grief rushes through her. Seconds pass before she realises she is the only one not moving. She looks at the mass of bouncing and waving bodies and then Nedzy bounces into her vision, his arms swaying above his head like a tree in a cyclone.

Her body mindlessly moves up and down, up and down. It feels as if she’s been doing this for hours but Calvin has yet to finish his set. There’s suddenly warmth and weight on her shoulders. She stops moving and turns. Michael drops his hands from her shoulders. Already she misses them. His face is ablaze with a smile as he moves closer. His eyes are directly aligned to hers. That stupid smile hangs around his mouth as his blue eyes stare unblinkingly into her eyes. There is no escape. His face moves even closer to hers. Is their first kiss going to happen here, amidst this bedlam? Her breath fails to leave her lungs. Her body is waiting. His face passes hers and there’s a flutter of air across her earlobe. He breathes his words into her ear.

‘Want a drink?’

She isn’t able to respond. It’s as if his words don’t belong in this slow-moving fantastical dream she’s experiencing: pumping music, pulsing lights, moshers jumping and slugging and crashing around her, and a sensation of Michael’s lips on her ear. Denial is her only choice. She closes her eyes and waves and sways, as though this is her kind of music. Warm fingertips caress her cheeks. Palms cover her ears and turn her face forward. She opens her eyes. Michael’s face is again directly in front of hers. His
head is tilted slightly to one side, that same lopsided smile exaggerating the tilt, and she suddenly remembers a question needs an answer. His lips are moving, slowly and carefully repeating his question.

‘Can I get you a drink?’

She feels herself weaken. Only takes some air exhaled into her ear and the feathery touch of his fingers to defeat her.

5

January, 2010, heading towards the bar at the Big Day Out side show.

Michael Cosgrove

As tall and as strong as he is, he has difficulty pushing through the gyrating mob. He uses the orange glow of the bar lights to guide him as he is buffeted one way or another by the frenzied dancers. He looks back at Francine. She gives him that strange half smile she’s good at, and then looks away, as if she is watching the performance. If Calvin Harris expects to earn bucks from Francine through iTunes purchases he’ll be disappointed. Calvin doesn’t flick his switch either, but he will do anything to spend time with this mystery, even if it is to put up with this inane punkish noise.

When he is closer to the bar, he turns again. Her thumb is on her lip, as if the digit remembers a childhood habit of being sucked. He’s seen this happen before. Always when she is deep in thought. Always when, it seems to him, she believes no one will notice. His fingers ache to stroke that troubled brow. He’d give the world to be permitted to sit in front of that beautiful face, to gaze deeply into those jet black eyes, and listen to her speak of her fears and hopes. But the door between them opens only a crack before it’s slammed shut again. Does she not feel about him as he does about her? Be patient, he recites to himself. Win her trust. She only needs time to see you are
genuine. But there’s a dark voice in his head, a voice of fear, that threatens whatever it is between them is only temporary. A fist grips his heart. What would life be without her in it?

6

Facebook entries

got sore bones and weary head. Lily Allen was sooo great. Must be getting old, cant hack the mosh pit. **FrankieJ Hyde.** Today, *January 22, 2010.* 9.45 am.
did the sun rise today? I hit the sack at dawn and slept until evening. Oooooh my mum thinks I am doomed! **Elisa Simson.** Today, *January 22, 2010.* 8.03 pm.

**FrankieJ Hyde** receives a friend request from **Michael Cee.**

**FrankieJ Hyde** accepts.

7

*January 22, 2010, in the apartment Francine Seeto shares with her friends, Elisa and Gail in an inner Brisbane suburb.*

**Francine**

She can’t believe she has done this. Must be the hangover. She would normally take ages to even look at any friend requests on Facebook. And rarely does she accept them. All the people she wants to network with are already her friends.

Did she hesitate for a second—before she clicked the Accept button and the deed was done? She can’t remember. She saw the request flash, and the name, and after that she was on automatic. In that act, she voluntarily pushed aside her ‘perfect’ plan:
no romance and work hard, save lots of money to invest in her art practice after she graduates at the end of this year.

8

*Early February, 2010, around m***idday, in central Brisbane’s Queen Street shopping mall.*

**Andrew Seeto** (Maria’s eldest son & Francine’s father)

Andrew glances down at his watch. 11.50. Still too early—Francine won’t get here until after twelve.

Blue, red, yellow, green. Purple, pink, orange, white. Florals, checks, stripes and denim. Kaleidoscopic flashes from the passing mob. His job involves handling crowds and at times he can feel himself annoyed by the masses—their impatience, their rudeness, their self-centredness—but this is different. This, here, with the crowds rushing by him, as he sits and waits, is like grabbing fragments of others’ lives.

The waiter brings him the beer he ordered and leaves. Andrew reaches over, takes a firm hold of the pot and lifts it to his mouth. His lips, already pouting, take that first long drawn-out suck. A fine fuzz of froth tingles across the place where a moustache might grow—the sensation reminding him of the smoothness of his upper lip. Since puberty he’s fancied himself with a moustache and furry side burns. Fits with the other image he has of himself, strumming his guitar, friends seated at his feet, adoring faces turned up to him. Moustache and sideburns—never going to happen! Instinctively his lips roll inward and he sucks again, this time more gently. It is the only thing about his body that makes him self-conscious about being Chinese: ever see a hairy Chinamen? His kids always tease him: dad, do you ever see a rock-and-roll Chinaman? You got no need for sideburns and moustache. They’d think something was
wrong with him if he didn’t respond. His usual answer: there’s always a first time for
everything.

His tongue runs slickly along his upper lip and completes the clearance,
hoovering in the remaining dregs of the slightly bitter but delicious residue. He
carefully returns the pot to the table. He studies the mall, the stores, the people passing
by, others sitting at the tables in the café. He hears conversation fragments and bursts of
laughter.

This life, so good. A future life he once worried about, when it was unknown.
Different in so many ways to the one he left behind. Sure, that was years ago, more than
thirty years ago in fact. But leaving that other life was like being re-born. He was one
Andrew before leaving, and another Andrew in Australia. No regrets, but it’s kind of
earth-shaking when he thinks about how things changed. Overnight, from teenager with
dreams and comforting familiarity, to adult in a strange city, another world that
operated at a whole different pace and sets of rules and priorities. Hah, those dreams:
maybe of becoming a rock star, which everyone laughed at, and the other, almost as
impossible, of winning over the heart of one particular Aussie girl who also lived in
Rabaul. Got that second one right. Best thing that ever happened to him.

Who’d toss this life in, anyway? So lucky to be living here in Brisbane. Not sure
how great life might have been if they’d stayed in PNG. He looks around at all the
happy, laughing faces going about their lives here in the mall. Are all these people,
here, feeling the same as he is feeling today, or is it temporary: a day out shopping or
meeting up with friends? Or are they worriers like he is, worrying if life is so good—
maybe it’s too good? Logic tells him a person can’t be happy all they time. If it’s too
good, that’s a sign something is bound to come along to spoil it. His mum’s
philosophies are inescapable: if you get too smug, you jinx yourself.
Despite such dampening thoughts, he can’t stop himself from feeling good about this day. Pity he couldn’t bottle this. A perfect day, packed into a bottle, which could be put aside to be opened on some other not-so-perfect day. Then, when the cork is busted, out will froth the essence of the best of Brisbane: brilliant blue sky, soft breeze, temperature in the mid-twenties, and humidity low. Don’t want to bottle the humidity. Some days a man’s clothes just cling to his body, and it’s hard to breathe. Yeah, he’ll filter out the humidity from his bottled, perfect day.

Between the broken conversations from the passing population comes a sound so familiar he has almost overlooked it. The melodic words: ‘She believes in me’. Ah, Kenny Rogers, coming from one of the stores that line the mall. He loves Kenny: carries Kenny’s CDs in his car; plays them non-stop as he drives. Kenny, in the mall, on this beautiful day, is the cherry on the top. He takes another suck of beer.

Lucky he came early. Otherwise he and Francine mightn’t have found a spare table at their favourite café. Not that that’s a big deal. There are numerous cafés to choose from, but they both prefer this one and he likes that it’s a habit, and sometimes a joke, that they share when they do get to have lunch together. She’ll be late; he knows his daughter well.

The beer and the feel of the day are doing something to his mind. He knows where his mind is heading. Past is past, he always says. Can’t make the past right. The important time is now. But how can he feel so grateful for this day, this moment, his life, if he doesn’t measure it against the past? Did he ever, as a boy, imagine he might find himself sitting here, able to afford the time and the money to enjoy lunch with his daughter? Did he ever as a boy imagine he’d have a daughter like Francine or a son like Lucas? Or for that matter did he ever consider the possibility that he would, at fifty-three years of age, be living here, in Brisbane, in Australia? Never. When you’re a boy,
you think life goes on indefinitely as it does at that moment. You think you’re a boy forever and that how things are is how they’ll continue. And, for that matter, where did the years go? And what does being fifty-three mean, anyway? Some think at that age, he’s old. As a boy, he’d have thought of someone that age as ancient, like his dad had seemed to him. But he feels no different in his mind than he felt when he was twenty, or nineteen or eighteen. Feels he’s at his prime. Well, not entirely. Sometimes his back or his knees remind him otherwise. He rubs his right knee out of habit.

Oh, damn! His mind’s going back to when he was a boy. He tries to resist, but, ah why not, on this beautiful day? A man should appreciate what he’s got, where he’s come from. Instantaneously he’s back there, in ‘the good old days’: when life was only about laughing and learning his ABCs at the Sacred Heart School; that daggy School uniform; the nuns; Rabaul. Well, all of New Guinea. New Guinea was home, after all. Back in those memories and suddenly he feels the same about Rabaul as he did back then, when he was a kid. Then, that place was going to be where he would spend the rest of his life. Wanted nothing more than that (except maybe wanting Kathy to share it with him). Rabaul fitted snugly: no street unknown, and out of town, roads that ventured out only around Gazelle Peninsula—and that wasn’t far. No surprises. He could measure how his life would be in the future by the lives of every one he knew. Europeans would get on with their things, Chinese and mixed-race would do theirs, and Niugineans would do theirs. Been that way for donkey’s years and, before it all changed, he’d not the slightest doubt it would continue to be the same forever. Everyone seemed happy. Damn good feeling, knowing just what was expected of you. Confident, then, that he knew just what was needed to live a good life in Rabaul. But shit happens.
Ah but yes, good things do come from the bad. One of those good things, his wife, Kathy. Back then, she was definitely out of his reach. He laughs at his former self. What a fool he’d been around her. Ha. Anything to get her attention.

He’s fifteen. His family live over near Sulphur Creek, in Chinatown. The Cunninghams live in the Admin-owned houses up off Malaguna Road. Where many of the Aussies live. Big houses, high off the ground. He’s never been in Kathy’s house but he knows what it’s like inside because his mate from school, John Watson, lives up there, on posh hill, too. Sometimes he questions how he and John became friends. Didn’t happen often. Most of the Aussie kids went to boarding school in Australia. The few that didn’t, stuck together. He sometimes questions himself: is he John’s friend because of where John lives (and the nearness to Kathy’s house) or because John is a nice guy, an Aussie who doesn’t mind hanging out with a Chinaman? Those Admin houses—like mansions to him, compared to his family’s home, a few rooms behind his dad’s tradestore—huge and open, looking out at the harbour like they own it. Guess they kind of do, as the Admin are the bosses of everything. Inside John’s house, even his furniture is big. Giant-sized rattan lounge suites with soft floral cushions. Hardly anything on the floor, except the stuff that should be there. In his house, too many people, too little space. Tidy, but packed tight with all they owned. Even had stock from the tradestore spill into the house at times. He’s impressed by the empty spaces of John’s house, but not sure it feels lived in. John complains the same furniture is in every Admin house, because it isn’t each family’s furniture or each family’s house, but the government’s. Kathy’s family’s house is a bit out of his way but he always rides past it on the way to John’s and on his way home.

He bursts out laughing. The unexpected sound of his own voice quickly hauls him back from past to present, back from Rabaul to the Queen Street Mall. He looks up
to see if any of the other diners have noticed. Might think he’s loco, a man laughing as he sits alone. Nah. Too busy laughing, too busy eating and enjoying this great day. He laughs again, but this time very softly, so it’s more a snicker, than the cackle it was before. Amazing. Who’d believe? At fifteen, skinny legged, and still riding a bike, he’d found his wife-to-be.

On his old hand-me-down, fixed-up-with-odd-spare-parts too-small bike that clanks and rattles, he’s riding past Kathy’s house like he does every afternoon, doing stupid things to get her attention. Riding as slowly as he can without the bike falling over, or riding seated backwards on the handlebars. There’ve been times when his knees have collected asphalt from Kathy’s street from falling off because his eyes are on the Cunningham house and not on the road ahead and so he doesn’t see any cars parked by the side of the street.

Ah, Kathy: at first, she doesn’t know him, because they don’t go to the same school, yet she laughs at him, standing by the large louvred windows, looking down at him on the street. Later, some days, she’d move onto the porch and lean against the rail. Even now, when he is fifty-three she still laughs at him. Thinks he’s funny, and he tries to be funny, all the time, because he loves to see her laugh. For a second, he holds his breath, still amazed about that, after how many years? A quick sum: a shock, twenty or more maybe? Oh, over thirty, in fact. Where did that time go?

Opening the floodgate of memories is not good. Blames the beer. And he blames sitting here in the mall, waiting for his daughter. With every thing sparkling in the sunshine, the real world seems so far away.

She’s here. Francine. He looks at his watch. Not too late. A good day, if that’s the measure.

‘Hi there, Pops. Give us a hug.’ Arms wide, smile beaming across her face.
‘Late as usual.’

‘You haven’t even looked at your watch. To you I am always late, even if I’m early. I make your life interesting.’

Her smile is barely visible. She’s teasing him.

‘Not sure if interesting is the correct word, but you certainly do make my life. So I’m waiting to hear what troubles and tribulations you have to share today, miss city life girl?’

‘Started without me, eh?’

He follows her eyes to the empty beer glass. Now it’s his turn to tease her.

‘Needed some dutch courage to help me keep up with what’s going on in your life.’

‘Ooh, dad. Anyone would think I live a terrible life, to listen to you talk.’

‘And don’t you? What would you care to drink, young lady, or will we order food now, straight away so we get time to eat it, because you are sure to have a need to dash off, always in a hurry to go somewhere, do something. Today, I’m sure, is no exception.’

She rolls her eyes, and says, ‘Well…’, and laughs. He smiles.

‘Wouldn’t have you any other way! So what’s it today? Usual? Something different? I’m having my usual—barramundi and rice.

‘Dad, some things’ll never change.’

This time her whole face lights up with her grin, and he’s reassured that she feels the same as he does. Same routine, every time they have lunch together. He waits patiently while she skims the menu, knows she’ll end up with the same thing. As always. He likes that this’s how it is between them, these funny little habits, symbols of a silent pact between them about how these luncheons are to be enacted. Quite different
to how it is between them at family dos, which are hectic with everyone wanting a bit of her, and him just standing in the background and observing. She’s the star of the family, let’s face it. Everyone’s favourite.

She’s looking at the menu, as if it’s the first time she’s read it, but he can see she’s ready to order. Knows her so well, and the thrill that he’s able to recognise her behaviour fills his chest with pride. He puts his hand up, and the child waiter comes over, ignores him but flirts with Francine while taking her order. He feels annoyed when the waiter continues to look at Francine when taking his order. Annoyed but proud at the same time. She is beautiful, his daughter. The waiter leaves, his eyes still on Francine.

‘Bit young for you, isn’t he?’

‘Come off it, Dad. Just doing his job.’

He smiles. He watches her as she twists around her wrist a beaded bracelet, a band of several strands each of a different shade. Her hand moves up to restore to its place on her shoulder one thin strap of her dress, and she whips her head, flicking her hair, as her hand moves onto her mobile, juggling its position on the table. Her eyes shiftily glance down (Messages?) then flash around, checking out the passing parade of the Mall or other diners in the cafe. Restless. Aware. Conscious of others, while he only has eyes for her. Is she looking to see someone she knows? Is she expecting someone? Meanwhile, she’s talking non-stop, telling him about her week. Same prattle, different variety, as he always hears. He’s only half listening to the ‘and then…’; ‘but she said…’; and ‘Whatever!’ Thinks he’s trained himself to pick up on the important stuff, from the change of her expression or tone of voice.

He realises his mind has slipped right away from her chatter when he hears his own voice.
'I hope you’re not wearing that to Gran’s next week.’

He sees his daughter’s eyes drop down and then flash up and glare at him. At first he thought, oh, she has forgotten what she is wearing. But the stubborn tilt of her chin, the straight line of her lips, and her angry stare tell him she’s ready to argue, defend her honour, so to speak. That look, that response, reminds him of why he thinks she’s like his mother. The steeliness in her eyes makes him quiver. Must remember she’s the child, he’s the parent! She raises her brows, and wiggles her shoulders, replicating something he’s seen on TV, a dance video maybe. The message is very clear, but he’s already committed to this line and, for pride’s sake, can’t withdraw.

‘Aw, come on, Francine. Out of respect for your grandmother. A little less boob showing, please.’

She’s not going to let him win. He waits for her offensive.

‘You’re old-fashioned, Dad. Not Gran you’re worrying about. And anyway, it’s in. Look, everyone wears these kind of clothes.’

With one braceleted wrist, she makes a wide sweep of the mall, its many boutiques on either side, and the shoppers striding past, bags swinging. He lets his eyes follow her arm, but he doesn’t see anyone. He can’t tell if those others she’s gesturing at have low-cut dresses or gaping bits of belly showing, because he can’t see past the palm of her hand—the one that’s pointing out these ‘in’ styles—and what seems to be a blue and red outline drawn on it. He grabs her hand and makes a big show of pulling it up to his eyes.

‘Francine!’

She’s too clever for him. She just raises one eyebrow, and her mouth turns up into a one-sided smile. Her indifference knocks the wind out of his belly.
‘Oh, come on, Dad. You aren’t going to make a big one over a small tattoo, are you? Such a dramatist. I’m twenty. Not a kid any more.’

He can’t look her in the eye. He feels so powerless, so … He’s scared that tears will squeeze out of his eyes if he has to face her challenge, and that’d be the ultimate humiliation. Who’s the parent, here? There’s that alien again, the strange creature that his cute and lovely little girl grew into. Not the first time he has felt this way. And he’s sure it won’t be the last. And now he feels weary.

Perhaps she understands him as little as he understands her. Something is being ripped out of him. But, then, calmly, she lifts his hand, the one still holding her palm, moves it towards his face, then turns her palm around so that it strokes his cheeks. His hand falls away. He’s completely lost to her. He can hear her saying, ‘Only a tattoo, dad,’ and slowly he permits himself to look at her.

‘Only a tattoo.’

He forces himself to join in her laughter, but it sounds hollow, even to him. Yet he no longer feels as panicked. A little used, maybe. Perhaps his girl’s still in there. She knows exactly what to do to get him back on side.

The waiter comes with the food. She moves back onto her chair. Soon she’s telling him the stories she usually tells him: of her life at uni, about her flat mates, about some party she went to. There’s his little girl back. He shuts out of his mind the low cut neckline, that isn’t really that low at all. And the jeans that hang off her hips, and the gap he noticed, when she turned to go to her chair, between her top and the jeans. And that flash of flesh, yet another sign that this person sitting opposite him, about whom he knows so much, is not anything like the one he has in his imagination. That glimpse drags him back to the tattoo and a sense that he’s seeing evidence of the ultimate act of rebellion against all previous generations and their rules and codes, their measures and
restraints. He feels censured. Anger is beginning to curdle his gut, though he’s resisting its call. He knows he’s over-reacting, but he feels slighted and somehow also tainted.

He doesn’t understand. Emotion begins to settle back into the hidden spaces in which it hides until moments like these. Normal again, he sips his second glass of Light, tucks into his Barramundi and smiles across at her.

Meal finished, he looks at his watch—time to go—but he’s reluctant to move, feels as though today’s lunch has been spoilt, and he blames himself. He squeezes these luncheons in between shifts at work, and they’re precious to him. She has a half smile on her face, as if she too is recognising the end of the meal together. She places her cutlery on her plate, her napkin on top, and stands up.

9
Francine’s visual diary

Queen Street Mall, Brisbane
Francine notices her father looking at his watch. Oh, it’s that time. Always the same. So predictable. A carefully measured moment to allow him time at home for a short nap before his next shift.

This lunch didn’t go well. Why does she have to act like this when he’s around? She so badly wanted to tell him about Tim Johnson. Instead, she was her usual blabbing, nervous kid-like self, not the adult she wants to be for her dad. Tim Johnson’s important to her, and she always shares her important stuff with her dad. She smiles at him, as he rises.

‘Here, Dad,’ she says as she holds out a twenty-dollar note. ‘Thanks for giving up your time, for having lunch with me, I really appreciate it.’

‘That’s okay, honeybell. Nah, keep your money. My pleasure. Here, give me a hug instead.’

‘Term break’s coming up, soon. Hope we can get to spend some time together then.’

‘Sounds good, sweetie. Mum’d love to see you, too, and Grandma. They miss not having you at home.’

‘We’ve Uncle Gabriel’s birthday coming up.’

‘Oh yeah, and don’t forget to bring your apron. You know how Grandma loves to get us all cooking. Tra-dish-on-al! Niugini-style!’ She can tell by the sound of her father’s laughter, he’s not happy either about the way today’s lunch has gone. But he continues his enthusiastic projection for the next family get-together. ‘How about you
and I team up. Think of something we can do, something we don’t usually do. Leave
the fried rice and the chicken to the others. We’ll surprise them all. Even Gran.’

She works hard to maintain a smile as she leans in to hug her dad. Tim Johnson.
Dad would have loved to hear about last week’s visit to the gallery, planned since the
moment she heard Tim would be exhibiting in Brisbane.

Early start. Through her kitchen window the sky is cloudless. Thank goodness. It’s a
long walk to the gallery. Too long for walking in the rain. But if the sky’s clear, there’s
a chance there’ll be only low humidity. So maybe she’ll get there without her clothes
clinging to her. Across the street and through an accessway and she’s on the pedestrian
path that runs along the river, passes under the bridge, and meets South Bank near its
man-made Streets Beach. Several pieces of fruit rattle in a plastic container she placed
in the larger section of her backpack and a bottle of water is beating a rhythm against
the outside of the bag, as it hangs from a clip. Inside, she’s packed her visual diary and
her pencil pack.

Young mothers in exercise gear pushing strollers fly past her in convoy. She
imagines them still sitting at the Streets Beach café by the time she gets there, rocking
their babies and sipping lattes. An elderly couple, hand in hand, give her tight smiles
and nod their heads. She feels her face stretch and return their smiles, adding interest to
the deposit, as her dad always jokes, by making hers wider and brighter. There’s a
continuous stream of walkers and runners, some coming towards her, others passing
her. She’s reached the southern end of South Bank, at last, and as predicted a tumble of
strollers is corralled near the café entrance. She can’t hold back a self-congratulatory
smile. Ah ha. Gotcha, ladies. The gallery’s at the far end, the northern end, of South
Bank, almost to Kurilpa Bridge. She’s underestimated the distance and decides on rest
and an early lunch within sight of the gallery’s distinctive building. Very early lunch. 
It’s only 11. But soon a vision of Tim Johnson’s work fills her head. She re-seals her lunch box, returns it to her backpack, and continues northward, no longer able to contain her excitement.

Just outside the roped off area in front of Tim’s exhibit, she sits, legs crossed. Other visitors block her view every now and again, as they pause and contemplate the multiple elements of Tim’s collaborative installation: three paintings, a plaster figure, a computer on which a CD rom is playing, a glass sphere and an eighteenth century Tibetan banner depicting Mt Meru. She’s just far enough away that others can view the work but close enough for her to watch responses and study the installation. Her diary’s in her lap, backpack on the floor beside her, and pencil in her hand. Mesmerised. Meditating. Fascinated. Time passes. So much detail, so many iconic elements. What’s it telling her? Many voices speak to her from the work, many different stories, but she senses they’re all meant to come together, while simultaneously directing viewer’s sights to look beyond the work, into their own souls. If art’s intended to evoke emotions and reflection, Tim’s is succeeding. Layer upon layer of meaning. It seems to her that any understanding depends on all these layers being woven together. Is this a personal contemplation by the artist, a means for him to explore his own place in the world, or is it an attempt to encourage someone caught by his installation to stop and look and feel in order to glimpse the complexities of the world we all inhabit?

She begins to sketch, to map out Tim’s various elements, something to which she can turn later, as an aid to jog her visual memory once she leaves the gallery, something that might bring her back to this moment. She feels tied to Tim’s work, but why she feels this way is still unclear. She feels like she is sorting through a storeroom of relics, each one vaguely familiar but their connection to each other ambiguous. She
knows she must linger in that room if she’s to make sense of the works’ meaning for her.

‘Excuse me, miss. Half an hour to closing.’

Where’s the day gone? Suddenly hungry, she nods to the gallery volunteer, returns her diary and pencil pack to her backpack, and reluctantly moves outside.

Her ambition: to create art that, like Tim’s, moves viewers to feel something beyond the medium of the artwork, something that might arrest a tendency to skim the surface. Dual emotions overtake her: a fear she doesn’t have the skills that wrestles with her need to articulate a vision. She has a plan and every decision she has made in her recent life has been weighed against that plan. So far, so good. Graduation, then into art practice.

Up the river, cloudbanks are rolling in. It’ll already be raining in Ipswich to the west of the city. She decides to catch a ferry down river to the jetty near her apartment, rather than walk.

If only she hadn’t been so adolescent. Her father’s gone and she’s lost her chance to share. Maybe next time. But, as her grandmother says, the key to life is not to let opportunities pass you by. ‘Nogat come again, Francie. Gtpela luck emi fly past. Yu nogat kissim em, na mebe any gut luck gone forever.’ Her grandmother loves to make grand statements like this in Pisin, as though that language gives the declaration more meaning. But most of the family can only understand Pisin, not have a conversation in it. And today her ‘lost opportunity’ is walking towards Central station. She watches him until he turns the corner. She could promise herself that next time … but next time probably won’t come again. Next time, some other distraction, something more pressing. She lingers at the table, smiles at the waiter, slowly drinks the rest of her
water, and watches the crowd, wishing she could be shopping instead of attending her afternoon lecture. For the last few minutes before she rises, she lets her mind go back to Tim Johnson.

Tim’s is a cross between south-east Asian and Aboriginal art. His palette: soft pastels. Not like her style of bold, strong colours. Tim’s incorporates what seem to be randomly selected icons, bits of many religions or cultures, which float over a background that bears a similarity to the dots and lines of Aboriginal art. Each work stands somewhere between cultures and spiritualities. And though she struggles with understanding the work’s profound effect on her, there’s one significant aspect she does recognise: its serendipitous entry into her awareness made more poignant by one of Tim’s interviews. In it, he suggested that nothing happens without reason; that powerful but unseen events influence lives. Yin-yang. For her it seems right that his work represents not differences and likenesses, but many things influencing each other. She likes that. Vaguely she thinks about how she might incorporate Tim’s ideas into her big graduation exhibition due at the end of the year.

Today, the moment of sharing has been lost to her—her father’s gone. She stands up, makes a casual wave to the waiter, and heads back down Edward Street towards the ferry terminal, looking forward to a relaxing journey up river to UQ.

11

March 2010, inside the home of Maria Seeto in the southeastern suburbs of Brisbane.

Maria

She moves out of her bedroom, along the hallway. The floorboards creak. She rocks to the left. She rocks to the right. She rocks to the left, then to the right again, as she inches
her way forward along the passage. Half way, she peers into a bedroom that is off the hall.

Yes, gutpela. All in order. Bed cover smooth, bureau tidy, a towel and face washer neatly folded. Ready for birthday boy. Fifty today. Gabriel, numbatu son. That boy. Too popular! No home of his own but plenty, plenty places to sleep! Mebe this night he make his mummy happy and sleep long tispela haus.

An oval mirror hangs on the wall just beyond the bedroom door. When she draws level with the mirror, she pauses, pushes one hand against the wall to support herself, and hefts her body around to face the mirror. She feels her cheeks wrinkle as a smile works its way across her face. Her index finger etches the mirror’s bevelled edge. The light on each bump and hollow is interrupted as her finger moves. She tilts her head to one side so that she might see more easily how the bevels catch the light. If she squints, she can imagine the angles do still sparkle like the diamonds that caught her attention in Chong’s store. But everything loses its shine with age.

Ha! Look long me. Me lapun too. Me nogat sparkle.

She smiles at her own joke.

Ah, what does it matter, anyway? This mirror, good buy. Only young woman when buyim—first thing ever buy with own money. For Patrick, this mirror, only another—what word he say?—chattel. As she was for him. Him, always the big masta. Money belong em. Businesses belong em. Wife belong em. Olegeta belong em. He tingting mirror belong em, but nogat. This mirror. Hers.

‘Choose.’ Patrick toktok long her. ‘No can take olegeta samting long Australia. Me tokim this mirror pipia. Kissim long rubbish.’

She say nuting. Act like no hearim. Just hide mirror long bottom of crate. When she kissim long crate in Brisbane and hang on wall, Patrick raise eyebrows tasol, make
noise with nose, olesam she stupid. This mirror been in her life for so many years—longer than anything else—longer than pikinini belong em. Na gutpela reason long this mirror still here, not left behind in PNG. Emi bigpela samting long her. Only thing she has of her own.

Bad start, marriage to Patrick. Makes everything stink afterwards. This why mirror nuting long Patrick. Na wan gutpela reason for her to love mirror. Another reason. There are many reasons.

For a second or two, she allows herself to see the mirror as it really is: patchy and clouded. In the humidity of the tropics, mildew thrives. Its white moss-like presence can be found everywhere, seeming to appear overnight. In the case of the mirror, when the mildew was removed, patches of the mirror’s back coating were lost. But, disfigured or not, for her this mirror is precious, despite coming into her life at a time when, for her, it was not much better than a slave’s. And, yet, at a time she had felt more loved than at any other. Though that love was secret, and any hope for it ended on the day her father sold her to become Patrick’s wife, it continues to live inside her. Soon after that bleak day of loss, she bought this mirror and, since then, it has reminded her that, because of love, despite her long hours working at the sewing machine, in the gloomy crowded space of Loi Fook’s trade store she was very happy.

Loi and her father are rarely at the store. Always off scheming or gambling or doing what she believes all devious men must do. Stephen comes to the store whenever he’s in Rabaul buying provisions for Loi’s plantation. Together they sit in the circle of light thrown out by the sewing machine. For once, Loi’s miserly limitations work for her. Loi always nags: ‘Yu no waste my money on kissim electric light all the time.’ The darkness of the store is comforting or, to be more truthful, less risky. Less chance of
being noticed. In Stephen’s presence, she forgets the drag of the heavy fabric, callouses on her fingers, weary eyes. As the machine chugs its way along the seams and hems, they sit and talk. Around them, in the darkness, ropes of trade tabak dangle from a beam above a counter stacked high with boxes of cigarette lighters, piles of old newspapers to sell to the smokers along with the tobacco hanging above. In the gloomy background, the numerous cartons of shirts, towels, and the like, are no longer visible. Nor the mountain of bolts of coarse trade fabrics, the stacks of ricebags and cans of cooking oil, the wick lanterns sitting on timber crates, piles of hairy blankets in bright shades, mounds of folded laplaps, and the row of meri blouses, hanging off wire coathangers suspended from the ceiling by a rope stretched between one wall and another. This is their private world. A vastly different world to the one in which she lives when Stephen is back on his plantation. In that one, people only pass by her—the store’s customers, occasionally Loi and her father—but the only words they share with her are those necessary for her to do for them what they need to be done.

The memories of the splendid days shared with Stephen buoy her from one visit to the next. On those days, as she listens to Stephen and he listens to her, she silently thanks God for bringing him back into her nenek’s life after the war so she could come to know him as an adult, not only as a child. Usually, the only interruptions are the occasional tinkling of the bell on the store door as a customer enters. The tinkling means she needs, for a few minutes, to leave Stephen waiting, so she can attend to the clients’ needs.

‘Tin pis plis’, one might request. Or bottles of bubbly water made by a local Chinese company: sarsaparilla or ginger beer are popular flavours.

Stephen’s visits began long before nenek died. At nenek’s house, they were joyous, open events. When she was forced to move from her nenek’s house, she feared
that would spell the end of Stephen’s visits. Despite her fear, they found a way. Yet they do not ignore the danger: Loi and Leo are dangerous men and instinctively they are aware neither would approve of these meetings. Strangely, it is Loi’s own nature that helps them achieve secrecy.

Generally Loi is known to trust no one, but for some reason he doesn’t interfere with her running of the store. Maybe he knows she has nowhere else to go. Should she be the kind of person who would steal Loi’s money, with too few available ways to leave Rabaul, Loi would know of any potential theft long before any escape could be made. From the outset, her responsibilities are made clear: open the store morning and close it at night, put the day’s takings in the safe, and to keep the store clean, and in between, sew laplaps and meri blouses and serve customers. All this for a few pounds of rice, some cans of bully beef or fish, and only a few silver coins—the same as he pays his Niugini labourers. The low pay doesn’t bother her: her life has taught her to have no expectation of riches, a view that’s been reinforced since her nenek’s death. And, contrary to what drives Loi and her father, her limited experiences have convinced her that the pursuit of money doesn’t automatically lead to happiness. The greatest luxury, in her opinion, is the freedom to do whatever needs to be done in her own way and at her own pace.

The one wish she has for herself, one she dares not admit and most definitely would never speak aloud, is a simple wish, but likely an impossible one: to be granted much more time with Stephen. However, in light of her low expectations of life, particularly since nenek’s death, any lofty thoughts or wishes are mostly packed away for dreaming about as she sleeps in her tiny bed in one dark corner of the shop’s storeroom. The rest of life she deals with in the practical way her nenek taught her.
Over her lifetime, nenek had passed on to her some very good tricks to resolve shortages in both money and food. Adding vegetables to rice and giving the dish a kick by adding spices and sauces has been most useful. She grows her own vegetables and rice comes as part of her wage. Her vegetable garden is hidden in the store’s back courtyard. She doesn’t know if Loi would or would not approve, so as a precaution, she keeps her garden a secret, Again, secrecy is enabled through Loi’s own habits. He’s not a tidy man. The courtyard is filled with discarded crates, furniture, car parts, bottles, and even old tyres: a pile so high Loi would not normally attempt to pass. Beyond this lies her garden. Growing her own vegetables means she only needs to spend a few coins every now and again to replace her supplies of spices and sauces. There is, of course, for special occasions, the tinned fish or beef that also comes as part of her wage. From all of these, she creates her own style of niugini mumu. She also makes her own clothes, always careful to use fabric for which she has a receipt. In case Loi should take it in his head to accuse her of stealing. He’s known to be brutal about matters of petty theft.

In this way, most of her meager wage she saves. Those coins she places in a glass jar buried in the loose soil at the edge of her garden, trusting no one. Especially not her father. Not a lucky gambler, but always a desperate one. If he knows she has money, no matter how little, he would take it. She has a purpose for those coins.

Her father’s gambling might explain Loi’s declaration to her soon after she came to work at his store. ‘Gut yu be dutiful daughter, should not complain. Yu paying off her father’s debt.’ If her father owed Loi, she would be the last one to know and he most certainly had not mentioned the word debt when he told her about her ‘future’ after nenek died.

In fact, Leo is almost a stranger to her. For most of her early life, before the eruption, she more-or-less had been fatherless. Then daddy George moved in. Henry
was born. Daddy George became their father. Daddy George worked for the Admin. This meant food was always plentiful. Mumma loved daddy George, and, unlike before the eruption, mumma laughed often. Together—she and daddy George, mumma, nenek, and Henry—were very happy in nenek’s home with its little verandah.

As always, she has found, life brings lessons to be learnt. The lesson of that time of happiness was that such moments can only at best be temporary. Too soon, after the war, there were only two remaining in nenek’s home. Now, as she looks back, the only memorable encounters she had with her father Leo, her father, were two monumental visits: one when he took her brother away and the other when he returned to her life on the day following nenek’s death.

On this, the worst day of her life, she has no one with whom to share her grief. Stephen is a day’s travel away on Loi’s island plantation, almost uncontactable. She’s muddled through the night that followed nenek’s death. Today she has attempted to attend to what needs to be done after a family member dies. As the afternoon passes, she’s counted each and every one of the twenty-four hours since nenek left her, each one a sharp omen of her future life. The double grief overtakes her: loss of her grandmother who was a mother as well, and as a consequence, of her own imaginable prospects of a lonely life. The weight of her loss, her alone-ness, begins to over-power her. Then she hears footsteps on the verandah. Signs, perhaps, of relief. Outside the door, with hand raised as if to knock, stands the man she recognises as her father. Nenek had, some time ago, pointed to Leo across the street.

‘Tispela man he got same blood long yu. He kallim himself papa belong yu. Take more than blood to be a papa.’ Nenek had then noisily gathered up phlegm in her throat and spat it onto the pavement, as the locals do with excessive betel nut juice.
The presence of Leo at the door strangely fills her with a faint hope that the years of thinking badly of her father were unfair, that perhaps he has been misjudged. Maybe he’s a good man who has come to pay his respects. After all, he and her nenek must have known each other a very long time.

‘Halo,’ she says, unable to find any more words to utter.

Her father’s face is blank. He’s holding in his feelings, perhaps. Or wondering who she is.

‘Koti Pereira dai pinis?’

She nods. Now he will say the respectful words he should say. He will see her grief.

She can’t tell from his face if this is so.

‘This house, emi Loi Fook’s house. Time for you to move.’

So unexpected are his words, so bluntly delivered, she can’t take them in. She must have heard him wrong. Her eyes search his face for clues but it says nothing to her. His body remains as rigid as it was when she first noticed him outside the door, his face as expressionless. It is obvious, however, he’s waiting for her to answer.

She has no control over her mouth but words do come. ‘Tispela haus? Tispela haus where nenek live forever?’

This house, with its little verandah? This house where she had lived her life so far? Nenek’s house?

‘Koti Pereira and Loi had agreement. Grandma dead. Agreement over. Your home now in Loi Fook’s store.’
If she’d not been so overtaken with grief she might have fought harder. If she had not been so overtaken with grief she might have heard a warning to heed for a future event. The only thing she was permitted to take from her nenek’s house was nenek’s chest.

She allows her eyes to wander over the mirror once more. And, again, her lips begin to tighten and stretch upwards, almost but not quite growing into a smile. Looking at this mirror makes her smile. It is like watching Andrew or Gabriel or Daniel when they were children. The funny way Daniel used to twist before he began to run or the way his hand always wipes his chin when he’s thinking about something. Only she, his mother, would notice these things, and when she did, her heart would swell with love. Because he’s her child. Because she, as his mother, knows these little things about him. Yet as a mother watches her child and revels in those familiarities only she can notice, as she feels overwhelming love for her child because of these small, private, observations, there’s also the faintest memory of a time, years earlier, and the delivery, an echo of the effort that had to be endured to bring the child into the world, and although that memory is diminished, it’s never totally forgotten. This is the depth of loving. She feels the same about the mirror. In its cloudy image and dulled bevels is proof that she is still who she has always been. Proof not only that at one time in her life did she choose to spend every bit of three years’ hard savings for its purchase, but also proof that before she selected the mirror as the object upon which she would use the only money she was free to spend as she wished, other wondrous and calamitous things had happened to bring her to a point where such a choice could be made. That too is memory of love.

The money had been intended to help Stephen repay a bond to Loi, to help Stephen be free from Loi. But when Stephen was taken beyond her, the next best thing
was to buy a mirror to remember the good moments, a mirror to provide proof of love and loss.

Life in Loi’s store has settled into a pattern: the lows of the loneliness between Stephen’s visits and the highs of the too short moments of shared joy. A week after her twenty-second birthday, she hears the tinkling that warns someone has entered the store. She doesn’t look up. Another Tolai customer. She’ll finish this seam, and that’ll give the customer time to look around before she stands to serve.

She’s surprised to see her father step into the small circle of light given off by the Singer. Has he come because … Is there the slightest chance he’s remembered her birthday last week? One glance at him and she senses there’s something strange about her father today. On those rare days he visits the store for Loi’s ‘business’, his face shows no emotion. Today he looks like he’s about to burst, like he can’t contain the words he wants to speak. She can almost see those words fluttering around his teeth. As he begins to speak, as his mouth opens to let out some words, instead of words a smile rushes out. She has no memory of ever seeing her father smile. What possibly could be so spectacular for him to make him behave so out of character? She begins to feel nervous. She remembers the last lot of good news he seemed to enjoy delivering. What will ‘good news’ cost her this time? His hands are flying around his head. He’s doing a little (if stilted) jig, hopping from one foot to the other. So unusual, so uncharacteristic, she can’t hold back her anxiety. Has he lost his mind?

‘Oh, yu wan lucky woman.’ Jig, jig. Clap, clap.

‘Oh, yu so, so lucky. Yu got new home. Yu soon become respectable Chinese wife.’
What madness? Why is he so excited? What benefit for him? And, consequently, at what cost to her? She’s no longer under any illusions about her father. But her nervousness hasn’t been born out of her father’s strange behavior on this visit. It has been building for some time, based only on intuition. For one thing, there are unanswered questions about Stephen’s irregular visits. Lately Loi’s been keeping Stephen on the plantation for longer and longer spells. In her world, nothing happens without a reason. What now?

Another question comes to her mind. What debt this time?

Finally Leo’s words are flowing freely. ‘You save my brother Stephen getting Chinese bride now?’

His head is bent towards her, his eyes unnaturally large, his lips fighting not to stretch into another smile.

She works hard to keep her emotions from showing on her face. This is her only resistance to his attack. Between her ears, buzzing; the store disappears; her father’s face distorts. Another Maria has stepped out of her body and is looking back at herself, noticing how the expression on her face is frozen; how her lips are open in a silent gasp; that her father is bending over her. So aware is this other Maria, she can see his words visible in the air between them: ‘my brother Stephen getting Chinese bride now.’

Of all the words she might reply to him, the only ones that seem to be waiting to be said, that feel as if they need to be said and yet are useless at this moment, are ‘Stephen is not your brother’.

Her father saves her from uttering something so futile.

‘Loi buyim a bride long China for Stephen. A thank you for doing good job on plantation. Mei Yee, emi kallim this wife.’ Her father pauses, as if allowing her time to
take in this important information. ‘Na her brother come along Niugini, too. Emi take care of Mei Yee on ship.’

He draws in a big breath. She senses there’s more to come. Now his smile can’t be held back, stretching as it does from ear to ear. So unusual, it holds her in its spell, suspends the reception of words so bleak she can’t accept them. Yet, one word at a time, their meaning becomes clear as they enter her consciousness.

‘And he like marry you. Loi tingting Stephen and Mei Yee makim plenty pikinini ole ken work long Loi’s trade store. Bargain for Loi. Na you and Tak Tam make plenty more long working my trade store. Bargain long me.’

Her body shudders. Why? Why? Why? She asks so little. God’s abandoned her. The trade store, the hanging laplaps and meri blouses, the sacks of rice, her sewing machine with its little light still glowing, have disappeared. She can only see her father’s face, smiling as if in victory. Time stretches, as if years have passed since her father entered Loi’s store. Slowly the haze clears to be replaced with a furious white anger. She can’t bear the unfairness of life.

And the clues tumble towards her: no matter how clever and secretive they thought they had been, somehow her father has learnt about Stephen’s visits. Yes, she can see it on his face. She can also see that her father believes he has won this battle. But what can be the victory for him? Can he be that vindictive?

He insists on recounting her ‘benefits’. Suddenly deaf, but with sight so sharp she can see, spreading across the trade store floor, an ever-growing pool of invisible blood, pumping out of the open wound that is her heart. Her father’s words go on and on.
‘This man, respectable Chinese man. Yu very lucky. You should appreciate. This man emi callim Seeto Tak Tam. You no need change your name. Yu still Maria Seeto. Gut name, eh?’

Her father can’t stop laughing at his own cleverness. She feels herself begin to die from the inside. Soon death will appear on her face and her body. There’s no hope for her. Seeto Tak Tam, you’ll be marrying a ghost. A dead woman.

And that, most certainly, is what Patrick did get: a wife who was part Chinese, as he had wanted, a part Chinese but a no longer present wife. Not his fault. But there are some things a woman can never move past. In Loi’s store, a lowly paid servant she may be, but as a working wife, she will receive no coins to put in her jar. So her first and last purchase was and would be the mirror.

Oh, but she was wrong about Stephen. What a twist. Stephen’s life did come back into hers. She stops herself from thinking about the consequences of that return. She prefers the fiction of it, the stories she has told herself, over and over. Too complicated is the truth, and too late now. Best to leave things be. True stories can only hurt. The best stories will always be those about the years in Loi Fook’s tradestore before her twenty-second birthday.

Like those moments when Loi flicks his wrist, dismissing her, a rare sign of his generous mood. These blessed moments for her are at someone else’s cost, she is sure—perhaps a good run with Mahjong or as a consequence of someone’s bad luck in business, he’d taken over a family’s source of livelihood. Not wanting to risk being caught by his sudden change of mind, she quickly switches off the sewing machine and the store falls dark. A seam partly sewn still sits below the machine needle. In five minutes she is almost out of Chinatown, heading towards Kamerere Street. Women like
her, also hidden in darkness as they take care of the family’s store, call to her as she passes, lifting their heads from serving a customer or from the sewing machine. Out of some stores come squeals and shrieks of children, playing amongst the stock, their games briefly interrupted as they look to see to whom their mother is calling. ‘Oh halo long yu, Aunty Maria,’ she hears one child say. Not aunty by blood, but as a woman who should be respected. She smiles, and waves to the children without slackening her pace. Near the park, on Casuarina Avenue, sitting in the shade of a casuarina tree, are two women she recognises. ‘Me lukim yu tupela’ she calls out brightly, and they laugh and carry on talking. She’s almost there, almost at Chong’s store.

Chong’s is owned by three brothers, and worked by the whole family: wives and children and grandchildren. It’s her sanctuary. She mocks herself: ‘yu leave one store to go to another. Stupid meri. Longlong.’ But where Loi’s trade store caters to Niugineans, Chong’s offers their goods to Chinese and Mixed Race and also to Europeans who also love the surprises they find there. To most westerners the orient is mysterious, so where better than in Chong’s store to journey into the unknown without leaving Rabaul?

Chong’s store is a deep, dark cave filled with familiar and foreign treasures: large carved camphorwood chests, like hers. Datuk Josef, whom she never knew, had given it to nenek as a wedding gift, and nenek gave it to her before she died. Knowing how precious the chest was to her nenek, since datuk died within a year of their marriage, she was overwhelmed by the gift. But something didn’t add up between datuk’s death and Maria’s mother’s birth, though nenek would not change the story. Always she would halt any discussion of the matter with the statement: ‘Josefina’s named long my husband Josef.’

This marvellous store also stocks matching carved sideboards, ivory ornaments for women’s hair, and strings of cultured pearl and gold rings set with beautiful opals.
For the Chinese, an opal symbolises truth and honesty. To receive an opal as a gift, one must be true of heart. (She has always wanted an opal!) And of course, there are the richly embroidered and brightly colored satin cheongsams with matching brocade slippers. Chongs also sold modern electrical appliances, ceramics from Germany, fine china from Japan, the latest British records, and gramophone players. Inside, the air is thick: above the musty smell of bolts of silk, lace and brocade; there’s camphor, candle wax, incense, shoe leather, the occasional bite of tiger balm and sickly sweet 4711 Eau de Cologne. Sneaking into these exotic aromas is a touch of the everyday: garlic and onion coming from the rear of the store where a meal is always being prepared.

Only Stephen knew how much Chongs meant to her. But, she bites her bottom lip, today she’s here in Brisbane and Stephen no longer in her life. She will not allow herself think about him any more. Too much pain. She wipes a tear from one eye and growls. These days, the past seems closer than the present. Too often she’s overcome with an urgent sense of unfinished business, and has to remind herself it is too late. She shudders. Yet, despite her vow, she is unable to resist being dragged back into her memories.

Chong’s store is long and deep. Through the few highly placed and arc-meshed protected windows sunlight struggles to illuminate dancing dust particles. On both sides, the full length of the shop, run glass display counters filled with surprising treasures. Stock hangs from rafters, is piled high behind and in front of the counters, fills the display cabinets and crowds the counter tops. Only a narrow passageway remains, down the centre of the store. Halfway along, on the right, on the wall behind the counter, hang the mirrors.

Hers, too, now hangs halfway along her hall. Her mind back in the present, she recognizes just how long she has spent at the mirror. And she’d promised herself that
today of all days she wouldn’t. Guilt urges herself to move on: there’s work to be done. But what she prefers to deny is that those few minutes she spends paused at the mirror give her lungs a chance to draw in the air they need to drag her body down to the kitchen. Mirror-gazing is a habit that began on her first day at school.

First day at St. Joseph’s and already she knows there’s a need to check her hair. Her papa might say she is a Chinese girl but it is clear to her that her hair is not the same as that of other Chinese girls. Theirs is dark, thick and straight—like her daddy’s—not tight curls, like hers. She is certain that other girls’ hair will not be like hers when nenek forgets to trim her curls. Her curls blossom out around her face like a huge dome. This first day and already she realises that this makes her even less like a Chinese girl than do her blue eyes. Worse, her curls resist being fastened or tucked. But in this first and very important lesson on her first day at school, she notes that on the heads of proper Chinese girls, long hair hangs straight and heavy and does not bounce and ping like hers. This leads her to understand something else: maybe her father is a liar. Good people, her nenek says, never lie. Until her first day at school she had been certain of who she was. But after that first lesson, doubts begin to creep in.

Nor have those doubts diminished over the years since. Particularly as it was less than a year later that a part-answer seemed to come to her on the day her brother was sent away. On that day, she found a clue to who she wasn’t inside the reason given for why she wasn’t going with her brother. Her numbawan papa (who had told her each of the few times he had come back into her life that she was his ‘Chinese daughter’) said it. Even daddy George, mumma and nenek said it. So many times repeated, it had to be so. Henry was going on his own and she was staying with mumma because Henry had a Chinese face and she didn’t.
But on her first day of school, this doubt had been brand new. Suddenly in a classroom filled with girls, she sees many different kinds of faces. When she goes home, she sees her family differently, their faces each different to each others’. A question comes to her: where does she fit? Not only does she not look as a Chinese girl should, with her curls, she also doesn’t have black eyes. Her mummy, daddy and even nenek have black eyes. She already knows mummy and nenek aren’t Chinese because numbawan daddy is always telling them so. A Chinese girl doesn’t have blue eyes and brown face; a Chinese girl doesn’t have curls as she sees in the mirror; and yet this is what her papa says she is. Something is wrong, but just what it is she cannot understand. When she asks her nenek, grandmother pats her curls and says: ‘Grandpapa belong you, eye he blue na mumma belong tispela grandpapa emi kissim curls. Only good thing tis grandpapa do, he give blue eyes long you, and lovely curls. You my Angel eyes.’ This explains nothing. Did datuk have blue eyes? The only good thing she understands about her blue eyes is that she likes being nenek’s angel eyes.

Some things, like what makes you who you are, are too difficult. But, a habit that is hard to break continues, so each time she passes her mirror, she still checks to see if her curls are tidy and tells herself she’s Chinese inside, not out. She gives one final pat of her hair. In case. But promises herself once more, she will not linger—there’s too much to do this afternoon. Finally, she begins her slow trek to the kitchen.

Earlier, she’d assembled some of the ingredients she’ll need. The aibika, bought at the local growers market this morning awaits her in a bucket of cold water in the sink. The coconut her eldest son Andrew bought for her last weekend, and split open for her when he stopped off on his way to work this morning, is on the draining board. In the fridge, there’s the fish chosen by Anna (her son Daniel’s wife) and delivered an hour ago. Anna has a good Niugini eye for abus.
First things, first. Before beginning her preparations, she looks to Jesus Christ who’s gazing not at her but towards the ceiling. No meal’s prepared in this kitchen without the Lord looking away, as if he cannot bear to see the food being prepared below. Sometimes she feels she should replace this image for one where His eyes actually look down, but the Bridegroom one, with Jesus in his glorious red gown and the bright gold of his halo, appeals to her. In truth, it’s the red of the Lord’s gown that keeps the image from being changed. Red for good fortune, she smiles to herself. This is good: Chinese beliefs crossing over into her Catholicism. Double good fortune, she tells herself. And, as if to demonstrate a little more respect to religion than the less weighty benefits of Chinese luck, she says a silent prayer before she reaches out one hand for the abika plant, shakes off the water, and wraps it in a damp tea towel. The aibika’s now ready for when she requires it later.

She reaches over to turn on her portable radio. A little bit of music always helps. This transistor came the long distance from Rabaul. Bought from Chong’s too, like her mirror, but unlike the mirror, this still works well, no mould on it. Can’t buy radios of this type now, especially ones that are in her favourite colour (red). Only as big as a small box of Roses, it has a small antenna at one end. Andrew’s boy, Lucas, tells her she should have an iPod but she ignores him. Too much trouble. And who wants to do that fiddling? What does he call it? Loading down or something. She moves the dial to tune into easy listening and is pleased to hear Charley Pride’s rich voice. She feels emotion stirring inside her. *Ramblin’ Rose* or *Danny Boy* are her favourites. This time it is *I Love You Because*. Almost as good.

She rinses her hands once again, in case. Outside she can see her neighbour Pavle is working in his garden. Pavle is a Serbian from Yugoslavia, or so he says, and Pavle means Paul in English, but she calls him Pavle, not Paul. Normally she would
watch him as he goes about his routine, but today she ignores him and sets her eyes
down to the task at hand. She unwraps the aibika plant, discards the tea towel, then
selects and breaks off the medium-sized and younger, smaller, leaves and bins the rest.
The more mature leaves are not good for cooking. They leave a bitter taste. She washes
her selection thoroughly under cold running water. Already she can smell the faint
peppery aroma of the aibika. Because she buys it from a local market, she knows it has
been taken straight from the garden, and if she doesn’t wash the leaves carefully, traces
of sand and soil will remain. She shakes the excess water off the leaves, then turns
towards the table and places them on her chopping board. Now the sink is behind her,
the table and board in front, all part of a well-rehearsed dance—practised over many
years—where she swings from sink to table as she cooks.

As she moves the aibika leaves from the board into a bowl, she looks around her
kitchen and into her dining room. She smiles, and nods her head, though there’s no one
to see her doing so. She feels good about these freshly painted rooms. Ah, yes, at last
her house is looking good. She was determined this work be done. And just in time.
Soon she’ll be too old to care. Or in a nursing home and senile. Not so funny, really,
because it’s close to the truth. She’s not worried. But never will she forget her son’s,
Daniel’s, face when she asked him to help her. Now, that was very funny.

She reaches for another bowl, rummages in the cutlery drawer for the scraper
she always uses for this next task, and turns back to the sink to the coconut that Andrew
has already cut in half for her. With one half of the coconut in her hands, she turns
again, back to the bench and places the half coconut on her board. Her hands are poised,
hers fingers gripping the hand-made special-purpose scraper, made in Rabaul and
brought down with her. She applies pressure to the inside of the coconut. She needs to
scrape out the meat into the bowl. She pinches a small amount of meat between her
good fingertips and tastes it.

Sweet. Nice. Good coconut.

She continues scraping. Sweat pops out on her forehead. She struggles to
breathe. Getting too old to keep doing this. Shame. Because she loves to prepare
traditional meals. She encourages her family to make the effort, rather than always go
the modern way, the quick take-away or the Aussie meals, which are fine, but just not
all the time, and certainly not for special occasions.

When the meat of the first half of the coconut has been scraped out, she turns to
repeat the process with the other. Then she rinses and dries her board, returns it to the
table, and from the second drawer down, she takes out of a sealed plastic bag a length of
gauze fabric. She spreads the gauze over her board. She empties the coconut meat into
the centre of the gauze, and gathers in the corners and edges then knots them together.
This task she has done so often, it’s automatic. The bowl, empty of the coconut meat, is
placed on the board, and into it she returns the meat that is now inside the gauze. She
uses her weight to press down, squeezing the juice out of the coconut meat, pausing
briefly, then giving the gauze a shake and then pressing down again. Occasionally she
pours off any milk extracted into a jug. It takes some time to press the milk from the
meat, and as she continues to shake and squeeze she contemplates what this house
means to her: home for more than just her and Patrick. Andrew and his family lived
under its roof for more than twenty years of their marriage, and Daniel, Anna and boys
are still here. Gabriel drops in and out, as suits him. At one time, Francine and Lucas
had shared the main bedroom with her and Patrick, and it was a comfort to listen to their
breathing. It was the only time her bedroom had been a place she wanted to be in. Even
now, after he has gone, her resentment of Patrick lingers. There are moments when she
acknowledges she has been harsh. He was yet another person whose life was
manipulated by her father and his boss, Loi, but she can’t stop herself from channelling
her anger towards the man who symbolised all that she had lost. So, in the room that
should be the heart of a marriage, Patrick’s presence had always been hard to tolerate.

Tonight, lusim bad tingting. Tonight toktok, laughing, kaikai, pipel, familii, will
make tispela haus special. Oh, so special, tonight.

She puts aside the coconut milk, unties the gauze and discards the coconut meat
into her bin. First she rinses then washes the board thoroughly, but leaves the gauze
crumpled up on the draining board of the sink to wash later.

Now the fish. She takes a tray from the fridge and examines each fish carefully.
Anna bought them from the local fish market. The flesh looks good. She draws out her
favourite knife from the rack, and one by one cuts the fish into bite-sized pieces, which
she places into an empty bowl. She reaches over her head to take down the large pot she
hangs from a ceiling hook and places the pot on her table. Then she carefully tips the
fish, the coconut milk and finally the aibika into it. She carries the pot to the cooker,
turns the gas burner to high, positions the pot over it and reaches for the salt. After
seasoning, she turns the heat right down low, stirs, and watches. This usually takes only
about seven minutes to cook. Good to have this done early. Once the others come, she
will forget to watch, too busy will she be listening to what everyone’s talking about, and
then the milk’ll boil. Too easy for this to be spoiled, by not keeping her mind on the job.

The kitchen fills with the peppery sweet aroma of the dish. What dishes will her
family have chosen to cook tonight? What other smells will be filling her house?

Gradually family members arrive, lugging on their hips and in their arms baskets
and cartons containing their ingredients, each one moving through the living area and
into the kitchen.
‘Who’s going to get gold stars from mum tonight, eh? Me and Francie, I reckon.’ Andrew is stirring his brother, and winking at his daughter.

‘Maski, brus. Anna’s the best chef ever when it comes to Niugini kaikai. And, besides, Mum loves Anna: Anna emi lukim me tru, she says. You tupela nogat a chance.’

‘Oh did you see the new Asian Food Supermarket opened in Sunnybank? Taking mum there on Thursday. She’s going to be so darn excited.’

‘Hey, guys, did any of you hear about Joseph Chung? Saw his brother-in-law in the city last weekend, and he told me Joseph is going back to PNG. Doesn’t like it here. Wife and kids aren’t going.’

‘He’s onto a winner, there. Gets himself a new meri who will do all his cooking. Fresh start. Ow. Don’t punch so hard, Kathy. A man is vulnerable when he’s all skin, bones, and no muscle.’

‘You’re too skinny, man. You need to eat more.’

‘Oh don’t tell him that. He already eats plenty and, damn him, it disappears. Makes me sick.’

Hah, yes. Family. Tonight Gabriel’s coming. Too often he isn’t in town. Even though it’s his birthday, it wouldn’t be the first time they have celebrated his birthday and he not turn up. Restless legs, that boy. Not married, he’s free to go where he wishes. Everyone loves him. Always Gabriel has a bed to sleep in and someone to feed him: family, friends and maybe even a woman. There are so many parts of Gabriel’s life that she doesn’t know about. A mother’s always torn between wanting to know everything and knowing that children must have their own lives.
Ah, Gabriel. Nuting olesam papa belong yu, my boy. Nuting at all. Mebe eyes, tasol. But it’s so long ago since she looked into his papa’s eyes, she’s not sure any more.

12
Francine’s visual diary.

April, 2010, at Cezanne’s Restaurant, West End, Brisbane.

Francine

‘Hola, pretty lady.’

Matias has been working at Cezanne’s on a six-month work visa. He flashes his smile her way, as she stands above him outside the door to her mezzanine office. Like many of Cezanne’s employees, he’s spent time and shared meals with her family, even shared a Broncos’ game on TV with her dad. Behind Matias, the rest of the wait staff
file in one by one, each waving, turning and smiling, or bowing to Francine as they pass below. No Michael yet. From Carl, the manager, she receives a half salute, done without turning or looking up, as he strides past the various stations in the restaurant, barking orders to each staff member as he goes. And finally the distinctive blond curls of Michael. He stops, turns, looks up and smiles at her. In her chest something is doing cartwheels. She lifts one hand, and moves it slightly in a restrained gesture, rolls her eyes, and turns away, as if heading for her office. But she doesn’t go any further than the entry. Against the wall, away from the rail, she hopes she is out of sight from those on the restaurant floor below.

She watches Michael’s broad back as he bends to extract cutlery from the drawer beneath his workstation, as his body twists upward to reach for glassware. She could stand there all day.

She still hasn’t invited Michael home to meet her family.

14

*Early May, 2010, in a suburb of Brisbane.*

Francine

As she turns into Michael’s parents’ street, she notices the houses are different. In this street, Queenslanders, built many years ago, stand proud. She suspects that the land sites alone, with their views of the city, are out of the average person’s reach but, as she draws in a deep breath of appreciation, she recognises what these houses must also add to land values. They’re not mansions, but they’re rare, homes from a bygone era, still loved and well cared for. She imagines who might live here: university professors, doctors, airline pilots, and, of course, Michael’s parents. Add to the mix Michael, as she sees him: his fairness, quiet conservatism, a way of speaking that displays an old-
fashion politeness, suggesting perhaps he’s the son of older parents. She imagines them silver-haired and respectable; his father an ex-banker, slightly posh, organised and polite; his mother president of some organisation, like the hospital auxiliary, quietly efficient and practical.

Carl told her about Michael’s cousin’s suicide last night, when she’d noticed Michael’s absence. She’s certain she saw in Carl’s eyes the same question that had immediately flashed through her own mind: why hadn’t Michael told her himself? But a sleepless night has convinced her: friend, lover, or the charming user she pretends he is, she can’t ignore how she feels. She has to be with Michael. She can’t bear to think of his pain, and not be with him. Regardless of her fears, with Michael is where she must be, welcome or not.

At the front door through the screen, she can see daylight streaming in from the far end of what seems to be a central hall. She knocks and immediately the brightness is almost eclipsed. Someone’s striding down the corridor.

‘Hello there. Sorry to disturb. I’m looking for Michael Cosgrove.’ The enormity of the moment, the certainty that she’s invading the privacy of Michael’s family at this terrible time in their lives, compels her to add, ‘I’m a friend.’

The man stares at her through the screen. For a moment she feels as if he’s going to refuse her entry, but then without a word he half-turns away and bellows back into the house ‘Muk! Muk! A pal.’ And now he opens the screen and nods towards the sofa on the verandah. ‘Muk needs a pal today. Not a good time. Sit. I’ll bring yus a cuppa.’

The wide verandah wrapped around the house is filled with several comfy sofas, furnished in a way she imagines those cool coffee houses at Noosa would be. Each sofa’s covered by multi-coloured throws, nothing co-ordinated, nothing matching, as if
each has been randomly gathered from secondhand shops, or donated by someone who
has had the pleasure (and she can see it would be a pleasure) to have spent time here.
Side tables carrying quaint art objects are scattered here and there. This space is meant
to be filled with people. She imagines the whisper of conversations, the vibration of
bodies connecting with one another.

From inside, Francine can hear voices. Panicking, her mind scrolls through
strategies for retreat before she recognises a silhouette in the space beyond the screen
door. Michael comes towards her, back bowed. He pushes violently at the screen, as if
it’s an old enemy. She wants to back away. The door slams back against the stop and
Michael lurches through the open space towards her. She studies his face and gasps. His
usually fair face is a bloom of red and white blotches, his eyes red-rimmed and
bloodshot. Her chest tightens. She’s now frightened less by Michael than by the
emotions flooding through her, and yet she lifts her arms towards him and steps
forward. He stops and scowls. Neither of them speak. The silence is palpable. Without
warning, he falls towards her, tears streaming down his face, an oversized boy whose
mouth is spewing out strange noises. His arms wrap around her. His head drops. Dead
weight. Wetness spreads across her left shoulder. Over Michael’s shoulder, she can see
the big man is at the screen door. He’s carrying a tray. Should she help? Michael has
her anchored to the spot. She looks at the man and blinks. He nods and strides past
them.

‘Muk, some tea, lad. Have some tea. Get him to drink some tea, will you
please.’

Michael’s grip on her loosens. He pulls himself upright, looking normal again.
Free from his embrace, she is able to reach out her right hand towards the man.

‘Francine,’ she says. ‘I work with Michael.’
The man is tall and athletic. The singlet and work-shorts he wears reminds her this is his home and his space.

‘Muk’s dad. Jeremy. You’re welcome, Francine. Tea,’ he says pointing to the pot and cups on the tray. ‘Drink.’ He heads back towards the screen door and disappears. Behind him, there’s a thunk and a click, as the door closes and latches.

Not silver-haired, but perhaps still a banker or anything, for that matter. And never, in her imagined stereotype, a New Zealander. How wrong could she be? How wrong might she be about Michael, about his mother?

She eases Michael down into the sofa. Great shudders shake his body. She can see he’s struggling to get them under control. Slowly the trembling subsides, and she can feel his body relaxing under her hand. Eventually he leans back into the sofa. He’s Michael again.

‘Sorry,’ he says, the word still wet around its edges, as if he’s still fighting for normal speech. She wonders what it is he feels a need to apologise for. She’s the interloper. She’s the one who should know more about what this death means to him, and doesn’t. With a deep sigh, he reaches for the teapot.

‘Tea? Tea fixes everything in this house.’ He attempts a weak laugh that fails. ‘Was doing okay until I saw you.’

‘Oh sorry, sorry Michael. I am sticking my nose in where it shouldn’t be.’

‘No, no. I’m so happy you are here.’ And then he looks directly into her eyes, as if through the clouds of grief, it has finally dawned on him. ‘So, so happy. How did you know where my father lives?’

She decides this’s not the time for a full explanation. ‘Carl told me.’ She covers her nervousness by arranging the mugs on the tray, and this reminds him he’d been interrupted from serving tea. He pours and she adds the milk. He picks up one mug and
hands it to her and takes the other for himself. Both hold a mug between hands, as if their hands need warming (as if they are somewhere else rather than in Brisbane) and they lean back into the sofa together, shoulders touching, as if sitting on this sofa, drinking tea, is something they regularly do. Had that day been any other day, they might have turned to each other and spoken about the magnificence of the view of Brisbane ahead of them, or the luxury of a house such as this to be able to command such a view. But this was not that day.

15

_Later, that same evening._

**Francine**

Brisbane is spread before her, now only an array of diamond lights that are gradually diminishing as families turn in. She left Michael and his father washing dishes to come to the front for one last look. This family—not so dissimilar to her own—have spent today comforting each other, reminiscing, planning, eating, crying and laughing, and including her as one of them. All that she might have known had she not kept Michael at a distance she has learnt today: his mother died of breast cancer when he was young; the cousin (who suicided) is Jake who is (was) nearly the same age as Michael and as dark as Michael is fair; Jake’s mother was killed in a car accident and his father (Jeremy’s brother) returned to New Zealand, so Jeremy has been father to the two boys, raising them as brothers.

She wanders back to the rear courtyard, where the crowd has dwindled. Airbeds, folding cots, and sleeping bags are filling the floor space, bodies are draped on sofas, and at last the house is falling into silence. Michael hands his father the tea towel he’s been using and comes to her.
‘Shall I call you a cab?’

He’d asked her earlier, but to leave hadn’t felt right. He’s taken the first step towards the telephone when she shakes her head, and drops it. Anticipation, excitement, and some other strange and unexpected emotions are running through her. It seems immodest to show them, but when she sneaks a look at his face, she finds it difficult to contain herself. His mouth moves to her ear, kisses it and whispers, ‘Thanks. Means a lot to have you here, with my family, tonight.’

That’s all it takes to do her in. This time she has totally lost her battle.

June 24, 2010, behind a closed bedroom door in a shared apartment, watching television.

Francine

Look at her! Bold as brass. Not one red hair out of place, her face as white as can be (a Geisha’s face: painted white, expressionless) and her eyes fixed straight ahead almost as if she’s trying to ignore those men behind her, as if she’s aware that these men are holding behind their backs very sharp knives ready to use should she present them with an opportunity. Gillard knows what she’s done to put herself in this place. She knows what’s ahead. She took her chance. Australia’s first woman Prime Minister. Never thought we’d see the day. But should we women be proud of her or concerned about the manner in which she reached her ultimate goal? And how will her methods be used to credit or discredit women who are ambitious for positions of power? Oh, and look at ‘poor Kevin’ (or ‘K-Rudd’, as the media have labelled him)! Quivering lips, tears pooling in his eyes, not yet quite spilling down his cheeks but threatening. Can’t but feel sorry for the poor bugger.
Her own lip quivers. She recognises herself as an amalgam of Julia and Kevin, the wrong way round. Like Julia she knows what she wants, thinks she has the courage to grab her chance, but she recognises the reason for Kevin’s quivering lips because, like him, she’s spoilt her chance for success through her own doing. Julia’s a clever woman. Julia would never have done what she has. Julia would have kept her eyes on the goal ahead.

17

Facebook messaging

wtf’s going on with our girl. Lights are on but no-one’s home.

Elisa Simson. Today. June 27, 2010. 1.38 pm

Hangover? PMT?

Gail Cerny. Today. June 27, 2010. 1.40 pm

3-way share is not the same when only two are chatting.

Elisa Simson. Today. June 27, 2010. 1.41 pm

Cut the air with a knife is what.

Gail Cerny. Today. June 27, 2010. 1.43 pm
Later, on June 27, 2010, in the shared apartment.

Gail looks up from her phone. Elisa is stretched out on the sofa with her iPad in one hand. Both girls stop tapping and shrug their shoulders. The front door of the apartment slams shut.

Later still, June 27, 2010, in the suburban home of Francine’s parents, south-eastern suburbs of Brisbane.

Francine

Dad is staring at her with what he’d call his ‘blank Chinaman face’, the one that he thinks gets him out of trouble but that, instead, usually sinks him deeper into it. Mum’s wide eyed, lips quivering in her attempt not to say a word wrong and consequently is saying nothing. Freaky. And so far she’s told them nothing. Just turned up at their house, let herself in, and has been all cheer and jokes since. Her parents’ reaction is reasonable, seeing as it’s not her usual style to bounce in midweek as if she might stay the night. She hasn’t told them yet it might actually be a few nights.

Secure in her childhood home, at last she’s able to recognise how tight her grip has been. Don’t let the girls know that something’s up; don’t show weakness at work or at uni; and always there’s Michael. Don’t shatter Michael. Don’t destroy him unnecessarily. Wait. Wait until the full damage can be assessed. Wait until she has a plan.

She remembers as a kid reading the notes behind a door of one of the highway motels they’d stay in on a family road trip. She realises now the motel’s ‘In Case of Fire’ instructions only tell you what to do within the first half hour of hearing the fire
alarm, just as the plans she has in her head will only get her through the next few days. She knows tomorrow morning she’s going to be out there, in mum’s kitchen, acting as if all is okay, chatting as usual, chipping off the questions. She knows she will take herself off to work at her new job at The Boat Shed in Milton (not Cezanne’s, which she had to chuck so as to avoid Michael). She knows mum and dad will think she’s had a falling out with Gail and Elisa, who will think she has broken up with Michael, and God only knows what Michael will make of it. Michael’s her weakness. Michael’s that thread that sticks out from a knitted pullover, the one that you mustn’t pull or else the whole thing will unravel.

Snuggled under her very pink childhood doona, she is muttering to herself. Might as well start sorting the wood and forgetting the trees, counsellor’s words, not hers. ‘Understanding your own thought process is a start’, the counsellor said, ‘to regaining control of your life.’ In other words, assess your priorities and take action.

Her parents have tried their usual problem solving techniques: bringing to her bedroom door her favourite food and drinks (like crispy chicken and milo), and leaving her alone. Her father’s finding the second one difficult. She has recognised his footsteps in the corridor, imagines him tip-toe-ing, listening, hoping someone asks for his help, and her mum frowning at him like he’s a naughty child. He’s such a darling. On the floor, discarded, is an A4 notebook she purchased in the city on her way from the apartment. She’s been working hard to convince herself she would follow the counsellor’s instruction, even if one part of her is not at all convinced. Time to act. Her hand, the pencil, the gripping fingers, all hover above the page, yet she cannot find the words she needs.
July 4, 2010, in Michael Cosgrove's apartment, West End.

Michael

His mobile in his hand, Michael’s thumb selects Contacts, scrolls down to Francine’s entry and presses ‘call’. He’s lost count of how many times he’s done this. It’s become automatic: Contacts, ‘S’, scroll down to Seeto, select, and ‘call’. Maybe just once she’ll turn on her phone and he’ll catch her unawares. This shutting out is no accident.

July 18, 2010, at the kitchen table in the home of Maria Seeto.

Francine

Ah ma, do you miss Grandpa Patrick? Don’t you feel lonely without him?’

‘Seven years now since your gung gung he went to God. You haven’t mentioned gung gung for a long time, Francie. What’s made you think about him now?’

‘I feel lonely, Grandma. I feel as if I’m a standing in a crowd but I’m alone. I wondered if you feel lonely too.’

‘What can make a lovely young woman feel alone? I don’t believe!’

‘Oh not alone, ah ma. Lonely. Don’t you miss gung gung?’

‘I was lonely like how you toktok when your grandfather was still here. I understand lonely.’

‘What do you mean, ah ma? Weren’t you happy with gung gung?’

‘Oh gung gung not bad husband. He just not the one I love. You save, Francie? Sometime you love but cannot have. That me. Me no tell gung gung. But me lonely.’

‘Ooh wah, ah ma. You’ve got secrets! Gung gung not the man of your dreams? So, who’s your secret love, ah ma?’

‘Francie, me tingting you got secret, too.’
‘Oh different kind of secret, ah ma.’

‘All secrets same-same, Francie.’

‘Well, ah ma, tell me, please, what do you do if you keep a secret, because you must keep it. Because if it’s no longer a secret, it’ll hurt someone or many people you care for?’

‘Ah Francie, all secrets hurt someone. Na mostly emi hurt pipel you love. Mebe that is why we keep secret in first place. No laik hurt some one we love, or no want hurt ourself.’

‘How do you keep a secret long enough to discover what is the right thing to do so that you don’t hurt everyone including yourself?’

‘I know this kind of secret, Francie. He hard to live with, this kind. But me tingting, if you no can tell all of truth, tell some only. Bits and pieces. No easy way—olegeta ways always he kissim trabil. Trouble kam, anyway. Yu no ken stap this kind of trabil.’

22

*Same table, same house, same day.*

**Maria**

Granddaughter belong me toktok me long her grandfather. How many lies me must kaikai to toktok her. She tingting Patrick her gung gung. Nogat. She tingting me sori tumuchia long Patrick dai pinis. Nogat. Lies. Tasol. Mebe samtaim Francine save her ah ma big fat liar. She save her ah ma no tok stre. Me tok stre long love my boys, long feeling lonely, but nogat lonely long Patrick. Stephen. All this about Stephen. Lies about grandpa, lies about lonely. Stephen tasol. Stephen na my boys.
July 20, 2010, a SMS message from Francine to Michael Cosgrove

Hey Michael how about coffee this arvo? Not Cezanne. Eagle Street Jetty at 2?

August 2010, at the home of Maria Seeto, south-eastern suburbs of Brisbane.

Michael

Her finger’s curled up near her mouth. Cute. But he knows that look. Means something’s on her mind. Like, yeah! No one believes the piss-weak story she’s handed out about the couple of weeks she spent off this planet, throwing in the job she loved and every other strange thing she’s done but he, for one, is just happy to be back here, in the inner circle. He’s willing to be patient. Strange (but lovely) creature that she is. She’s sitting next to her mother who’s animated as she talks, wagging a finger, pointing to individuals, laughing, and he’s watching her from where he’s sitting, across the garden. Francie gives her mum a weak smile. Wonder if her mother knows she’s not listening. Probably does. Probably, like everyone (especially him), not willing to push too hard, not willing to risk losing her again. On his part, he’s very happy that he’s been given the opportunity at last to meet her family. They’re great. He feels right at home. Especially great that they haven’t kicked him out yet. Tons of food. Francie’s grandmother’s the best. Got eyes like a hawk’s. Misses nothing. Bet she’s got Francie’s number, or is pretty close to discovering it. Maybe it’s just to do with uni, graduation coming up, pressure, and so on, like she says. Nah! It’s not.
Same place, same party.

Andrew

There they are, his girls. Kathy, Mum, Francine. And that poor guy Francine has brought along, whose suffering a full grilling by the girls. If he hangs around after tonight, after their interrogation, then he has to be a good-un because Kathy and his mum are giving him the full working over, as mothers do to protect their offspring. Should go over and rescue the guy. Too knackered. Been at it since six this morning.

Started with a trip to butcher to pick up a suckling pig. ‘Kissim abus’, his mother ordered. ‘Check he gutpela. Tell butcher must be fresh.’ Back here, to his mother’s place, to get the spit set up and turning. Takes hours to cook a whole pig, but his mum wants it all to be Niugini-style. Meanwhile, been hanging lights off tree branches, setting up tables and chairs, cooking rice, and cleaning house. Pig’s just about ready to serve. A shower and a change and he’ll be ready to get on with serving, his next chore.

His mum’s happy. Nothing she likes better than having ‘familii’ and ‘mumu’ and lots of people. She’s past it, these days those old legs can’t get her around as well as they could, but she still wants these family dos to happen. Been a hard worker all her life. Taken care of all of them. God, he loves her. What’ll he do when her time comes? Francie will be the next one to boss them all around. She’s ah ma’s double. In years to come, the lights will be hung as she wants them, and the meat on the spit will be the kind she likes. It’s there, in the future, all waiting to come. But, anyway, what good’s life without family, without being there for each other? That’s what their mum has taught them. Like last year, a distant cousin, Sam, he came from PNG, no job, no home, kids to feed, and Mum put them up until they got on their feet. Mum says ‘like Uncle
did when we come long Australia’. True, true. But Mum’s old and should not take on such problems. What happens: everyone helps. Someone gave Sam’s pikininis hand-me-down school clothes, someone else loaned the family a car, a bit beat-up but still goes. Mum needed help every day. She has trouble grocery shopping and even though the kids, Francie and Lucas, teach her to do online shopping on the computer, she says: ‘no like, got stupid brands’ or some other thing is wrong with what’s on offer, or ‘can’t lookim see if fresh’. Never mind that online is better than no food if everyone is busy and can’t make it over to her house to help. So until Sam got to know his way around, with so many mouths to feed, it was a trip to the grocery store for the mob of them every second day. Not complaining.

Will he shower? Or rescue Francie’s pal?

26

September 14, 2010, in Maria Seeto’s bedroom in her home, Brisbane.

Francine

Well, the redhead has done it. Touch and go. But now she’s been sworn in and it’s official. Australia still has a woman Prime Minister. How long will Julia survive? Julia’s future’s still shaky.

There’s a lot of shakiness going around lately. Who would have thought solid, reliable ah ma could become shaky? She’s packed a bag, taken her passport, and headed to PNG. Everyone’s as stunned as they were when Julia kicked out Rudd. As a result, Gran’s bed is covered with a pile of photos and papers that she left, tipped out of a shoebox. No one’s ever seen this lot. She wishes her ah ma was here to explain and tell the stories, make sense of the photos, but right now she’s looking for clues. Ah ma’s not just taken herself off, but she also told no one what’s going on. Very unusual. Very
upsetting. Meanwhile her Dad and Uncle Gab are flapping around like idiots while Uncle Daniel seems unable to do anything. Might be because he and Anna were away for a week when Gran shot through. Gran was sneaky. Uncle probably feels guilty, like he let everyone down by not being there to keep an eye on her. But who would have guessed? No one, that’s for sure. But while Gran’s doing a runner is a big worry—she’s not well, which means something big must have happened—benefits comes for another shaky person. Just when she was about to make her big announcement, this happens. Ah ma might call it ‘fate’. It’d be pretty darn selfish to be drawing attention to herself by making her own announcement, when they’re all so worried about ah ma—so looks like she’ll have to stall sharing her news.
1

September 2010—East New Britain Province, Papua New Guinea.

Henry

Maria. His sister. She’s been tambu for a long time. By his own choice. But, lately, he can’t stop thinking about her. These days his head is messed up in many ways: thoughts muddled and confused; strangest notions popping up at the oddest of times. And contrary to how it’s been in his life up to this point, often those thoughts are filled with memories of Maria. Not the Maria of today, in Australia, if she’s still alive, but the child Maria who was permitted to stay with their mother when he had to leave. But rogue thoughts are no more unusual than the recent behaviour of the rest of his body, which sweats too much, has lost its taste for the food (even fish, and he’s survived on fish most of his life), and its far too often demands for the toilet. Even his Tolai friends notice how many times in the hour he has a need: ‘Ah Henry, yu sick. Pis tumuchia.’ Is his body trying to tell him something?

His son’s diagnosis: ‘Papa, you can’t sleep at night because you are a lazy man all day.’ True, very true. Ling’s probably right. Most days he does very little. But it’s not the lack of sleep that worries him. It’s the dreams.

And if Ling’s worried, he’s petrified. If he’s dying soon, he doesn’t want to spend eternity as he’s done in life.

Maria is a rock he can’t bypass. He has many unanswered questions. Perhaps if he had the answers he could die in peace.
In his dream he’s waving a clenched fist at Maria. The dream feels real, and he is certain it is Maria, though he doesn’t see her face. Anyway, would he know what she looks like as a lapun meri? Last time he saw her was before independence, too many years ago, and then he’d only caught a glimpse of her at the bung (and he’d made sure his path didn’t intersect hers).

In his dreams, he’s an angry man, and while the dream feels real, he knows it can’t be because that’s not the man he knows himself to be. He’s a man who would rather eat his anger than show it, a man who would never confront someone he was angry with. If he had been the other kind of man, a man who wanted to resolve whatever anger issues he holds, the crate—the perfect excuse to face his sister—would not still be in his bedroom. For some years it has sat there, challenging him to act, since Uncle Stephen asked him to arrange for this crate to be shipped to Maria. Uncle Stephen also took away his other excuse for not contacting Maria: of not having any of Maria’s Australian contact details. Uncle Stephen even gave him sufficient money to pay for the shipping. He’s done nothing: the crate is still here, and now Uncle Stephen is dead.

Another kind of man might also have satisfied his curiosity about the crate and opened it.

The thing he’s best at doing is not facing his own fears. He’s perfected the art; spent his own life practising it.

The rattle of metal against metal and the drum of rubber on bitumen break through his meditation. He looks up and just above the hibiscus hedge that separates his property from Kokopo Road, a glimpse of the upper section of a rusty truck cab is followed by the tops of many heads, all curly-haired and swaying. A village truck. Several pass his home throughout the day but, just because they pass often, doesn’t mean that each time they pass they don’t surprise him. One hundred metres from his
home to the right, and Kokopo Road bursts out from behind an embankment and then
disappears around another corner a couple of hundred metres to the left. From either
direction, one minute no vehicle is visible, there’s no sound, then a flash of one and a
roar, and then, once more, nothing to be seen or heard. Things always surprise him. For
some reason, what is clear to others is never clear to him. All his life he’s been waiting
for the fog to clear, for life to have meaning, for a feeling that there’s some purpose to it
and his role in it. But it still hasn’t reached him.

2

September 12, 2010 – Brisbane.

Maria

Last time she have Henry for brother, Henry was so, so tiny. That day so sad: she
lookim his pikinini hand leave Mumma’s hand na go long numbawan papa’s hand.
Never see that hand again.

Papa’s straight back, his dark hair, is what she watches as papa and Henry leave.
From papa’s head, across his right shoulder, down his arm, to his hand, her eyes travel
to where Henry begins. And at this place, papa’s big hand swallows Henry’s small one.
Papa’s body is straight like a bamboo pole. Henry’s is twisting and turning, like a fish
on a line. First his little head turns to look over his right shoulder, then over his left
shoulder. Each time he turns, his legs go wobbly. Each time he turns and wobbles, papa
shakes him. For a little while after each shake, Henry’s body is straight, like his papa’s.
But then he turns again. So they go, two together, until they are just two small dots
disappearing along Malaguna Road, heading out of town.

Each time Henry turns, she pictures his baby face. She imagines she can see his
straight fine black hair flicking back and forth, like it does when he running and playing
with her, his little lips quivering. She knows that being able to see his baby face can only be happening in her imagination. Henry and papa are too far away. But each time he turns, she cries ‘Henry. Yu stap. Henry. Liklik brus belong me. Yu nogat go.’ Her face is wet.

Like soldiers, the tall trees long Malaguna Road stand guard either side of papa and Henry’s exit.

Her mummy’s hand is still reaching out for her boy, as it was when papa took Henry’s hand from hers. Mummy’s mouth is open, like she wants to say something but mummy isn’t even crying.

She stands beside her mummy, holding her body still, like her mummy holds hers, and together they watch papa and Henry until there is nothing to see but quivering dots. Her mummy only looks to the place where Henry once was, as if she’s forgotten there’s someone standing at her side, and still holding her hand. Is her Ox brother frightened? He doesn’t even know this papa. All his life he has only had one papa and that was daddy George.


Nearly sixty years since Henry left. All those years she remembers him as a little frightened boy. Yet she has never forgotten how old he really is. Always she remembers his birthday, lights a candle for him, whispers ‘Happy birthday brother of mine.’ She doesn’t expect that Henry has done the same for her on her birthdays. He made it quite clear he did not want to be her brother anymore, after the war and since, by ignoring her letters.

She was two when Henry was born. She’s a Dog person, and she’s secretly proud of her dog-like qualities: a man’s best friend, faithful, courageous, smart and
warm-hearted. A keeper of secrets. That’s exactly who she is. But she can’t know if Henry’s truly an Ox person. Ox people are honest, industrious, patient and cautious, but they are also obstinate and poor at communication, according to her book about Chinese astrology. He must be an Ox. Otherwise he would remember his sister and speak to her.

3

September 12, 2010 – Henry’s home outside of Rabaul.

Henry

He’s made the call. Told her about the crate in his bedroom. She’s coming.

The wall he’d built has crumbled. That his sister is coming back into his life means he has nothing to hide behind.

Daddy George has wrapped him in his arms, so tight he can hardly breathe. Over daddy George’s shoulder nenek’s face is looking at him, her hands fluttering, as if she is trying to take hold of the air. She isn’t crying. Daddy George’s hands are under his arms. He’s flying through the air. He thinks daddy George and mumma are playing a game with him, like they do sometimes. Mumma takes his hand and they walk out of their house. Maybe he and mumma are going to the market. They are walking along the same street as they do when they go to the bung. A man is there. Mumma says: ‘emi numbawan papa belong yu. Yu save? Papa belong yu kissim yu long holiday. Yu be brave pikinini na me lookim yu soon.’ He’s looking back. Mumma is there. She is standing in the middle of the road. He remembers her blue eyes. Mumma.
September 14, 2010, Tokua airport terminal, East New Britain.

**Henry**

His sister’s here.

They’re sharing some coffee before they start on the drive to his home.

‘You got blue eyes’, he says to his sister.

‘Oh please, don’t start that again.’

‘What you mean? Don’t start that again?’

‘You tease, oletaim, about blue eyes. Everyone else got brown eyes or black eyes, you toktok. You make me cry. Oletaim.’

‘But wonem mumma? Nogat mumma’s eyes blue?’

His sister’s eyes are sad. Her blue eyes stare at him and then she shakes her head. ‘Nogat. Mumma eye’s black. Yu lusim?’

For a moment her face is wrinkled, as it would be if she had a toothache. Then her hand dives into her handbag and shuffles around. Her face is beaming. She draws out a brown envelope and pulls out of it two photographs.

‘Kissim copies bipor me leavim Brisbane. Tispela. Na tispela.’

Her fingers push each photo until she has neatly organised them on the table in front of her, side by side, upside down. She slides them across the table.
In the home of Henry Seeto.

Maria

The blonde rough timbers of the crate have mesmerised her. Last time she saw this crate was in 1959—she’ll never forget the year—and it was swinging across the wharf, high above her car, heading for the hold of a local supply vessel. Did Stephen open it and discover her heart inside? And, if so, why after so many years did he send it to Henry. Why Henry?

---

1913, in Rabaul, capital of German New Guinea.

Koti Pereira (Maria and Henry’s nenek)

For several hours she has remained as he left her, willing herself not to panic, not do something she might regret; imagining herself through the eyes of the gecko watching her from his lizard spot on the ceiling.

Gecko he tingting how this tall meri look so small, why she curled in a ball on her bed? Koti, Koti, Koti. Nogat lusim. No one will believe Koti. Only believe young masta Heinrich.

She wants to run away from this place, from these people. But run where? This town, Rabaul, is on an island, and even the other town, Kokopo, is on the same island. Everyone knows everyone. Rabaul gossip would make sure everyone knows something bad has happened. For someone like her, whose job is to care for a masta and his missus, there will be no job. She must be clever.

And, besides, her belongings are precious to her. She can’t afford to leave them behind. She will not leave her marriage chest behind. Never. But she certainly can’t tuck it under her arms and carry it out.

Tingting clear, Koti. Tingting smart.

She has until dawn. By dawn all those who work for masta Schultz will have begun their day’s work and will have noticed if she isn’t at her usual tasks.
Tispela man na meri ole toktok: Koti, emi sick? Koti nogat kissim work, nogat wasim laplap, nogat kukim kai, nogat brumin floor. Wonem?

There are only, she guesses, about two or three hours before sunrise. She has to find a way to get herself moving. She has to work out a way that will work for her, not against her.

Slowly she lifts her head, her shoulders, and brings her upper body to its full height, though her legs remain curled beneath her on the kapok palliasse that is her bed. Her chin lifts.


Her sleepout is only walled to rail height so she is able to watch the main house across the garden. There have been no lights in that building for some time. No movement or lights in the male servants’ quarters behind the main house on one side of the garden, either. But she knows no one ever sleeps well, the nights are too hot and sticky. She cringes at the possibility of accidentally meeting anyone, though habit tells her those meetings are usually silent: pass a man or meri in the night and no one looks at the other, certainly no one speaks. Just pass and walk to wherever it is that night-walkers go. She worries that the young masta’s crime is written over her body. She sniffs the air and, yes, she nods, her body stinks—his stink. She gags in disgust. She needs to wash, to rid herself of his dirty boy stink.

Wash-haus kallim long Koti—Koti, come long me, me gat water na soap.

Half her day is spent there, in the laundry—its every day sounds and smells sing to her, familiar and comforting: water hitting the bottom of the concrete tubs, the scent of freshly laundered clothes and soap. The feel of water and lathered soap on her body.
becomes an obsession. And masta Schultz’s wash-haus is a place like no other she knows of in this town of open doors and windows. This wash-haus has hatches that can be closed. Drop the hatches, close the door, and the world is shut out. At this moment, this privacy, if only for minutes, seems most precious.

Her sleeping room backs onto the wash-haus, so she knows how short the walk will be: out of one door and into another. On other days she could do that walk several times and not be seen by anyone. But tonight her height and the circumstances make her feel as if everyone can see her. She drops down on her hands and knees and crawls towards the door of her sleep-out, out through the doorway, around the corner, down the path and into the wash-haus. Once inside, she takes a moment to catch her breath and then gives the door a gentle push, and finally makes certain it is firmly closed by applying light pressure with her fingers. At last, in what seems to be her only haven, she allows her body to relax, but it is short-lived. The consequences of the night’s event can’t be forgotten for more than a second. She’s suddenly very weary. She has to fight a desire to curl herself up once more, to not move. Despite the sweet aromas of the laundry, she can’t escape the scent of the young masta that rises up from her body, clogs her nostrils, and that is all she needs to spur her on.

Must waswas. Must rid herself of her shame.

The darkness of the wash-haus is no hindrance. She knows this space so well she can feel her way across to the window. Once there, she stretches her long arms in front of her, allowing her fingers to feel for familiar shapes and work their way outwards and upwards towards the hatch. Ah yes, there it is. She stands. Feeling suddenly exposed, her eyes do a quick scan outside the laundry as her hands seek out the end of the hatch’s brace. Usually, if a storm comes up, she’d grab this, drop it to the floor, and let the hatch bang loudly, wood on wood, against the sill. Not this night. She
wants no one to hear anything. One of her hands carefully takes the weight of the hatch cover and pushes out, while the other lifts out the brace so the cover can be eased down to rest against the sill with only the slightest voomph of a sound. Only then does she bend down and places the brace on the concrete floor.

At last she can breathe.

Olegeta man na meri no ken lookim long Koti.

For some minutes she sits, secure in the pitch-black room, but the voice in her head won’t give her peace. The night is drawing to an end. She must have a plan in place before dawn. And she’s beginning to feel the effects of the hatch being closed: no breeze to blow away the humidity. The wash-haus is a hotbox. Sweat pools over her body, the reek of her own body even more repugnant. This body is no longer hers; it has been changed forever by the young masta. She dry-retches.

Waswas gutpela. Koti waswas strong.

As much as she fears light, she can’t do without it. Masta Heinrich keeps emergency supplies stored in the wash-haus in a cupboard beside the door. There will be two battery-operated flashlights. That’s because Masta Heinrich is worried about the volcano, and he believes keeping these torches ready for emergency use is essential.

She wriggles across the floor, feeling her way, until her fingers curl around the wooden knob of the door to the storage cupboard. Inside the cupboard, her fingers creep around, feeling for the smooth leather of the torch grips. At last, she finds one. She uses her forefinger to slide the metal latch and a glorious beam of yellow light fills the storage cupboard. She brings the torch out into the larger space, closes the door, and focuses the beam on herself.

Until this moment, her thirty-three year old body has served her well. But at this moment, in the torchlight, she can only feel disgust for it.
Pikinini masta only sixteen-year-old. Why he do this?

Though it’s hard to admit, one thing he has done to her tonight is worse than the other. What he did to her body is bad enough, but the other has crippled her. Through his absolute disregard for her, he has crushed something precious. He had been, until tonight, like a son to her. She had aided his mother at the time of his birth, and since that birth, she’s been with his family like a second mother to him and his brothers and sisters. Now, two times over on this night he has shown how he sees her, shown her that he thinks of her as someone with no voice, no power: a nothing person. He has also shown his self-assurance, that he is very aware of the security and power of his own position. Silently he has shown her that he knows whatever she says, even if people believe her, no one will do anything. They’ll pretend it’s not important. His papa’s company owns this town. She knows he’s right to see it this way, for that’s how it is. She also knows she has to find a way through this without seeking justice for her or punishment for him. Like an insect, she must hide in a corner if she is to save herself. She swallows to stop the bile rising up her throat.

She can find ways past the dirtiness of his act, and her anger at being treated as nothing, but can she recover from the most important thing that tonight has damaged: her belief in herself? Leaving home at fifteen, losing a husband, being left without home or money so young, all had to be faced with courage. She has always believed with effort she could find a way through anything. She has never seen problems, only a need to find solutions supported by a belief that as hard as those solutions might be to find, with effort she could find them. The young masta has stolen that. He has shown her who she really is: shown her that all her efforts have been for nothing.

Mummmum

Her mantra.
Her arms wrap across her chest and her hands grip her shoulders.


But she only allows herself a short burst of self-pity. She must move.

Anger provides her the will to lift herself from the floor and stand at the tub. She grabs the tap’s brass wheel and wrenches it round, as if it’s the young masta. The effort has her complete concentration. Round and round, round and round, until it’s fully open. As the water pressure increases, the tap creaks, the pipe whistles and groans in protest. The rush of water lifts her beyond this evening. Her fear of someone hearing and wondering at the oddity of such a noise at this hour is forgotten. The great waterfall strikes the bottom of the tub, and then flies back up at her face and her shoulders, drenching her upper body. The breeze created by the rushing water refreshes her. She forces a stopper into the drain and waits for the water to rise, and to continue rising, then plunges her head into the tub, down, down, down, as deep as she can go, as deep as the limits of her bended body will allow her to go; until head and shoulders are submerged. She works hard to resist an urge to remove her clothes and climb in to rid her body of the smell of his sweat that had pooled and slurped between them in his assault of her. For a moment her awareness of the rest of the world returns, and she lifts her head. What if someone finds her here? How would she explain? But she squashes that voice, and again submerges her head and shoulders. Listening to the sound of the water falling, the bubbles rising through it as she plunges in, before coming up for air. The excess water pours down over her smock. The few minutes of submersion have made the washaus her own fragile but private space. In that space, she can shut out the sounds of a Rabaul night: the breeze buffeting the vegetation, of feet plodding on the ground, as the Tolai carry out their endless nocturnal wanderings, the buzz and click of
insects, and the tut-tutting of geckos on the ceilings. Shutting out those sounds makes her feel temporarily removed from Rabaul, safe and without fear.

But the anger is never too far away.

She pounds her fists to her chest. The scrubbing brush, sitting on the bench beside the tub, dares her. She snatches it up, releases the water from the tub, but leaves the tap running. Into the running water she dips the brush and viciously scrubs her arms, chest, and her legs. But—not that place. Can’t touch herself there. Not yet. Dirty. Filthy. No tears, though. The scrubbing, the pain of the brush on her skin, releases her, brings back her resolve.


She reaches over to the pile of freshly laundered towels, takes one and lathers it with laundry soap and lifts it up and under her smock. With force she scrubs between her legs, around her breast and her backside and as far as she can reach up her back, every part of her body that the dirty, cowardly child has invaded. She seems unaware of time but somewhere in her head a clock must be ticking because before too long she forces herself to stop scrubbing and rubbing and rinsing, turns off the tap, and dries her body. On the shelf, a pile of clean laundry, and one of the house-staff has left a clean smock behind. She removes her drenched and soiled one, and dons the clean one. Now she must face that terrible room. Standing proud and tall, she leaves the wash-haus and enters her sleep-out. She grabs one end of the coarse mattress covering and pulls it, gagging and retching at the stink of semen and sweat steaming in the heat of the night. She throws the cover outside. Weariness suddenly overtakes her. She turns the mattress over. Her body falls onto its bare surface and there she remains, in a crumpled bundle.
Sleep comes and goes, interrupted only by delirious dreams. She’s back in Hollandia and begging for a berth on a cargo ship heading for Friedrich Wilhelmshafen, the town on the mainland where her husband of less than a year has gone to work on the tobacco plantations. Josef, Josef, she cries in her half-sleep. But she does not complete that journey, does not reach the place in which he died only months after arriving. Died with so many other tobacco plantation workers. She cries. Josef, Josef. You died alone. Those men died alone. Families will never know of their death. If it wasn’t for those deaths, perhaps she might never have come to Rabaul, for it was the fear of the swamps that brought the Germans from Friedrich Wilhelmshafen to Kokopo, and then to Rabaul. As is the way of dreams, she moves from one sea journey to another, this one with several other people—young men and women—dark and tall like her. They are calling out to each other, encouraging each other. They speak her father’s language as they bend their backs and lift their arms, driving forward their large canoe through the waves.

She wakes in panic. Has dawn come and gone? Her dream is still with her, as fresh as any memory. She thinks back to the time before Friedrich Wilhelmshafen, to her island home, west of New Guinea. Then she was a stupid young girl with too much courage, influenced by the tall tales of foreign sailors.

Mebe this is why trabil kam: Koti forget who she is, tingting she olesam missus na masta. Koti tingting she ken do anyting. Masta na missus no laik meri tingting this way.

She re-imagines her father’s shame at a disobedient, wilful daughter. So much time has passed, so much has she changed, she cannot gauge what her father’s response to her leaving might have been. Or how the community might have judged him. But the tales the sailors told were in the main true enough: the escapees found jobs and a whole
new world. What none of them had fully anticipated was the cost of that new life. They had lost a homeland, companionship of people who saw the world as they did and a daily life wherein they could hear their own language spoken. Since leaving, she has rarely heard her own language and she feels the loss of it. The sailors didn’t warn of these things, just as they didn’t make big of the risks of dying or being swept off course. Yet, the six rebels had been able to paddle from island to island and for the last, far longer journey, the prevailing winds did push them towards Hollandia, as the sailors had said the winds of a certain season would do.

Hollandia was nothing like the place she had left behind. Her island looked like it was still being formed, with its volcanic cones and sandy shores, and narrow strips of land, and the broad expanses of ocean visible on both sides. Hollandia had similar volcanoes, but beyond the town, beyond its wide bays and steep mountains, it had seemed to her islander eyes that the land went on forever. Strange buildings stood solidly on the earth, built of heavier material than used on her island for buildings. The sight of this new place was both exciting and terrifying. In the harbour when they arrived that first afternoon, they had made their way past large vessels, like the ones that had brought the mischievous sailors to her island. The six of them had argued about where should they pull their canoe ashore. In the end, they chose a white sandy beach, probably because it looked a little like the beaches on their island. They found it beyond the clutter of buildings at the centre of the harbour. As they had wandered around the town, wide-eyed and partly fearfilled, they saw many people busily working and casually strolling: men and women with different faces and bodies to hers, some very white, some brown; some with hair that was straight and white and others whose hair was dark, like hers, but with tight, wiry curls. When she thinks back to Hollandia, she can see resemblances of that port to Rabaul’s harbour: the steepness of the surrounding
hills, its beauty, and its streets filled with many kinds of people. There was much to be feared about leaving her island—death, mostly—but she and her foolish friends were strangely unafraid. She was brave, too, after Josef’s death. She needs that courage today.

Yes, Koti, you ready for this day. You can be strong.

She lets her thoughts linger on her father. If she could see him once more, would she tell him that the pain she caused was for nothing? How, instead of washing, cleaning and cooking for a husband he’d have chosen for her, she did those chores for someone else’s husband, someone else’s children. She tries to think in Malay, but it doesn’t come easy. Malay words gets mixed with TokPisin and the few words of English and German she speaks every day. Strangely, what comes to her is that her papa called a house ‘rumah’ and a home ‘tanah airku’. House and home. She has only ever had a house—a place in which to sleep and eat, to work—never one in which she felt secure, surrounded by things that she holds dear. A tanah airku is a luxury out of her reach. For so many years she has worked for the German masta Heinrich and his Niugini missus. The German word for his house is the same as pidgin word ‘haus’. Pidgin ‘haus’ means two things: first, a building to keep rain and wind off the body and, second, a home that belongs to you. In German, there’s another word for home: this is ‘heim’. She sighs. She has no home and for her house means work. She snorts as she remembers masta Heinrich senior, when he told her to make his haus her heim. Words come easy. Doesn’t mean they are true.

Long masta Heinrich she hauskeeper tasol.

First chore of the day: she takes the soiled linen into the wash-haus to boil in the copper, and next, to fit a fresh cover to her palliasse.

Must make it look like nothing happened.
That need to make the young masta’s act invisible brings back her anger. She fights to control it, by reminding herself the invisibility is for her good, not his, but loses the battle. The Schultz family, witnessed the birth of all the Schultz children ... Finally she makes a pledge to herself: if she finds a way to run from this place, good or bad, rough or smooth as it might be, never again will she forget the important lessons learnt this night.

Past sunset and after filling the day with her usual habits of work, she finally has a plan. For once Heinrich, the father, has kept Heinrich, the son, busy throughout the day. That’s part of young Heinrich’s problem: too much idle time, too much drinking, too many Niugini woman to make trouble with. At this moment, the other haus meris are in the kitchen cleaning up after the evening meal. Which means, if the Schultzes have finished their evening meal, as is their habit, the two Heinrichs would have taken up their wicker lounges on the verandah. Such verandahs are for the lucky people. Verandahs turn a haus into a heim. She dreams of a verandah of her own. She peeks around through the bushes in the garden. Ah yes. In the deep blue of the evening sky, she can see the clouds of cigar smoke and hear their laughter. They will have glasses in their hands and a bottle or two on the table beside them. Their life is going on as it always does. Young Henrich would not be troubled by last night’s events. Other women have suffered invasion of their bodies, too, she has now convinced herself, and coming to that conclusion, dark murderous thoughts fill her head. She is surprised. Never has she felt this way about others: hate sufficient to want to see them dead.

She carries those black thoughts with her as she heads behind the high vegetation at the rear of the property and walks along the path towards the back gate. She’s taking the long way to town. It’s a humid night. Loi Fook’s house in Chinatown is quite a distance. Sweat bubbles on her forehead and down her arms, making her ebony skin glisten. The Niugineans she passes know her as black and do not mumble their usual greeting of ‘good evening missus’, as they would for a European missus or even a Chinese missus. Instead, the men snicker. Mosquitoes eat her. She’s thirsty. She ignores everything. The town is quiet. The offices of NDL, NGK and Hernsheim and Company are closed, their people (same same masta Schultz) have gone home to their families. Trams are in their sheds. She tramps along the dusty Rabaul streets, re-running her plan in her head. Past the low and high timber buildings of Chinatown. At last she’s striding down a lane. The soft glow of a kerosene lamp filters out an open window: Loi Fook’s humble hut. She takes a deep breath and knocks.

Loi works for the Schultzes as a handyman. He does whatever they ask of him but she’s seen that Loi doesn’t work for the German to earn money but something more important to him. She wonders if masta Schultz realises how clever Loi is. While he acts as humble servant, he uses every opportunity to learn so he can put that learning to use for his own benefit. She sees his businesses growing. One day he will be more powerful, far richer, than all the German mastas of Rabaul. She has heard from Schultz’s Niuginean gardener that Loi is about to open a trade store. She hopes she has read him correctly: that Loi wishes to continue as long as he can working with the Germans, learning from them, keeping abreast of events. To do this he needs to find someone trustworthy to run his tradestore: a reliable person, like Koti Pereira, maybe. A flutter of fear passes through her. Is she selling her soul to the devil? Loi, she can see, cares for no one but Loi.
1914, in Rabaul, capital of the German protectorate of German New Guinea.

Koti


She is glad she did not use poison in the drinks of those two Heinrichs were sipping as they sat on their verandah on that dreadful night. Fate has taken care of them for her. War comes and what war says is that it’s the Germans in Rabaul who are ‘nothing people’, as young masta Heinrich made her feel she was. Some Germans have remained in Rabaul, saying this is their home, but they no longer have their big houses or their powerful jobs. The big war is in another country but a little war happened here at Bita Paka, when the Germans fight the Australian Navy. But that’s over now. The Australian Government has taken over the German-owned plantations and their houses. Both the Heinrichs went, but they left behind their Niugini wife and mother. Her home is in the town of Friedrich Wilhelmshafen, a long way from Rabaul, and she is left to cry for the son she knows she’ll never see again. The father and son have treated her worse than they treated their servants. She hasn’t money and she needs to feed and care for the younger children. She could live in her village near Friedrich Wilhelmshafen if she had money to pay their fares. One good thing has happened, though. The new Administration has changed the long name of that town to Madang. Nice and short now.

Young masta Henrich’s mother, she Niugini mamma who left her village when she was only thirteen kristmases. Papa and mamma belong tispela meri (like papa belong Koti) mebe tingting she dai pinis, too long since they toktok her. Niugini
mamma need to remember, olesam Koti, not to cry over humbug white man and half-white son because all her brown pikininis love her tumuchia. And Koti cry too, but cry long being happy. Two Heinrichs gone na Koti nogat worry long baby girl, gift from young Heinrich, one he might want back sometime. Only one and a bit years old is this beautiful pikinini. Dark sam long her mumma na dark olesam husband Josef. Koti so sori he die before tupela make baby, so Koti gaimin tispela pikinini come from Josef. Not from Heinrich. Koti kallim baby Josefina. Josefinia Pereira. But Koti’s trabil that begin long young masta Heinrich still not pinis. Still got Loi Fook to worry about. Loi Fook, he toktok: ‘Koti yu ken live long wanpela haus belong me but yu work long me no pay. Yu make business gutpela long me.’ Koti nogat lusim long Loi. Never trust Loi.

Her fears are justified. Although Loi has not interfered with her own activities so far, as long as she does the chores he wants done. Because he likes to remain invisible, he needs her to act on his behalf, like take paperwork to the Administration office. He wants no clear path to his door, doesn’t want people to know how rich he has become. That’s why he still lives in his little hut in Chinatown. But recently she has had some success of her own. Some months ago, someone high up in the Administration (masta George Brown) asked her to cater when there were officials visiting from Australia. Everyone liked what she offered, and they paid her good money. Since then, every week, sometimes every day, they have a need for someone to cook for them. They love Koti! Good for her. But she’s certain there will be a price to pay to Loi. He doesn’t like to share his good fortune. Maybe he will not act now. But some time in the future she knows he will make his claim.
October, 1934, Chinatown, Rabaul.

Leo Wei Seeto (Maria and Henry’s father)

He first met Josefina Pereira the day he arrived in Rabaul. Raw-bowel, his master pronounced it. She was serving customers in the master’s trade store when they arrived there. Young. He knows now she was about eighteen then. Tall. Dark. Thought at first she was a Tolai, the people of Rabaul. His master had described them on that first day as being generally tall. He didn’t notice at the time that there was something different about her to the Tolai. Darker. Straight black hair, not tight curls. Those black eyes—missed nothing, but for some reason had looked right past him. For that reason more than any other, he had instantly disliked her. She didn’t say much, but he could see that although she did what was asked, there would be limits on how obedient she might be. She was someone with an opinion of her own way. Beyond her standing, in his opinion. Inevitably, he’d thought, this attitude will cause her problems, or bring trouble for someone else. She needed to be leashed. The old man did not appear ruffled by her brusqueness. Must have known he could rein her in at any time.

Their ship had docked at dawn, the cargo unloaded. At last dry land again. If a foreign land. They had left the boy, Chun-Yuen, with the cargo on the wharf and already, before they had left, the boy was off in his dreams, scratching with charcoal on whatever flat surface was handy. He’d wondered, as he’d observed the boy during the voyage, if it had been a mistake to grab whatever homeless boy had been nearby and name him as a younger brother. Impulse. Didn’t want to be the one on the bottom of the ladder. With a ‘younger brother’ he would be the one in the middle. Receive orders—pass them down. Brother to (adopted) brother, two fates locked. Seeto Wei and Seeto Chun-Yuen. Lucky the boy had the same surname. But had Loi Fook been convinced?
As they’d walked away from the cargo and the boy, he had carefully lifted his eyes to see if the master had shown any reaction to the boy and his scratching. The old man seemed set on other matters. Not leaving his cargo too long at the docks, for one. What did it matter, really? The boy’s there, in Rabaul, and how he uses the boy is up to him.

That day, the first one in this strange town, had been remarkable. Fresh eyed, open-minded, he’d taken everything in. Knowledge is necessary if a man is to survive. He learnt that on the streets of Kaiping.

There’s a Chinese saying: what is fated to be yours will always return to you. Today, Josefina Pereira is his wife. Not the wife he’d wanted. Ambitious—wanted a Chinese wife. But Loi Fook, always the realist, had pointed out the few potential Chinese wives in Rabaul had already been bought by more powerful businessmen or ones with family allegiances already established and therefore more desirable to potential fathers-in-law. But, Loi also advised that a businessmen with no wife lacks credibility. He should know: he has no wife. Besides, Loi instructed, a wife and children are cheap assets. They cost very little and can work long hours. This wife cost him nothing. Deal done between Loi and his bride’s mother.

4

May, 1937.

Koti

The earth shakes again. The air is thick. Vulcan, the cone on one side of the harbour, is growling and spewing. It is difficult to walk, but walk she must: walking, walking, walking. To Josefina. Her knotted fists are drumming a marching beat against her thighs.

Where husband to lookim long Josefina and pikonini meri?
Josefina’s husband is absent. He is safe on some other island, and he doesn’t seem to be worried about his wife and baby girl, whether they have to eat volcano dust or are crushed under the dirt and rubble. In fact, it seems if his wife and daughter were to die, it wouldn’t matter to him. Ah, yes, this is the kind of man that Josefina is married to. Once he saw that Josefina gave birth to a girl, he lost interest.

Leo he lookim long pikinini na he toktok: ‘Ah, tispela pikinini meri tasol. Where my Chinese son?’

But this daughter’s so beautiful. Josefina called her Maria. Maria has a brown face, not black like her grandmother’s and mother’s, and not Chinese like her father’s. But she has blue eyes. These blue eyes cause her so much trouble. Brown face and blue eyes do not usually go together, but there’s a reason for her having them that her stupid grandmother can’t tell: a little bit of German has shown itself. Strange how babies turn out. Josefina, when she was born, could have been a Malay child, not a daughter of a Malay woman and a part-white/part-brown blue-eyed stupid boy. And now Maria’s papa is frightened by his daughter’s blue eyes. He doesn’t like the brown face, but the blue eyes terrify him. As if they are the eyes of a spirit come to judge him. And well they might be. He deserves to be judged.

Papa Leo he lukluk long pikinini na face emi screw up na emi toktok, ‘Aiyah, Niugini meri.’ That’s because of brown face. But he no toktok long blue eye. He nogat answer long blue eyes.

But Leo is smart enough to look to the future. He knows that a daughter who has a Chinese father is worth money in Rabaul. It doesn’t matter whether she looks Chinese or not, as long as she shows herself as Chinese by habits and beliefs. There are too many Chinese men and not enough Chinese women. A part-Chinese daughter provides good bargaining power for her father. Maria’s papa tells her every time he sees her
(which isn’t very often) that she is a beautiful Chinese daughter. He goes back to his plantation counting the dollars he will receive when she is sixteen. To know it pleases her father that she is Chinese makes Maria happy, also.

So happy to be Chinese, Maria does not want a Malay grandmother but a Chinese one.

‘Nenek, papa belong me emi tingting me pikinini long China. Me so happy. Me kallim yu ah ma, nogat nenek.’

‘Me long island. Nenek nam belong me, nogat ah ma. Me no grandmother long China.’

But tispela papa gaimin tasol. Emi no save Maria special. For this, he shows himself as stupid. Maria is very special meri. No matter what papa tingting. He gone oletaim, anyway.

Leo comes from his plantation, makes trouble in town both for his family and in gambling dens in Chinatown, and then he goes back to his Niugini meri on his plantation. Last time he was in Rabaul, he made a new baby inside his wife’s belly. But Josefina did not tell him. This is her way of showing him she is not happy to be used. It’s easy to see that Josefina is strong—much stronger than her mamma. Josefina says she hopes this baby is a boy with a Chinese face, if only so that she can keep him for herself. She knows a son is all he wants.

But now, the volcano is going to blow and there is nowhere for Josefina, Maria and the unborn baby to go. No one but her mother to take care of her. This is punishment because Josefina’s mother is such a bad person.

Oh wah no please mumma earth, do not eat Josefina and her pikinini. Me. Please, mumma earth, Kaikai me, eat me. Me nuting.
December, 1941, Chinatown, Rabaul

(Daddy) George Brown

Since the eruption nearly five years ago, this is his family. A family he loves dearly.

The children, Maria and Henry, are asleep in their beds. Josefina and Koti sit at the dining table, bodies tense, hands clasped together, eyes turned towards him. Josefina can’t wait.

‘Well?’

‘Patience, girl. Steady, steady. Em he talk when he ready!’

Josefina turns angrily to her mother.

‘Mamma, you know so many of the Australian women and children have already gone because the volcano is erupting again. Everyone knows the Japanese are going to pick a place like Rabaul to make a base. It’s obvious. Now, think about what happened at Pearl Harbour, only worse, because unlike Pearl Harbour, there’s no one here to defend us. We’re on our own.’

‘Australia he kissim boat na …’

‘Oh yeah, mamma, for the few Australian women and children that are left. But you can’t really think they’re going to worry about us. Our only hope is if they decide to take the Chinese children (and they should, after all China and Japan are already at war) then maybe they’ll also take our pikininis, too. But I can’t remember anything that makes me think that. Look what happened in ’37 when the volcano went up. Who was left behind then? It’s up to us to think of something… something … for pikininis …but what?’

Her voice breaks, she wipes tears from her cheeks with the back of her hand, and turns to look at him for a response.
All three of them look down at the floor for a solution. And of course there is no solution down there either.

He knows Josefina is right. Officially he knows this, as part of his job. The Administration have nothing planned for evacuating either the Chinese, Ambonese and other mixed race people. They haven’t even warned the Tolai. The Chinese are making their own plans, splitting into two camps: Catholics and Methodists. Australian Defence authorities have some strategy that they’re operating under, but they aren’t telling anyone what it is, not even the Administration employees. But he can’t utter those words of doubt. As an Administration employee, even if he’s one who has no say in what can or cannot happen, he feels complicit. Guilty.

He can’t stall any longer. They need to know what they are up against, if they’re to find a way to protect the children. The five of them are doomed, one-way or another, one plan or another. And even Matupit knows this. She has begun spewing out her rocks and ash again.

6

Francine’s visual diary.

---

"096859" black-and-white photograph, copyright expired. This image is in the public domain.\(^3\)

---

\(^3\) Ratongor, New Britain, September 13, 1945. According to the Australian War Museum (AWM) archives, this photograph is of the Ping family in a tin humpy, the home they occupied for 22 months in the Chinese internment camp. It was just large enough to hold a double bed and a writing desk.

According to AWM archives, “Chinese civilians, interned by the Japanese at a camp 15 miles west of Rabaul, were contacted by a party of Australian Army and Red Cross officials soon after the arrival at Rabaul of a force from 4 Infantry Brigade to occupy the area. This photograph shows a section of the civilians with the contact party.” Accessed June 14, 2014. https://www.awm.gov.au/collections/096518/.

January, 1942, at the town end of Malaguna Road, Rabaul.

Josefina Pereira Seeto

Together she, George and her mother have made their decision, the only one possible. The hard part is making it happen. She has had to involve Leo, and he’s only helping them because of his own wish for survival. He arrived in Rabaul too late to join the Chinese Catholics at Ratongor. And he’s well aware he’s not liked by the Tolai and that he will require their help if he wants to remain out of sight of the Japanese. But he also knows the Tolai will not turn the child away.

Her heart is being torn from her body. She watches as father and son leave her. They are walking away. To her they are like ghosts, now, those two, fading off down Malaguna. Away from their home. Away from Rabaul. Away from her. The larger one does not concern her. What is or is not between her and her husband is in the wind anyway, war or no war. But her baby—her little boy, her Henry. So trusting as he takes his father’s hand. So dutiful. Yet she can feel his eyes, hear his thoughts, knows he blames her. She imagines his anger at her for staying while she demand he must leave, but to explain would make him more fearful than he already is. He’s only a child—but does he not see her pain, does he not understand she does this only because she must? It’s only in her heart that can she truly say goodbye because she needs him to be brave, to see a future that she no longer sees.

And this man, this husband of hers—this man who is the one who should care most for Henry, should protect him with his life—she doesn’t trust. She knows this man too well, knows that to him what is paramount is his own survival. He has shown his weakness already in her life. He’ll argue to himself that should he live, he can take another wife, have another child who’ll carry on his heritage. This knowledge, in other
times, might not trouble her at all; might indeed be welcomed. Go find yourself another wife. Go find another heir. Just leave her this child. Her child. He might have another son, should this one be lost—but could she? Yet she has no option but to leave her son in his care.

It is not death at the hands of a Japanese soldier that she fears, but death from the pain of this separation.

Those two have been gone less than a day, and now George, too. As a volunteer rifleman he has been ordered into the jungle with his group. Soon, George, the love of her life, will be facing men and their bayonets, no longer the creatures of nightmares, but real and dangerous, who are invading the space everyone thought was safe. Soon those men will be everywhere, even in whichever village Leo has found to shelter him and their son. Please God let Henry and George survive. Let everyone survive. Even Leo.

8

Francine’s visual diary.

“096541”, black-and-white photograph, copyright expired. This image is in the public domain.  

June, 1942, occupied Rabaul.

Commandant Tsukamato, Commander in Chief of the Japanese Forces in Rabaul.

The old woman is still there, before him. Head bowed, eyes hooded. Feigned. Can’t fool me, you old hag: the words his eyes challenge her with. She dishes out a full serve, and takes half a step away but returns to add some more. As she does, her gaze meets his. For a second there’s no mask between him and her, but then she lowers her lids in a play of subservience. He holds his face expressionless, as if he’s playing her game, even

---

7 This painting by Geoffrey Mainwaring (Ballarat Victoria 1970, oil on canvas, 162.5 x 263.5 cm; framed: 177.8 cm x 300.6 cm x 9.5 cm) depicts the Japanese landing at Rabaul. According to AWM, This painting depicts “A” Company, 2/22nd Battalion in action at Vulcan on the morning of 23 January, 1943. The Australian garrison at Rabaul (New Britain) consisted of the 2/22nd Infantry Battalion, AIF, supported by other Army detachments, totalling in all about 1,400 and one air squadron. From early January 1942 the Japanese began raiding the area and brave attempts at defence by out-classed Wirraway aircraft resulted in the loss of most of them. The Japanese invasion fleet entered Blanche Bay about 1300hrs on 23 January, and an hour later troops started coming ashore north and south of Vulcan Crater where companies of the 2/22nd were disposed. One company was quickly overwhelmed, but another— “A” company shown in this painting—was still resisting strongly at dawn. Ultimately, it was withdrawn in the face of intense enemy pressure, including air attacks. Despite spirited resistance by the Australian force Rabaul was soon in enemy hands. Some of the garrison were forced to surrender, while others managed to escape from the island. The majority of those who surrendered lost their lives in the sinking of the Montevideo Maru on 1st July, 1942. Japanese occupation of Rabaul continued until the end of the war, but the base had been by-passed by other operations and rendered ineffective by Allied bombing.” Accessed June 14, 2014. https://www.awm.gov.au/collections/ART27632/.
as he’s thinking, I’ve seen how clever you are, out there, just as now, giving me that extra ration, smiling obligingly as if it’s your generosity that privileges me. You know your life’s in my hands.

The daughter passes by in the background, the challenge momentarily shattered, but then he recognises the old woman’s intention: to keep him at distance from the younger. A surge of rage. Rage is replaced with the vicious desire to outsmart her—to outsmart them both—and his desire grows. He’s more determined than ever to take that dark young woman by force or guile. She’s his.

10

September, 1945.

Koti

Only Maria and me now.

Henry and his father, no one save long where tupela stap. Dai pinis mebe. Long bush.

Josefina dead and with her, George Brown’s unborn baby. And George Brown gone, gone to Japan mebe, or dai pinis, me no save.

Me lukim George. Prisoner. Go long Japanese ship. Go long plenty moa Australians. Montevideo Maru. Thanks God, me tingting. Me hearim about plenty Australians lose heads at Tol Plantation. Bad, bad place, that Tol. Long time me ting George Brown no got a head, but then, when me see him go long ship, me happy. Maybe he no die. But no one save where ship go, na me tingting maybe he dead too, or good as dead.
Thanks God, George not save about Josefina. George tingting Josefina safe.


But now, only me and Maria.

11

Francine’s visual diary

“099939”, black-and-white photograph, copyright expired. This image is in the public domain.8

8 Rabaul 1946, a Chinese family outside a newly constructed house in the new Chinatown near the Matupit crater. According to AWM, ‘although the town of Rabaul was razed by allied bombing, the town commenced to reappear soon after occupancy by 11 Division. Under the guidance of officers from Australian New Guinea administrative unit headquarters, 1,500 Chinese, 300 Malays and half-castes applied typical Eastern industry to the area and cleared wreckage to establish a new village complete with commercial, cultural, sporting and educational facilities.’ Accessed June 14, 2014. https://www.awm.gov.au/atwar www.awm.gov.au/collection/099939/.

Stephen Chun-Yuen Seeto

Out from its safe place behind the door, the crate looms large. Second time he’s opened it. First time cut him to his core. Even now, everything about it hurts him. The blankets in which the contents are wrapped, similar to those that were bundled in Loi’s store.

The long tapes used to bind the blankets are made from the corded tape that Maria used to decorate the laplaps she tailored for Loi Fook’s store. How many times had he seen her line the tape along the straight edge of the seam and peddle that Singer savagely so that its needle danced along each edge. Over Maria’s bowed head, large wheels of similar tape, in a variety of colours, hung from wires attached to the ceiling.
A tug at the end of any of those ribbons of tape, and the wheels would spin, the tape whirl to the floor and lie curled at her feet. Maria had a knack of assessing the precise length of tape needed for each laplap. She’d made hundreds. He liked the notion that the lengths of fabric, like him, waited for her attention. He would sit on a crate placed as close to her as he possibly could get without disrupting her work, the bolts of fabric on guard beside him, and the ready-cut lengths neatly piled on a nearby bench, ready for her.

His gut clenches at the thought of how those two men, Loi and Leo, exploited her. Worse of course that one was her father. But he pushes that anger aside to return to the memory of the snake of tape and their hours of talking.

The light of the machine illuminates her face. His love for her so strong he is sure it’s visible, and which he imagines as a glowing ribbon that wraps around them both. The flame that burnt so strong then, despite Leo’s effort, has never been extinguished. Oh, my love, if only I could have told you how those few short years have sustained me.

For some time after telling her stories of the day, she would be giggling to herself, as if she was running the story through her mind over and over again. And, oh, how he loved to hear her laughter.

As she chats, one laplap is finished, folded, and added to the pile. Then the routine begins again: her hands reaches for another length of fabric, pull the trailing end of the matching tape until it coiled at her feet; her fingers bring together fabric and tape and place them together under the needle; and then she begins peddling, and the needle flies along the seam until yet another laplap is finished. Her eyes like blue crystals, dancing between the work in front of her and to him. How he loves those flashes, when her eyes met his, that second when their glances locked together. The brilliance that overtakes her whole face. Soon she is laughing again. For him, the thought: ‘if this is love, then how blessed am I.’

Those days. Those beautiful, magical, breathtaking days. When they thought no one else knew. How wrong they were.

In his living room, the navy blue tape has fallen away from the chest, releasing the trade store blanket Maria has used as protection. He folds the blanket back neatly. It will be used again soon. First he folds one side of the coarse mottled-grey felt, then the other; one end and then the other. Freed after all these years, the aroma of camphor fills his nostrils.

First time he opened it, in 1959, when the crate had been offloaded from the small supply ship after returning from his last meeting with her, the smell of camphor had crippled him, drawing out emotions he had so far managed to suppress. The chest was not unknown to him. Over the many years he and Koti Pereira had been friends, even before Maria was born, and later, when Maria was a child and in her growing-up years, this chest had been opened and closed many times. Mrs Pereira was always
adding something or taking something out—photographs, trinkets, folds of fabric, small carvings—and each time the tale was told of how her husband Josef had given this chest to her on their wedding day, how it had followed her from Hollandia to Rabaul. He could almost recite it word for word. In those early days, he hadn’t realised how important it would become to both he and Maria.

Koti gave the chest to Maria just before she died. Knowing its importance to Maria only added to the significance of Maria’s gesture of adding this chest and its contents to his freight of annual supplies. By doing so, she had said much more than any words might have done. He wishes, now, that he could have spoken to her just once more afterwards. But he didn’t want to make things any more difficult for her than they already were. The words he would have given her he’s whispered to himself many times over the years. He would have said: ‘By giving me this chest, you have shown me you know me better than I know myself, Lizhen. I thought I had kept my negotiations with your father secret, but you already understood what it meant: I gave you a piece of my heart, as you gave me a piece of yours.’

He had given her the name Lizhen because of her wish to be recognised as Chinese. Maria was not a Chinese name, she had declared over and over again through the years he spent with her, from the moment their friendship had begun to blossom, once she realised he was not her father’s brother.

And on that afternoon in 1954 when Mrs Pereira, dressed in her best, witnessed their vows, it was Seeto Lizhen, not Maria, in her beautiful blue brocade cheongsam and Seeto Chun-Yuen in his simple white suit who had pledged themselves to each other. With or without official papers or a father’s approval, they had entered into a commitment as meaningful as any marriage ceremony. And on that day, Lizhen had
declared that Maria Seeto is Seeto Wei’s daughter, a nothing person, but that Seeto Lizhen was the person Maria had always wanted to be.

Only five years later, on the wharf, that marriage was forced apart. He gave her what was most precious to him and she had given him what was dearest to her. Each year, on the anniversary of their wedding, he fights the impulse to open the chest. But he knows he is too much a coward. Because he has decided the time is right to return the chest to Maria, he’s very aware this will be his last opportunity.

The grey felt blanket falls away and there the chest stands proud. On all four sides and the top, the dark figures of its heavy carving are revealed, shapes accentuated and contrasted in shadow and in light by the harshness of his home’s fluorescent lighting. Now he sees them again, these figures carved into the side of the chest beg him to run his fingers around them, as he had often done at other times, appreciating under their touch the effort of long forgotten artisans whose work lingers on the surface. What stories do these carvings tell? What inspired the man or woman who, with head bowed over the timber, had chiselled from imagination?

He scans the outer surfaces for damage. Almost as good as new. This chest has some tales to tell: from the city of Kota Jayapura, which Mrs Pereira knew as Hollandia. To Rabaul. From Rabaul to any remote island on which Loi’s plantations have been located. Finally to this place, Kavieng. How old might this chest be? Probably not new when it came into Mrs Pereira’s possession, in the late 1800s ...

He’s stalling.

Under the brown paper, wrapped in white tissue, Lizhen’s precious gown. Wrapped as she did anything she was putting into storage, a method learned from watching how the Chong family wrapped their stock, so that even the style of wrapping brings her back. Through the tissue’s whiteness, a ghostly hint of blue. His fingers slide
beneath the bundle. Crisp crackling as paper responds to touch. As if the cheongsam has suddenly come alive. As gently as if he was lifting a newborn, he carries the pale blue bundle over to his bed and carefully lays it. Gently. Gently. He pauses, draws in a deep breath. He uses his thumb and finger to separate and lift off the sheets of white tissue. The delicate embroidery, the satin-sheen of the fabric, its brilliant blueness, burst forth. Lizhen stands before him. Only nineteen. The blue of the brocade cheongsam sets off the brilliance of her blue eyes. He feels their electricity gazing into his. Instinctively, his hands reach in front of him, palms up, as he did on that day, and her hands come towards him, palms down to be encased in his. His wife, he reminds himself. His beautiful nineteen-year-old wife. How blessed was he? His wife. 1954. By 1959 their lives had changed.

Maria’s grandmother died in her sleep less than a month after their wedding day. The morning after her death, Leo came to see Maria. No time for grieving because Leo had finally found a use for his daughter. Leo: his one-time companion of the slums of Kaiping and so-called elder brother. Thoughts of Leo bring a bitter taste to his mouth. Vile man.

When her grandmother died, Lizhen had sent him a message via the supply ship. A long time reaching him, but he quickly arranged to return with the ship for an unscheduled visit to Rabaul, one for which he would have to explain to Loi, his boss and owner of the plantation, as ‘business’. Once ashore, he managed to force himself to not rush, but saunter up the street as if he had no clear purpose or destination in mind, in case Loi’s many eyes might see him and report back. Outside Loi’s store, Lizhen’s new home, he waited to see if anyone went in or came out. After a few minutes, he put his head around into the doorway.
The tinkling of the bell on the shop door. Maria rushes towards him, ignoring the customers milling around, and bursts into tears.

‘Yu no ken visit. How we tupela married now? Me go long plantation, live long yu.’

‘Nogat Lizhen. Loi has me bound.’

Such a solution sounded blissful. Oh how he wished for that, too. He knows he owes her a fuller explanation, even if his heart isn’t up to it. ‘Yu save, nothing free long Loi. I already stuck. Yu come I stuck more so, and doubly bad, yu stuck too. He toktok yu owe him for you not working his trade store. This is not a good plan. We need a better one. Need patience. We find a way.’

In his head he can’t think how. Twenty or more years he’s been bound to Loi. He fears he will never be able to pay him back.

A fresh flood of tears fill those blue eyes.

‘What we do, Chun-Yuen? What we do? We go like my grandmother long lakatoi na find an island, belong tupela.’

The Tolai customers snicker behind hands, as if they know these ‘tupela’ are both stupid. One mutters as she creeps past them on her way out of the store: ‘masta na missus krai tumuchia. Longlong.’

‘We’ve got each other, Lizhen. We married. Only change, you don’t live in grandmother’s house any more. Same like before, I kam long visit yu whenever me kam long Rabaul. Nothing change except yu live long Loi Fook’s store.’

‘Same-same plan: we married. Me save, Chun-Yuen. But will we ever kissim dream? Yu na me, we lapun man na meri, na yu still on plantation, na me still sewing laplap, sweepim Loi Fook’s floor.’

‘We find a way, Lizhen. We find a way.’
Even as he had made the promise on that day, he did not see a way. His head drops. He failed her. Their luck ran out the day Leo found him at the store, talking to Maria. Only talking. But Leo has always been a suspicious man, always on the look out for something that could give him an advantage. That was Leo’s greatest asset. A skill that made Leo recognise an advantage. Like when he made himself known to Loi while Loi was in China, visiting their village. Leo learnt the Loi had lost a wife and son in an influenza epidemic. Soon he had convinced Loi he was a stand-in son. The advantage Leo saw in taking a homeless boy and calling him his brother. And that skill has been honed over the years of working for Loi, a man with a similar skill. And he, Stephen, should have known better. Leo was not his brother by blood, but he knew him better than one brother knows another.

When the chest came to him in 1959, it contained only Lizhen’s wedding gown. After the surprise of Lizhen’s gesture, it took some time for him to conclude he would return the chest to her. Since then, he has collected other things. His art, letters Lizhen wrote him over the years but to which he never replied: anything that might be used by his son to learn who is father is or was. He’s heard her husband has died. Now is the moment. The time has come to repack.

Before closing the carefully repacked chest, he places inside a letter he wrote to Lizhen after their wedding, a letter never sent. He’s wrapped it in a red silk handkerchief. He knows red is Lizhen’s special colour.

He has decided to ship the re-crated chest via Henry. Perhaps in this way he can give Lizhen another gift. Perhaps Henry will move past his stubborn resistance and reconcile with his sister.
Seated on a chair in Henry Seeto’s bedroom, staring at the crate awaiting unpacking.

Maria

She has to wait until seven-thirty. That’s when Ling will come to open the crate for her.

Can she wait? She lets her mind go back to 1959.

She’s listening to Radio Australia. Errol Flynn has passed away. He died in Canada. A long way from Niugini, where he once belonged, where once he owned businesses that failed. She likes the connection that comes through Errol, between Rabaul and places like Canada and the US and the UK.

Hum bao is steaming on the cooker.

If it had been someone else other than Stephen interrupting her listening, she might have been cross. Patrick told her yesterday that Stephen was in town, otherwise she might not have known. Since they had given up hope of living their dream, Stephen has tried to keep his distance, not always succeeding. But it’s been months (feels like forever) since she has seen him. He has asked her to meet him at the Small Ships Wharf.

Patrick also told her that her father, Leo, had ordered Stephen to pay him a visit. Her father is not the ‘ordering’ kind of person, especially when dealing with someone who also works for his own employer, Loi, as Stephen does. If things need to happen, they do, such is the hold that Loi has over his ‘employees’. She recognises that this, then, must be an exaggeration of Patrick’s.
For Stephen, she worries. Exaggeration or not, this might be a bad sign. Patrick’s exact words were: ‘Stephen kam long store na totok important samting long papa belong yu.’ Seems to her that Stephen may have been the one initiating the meeting, not her father.

She too has ‘business’ with Stephen, but her ‘busness’ is best conducted without a face-to-face meeting. It has been in a storage room at the wharf, awaiting the next shipment to the plantation. As much as she fears the pain of seeing Stephen again, now that he has asked her to come, how can she say no? Face-to-face will be hard. Stephen is the only person to whom she has ever told her most private thoughts and he used to be able to read them without her speaking. Today, though, she will have to keep those thoughts locked inside her. If he were to know her secret it would rip him apart.

She suspects possibilities for what her father and Loi might have in mind for Stephen, none good. Nothing, good or bad, will make Stephen’s future (and consequently her own) any better. She and Stephen are just pawns in the two men’s games. Loi’s plans, whatever they might be, always come at a cost to Stephen (and through Stephen, to her). Bottom line, for Stephen and for her, there is no getting around the reality: he is married to Mei Yee and she to Mei Yee’s brother. Patrick is the only one who seems to be benefitting from these arrangements.

Despite her nature always to be honest, something her nenek taught her, honesty, here, might be fatal for Stephen.

As she drives along the Small Ships Wharf, she can see him standing at the far end, waiting for her. She is happy that their meeting is happening here, if only because it is far from Chinatown, far from family and friends. The wharf, despite the numerous vessels that dock here to take on supplies for outlying plantations, missions and communities, is not well cared for by the government. It is a sad place for her. From this
place, Stephen has, far too often, boarded a vessel and left her behind. She is convinced this will be their final farewell.

The afternoon downpour has left puddles along the uneven surface of the wharf. As she drives towards Stephen, water splashes up on the side windows and the windscreen: like the tears she cannot allow herself to shed. There are trucks and wharf workers everywhere. Her eyes are watchful. A crane moves overhead, carrying a blonde-wooded crate. She stops the car, and looks. Yes, that is her crate. Is this a sign? An omen?

No, she tells herself. If it is an omen, it is not a good one. Since the day her father told her she was to marry Patrick, she has been thinking of a way to reassure Stephen of her love, despite how things have turned out. Her solution is a good one. She knows he will read her message from the crate, and that it is passing overhead means it is on its way to his plantation. In Niugini talk, this would be ‘long gutpela payback.’ Once the decision was made, to crate the chest was the easy part. She’s aware she would likely only have one chance to get it to him, and this visit by Stephen to Rabaul provides her that window of opportunity.

She stops the car a short distance from Stephen. He only has eyes for the boy in his arms. Once out of her car, and as she treks towards him, he turns at last to face her. Only a short walk, but each step feels heavy, like her body is aging with each one, and there, standing in front of him, she suddenly feels much older than her twenty-four years.

Maybe this is the act of a kind God, this slowing of time.

Last look. Goodbye my love.
This is the first time she has seen his son. The boy is a baby version of Stephen.
He plays with his father’s hair. Her own fingers ache with longing. The boy looks at her
and smiles.

It is as if she, Stephen and the boy are in a space separate from the hustle and
bustle: the ship being loaded and the trucks coming and going. She hears the drone of
an engine. Her body feels a vibration running through the wharf. There’s a smell of
copra and diesel. She feels ill, tastes bile in her throat. But she knows these symptoms
are not to do with the wharf or the moment. She works hard to hide them.

Behind Stephen, high on the bridge, a man is watching them. The Captain. She
has already recognised him. What’s-his-name? Someone from school days. His grin
suggests he is imagining that something unusual is happening right before his eyes,
something he will be able to create a tale about for the next time he’s having beers at the
Ambonese Club. Contributing to the Rabaul gossip machine. Maybe he’s thinking: why
is this unlikely duo meeting here, at this stinking place? Of course, he’s right. It is odd.
Rarely anyone but the wharfies comes here unless some soul is boarding or
dismounting.

Stephen must have a reason for choosing this place. Maybe it allows him a quick
escape. He and the boy could board immediately after she leaves. Maybe it’s to avoid
prying eyes.

Stephen must know the captain is there but he doesn’t turn. His dark eyes, his
tense jaw, his rigid body announce he is here to do what he needs to do. The effort
required is noticeable, its trace left along a face so familiar to her.

The boy is tapping his father’s face. This makes her smile and seeing that, the
boy tucks his head into his father’s neck. Again, desire washes through her.
In Cantonese, Stephen speaks to her: ‘You know Mei-Yee can’t stay. No Australian passport. Time’s up, got to go back to China. Leaving next week. I’ll be back at the plantation by then.’

She doesn’t trust herself to reply. The silence grows.

Finally he says: ‘Besides, she wants to go. Hates it here.’

One quick look to his boy and, suddenly, he holds the baby out to her. She feels his pain, swallows a gasp, and instinctively reaches for the child.

In Cantonese again, he speaks to her: ‘Here. Yuen Sang’s your son.’

How wrong were her suspicions about the business between Stephen, Patrick and Leo. But, she was right about one thing: today has been at a cost to Stephen as well as to Mei Yee, and their son. And for what?

Without protest the boy moves from Stephen’s arms into hers. Once in her hold, he curls his body and burrows his head into her chest. She kisses his forehead, draws in the aroma of his body, wraps his pale skin in her brown arms, and bone-on-bone, skin-on-skin, she feels his heartbeat. His tiny hands reach up into her curls. From this moment he becomes her son, not Stephen’s. From this day forward, she will be his mother. But she is unable to look directly into Stephen’s eyes. Nor is he looking at her. Furtively, she watches as his eyes walk along the body of his baby son, follow the boy’s fingers as they creep into her hair, and finally wander down to his toes. She notices how the muscles of his jaw ripple like the taut ropes tethering a ship to the shore. And then, as if, having memorised every part of the child’s body, he’s able to move away, he turns and faces the vessel.

Afterwards, she wonders how they managed the exchange without a single touch. The imagined possibilities of a touch that never happened commence a continuous loop in her mind during her drive home, and perpetuate as a sensational
background to a life that no longer delivers any promise for her except through this child.

From the bridge the Captain’s voice floats down: ‘work pinis long wharf, masta Seeto. We’re sailing in an hour.’

Patrick’s waiting for her when she reaches home. He takes the boy from her, laughing and holding him high. He’s as proud as he might have been had she given birth to the child. He looks at her, a strange expression on his face, and says: ‘Stephen never coming long Rabaul, never. Loi nognat want him leave plantation. Just order supplies and supplies go long liklik ships. Stephen he gat nuting. Stephen nognat Chinese wife. Only kissim Niugini meri long plantation. Soon Stephen he olesam papa belong yu: kissim plenti Niugini pikenini.’

Then he fills the gaps in her knowledge.

‘Baby’s mother sold her son to your papa for a fare back to China. This boy my reward for marrying you.’

At that announcement, the pieces of the puzzle fall into place. As she saw a need to send a final message to Stephen within the crate, Stephen, again in a lose-lose situation, has ensured he had some influence on the future of his son. To comfort herself, she sees Stephen’s gesture as his way of saying to her: ‘if anyone should have my son, it should be you,’ a gift to her in compensation for the promises neither one of them could fulfil. She doesn’t dare let her emotions show.

A losing gambler her father usually may be, but in this one risky venture, he has shown himself to be a winner. Oh how she hates him. And her husband.

Patrick’s satisfied. He has his Chinese son. He doesn’t seem to mind that he’s not the father of the boy, only that the boy looks Chinese; nor that his sister will soon be going back to China, leaving her son behind. A Chinese son presents him a face of
respectability in this town. Does a Chinese son compensate him for his not-so-Chinese wife? In face of Patrick’s celebration, another question flutters through her head. How Chinese might Yuen Sang’s half brother or sister look when he or she arrives in five months’ time.

As it turned out, Gabriel is not so Chinese at all. His face and body show little of his father, Stephen, and much more of his mother. He, too, is Niugini on the outside.

2

**Ling Seeto**, Henry’s son

When his Aunty told him she wanted to visit Uncle Stephen’s grave, he’d tried to take time off work to go to Kavieng with the old pair but his boss was not obliging. He’s been sweating it out since. Worrying about them. Certain there’d be trouble. But he’d heard they got there okay. They’ve been there several days. He’s still uneasy. He’s debating whether to be the over-protective parent and call his father, when the office pages him.

‘Ling, call from Kavieng.’

A tight fist closes over his heart. He’s certain this isn’t going to be good news.

‘Hello, hello. Dad, what’s up?’

There’s no answer, and he begins to panic, so to cover up he starts babbling stupid chit-chat. ‘What’s it like in Kavieng? Years since I been there. Aunty get to pay her respects? How’s the hotel?’

Finally his father speaks, and even over the phone he can hear the tears. His father sounds like a child.

‘Son, son. I need your help. You come. Aunty not well. Doctor he say she can’t leave.’
‘Oh shit, Dad. Worst case scenario, like I feared. Family in Brisbane going to kill us for not taking good care!’

Aside from the fear of a family killing, he is very concerned that Aunty won’t make it out of Kavieng. He begs his boss to let him go. The boss takes pity, tells him to go see some bloke about a business matter while he’s there, and he’ll pay his airfare.

Aunty’s very sick indeed. But she’s still firing, making jokes, giving orders. She has his father under her little thumb.

‘Henry, you should be out sightseeing. You can’t make me better by sitting here. And you, thought you too busy to come on a holiday to Kavieng. Nice place this. Never been here before.’

He asked her about the grave, whether she’d got to do what she needed to do. She nodded. But she had that look in her blue eyes again and he knew he would be getting his orders soon.

‘God calling me,’ she says.

Maybe the Kavieng doctor told her that.

She waves some money. ‘Plenty here to pay hotel or hospital. No worry about me. Take your daddy back to his home.’

She hands him her air ticket. Two seats from Tokua to Brisbane. She must have paid big to ensure comfort for her big body. Her finger’s in the air and wagging, ‘Now you a man of influence. You go tok long Air Niugini, tell them me go long heven and you need to go to Australia to tell family. They do it.’

No asking can he or will he? Just do it.

‘Please. Yu toktok long my family. You tell them it my choice. I the one who want to stap here, long Kavieng. Important to me that they understand. And anyway if you don’t toktok them, they might think you just cheapskate family who don’t want to
pay for me to go back to Brisbane. You speak. My eldest son—his name is Andrew—or there’s Gabriel or Daniel—or my granddaughter Francine—and grandson Lucas, or Kathy, Anna—too many to say. I write here on this paper telephone numbers and addresses. You promise? Na you ship my crate long my granddaughter Francine. Yu papa got money long shipping. He givim yu.’

What could a nephew say to his aunty?
30th September, 2011.

Francine’s red notebook, courtesy of Ms Mercanti, counsellor

One year since I wrote in my diary.

One year since Gran died and it seems forever, and yet also only seems like yesterday. Too much has happened … I miss ah ma so much. Still hurts. But can’t wait to see Ling and Uncle Henry again. Glad the family has pooled together to pay their fares down for Gran’s anniversary. Gran would be proud of us, working as a family to make it happen. I love it that we have a connection to PNG again, especially now I understand how important PNG was to Gran. I mean, why else would she have gone back, knowing she wasn’t well?

And at least now I can talk to ah ma inside my head: her house is my house (because the family have decided that is what ah ma would have wanted) and as I sit on the front porch, like ah ma used to do, and look out upon ah ma’s garden, I feel she is here with me. Daddy and I no longer have our lunches in the Queen Street mall. Instead he helps me look after grandmother’s garden. Slowly I am becoming a better gardener. Daddy is so patient, and he needs to be. I want immediate results. Daddy reminds me that ah ma began with nothing: ‘only dirt here when we first came, now look at how green it is. All because your grandmother, she is steady, steady.’

And of course, I don’t sit on the porch alone. There’s my beautiful girl to care for—the one her grandfather calls ‘his little China doll’. Doesn’t have Michael’s curls. Doesn’t have his blondeness, either. Daddy teases Michael: ‘Brown too strong. You
can’t beat brown.’ And Michael, God bless him, laughs and says, ‘Man, who would
want to beat brown. Brown is beautiful.’ And he kisses me each time. A little ritual of
our own happening here. Anyway, this baby girl is so loved. And isn’t she cute? I admit
I am slightly biased.

I am so proud of myself, even if I can only say that here. Since ah ma’s crate
came from PNG I have been busy organising an exhibition at the Chinese Catholic
Church at Runcorn, to exhibit gung gung Stephen’s art. Isn’t it strange to be saying
‘gung gung Stephen’ after years of saying ‘gung gung Patrick’? They’re both my
grandfathers. I have three, because there’s also grandfather Cunningham (mum’s dad).
And I have three grandmothers, although the one in China I will only ever know her any
more than by her name. Mei Yee. Maybe I will call my next daughter after her. Better
not let Michael read this diary. He’s hoping for a big family and that’d be giving away
all my secrets.

Gung gung Stephen has to be the one who gave me my arty gene. All makes
sense, doesn’t it? And I am proud of researching, and successfully applying for a state
government grant to have gung gung’s works framed that meant I could donate the
proceeds of the exhibition to the church. Never knew I had it in me to do such things.
Grown up, ah ma might say. And I think ah ma would like what Michael and I have
done with gung gung Stephen’s art. It’s a living monument to the man most of us never
knew about. His work hangs, floor to ceiling across any spare wall space. In the living
room and along the hall. We didn’t shift Gran’s mirror. It’s kind of an artpiece on its
own. Will never know why it was so precious to ah ma, only that it was and that makes
it important. But everywhere else, above and below and each side of the mirror, there’s
gung gung’s work, as evocative in its mystery as Tim Johnson has been for me. None of
us will ever know the full story behind any of these works, nor how come we all got so
mixed up, but can’t you just feel there’s a great love story or two in the past? All we can cling to is the relics we’ve been given. And trust our instincts, I guess. Next challenge is arranging an exhibition through the Australian Chinese Community Association or one of the museums. A volume of history tied up in his work, I guess. Needs a lot of research, though. Michael suggested one of those institutions that are picking up the theme of immigration. Could work. And Tim Johnson, well, he’s still in my life. My delayed graduation exhibition is happening later this year.

I’ll have to put this aside soon because MY HUSBAND—got to say it again—my husband will be coming home soon from his job. His career has taken off. He’s second-in-charge at Cezanne’s now. Carl saw his potential way before I did. It’s great for me. I get to see all my old friends whenever. Cezanne’s will always be a special place for me. Helped me pay for the life I worked to have and—oh, yeah—it’s where I met my far-too-beautiful husband. Still a bit too blond for me sometimes, too much a surprise in its brilliance. But, oh, my God, didn’t we make a great couple at our wedding? Him so, so beautiful, that smile of his working miracles and me wearing Grandma’s cheongsam (a marvel I could fit in it after Aisha). I wore the matching slippers, too. Thought I was Michelle Yeoh in ‘Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon’—Dad’s fave DVD. Our wedding: perfect. At ‘my house’, or I should call it ‘our house’—feels great to say that! My family and Michael’s, our friends, so fantastic. Best wedding ever.

Can’t believe I cried when Michael told me I looked beautiful. At first he thought it was because I didn’t believe him. Then he thought I’d changed my mind. And he looked as if he might cry, too. But it wasn’t any of those reasons. I knew that cheongsam made me look beautiful. How could it not! And those matching slippers, I knew Gran had chosen them especially for me, like she had foresight or something.
Spooky Chinese intuition, maybe. And there was no way I didn’t want to marry Michael. I wanted to be his wife more than anything, except being Aisha’s mum. And, surprise surprise, more than being a famous artist or having my degree or (though I can’t believe I am saying this) being rich. Not that I don’t want those things, but if I had to choose? Well …

It was Gran’s cheongsam and her beautiful matching slippers that made me cry, cry for Gran and the man she loved, and the stories that I could only glimpse into. All I had to say to Michael was: ‘those letters’. He understood. As beautiful as the cheongsam looked on me, woven into it was the saddest love stories anyone could ever tell. After I’d finished, there was like the biggest fattest lump of sadness inside me. And I can only guess how much more we don’t know about Gran and our family. It’s gone forever.

And I cried because I knew how much Gran would have loved to see me on my wedding day. Especially she would have loved to see me wearing gung gung Stephen’s gift to her. Being here for my wedding is just another something Gran has missed out on. That’s why I appreciate being able to marry my soulmate and to live in Brisbane in this house with its little porch out front that looks out over Gran’s beautiful tropical garden.

For Gran’s anniversary I am cooking a ‘tra-dish-on-al’ PNG dessert. Gran would be so proud. It’s called Bariva. Uses cooking bananas and sago and is cooked mumu style. Then you make coconut sauce where you have to scrape out the inside of the coconut and the juice has to be all squished out of it—and Aunty Anna showed me how Gran used to do this, with her special scraper and gauze bag—no measuring, just look and see and practice. I can almost say those words the way Gran used to say them: ‘you try, you learn’. I’ve been trying a bit too often—I think Michael is sick of Bariva, just as
he’s sick of asking the purchaser at Cezanne’s to get in cooking bananas and coconuts. He says he loves it! God, aren’t newly weds just a bit too smulchy, those first few months of being married? Wonder when we will reach the ‘take it for granted’ stage? Just as well this diary is only for my eyes. Michael would be shattered to read what I have just written. He’s by far the more romantic soul of the two of us. I want to get down to practical things—either it can happen or it can’t—end of story. But he’s for the dream.

But you can’t criticise the man. Since the end of July he’s been working in the restaurant to all hours of the evening (or morning), grabbing some sleep and spending the rest of the day taking care of Aisha Maree before he goes back to the restaurant. Not every day, mind you, but often enough. He’s doing this so I can finish off my degree. Re-enrolled in second semester this year. So here it is, September, and there’s a month or so before assessment, followed by graduation exhibition—and, shit, am I scared of having all those critical eyes crawling over my work! And the miracle is I actually know how big a space I need to reserve for my work! Because, who’d believe, despite making Bariva every second night, despite having a baby to care for and a husband to love, I have actually all but finished my final piece. And it’s huge! Dad will have to hire a ute to get it to the exhibition site. And God knows how we get it in the door. Oh shit, do I need to think of that? Better ring the Graduate office tomorrow. Anyway, definitely a Pollock, if size is the measure. Well, hey, found damn good motivation to get it finished, didn’t I? Knew how it felt when I thought it’d never happen. The memory of that sure gave me a kick up the backside. Got a second chance. Wasn’t sure I’d get a third.

Doesn’t matter what the examiners think about my work. Oh sure, I want to get my degree—did a lot of hard work to get there and it’d be rewarding to have some
proof of that—but, God, this work was more than about uni and marks. I put my heart
and soul into it. Best therapy ever! I know Gran would love it. Tim Johnson was
definitely my inspiration. Though it’s a Francine Seeto through and through—oh yes,
I’ve decided to use Seeto for my professional name. It reveals the source of my creative
inspirations. See? Sounding almost as if I am a Practising Artist already. Just got to do
the slog now. Still learning about the Cosgroves, so using that name would sound a little
insincere. Anyway, wrote my theory about Tim Johnson’s philosophy and how that
makes an appearance in his work. My work shows my philosophy. Like Tim’s, my
work is a reflection of the many influences that make me who I am. A big slab of red.
Guess where that inspiration came from? There’s a reference to my wedding dress, the
marriage chest it came in, grandfather’s love letters to Gran, our family’s cooking style,
and our many different kind of faces. Grandma would call it mumu art. Hope when
Aisha Maree is older she will have the insight to read what’s in the work. Hope I find
the creative imagination to produce enough inspired works for an exhibition. Then my
life would have surpassed anything my previous but abandoned ‘perfect’ little plan
would have delivered. I am so lucky.

Well, how’s that for sorting the wood from the trees. But this is it. No more
diary. Just Life from now on.

Pinis/The end
‘As much as fits upon an aibika leaf’

The exegesis
A novel does not assert anything; a novel searches and poses questions … The novelist teaches the reader to comprehend the world as a question. There is wisdom and tolerance in that attitude (Kundera 1980).

There is no doubt fiction makes a better job of the truth (Lessing 1995).

Books may not change our suffering, books may not protect us from evil, books may not tell us what is good or what is beautiful, and they will certainly not shield us from the common fate of the grave. But books grant us myriad possibilities: the possibility of change, the possibility of illumination (Manguel 2008).

My search in this thesis is for an alternative approach to addressing difference in fiction, inspired by a vision of an expansive, dynamically changing future for diverse peoples, their histories, their experiences and places in the world. The reflections in these pages are built on the notion that fiction, by its nature as exploration, fundamentally concerns itself with representing difference; thus its most intriguing subjects are never fully knowable. Perceiving fiction in this way not only enables but also encourages creative writers to consider what constitutes responsible and ethical narrative choices, choices that make a virtue of the quality of elusiveness of the subjects of writing and potentially open meaning to multiple possibilities. In other words, what may have been a subjective
enterprise becomes inter-subjective, since through the medium of fiction, representations of otherness can offer a writer (and her readers) new ways to imagine, and connect with, the lives of others.

Rather than adopt the view that no one can speak for (or write about) another because of the risks that come with privileged positions of power, I see that, for creative writers, the very incompleteness of certain subjects of writing (when, for example, representing otherness or difference) can be productively and creatively worked through. Within the narrative choices creative writers make, by suggesting (and perhaps even highlighting) a subject’s or character’s remoteness, there exists the potential for the responsible representation of difference and for providing within the text opportunities for readers to perceive a decentred location of knowledge in their encounter with the representation of marginalised others. In this way, as theorist Shameem Black observes, creative writers minimise the risk of ‘doing violence’ to [their] ‘object of description’ (Black 2010, 1), and may encourage in a reader an opening up of interpretive possibilities (rather than the taking up of fixed perspectives), or even perhaps the moving away from long-standing traditions of dominance (Spivak 2003).

This thesis locates itself between theory and practice—between the complexities of the representation of otherness and those of the process of creativity—by approaching the subject of research from a creative writer’s perspective. The thesis is based on my understanding that writing is a social activity emerging out of a complex of decision-making processes both conscious and intuitive in relation to content and form. Though a writer may claim for herself the freedom to write about any subject in any manner she chooses, she can never be free of the conditions of the world in which she has been shaped, in which the inspiration for writing has emerged and into which
the finished work will be offered. A responsible writer will be aware of her role within a communicative social network and will work at making responsible choices that reflect this awareness (Surma 2000). The contingent nature of writing takes a writer on a journey along highways, byways, detours and, occasionally, to dead-ends, as she seeks the best way to communicate her ideas (Grenville and Woolfe 1993, 283). Her readers remain silently behind her decisions (even if the only audience may be herself as the writer–reader) as she responds to the demands of writing of fiction (Harper 2008, 2010; Gardner 1991). It is from this foundation I approached the writing of my fiction and the research on which this exegesis is based.

What began as a ‘simple’ desire to tell the stories in fiction of a group of people from the town of Rabaul, in Papua New Guinea (PNG), who entered my life many years ago, soon became a complex area of research. Who these people are, their relationship to me, and why they are of interest, I will explain below. In the interim let me say that although these individuals see themselves as a group they have no official group name. They identify themselves collectively as ‘Rabaul Chinese and Mixed Race’, accepting this label as recognition of identities that enact a certain blend of cultural traditions and

---

9 In this exegesis, at times I refer to Rabaul Chinese and Mixed Race collectively as ‘the group’. However, the evolution of the group occurred over many years, hence there is no definitive moment when autonomous individuals began to identify themselves as ‘Rabaul Chinese and Mixed Race’. Thus, when I am discussing Rabaul’s early history and use the term ‘the group’, I am generally speaking about individual non-western migrants to Rabaul. This identification becomes further complicated after PNG gained independence. Before and after this moment, stateless adults were given options of PNG or Australian citizenship, each carrying its own ramifications. As well as the obvious social and economic considerations, individuals had to decide whether to remain in PNG or undertake compulsory emigration to Australia. From a writer-outsider’s perspective, this dramatic and traumatic shift in situations made more apparent the strength of the blended cultural traditions and values that identified (and continues to identify) individuals as belonging to a group, how those traditions and values might be separated from location of origin and continue to thrive within another society.
values, though they are now Australian or PNG citizens.\textsuperscript{10} Suffice to say, in the work of fiction that accompanies this exegesis my intention has been to populate my imaginary world with characters based upon my impressions of living people whose cultural background, beliefs and experiences I do not share. Consequently, my position in relation to the subjects of my fiction, their culture and experiences, is as writer–outsider. This brings me well and truly into the politics of representing difference (Hall 1997) and of speaking for and about others (Alcoff 1991), particularly as the significance of these stories relates, at least in part, to the effects of disempowerment and the adaptability of individuals to their straitened situations of limited power.

In my attempts to transform stories of living people into fiction within my creative work, ‘As Much As Fits Upon An Aibika Leaf’ (‘Aibika Leaf’), I could have chosen to write whatever I wished about individuals, justifying my choices by the fictional nature of my writing.\textsuperscript{11} But those I am interested in are my family by marriage, my nieces and nephews, and my friends whose ancestors were mostly sojourners from many origins who settled in PNG’s regional capital Rabaul, over a period of almost a century before PNG gained independence. It is the privilege of these valuable relationships that caused me to pause and reconsider this apparent freedom I enjoy as a writer. Or rather, it was my awareness of the privilege of my relationship with those

\textsuperscript{10} Although this name is the one used by the community to identify themselves and their cultural traditions, it is highly likely this is a name born out of the colonial practice of classifying people according to racial appearance. Individuals comprising the group may or may not be ‘Chinese’ or they may be both ‘Chinese’ and ‘Mixed Race’ or neither, so diverse is the ancestral cultural mix of members of the community. The difficulty in finding an appropriate name for the group is articulated by social economist, Margaret Willson (1989). Willson notes that while she refers to the PNG-Chinese as ‘Chinese’ throughout her thesis, ‘PNG-Chinese have been influenced culturally by Melanesian [Papua New Guinean] and Australian practices’ (Willson 1989, 6). Willson describes the PNG Chinese as having an elusive identity, ‘a culture that is neither Melanesian, Australian nor Chinese, but a product unique in itself’ (1989, 77–78), yet ‘sharing with the wider Papua New Guinea society a common language (Tok Pisin) and many aspects of their world view’ (1989, 73).

\textsuperscript{11} My Honours thesis (Glassby 2008) contained an early but limited exploration of ideas for a fictional telling of the unique experiences of Rabaul Chinese and Mixed Race individuals. A different approach and a considerably expanded narrative have been developed for this doctoral thesis.
whose stories I wished to fictionalise and the potential risk of abusing that privilege that made me more aware than I had previously been that the writing of fiction does not exempt a writer from responsibilities to the world beyond fiction.

However, that which makes these histories interesting also complicates their (fictionalised) telling. Rabaul, PNG, the geographic location for the stories and the histories upon which my fiction is focused, has survived a very violent past: volcanic eruptions (Johnson and Threlfall 1992); an outbreak of fighting in World War One (Threlfall 2012); heavy and persistent bombing and occupation during World War Two (Stone 2006; Sakaida 1996); and, less violent and yet still destructive, the transitions between various administrative governments, including the ultimate outcome, PNG self-government and the transfer of administrative documents relevant to Australian government’s trusteeship from its former headquarters in Port Moresby to the archives in Canberra (Cahill 1972). Not only have official documents but also personal records and mementoes been lost or destroyed during these monumental events. In particular, during the Pacific War, as a consequence of the relentless bombing of Rabaul, not a single building remained intact and most written records held there were destroyed (Threlfall 2012, 6). These losses would be problematic for anyone wishing to research the history of this region of PNG. But for me, conceding a need for accuracy, even in fiction, because of a responsibility to living descendants, the losses of any general history became more significant when I realised that few of the older generation had shared or handed down their stories.

With very limited official or even anecdotal sources on which to base my research, a wish to respect those whose stories I was recreating in fiction heightened my awareness of my responsibilities as a creative writer to any imagined audience, particularly one that might already have more intimate knowledge on the subject of
writing than I might ever hope to acquire. But, at the same time, I could see that, to a
greater or lesser extent, all kinds of fiction writing carries such risks, since imagination
is the basis for fiction. The twist for me, and what made the project particularly
challenging, lay between my desire to give voice to a lost history of a specific PNG
community, and my need to ‘imagine’ to fill the gaps left by an absence of any
substantial historical records. Yet out of this challenge came my exegetical focus on the
many stories needing to be told about the complex experiences, identities and histories
of so many marginalised individuals in a globalised world. In this context, too, I became
interested in exploring responsible approaches to telling such stories, taking
a cosmopolitan perspective where difference is critically and creatively reflected on.

I thought about the many other potential stories that might emerge in our world
of shifting borders and evolving cultures, and considered what might be literature’s
contribution to articulating these kinds of difference. What is a local problem for me in
my creative practice—discovering an appropriate style in which I can create fiction
about people who seem familiar (and are often loved) but who are indeed strangers—is
in many ways a global challenge of today, especially for the writing of fiction in a
globalised world. As philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah argues, the challenge for us
as cosmopolitan citizens is to respond to our obligations to others and to learn from our
differences (Appiah 2006). These are the responsibilities I face as a creative writer
narrating the stories of others.

All of this—the focus, peculiarities and challenges of ‘Aibika Leaf’—is only a
shard of flint that must strike the steel of the exegesis, and the questions it reflects on.
Each of the texts examined in later chapters—The Summer Exercises (2008) by Ross
Gibson, and Hand Me Down World (2010) by Lloyd Jones—extends to a reader a
different invitation to explore an essentially ambivalent world and to reflect on some
key questions about others and about themselves. Each text responds in its own way to the problems of representing otherness or narrating subjects that may not be fully or ultimately knowable by decentring, dislocating, displacing or redistributing the source of knowledge, particularly away from the reader. My own fiction, ‘Aibika Leaf’, stands on its own; in keeping with my aim to encourage more flexible and reflective interpretations of difference, I provide no explanation of the text other than the brief background offered in this exegesis. The other two texts are discussed through my critical reading of them, as a creative writer seeking to uncover possibilities for the responsible representation of ultimately unknowable subjects.

Structure of the exegesis

This exegesis consists of five chapters. Following this introductory chapter, Chapter Two draws from Black’s (2010) exploration of the literary techniques of what she calls ‘crowded selves’ and ‘crowded styles’ for developing ethical and creative representations of social difference. A brief background history of Rabaul and its past and present societies identifies the PNG stories as having in common with many other migration stories experiences of alienation, marginalisation and the loss of identity. Placed within this larger, global context, migration stories can be seen to articulate the effects of globalisation. If cosmopolitanism is a critical response to globalisation, then particular works of fiction might be viewed as significant forms of cosmopolitan resistance to the homogenising effects of globalisation, as they place those migration stories in a global context, focus upon human experiences within that context, and invite a reader to open their imaginative sympathies to other perspectives.

Chapter Three considers how selected elements of images and words chosen by Ross Gibson, the author of the experimental novel The Summer Exercises (2008), create
a subjunctive space in which meaning is open to multiple interpretations and possibilities. Gibson creates a crowded style that acknowledges that the novel’s subject, the city of Sydney, New South Wales, circa 1946, is no longer accessible when it encourages the reader, by means of its crowdedness, to find relational connections between its various components. Out of a reader’s struggle for understanding may be gleaned something of the mood and identity of that past Sydney. Thus, the text demonstrates literature’s ability to represent difference, albeit without rendering its subject fully knowable.

Chapter Four examines *Hand Me Down World* (2010) by Lloyd Jones in which Jones’s characters remain at some distance and largely unknowable. Jones thus challenges a reader’s interpretations of the text and their presumptions about his characters. This narrative, located explicitly in a contemporary context of globalisation, provides a reader with an opportunity to consider how the real world is represented via contemporary media and how far it determines what we know about those near and far, familiar and strange. Characters of *Hand Me Down World* may be read as crowded selves, displaying identities refracted by or constructed in response to other identities; each character changes and evolves as we read them from different perspectives.

Chapter five draws together the threads woven in the preceding chapters. The arguments of this thesis are built upon the notion that fiction, by its impulse to exploration, fundamentally concerns itself with representing difference and therefore its characters remain in process and can never be fully knowable. Perceiving fiction in this way encourages creative writers to make narrative choices that work *with* the impossibility of the finite or fixed subject, opening the text to multiple possibilities for interpretation. By imagining a cosmopolitan future in which we have a responsibility to each other despite our differences, writers can make creative choices motivated by a
vision of alterity as something ‘that contains us as much as it flings us away’ (Spivak 2003). With such a vision motivating creative choices, as the novels of Ross Gibson and Lloyd Jones demonstrate, new ways of representing difference emerge, undoing the familiar and scattering secure or singular understandings so as to reinforce the value of many perspectives rather than one. Thus, difference is celebrated rather than resisted; what may have been subjective becomes inter-subjective. In other words, through the medium of fiction, representations of otherness can offer new ways to imagine the lives and situated experiences of others. Perhaps, as the novels of Gibson and Jones (and my own fiction) show, writers’ attempts at visionary and creative choices can give rise to extraordinarily imaginative works of fiction that deepen and complicate a reader’s appreciation of the other and of difference.
Chapter Two

Representing strangers in a cosmopolitan future

… And so each venture
Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate
With shabby equipment always deteriorating
In the general mess of imprecision of feeling,
Undisciplined squads of emotion
… For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business

(T. S. Eliot 1944, 48).

We reside in a world where ‘strangers are real and present’, Appiah declares in his significant text, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (2006, 99).

Nonetheless, from Appiah’s cosmopolitan perspective, this entails our being aware of our responsibilities to each other ‘despite our differences’ (Appiah 2006, 135; italics in original), in a world in which difference is recognised, perhaps even celebrated. As creative writers, our work can play an important role, not only in offering possibilities for how the world might be differently understood, but also for dealing with a complex world whose complexity is difficult to represent. Sneja Gunew heralds such work as embracing a ‘new cosmopolitanism [that] is actually committed to weaving the local into the global’ (Gunew 2014, 13), by challenging the ‘notion of [any] unified identity’,
languages or selves (Gunew 2014, 22).12

In 1993, the Nobel Prize for Literature was awarded to American writer, Toni Morrison, who began her lecture with the words, ‘I believe one of the principal ways we acquire, hold and digest information is through narrative’ (Morrison 1993). As we attempt to make narrative fiction from the stories of our own experiences and those of our families, our friends, our neighbours and strangers, we are constantly challenged to articulate sensitively the diversity of individual stories, experiences and places. Our ability to narrate is constantly being tested by the rapidity of change and the increasingly instantaneous nature of forms of communication. To allow for this, our practices thus need to invite flexible and open interpretation. To create such a narrative, a writer engages in what T. S. Eliot calls ‘trying’, see Eliot (1944) quoted above. Eliot’s poetic persona seems to be referring to the creative process in which each writer immerses in order to find the right words, the right form, to express her ideas, her re-imagined world.

With this in mind, this chapter considers, from the perspective of a creative writer, how a specific writing project is approached and where its exploration might lead in terms of a research journey. In this instance, the outcome, given that the research undertaken is part of this exegesis, is an understanding of the complexities of representation in this rapidly changing world and the role of the creative writer to seek alternative forms of fiction in order to acknowledge (and reflect in their writing style) fresh ways of representing strangers, ‘strangeness’, otherness and the various, ultimately unknowable, subjects of writing.

12 In her article, Gunew examines Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s essays, in particular Among the White Moon Faces: An Asian-American Memoir of Homeland (Lim 1996). Gunew argues that Lim shows herself to be a ‘neo-cosmopolitan’ writer because ‘many of the elements central to the new debates have been present in Lim’s work over several decades, driven by her interest in scrutinizing ecologies of belonging within frameworks of nationalism, transnationalism, globalisation and neo-cosmopolitanism’ (2014, 13).
The specific writing project has already been introduced in the first chapter as one that aims to fictionalise the stories of individuals of diverse origins (my family and friends) connected to PNG. I have already declared that my work of fiction must stand on its own merit. However, I realise while most readers may be aware of PNG’s broad history and many may perhaps already know of Rabaul as the capital of the East New Britain province of PNG, if I am to explain adequately the fit between my fiction and the potential for many other migration stories in fiction emerging from the phenomenon that is globalisation, in light of the absences of historical record focused upon Rabaul Chinese and Mixed Race I have already noted, some background might be useful.

Following a glimpse into the history of Rabaul and its population, the chapter then turns to cosmopolitanism as a critical response to globalisation and the value of imagination when writing in a cosmopolitan context. Roger Silverstone’s (2007) concept of the mediapolis and the orientation of ‘proper distancing’ as a means of representing the other will also be explored in a discussion of the limitations and opportunities encountered by a writer engaging in the representation of difference. Finally, I turn to Shameem Black’s (2010) concepts of ‘crowded selves’ and ‘crowded styles’, the literary techniques that Black argues enable the exploration of ‘how very different kinds of fiction choose to wrestle’ with the problems of representing, while striving ‘to develop nuanced responses’ (2010, 4) to different kinds of alterity. The aim of this chapter is to provide the theoretical and conceptual foundation on which to base the critical readings of chapters three and four.

But, first, it is useful to attempt to place my creative work, ‘Aibika Leaf’, within a broad spectrum of other fictional works interested in PNG.
An overview of PNG literacy and literature

Let us begin with a brief look at the state of PNG literacy. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), literacy is one of the biggest development issues in PNG, with the nation unlikely to meet the Millennium Development Goals set by the UN for 2015 (Pollard 2011). Yet it is hard to get a precise picture of the national literacy rate and education levels because of PNG’s uniquely complex tribal society (Pollard 2011). More than a third of the six million population—most of whom live in traditional subsistence villages in rural areas—are unable to read and write. Among older people, as many as one in two may be print-illiterate, perhaps not surprising in a country with little history of writing (Pollard 2011). This has inevitably had an impact on the development of PNG literary print culture.

As a brief aside it is worth noting that, as far back as 1893—according to author and creative writing scholar Nigel Krauth’s (1982) anthology, collected over thirty years ago—Australian literature has featured images of New Guinea. In his introduction to his anthology of Australian literature that refers to New Guinea images, Krauth comments that the nineteenth century works of E.W. Cole and Marcus Clarke were ‘bizarre distortions of unvisited New Guinea’s reality, but were nevertheless shaped by Australian cultural preoccupations at the time’ (Krauth 1982, viii). Today, raised consciousness about hierarchies of power and the undesirability of misrepresenting or doing violence to subjects of writing may lessen the occurrences of what PNG writer Regis Stella has called ‘fraudulent representations’ (Stella 2007). But hidden or less obvious risks will always challenge attempts to represent the other, as this thesis attests.

Since becoming a nation, PNG has properly focused on developing its own
writers and artists. Amidst the various challenges faced by the emergent nation, however, the arts have suffered. In 1997, on behalf of PNG’s literary community, PNG poet, scholar and educator, Steven Winduo (1997) made a call for a PNG ‘collective expression of difference’ through its literature, a way to resist PNG’s ‘double consciousness’ left by colonisation, one that, according to Winduo, blames someone else for PNG’s problems, and that struggles within a world described for Niugineans by others. The language Windou used in his paper shows that he was addressing the writing community, the PNG government and the academy. Despite Winduo’s call, literature in PNG continues to struggle, not for the lack of creative energy or the productivity of its writers, writing in both English and Tok Pisin, but for practical reasons: many PNG writers are no longer published in their own nation (Modjeska 2003, 50); bookstores struggle in a predominantly oral culture (Modjeska 2003, 50); and there is still a lack of Government support for the arts (Winduo 1997; Modjeska 2003).

In 2003, author, scholar and critic, Drusilla Modjeska, referred to this issue in her editorial introduction entitled ‘PNG Writing, Writing in PNG’ to the Australian literary journal Meanjin’s special edition dedicated to PNG writing (Modjeska 2003, 47). Like many other Australians, Modjeska too spent time in the Territories and is emotionally bound to the nation. In her introduction, Modjeska points out that the years leading up to and following self-rule, the early years of the University of PNG, are often referred to as the “golden” years of PNG when the arts flourished, poetry was published, cultural institutions were funded, writers were writing, theatres were full and there could still be some thought of a national culture’ (Modjeska 2003, 48). While Modjeska (2003, 53) draws attention to the observation of Epeli Hau’ofa, an
anthropologist from the University of PNG, that talking (or writing) about themselves sits uncomfortably with the Niugineans’ very different registrations of self, she points out that over the years since self-rule in 1975, writers and poets have moved from ‘taking up an oppositional stance to Australia as the colonial power’ (Modjeska 2003, 49), to ‘confronting corruption and bad governance’ (Modjeska 2003, 54), exploring events in their everyday lives as well as expressing strong political views, such as those of Bougainvillian poet Matuha Tubun.13

The vexed issue of representation and otherness, for both writers and readers, Modjeska believes, inhibited some writers who might otherwise have provided valuable insights to add to the 2003 PNG issue of *Meanjin*, many choosing to abstain from the challenge: ‘there are not a lot of people writing about PNG outside economic journalism or academic disciplines’ (Modjeska 2003, 54). Many memoirs have been written, with the nation, its history and its people at their heart. And these texts are at the heart of anxieties about how to write PNG experiences, how to write PNG characters. Memoir, in particular, is problematic ‘as a textual response to cross-cultural experience’ (Modjeska 2003, 52), since ‘writing … of “being there” raises contentious questions of speaking positions and audiences’ (Modjeska 2003, 52). Now deceased historian Hank Nelson, for example, claimed to locate his writing in the ‘metaphoric position of somewhere in the Coral Sea’ as he explains ‘Papua New Guineans to Australians, Australians to Papua New Guineans and Australians to Australians’ (Modjeska 2003, 52).

---

13 Poet Matahuna Tahun was featured on an Australian Broadcasting Commission Radio National Poetica series entitled “Poets of PNG Part 1 and 2” (2009), along with several other PNG poets. Tahun believes Niugineans ‘have not settled their past’. His poetry is overtly political (http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/poetica/poets-of-png-part-2/3140546).
More recently Modjeska (2014, 22) has reassessed the state of writing in PNG in her review of two recent PNG publications: The Crocodile Prize Anthology 2014, edited by Phil Fitzpatrick (2014) and Brokenville, ‘a child-eye view to the civil war of Bougainville’, by Leonard Fong Roka (2014). She makes two key points: first, that in PNG ‘oral storytelling remains a reality for many … folding recent histories into those handed down from past generations’; and, second, in this anthology the mood is ‘less meditative … [and more of] anger and loss’ (Modjeska 2014). Roka’s Brokenville, claims Modjeska, brings to the fore a child’s perspective of ‘the contradictions of a nation drawn from colonial borders, about moral ambiguity, about betrayal and possibility’, and about identity. According to Modjeska, the young Roka acknowledges that the crisis of the civil war ‘made me who I am’ (Modjeska 2014, 22).

Modjeska’s own fictional work, published in Australia and read, presumably, largely by Australian or western readers, includes The Mountain (2012), a novel straddling two generations of characters in PNG. The first generation are residents of the country around the time Canberra is preparing to hand over governance to Port Moresby (1968–1973), whose lives centre on the newly formed university (at which Michael Somare, who becomes PNG’s first Prime Minister, is a student who enters into the narrative). The story of the second generation is set between 2005 and 2006, when a now-adult (‘hapcas’ or mixed race) child returns from overseas where he has spent most of his life. The fictional narrative interweaves the politics of cultural relationships and changes between the two eras. Modjeska’s novel was one of those short-listed for the 2013 Miles Franklin Award in Australia, as was Annah Faulkner’s novel The Beloved (2012), in which Faulkner draws from her own experiences of a childhood in PNG to tell a story about an Australian family unravelling during their time in Port Moresby. Other texts worth mentioning here, though by no means representing a bibliography, are
Lloyd Jones’s novel *Mr Pip* (2006) set in Bougainville during the civil war; Peter Watt’s *Papua* (2002), based on Watt’s experience in PNG as part of the constabulary; and Maureen Stewart’s novel for young adults *Lerakim Watched* (1992) based on Stewart’s experience of education in PNG. Each of these is of course a work of fiction. There are also numerous non-fictional works available, many of which are based on war experiences along the Kokoda Trail, or more recent revisiting of the trail.\(^{14}\) Nonetheless, apart from the many expatriate memoirs within this genre, there is still a dearth of fictional and non-fictional explorations of contemporary PNG life, and fictional representation of the Rabaul Chinese and Mixed Race experience is (to my current knowledge) completely absent.

**Rabaul and its other population**

As background to my own subject of writing, this section begins in PNG in the town of Rabaul around 1895 when western involvement was in its infancy, and moves forward to 1959, when I began my six years of life in Rabaul and made the observations that have culminated in my work of fiction.

The nation of PNG has existed for almost forty years. Before becoming a nation, PNG was known as the Territories of Papua and New Guinea: Papua the former British Papua identified on Map 1 below as the southerly/easterly section, and New Guinea, the former German New Guinea, the northerly section (Biskrup, Jinks, and

\(^{14}\) Many works of non-fiction have been written about the experiences of the Australian armed forces during World War Two. Key texts include FitzSimons (2005) and Freeman (2012). Another popular topic has been trekking the Kokoda Trail, including a study by James (2012).
Tok Pisin is the most commonly spoken and read language.\textsuperscript{15} According to the Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/png/png_brief.html), Tok Pisin is one of the three official or national languages used in PNG. It is a form of Melanesian Pidgin English that was developed in the early 1800s as a result of increased travel and economic activity between the Melanesians and Europeans. According to Tok-Pisin.com (Tok-Pisin 2012), an online site for translation, resources and discussion, Tok Pisin is still today one of the most dominant languages in PNG. In a country that is said to be the most language-rich place on Earth—with more than 800 distinct languages in one land mass—Tok Pisin is an integral part of communication for almost all citizens.


My interest is in the part of PNG that began as German New Guinea, the area generally contained within the northern part of the mainland (on which is located the town of Madang), and the islands of New Britain and New Ireland, all of which enclose the Bismarck Archipelago, as can be seen in Map 2 above. Rabaul, the present-day capital of PNG’s East New Britain Province, is the epicentre of my fiction and the birthplace of the absorbing history of the Rabaul Chinese and Mixed Race people on whom my fiction is based and who are now scattered throughout PNG and Australia. With Rabaul at its centre, this region’s history is vastly different to that of any other region of PNG.

Historian Neville Threlfall (who was commissioned in 1980 to research and write a history of the East New Britain capital to compensate for the destruction of most written records during the bombings of World War Two) has provided me a marvellous description of Rabaul:

> From its foundation Rabaul was a crossroads where the people of many tribes, races and nations met, in peace and in war. Germans, British/Australians and other Europeans; Chinese, Indonesians, Japanese, Koreans, Indians, Filipinos, Pacific Islanders from Melanesia, Polynesia and Micronesia; Baining and Tolai, the original inhabitants, and tribespeople from all over what is now the nation of Papua New Guinea; all combined to make it a cosmopolitan community as colourful in its human elements as in its scenery. Most people who stayed any length of time became deeply attached to this town, and if they had to leave, did so reluctantly (Threlfall 2012, 16).\(^\text{18}\)

---

\(^{18}\) The Baining and Tolai people are the indigenous inhabitants of East New Britain, the Tolai belong in and around Rabaul and the Baining beyond that, particularly in the Baining Mountains (Threlfall 2012, 25–34).
A cosmopolitan town, a crossroads: this is exactly how I found Rabaul in 1959, sixteen years before PNG self-rule, more than fifty years before the publication of Threlfall’s work. A not dissimilar earlier version was recorded by author James Lyng soon after Australia took possession of German New Guinea in the early twentieth century (Lyng 1919). Threlfall’s description, then, it might be concluded, expresses the continuity of Rabaul’s society, as unique as the history of the region.

As mentioned above, my interest is in the area formerly known as German New Guinea and the town of Rabaul, from the late nineteenth century when, of the three nations holding colonies on the mainland (see Map 1 above) only Germany was actively engaged in any major way in any commercial enterprises. Britain saw Papua as having little more worth than as a buffer between the rest of the world and its colony (Australia) to the south; and for the Dutch, West Papua had outlived its purpose a century earlier as the back gate to the spice islands.

The German commercial investment in the colony had begun in tobacco plantations established on the mainland near Madang in the late 1800s. The mainland location was an unhealthy one and the potential of the island of New Britain and Rabaul’s magnificent harbour was soon recognised. The Germans’ headquarters were moved to New Britain around the turn of the century. The colony flourished. Rabaul’s port connected the colony to the rest of the world, permitting the export of its produce and the import of materials and human expertise, commodities progress demanded (Threlfall 2012, 92). Railways, wharves, administrative and commercial buildings multiplied. Heavy labouring fell upon Niugineans, but to build the wharves and the buildings the then-governor invited Chinese artisans to come to the colony as free immigrants. Their adaptability and eagerness to work made them useful members of Rabaul society, so more and more were given opportunties to migrate.
Those of the southern Chinese sojourners (and their descendants) who stayed and settled (Wu 1982) comprise just some of the individuals on which my fiction is based. Later, others came: Micronesian families from American territories, such as Samoa and Guam, Filipinos, and those from the Netherland East Indies (now Indonesia) known locally as Ambonese or Malays (Threlfall 2012, 95). There was also a small but strong Japanese community in Rabaul between the two world wars (Iwamoto 1999, 14).

As those many non-western individuals settled, the German governor’s challenge was to maintain the balance between satisfying the homeland’s wishes for the colony and those of the large firms who had vested interests in its success, while pacifying those on the ground: the tradesmen, labourers, cooks and service providers that made the colonisers’ desired successes possible. To address whatever the current pressures and matters of contention in the colony might be, rules and regulations (such as who was permitted entry into the colony, who was entitled to acquire land or assets, and so on) were constantly being changed (Cahill 1972; Threlfall 2012). Many of these regulations had the greatest consequences for those of the colony’s population with the fewest options, and upon whom the mostly restrictive and discriminatory laws were imposed.19 These regulations ultimately made the region a place of containment (even from its companion Territory, former British Papua).20 From the early days of

---

19 For many of the immigrants, changes of personal circumstances or disruptions in their homelands meant they were unable to return. They were left with no form of national identification. Thus many were dependent upon whatever opportunities the colony allowed them (Threlfall 2012). In effect, certain residents of Rabaul were categorised as not meeting the criteria either for recognition as expatriate members of whichever colonising nation happened to be in power or as indigenous to PNG. A majority of former immigrants were therefore confined within the area known at one time as German New Guinea, even after it became the Territory of New Guinea, only allowed restricted and strictly controlled movement elsewhere (Cahill 1972).

20 Although the two Territories of Papua and New Guinea under Australia’s care as PNG independence approached appeared externally to be administered under one seamless and singular operation, this was not so. Each came to Australia’s care in quite different ways. New Guinea, for example, came under Australian governance twice. First the area came to Australia under military governance at the outbreak of World War One. Some time later, New Guinea became Australia’s responsibility as a mandated territory under the League of Nations, interrupted by World War Two and Japanese occupation, after which both Territories were overseen by the UN, with Australia carrying out the UN’s directions.
settlement to today, development of the New Guinea region has occurred in the main centres: towns such as Madang (on the New Guinea mainland), Kavieng (on the island of New Ireland), Kokopo and Rabaul (on the island of New Britain). For the former immigrants to New Guinea, Rabaul—the place in which they began their PNG life and mostly stayed for several generations until deregulation and acquisition of Australian passports permitted free movement—would become the centre of their world, around which a circumscribed future was defined. 21 For those who were neither wholly welcomed nor totally marginalised, being quasi-captives meant that this location would become ‘home’: not only a place of residence but also a symbolic homeland (Willson 1989; Cahill 1972).

Intriguing for me has been that, despite their diverse cultural origins, out of a particular set of circumstances and history and, perhaps too, because of the remoteness of location, these people became a group who, over time, developed the strength and the

However, legislation and certain precedents put in place in the former German New Guinea by Germany lingered, particularly the presence of the former immigrant population. Papua on the other hand moved directly from British colonial rule to Australian jurisdiction under the Papua Act 1905 (Biskrup, Jinks and Nelson 1968, 71). Of relevance in this discussion, Papua had not followed the German colonial policy of allowing entry to non-western artisans or traders, and thus had maintained tighter entry controls in its early history, restrictions that also applied to many residents of its neighbouring Territory lacking acceptable forms of national identification.

21 An example of the impact of the colonial government and subsequent restrictions imposed on immigrants relates to marriage. At first, single men might have travelled to homelands to marry and bring back wives, but changes to immigration requirements often compelled these men to find wives from within other cultural groups (Cahill 1972; Willson 1989). As entry restrictions continued, cross-cultural marriages occurred more frequently, despite the occasional disapproval of individual cultural groups (Willson 1989), if for no other reason than because marriage determines continuity of family lineage (Wu 1982) and helps maintain cultural integrity within a particular group. Inevitably, as more individuals were contained within the colony, either by limits placed on entry and return or because men (who were otherwise qualified to come and go from the colony) could not afford to travel on the low wages resulting from their racial subordination, the number of cross-cultural marriages increased in subsequent generations. Inevitably, the Rabaul-born children of those marriages, not able to claim citizenships of the former home nations of parents or grandparents, not eligible for classification as New Guinea indigenes nor as Australian citizens, were effectively stateless (Cahill 1972). It is worth noting these limitations were not limited only to Rabaul Chinese and Mixed Race babies born in Rabaul but to all non-indigenous children born in the Territories. Children born in Rabaul to Australian parents needed to apply for nationalisation but, as these parents already held Australian citizenship, applications were quickly processed. However, for those with no acceptable (as defined by the Australian authorities) form of identification, a community of miscellaneous immigrants (confined to the region known as German New Guinea) grew, one generation to the next.
means to subvert the subtle oppression of their colonial situation. The individuals of the emergent community are ‘the others’, the subjects of my fiction.

Now a leap to 1959, when my family arrived in Rabaul. The hierarchy structuring Rabaul society that I witnessed at that time, as I suggested above, was not vastly different from that reported by others as existing during the German era: a minority of westerners; a larger group of non-western expatriate residents who I now call the Rabaul Chinese and Mixed Race community; and the various Niuginean tribes. The westerners (or as they were locally called, ‘Europeans’) in 1959 were mostly Australians (not Germans as in the previous era) employed by the administration. The non-western expatriates comprised the surviving first arrivals of immigrant workers and their descendants (as well as any individual Europeans or Niugineans who had married into the group). The majority of Rabaul’s population were, again using Threlfall’s words from earlier, ‘Baining and Tolai, the original inhabitants, and tribespeople from all over what is now the nation of Papua New Guinea’ (Threlfall 2012, 16).

From my naïve perspective, as I went about my life, the Rabaul Chinese and Mixed Race people, established in Rabaul life, were confident of their place in Rabaul society (even if that was distinct from and considered by those in power to be subordinate to the other non-indigenous group, the Europeans), and generally and apparently successful in the middle-range commercial, construction and services industries. Many of this group were the major landowners within the town, as well as owners of plantations and businesses. Consequently, it was easy for a newcomer to assume they might also be the wealth holders (outside of the large companies operated

---

22 ‘Europeans’ is a locally used term for westerners and ‘Niuginean’ is the Tok Pisin word for the people of PNG.
by Australian, New Zealand and other corporations), despite no overt displays of wealth in their family residences and lifestyles, as Willson notes (1989).

Once I left Rabaul, I discovered that despite my perception of the Rabaul Chinese and Mixed Race group’s significant presence in Rabaul, any official information about them was confined to brief mentions in PNG histories. These histories were focused on PNG’s transition from tribal lands to self-ruling nation, and only referred to the group en masse in terms of their numbers, offering little about the details of their arrivals, residency, culture or ways of life. The diversity of their individual histories or their influence (or lack of influence) on the efforts towards realising PNG self-rule were also (mainly) absent. From these accounts, I really only gained an impression that these individuals had always been perceived by those in authority (and therefore those whose voices dominated any accessible histories) as ‘needed but not wanted’. In each era prior to self rule, non-indigenous expatriate individuals have been perceived and treated as temporary residents with no place in any vision of PNG’s future, a view that has been contradicted in practice.

Following my early research, events have occurred that have sharpened and re-focused my interest in the Rabaul Chinese and Mixed Race group and their history. First, my sister married Ben from the group, and so my interest became personal. Through Ben, (and, by extension, through his family and friends, and of course through my nieces and nephews) I was permitted to reflect on the personal impact of broken connections to PNG for individual members of this cultural group, particularly in terms of a struggle for validation of their cultural identity. Second, over time, several

\[23\] I have borrowed these words from the title of Peter Cahill’s (2012) informal history, *Needed–But Not Wanted: Chinese in Colonial Rabaul 1884–1960*.

\[24\] For example, Sir Julius Chan GCL, GCMG, KBE, twice prime minister between 1980 and 1982 and between 1994 and 1997 and who continues his involvement as a Member of Parliament, is the son of Chin Pak, a trader from Taishan, China, and a Niuginean woman. He is but one of those who have challenged a perception that members of the group have no identity and no place (Wu 1982).
academic theses and other works covering a range of topics related to PNG have become available (Cahill 1972, 1996, 2012; Wu 1982; Willson 1989; Johnson and Threlfall 1992; Iwamoto 1999; Ichikawa 2006; Stone 2006; Nelson 2007, 2008; Threlfall 2012), each written by an individual who is outside of the group and who notes the limitation of available sources. Each work—as it examines, in small or large ways, the history of the Chinese in PNG from social, administrative or anthropological perspectives, their trading habits before and after independence, the general experiences of war in Rabaul, the history of the Japanese community of an earlier era, volcanic eruptions in the area, or administrative policies—is worthy in its own right but none satisfies someone interested in the human—subjective, lived—aspects of migration and the development of complex cultural identities.

In this exegesis, I have had to resist a strong desire to explain the intricate reasons for and eventual consequences of the limited movement of Rabaul Chinese and Mixed Race individuals, which might be rationalised as unintentional outcomes of Australia’s three administrations needing to work around ‘problems’ or complications inherited from its predecessor. But such explanations (while interesting) are beyond the scope and focus of this thesis. Suffice only to reiterate that over the century before self-rule, many individuals were, by choice or legislation, confined for a variety of circumstances and reasons to the region surrounding Rabaul, and that Rabaul was the heart of social activity for particular individuals. This means the Rabaul Chinese and Mixed Race group (never very large, though always larger than the numbers of ‘European’ expatriates resident in the Territory) is in many ways a huge family, all somehow related or intimately connected, if not by blood then by marriage or friendship. Although these individuals have no officially sanctioned group name, each one will say of themselves ‘I am Rabaul (or PNG) Chinese/Mixed Race’ in the same
way as I say ‘I am Australian’. No ‘official’ group name and only limited appearances in documented PNG historical records adds to this sense of being merely a large family, rather than being recognised as the cultural group it is. For the Rabaul Chinese and Mixed Race community in particular, because of their marginalised, minor status, recognition as a group or collective is important for their sense of identity. However, this does not override or undermine their significance as unique individuals thus, simultaneously, the diversity of ancestral origins is not overlooked by individual families within the larger cultural community.

For me, the manner in which diverse cultures have come together through economic immigration (seeking work far from homelands) and evolved into a hybridised culture is the intrigue that propelled my work of fiction. The complexities of identity, of how we each explain ourselves to ourselves and to others and how cultural and embodied differences play out in specific social settings snares me, entangles my curiosity as a creative writer. The challenges of creating my work made me realise that many others—whose lives and histories might also be difficult to narrate, like those of Rabaul Chinese/Mixed Race individuals—are similarly impacted by living in a globalised world.

Thus I need to return to my interest in the subjective, lived aspects of migration and the development of complex cultural identities. Stepping away from my personal interest in the Rabaul Chinese and Mixed Race individuals, I can see within the events of that history a microcosm of the present-day effects of globalisation: accelerated hybridisation of identities and individuals adapting to rapid or enforced change within a world that, despite globalisation’s mitigating influences, is in many ways still divided by deeply felt cultural divisions. A global village the world may in some sense be, but it remains a world inhabited by humans understandably reluctant to let go of their
histories and who are (as cultural beings) ‘incomplete or unfinished animals’ (Geertz 1973, 49), continually re-defined by cultural understandings that come through comparisons and interactions with other cultures. To tell our own stories and those of others requires that we combine facts and feelings, public and private, external and internal, and the other outside and within ourselves. This is the challenge Toni Morrison (1994) has laid before creative writers (as noted above): to go beyond the mere facts that history can deliver, so that writer and reader can work through narrative to find an understanding of our human complexity by reimagining the world as others experience it.

**A creative challenge**

For me, the first challenge in the writing of ‘Aibika Leaf’ came as a surprise: I had believed I ‘knew’ Ben’s community. In my short time in Rabaul, as a member of a minority group of westerners, I had found my school friends and work mates within this community. My life since leaving PNG has been filled with opportunities for conversations with other one-time residents, with Ben’s extended family, and my own. Memories are regularly evoked of that time from the past—in Tok Pisin ‘bipor long taim’. But these kinds of memories are not reliable and the scarcity of resources—literature, official records, or verifiable anecdotal evidence—provided me with little, if any, support for my personal observations and my interpretations of others’ experiences of life in Rabaul.
As historians might turn to oral histories to fill the gaps, so often do writers of fiction.\textsuperscript{25} However, when I turned to the group for its oral histories, I was not alone in my disappointment in what seems to be a generational silence from those who had experienced life in New Guinea. Perhaps the silences are a consequence of the tight interweaving of relationships.\textsuperscript{26} However, I suspect that the silences have a deeper basis: I believe they are residual habits of earlier generations, whose survival and success often depended upon secrecy and invisibility. This suspicion feeds my imagination, raises questions that my creative endeavours will harness. Unfortunately, however, as time since self-rule elapses (next year it will be forty years), those who have memories of the past and can share them with younger generations are diminishing in number. As Rabaul Chinese and Mixed Race people were never granted a significant role in the official PNG story, the group’s history will very soon be irrecoverable. Those born in Australia, or who were only children when they left PNG, see the danger. They desire to have their histories acknowledged somehow.

The weight of that perceived potential loss of my nieces and nephews’ history provides an incentive to drive my research into an imagined history forward, fuelled, in part of course by a desire to satisfy the wishes of my brother-in-law, Ben, and my nieces and nephews, by my belief that, without a fuller account of other presences in PNG, Australian history and its role in bringing that nation to self-rule is not complete. But, paradoxically, as I feel my family’s desire to have their histories recognised, as I move closer to the material I need to feed my creative work, those whose wishes are

\textsuperscript{25} Historian Mario T. Garcia (Garcia 1977), discussing the Mexican experience in the United States of America, suggests that poor immigrant groups and unorganised working class often have not left for historians written primary documents in the form of correspondence, memoirs, diaries, etc. To meet the challenge, Garcia argues, historians turn to oral histories.

\textsuperscript{26} Cahill acknowledges one person’s story cannot be told without touching others’ stories, when he talks about the sourcing of stories for his unofficial history: ‘Informants … chose their words carefully, anxious not to criticise or offend distant family members’ (Cahill 2012, ix).
motivating me begin to retreat into the roles of familiar strangers. While the telling of the stories was originally motivated by my wish to satisfy my family’s need for validation through making visible their shared experiences, to understand the task I am undertaking requires that I distance myself from those personal, private connections. Family and friends, usually recognised by me through my relationships with them or through my love for them, need to become, for the purpose of my creative practice, ‘others’ or strangers. As such, I must acknowledge that their histories and experiences are foreign to me and also in some sense ultimately unknowable to me. This is a necessary shift. The aim of art, of creative writing, is not to document a set of events as history might, but to transform the world we encounter through imagination and creativity. As I seek a creative way to explore those familiar lives and experiences, I am compelled to ‘defamiliarise’ them. Yet it is also apparent to me that the process of defamiliarisation comes with responsibilities. However I tell these stories, whatever might be my motivation to write in a particular way, and whatever form and content I choose, there are living individuals from this community, each of whom is a potential (imagined) reader and who might recognise herself as not dissimilar to the fictionalised subjects of my stories.

**Migration stories**

As I step away from the emotional pull of the group, I can see the singularity of the group’s stories and how they might be seen as stories of double or triple migrations.

---

27 In Chapter Four, I discuss the intimate stranger, a term that evolves from the phrase ‘consequential strangers’ developed by psychologist Karen L. Fingerman and journalist Melinda Blau (Fingerman and Blau 2009), who explore the significance of those with whom we have ‘casual relationships … [but who] are as vital to our well-being, growth and day-to-day existence as family and close friends’ (Fingerman and Blau 2009, 3). In this instance, however, I am referring to a growing awareness of the distance between my own understanding of the world and that of those familiar individuals to whom I am emotionally close and whom I had hitherto seen as possessing a perspective similar to my own.
Simultaneously, I recognise that these stories also resemble other migration stories. Each of these variously expresses an individual’s sense of alienation, powerlessness, overt or covert pressures to assimilate, grief for loss of home, families, and traditions and, too often, experiences of marginalisation and discrimination. But migration stories are also able to move us beyond isolated experiences. They can be understood as stories that incorporate each and every one of us, a vast migration story of humanity. In this regard, legal scholar, Lynette M. Parker, in a briefing paper about key considerations in respect of immigration, remarks:

Migration is fundamentally the story of the human race from its origins to the present. Migration is an integral aspect of life on this planet. People move to survive. They move in search of food. They move away from danger and death. They move towards opportunities for life. Migration is tied to the human spirit, which seeks adventure, pursues dreams, and finds reasons to hope even in the most adverse circumstances. Such movement affects the communities migrants leave and the communities that receive these migrants. This movement also impacts communities along the route of transit (Parker 2014).

Migration is about the movement of people, and there is no one perspective on, no simple explanation for, the reasons, effects and consequences of migration. Moreover, one story dovetails into another; each single experience is interwoven into complex networks of other experiences and influences, and out of it, people are changed.

---

28 To name but a few examples of migration stories: Shaun Tan’s *The Arrival* (Tan 2006), which expresses through images the feeling of wonder, displacement, and strangeness of an immigrant in a new land; Jeffrey Eugenides’s *Middlesex* (2002), the story of a family that came from Greece to Detroit (and other forms of otherness); Richard Flanagan’s *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* (1998), about the alienation of European workers in Tasmania; and Elizabeth Jolley’s story *The Georges’ Wife* (1993), about the voyage to Australia and a desire to repeat the past.
forever. Seen in this way, all stories might in some way be understood as migration stories.

As Appiah (2006) reminds us, humans have been engaged in migrations throughout human existence. We are, however, right now, particularly conscious of those movements and their consequences. The movement of large numbers of individuals and groups across national and international borders is one of the key contemporary manifestations of globalisation.

**Globalisation and creative writing as cosmopolitan practices.**

Globalisation is, according to media scholar and sociologist Roger Silverstone, ‘a view of the world which privileges the interconnection and integration of networks and capitals flows, of corporate control and commercial exploitation’ (2007, 9). Globalisation is a social, political and cultural phenomenon as well as an economic one, and a term that represents the dynamic intensification towards an homogenised global culture. A globalised world is inhabited by ‘strangers’ (Appiah 2006). Nonetheless, the changes wrought by processes of globalisation give rise to global interdependence and ‘involves increasing awareness of, and interaction with, the stranger’ (Silverstone 2007, 13).

However, political sociologist Gerard Delanty argues that theories of globalisation do not provide interpretation of the social world. Globalisation is thus a problem to be understood and explained, says Delanty (2009, 1), and he proposes that this might be approached through a critical cosmopolitanism. This requires ‘a particular imagination—the cosmopolitan imagination’ (Delanty 2009, 6)—one that imagines a social reality as essentially ‘a field of social relations in which conflicting orientations are played out’ (Delanty 2009, 6). Central to the cosmopolitan imagination is an
interplay between self, other and the world as well as an orientation to openness, ‘immanent orientation’, says Delanty, that:

takes shape in modes of self-understanding, experiences, feelings, and collective identity narratives. The imaginary is both a medium of experience and an interpretation of that experience in a way that opens up new perspectives on the world (Delanty 2009, 14–15).

Within this orientation, ‘the outcome of individuals or collective decisions is often determined by global contexts … [and] give expression to specific forms of experience of the world’ (Delanty 2009, 6).

Surma (2013, 13) harnesses Delanty’s perspective to explore practices of writing and reading as she argues that a cosmopolitan perspective ‘helps us to see the porous borders, not only of language, syntax and meaning, but also of text and image.’ As a creative writer seeks to recognise the many forms in which ‘decent’ (Appiah 2006) human lives are lived, Surma’s words about the role of fiction writing as a form of resistance to globalisation’s homogenising influences, become significant:

As an extended narrative, which may encourage in the reader a contextualised, relational understanding of the complex interactions between people, place and events in time, fiction writing can invoke a richer appreciation of how we might imagine, and respond with care to, the worlds of others (Surma 2013, 14).

Gayatri Spivak (2003) also envisions a literature that can move its readers beyond globalisation’s imposition of the same system of exchange everywhere: beyond globalisation’s link to colonialism, post-colonialism, and the othering of individual subjects, to a space where alterity is seen as a fundamental quality of human existence,
rather than something we continuously attempt to essentialise or fix, and where alterity ‘contains us as much as it flings us away’. Spivak uses the concept of ‘planetarity’ to describe texts (such as Toni Morrison’s Beloved (1987)) that ‘undo’ what has been made familiar, natural or accepted, that attempt what is impossible to translate, and that concede the absoluteness of change (Spivak 2003, 88).

Nonetheless, creative writers cannot escape or ignore the often hidden workings of hegemonic power on the production of literary texts and the impacts of critical practices of reading or interpreting those texts. Underwriting much of that interest is an understanding of the practices of representation. Cultural theorist and sociologist Stuart Hall (1997) helps lay the foundations for my understanding the significance of representational practices, and Linda Alcoff’s essay “The Problems of Speaking For Others” (1991) helps tease out the nuances of such practices. Both scholars offer insights that highlight the challenges facing the creative writer working imaginatively in the context of contemporary globalisation.

Representational practices: speaking for others and fictional representation

In linguistics (as explained by Ferdinand de Saussure (2006)), difference matters, as it is essential to constructing and defining meaning. Binary opposites or dichotomies (say of ‘black’ and ‘white’, or of ‘familiar’ and ‘strange’) may enable us to capture, albeit very crudely, the diversity of the world. However, the rigid two-part structure of binaries also opens them ‘to the charge of being reductionist or over-simplified’ (Hall 1997, 235). According to Hall, cultural order is disturbed when things ‘fail to fit any category’ or when the culture’s symbolic boundaries, that are central to cultural meaning, are transgressed (Hall 1997, 236). Accordingly, Hall notes:
marking differences leads us, symbolically to close ranks, shore up culture and stigmatize and expel anything which is defined as impure, abnormal. However, paradoxically, it also makes ‘difference’ powerful, strangely attractive because it is forbidden, taboo, threatening to cultural order (Hall 1997, 237).

Because difference is both inherent in the production of meaning and ambivalent, it is potentially both positive (for language, culture, social identities and subjectivity) and negative (for example, as a site of negative feelings, hostility and aggression towards the stranger other). And, ultimately, because forms of representation reproduce or reimagine culture, what becomes central to creative writing work is how we engage in the practices of representation and to what effect.

This, then, is the challenge of my creative project and my wish to fictionalise the stories of a unique group, as I (within the language of my own culture) attempt to represent a different culture. In my fictional rendering of the experiences of the Rabaul Chinese and Mixed Race, stories about the group’s experiences in PNG must be understood by means of various discourses, including colonialism, race and ethnicity. And this brings me to reflect on how we understand ourselves and others, and how we identify ourselves and others. Hall’s assertion that ‘the concept of identity [is] … not an essentialist, but strategic and positional one’ (2000, 17), is salutary:

Precisely because identities are constructed within, not outside discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies. Moreover, they emerge within the play of specific modalities of power, and thus are more the product of the
marking of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of an identical, naturally constituted unity — an ‘identity’ in its traditional meaning (that is, an all inclusive sameness, seamless, without internal differentiation) (Hall 2000, 17).

The play of power and differences, which problematises any attempts to ‘speak for’ or ‘speak about’ others, is also one that I struggle with in my creative writing. Although Alcoff does not directly address her reflections to creative writers or in terms of literary texts, her approach is pertinent to this discussion. At the core of Alcoff’s essay is the argument that although the self is socially shaped and thus always in some sense spoken for, speech acts (and, by extension, written works) are ‘always mediated in complex ways by discourse, power and location’ (1991, 5). She argues that, as we engage in the practice of speaking for or speaking about others, we should remain acutely aware that ‘we are engaging in the act of representing the other’s needs, goals, situations, and in fact who they are’, based on our own situated interpretation (1991, 5; underscoring in original). The problem of representation underlies all cases of speaking (writing) for or about. The question with which Alcoff concludes her essay is relevant to the creative writer as she works to represent alternative and ultimately unknowable identities, cultures and experiences (imagined or otherwise): ‘will it enable the empowerment of oppressed peoples?’ (Alcoff 1991, 21).

As creative writers wrestle with the challenges of representing difference, of writing about others, they seek (as I do) inspiration from literary forms that aid their endeavours. There are many theorists who have explored imaginative and creative ways of writing difference, including Hélène Cixous (1976, 1991), and Luce Irigaray (1985a and b) in relation to gender, and Sneja Gunew (1994, 2004) and Toni Morrison on race
and identity (1992). There are also those who concern themselves with race and ethnicity in a modern global world, such as Paul Gilroy (1993), Denise Ferreira da Silva (2007) and Suvendrini Perera (2009). But it is to Shameem Black’s alternative approach to reflecting on social difference that this thesis turns, an approach to border crossing fiction that embraces ‘the challenge of representation with an intensity that … call[s] attention to the problem of writing across borders and suggest responses that can be defended as alternatives to hegemonic of identitarian effects’ (Black 2010, 4).

Black’s ‘crowded selves’ and ‘crowded styles’ offer creative writers productive ways of reflecting on and representing alterity. Her perspectives also provide an important foundation for the readings of the two novels that follow in Chapters Three and Four.

‘Crowded selves’ and ‘crowded styles’

In *Fiction Across Borders* (2010), Shameen Black offers creative writers rich conceptual models for representing socially diverse groups without resorting to stereotype, idealisation, or other forms of imaginative constraint. Black’s approach is that of a sensitive and observant reader as she concentrates in her reading ‘on moments when subjects seek to represent forms of social difference that have been associated with oppression, marginality, or ideologies of inferiority’ (2010, 2). Black argues that

---

29 Cixous (“Coming to Writing” and Other Essays (1991) and “The Laugh of the Medusa “ (1976)) is concerned with writing sexual difference in relation to women’s bodies. Irigaray (Speculum of the Other Woman (1985a) and This Sex Which Is Not One (1985b)) is interested in examining the differences in the ways men and women speak. Gunew (Framing Marginality: Multicultural Literary Studies (1994) and Haunted Nations: The Colonial Dimensions of Multiculturalisms (2004)) reads difference through the critical lenses of postcolonialism, multiculturalism and feminism. Morrison (Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination (1992)) examines the representation of African-Americans in the white American literary imagination. Gilroy (The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness (1993)) argues there exists a culture that is not specifically African, American, Caribbean, or British, but all of these at once, and one that manifested itself in black writing, from the “double consciousness” of W.E.B. Du Bois to the “double vision” of Richard Wright to the compelling voice of Toni Morrison. Da Silva (Toward a Global idea of Race (2007)) breaks open the concept of race in a modern, global world. Australian theorist, Perera (Australia and the Insular Imagination: Beaches, Borders, Boats and Bodies (2009)) writes on issues of race, ethnicity, multiculturalism and refugees.
the works upon which she focuses call ‘attention to their own representational
dilemmas, inviting a reader to question assumptions about identity and imaginative
projection that underlie calcified forms of discursive domination’ (2010, 4), noting as
she does that ‘not all writing on themes of border crossing challenges a reader to
consider the ethical stakes of imagining alterity’ (2010, 4).

Black then challenges the once radical theories (postcolonial, feminist, ethnic
minority and other theories) that present representations of alterity as inevitably
‘contaminated by discursive domination’ (2010, 20) and hegemonic representation. She
argues that any search for ‘a clear and coherent path towards an ethics of representing
social difference’ (2010, 20) cannot be found in the approach of such metanarratives,
which see that the representation of alterity comes from positions of relative privilege,
encouraging two central ways of thinking about representing alterity. The first reads
‘any representations of others …as displaced representations of self’ (2010, 20), and the
second, ‘locates alternatives to invasive imagination in spaces of silence beyond
representation itself’ (2010, 20). In contrast, Black suggests that ‘if novels have the
power to promote and perpetuate ideologies of inferiority, they may logically have the
capacity to help us begin to question them’ (2010, Postscript). To do so, Black argues,
there is a need to find a ‘new interpretative lens that will help us identify an ethics of
representing social differences’ (2010, 3). Thus, Black looks to what she calls ‘border-
crossing fiction’. The works of fiction to which Black gives her attention are those
produced in the late twentieth- and early twenty-first centuries, a period defined by
‘shifting landscapes of persons, technologies, capital media, images and ideas’ (2010,
6), out of which come multiple perspectives inflected by historical, linguistic, and
political situatedness.
Black begins her text with an insightful question that resonates with Alcoff’s, considered above: ‘At the turn of the new millennium, might it be possible to imagine another without doing violence to one’s object of description?’ (Black 2010, 1). The lens Black proposes is one that ‘make[s] visible the implicit value judgments that pervade influential ideas about writing across borders’ (2010, 31). Here, Black concedes that ‘no representation will ever be above criticism or untouched by the workings of inequality’ (2010, 31). However, drawing on Ihab Hassan, she argues that ‘the predilection for difference over similarity that characterises many forms of critique’ discourages empathy, leaving ‘only raw power to resolve human conflict’ (2010, 31). She seeks to map a path out of this impasse.

For Black, it is not the subject of fiction that is of interest but how fiction represents difference, that is, how the text works against ‘familiar forms of invasive imagination in their encounters with difference’ (2010, 14). In this respect, and from her perspective, Black argues that writers be encouraged to make appropriate or particular narrative choices that ‘may help to resolve controversies about the ethics of representing others’ (2010, 20).

Drawing from philosophical and psychological accounts of representation, Black proposes three key moves (2010, 14). The first requires that border-crossing fiction needs to display through its characters a recognition of selfhood and language as socially shaped. In this view, there is ‘no single perspective on the self, including the self’s own view, that will ever offer a fully complete account’ (2010, 35). From that first characteristic of an ethics of representing social difference that sees selfhood and style as neither unchangeable nor eradicable, comes the second, in which characters within works of fiction are represented by their actions and dialogue to have the capacity to reimagine themselves. This capacity for self-reflection often means that a
character will acknowledge how they have been shaped by the experiences of others. The third complements the idea of a socially shaped identity and active self-reflection, and entails the characters engaging in ‘a generous dialogue between self and other’ (2010, 45). Thus characters demonstrate a conscious or sub-conscious awareness of an inability to inhabit the perspectives of others.

Literary attempts by writers of fiction to cross the borders of perceived social difference can be open to criticisms, claims Black, if there is no ‘interplay between imagining other worlds and scrutinizing one’s own’ (2010, 43). Imagining others’ social location demands an active reimagining of one’s own, as there exists a constant risk that a concern for others’ lives might be perceived as ‘unself-conscious paternalism’ (2010, 43), which could cost the work ‘its credential to forge imaginative solidarity’ (2010, 43). When writing about others, the risk is of revealing within the text, through a character’s actions and dialogue, a subconscious assumption that the writer’s own individual perception carries weight. The key moves Black advocates, as outlined above, are intended to encourage a writer to admit an inability to fully inhabit the perspectives of others. Black suggests this ‘vulnerability’ (2010, 44) should be visible, ‘modeled in the texture and tone of subjectivity and style’ of a text attempting to represent alterity, so as to provoke ‘a transformative touch’ (Black 2010, 44).

Based on these central concepts, Black identifies two ‘crowded’ literary forms, where the term ‘crowded’ refers metaphorically to the text’s ‘ability to embody an openness towards difference and a sensitivity toward the spectre of hegemonic representation and ideological constraint’ (2010, 52). For Black, the character represented as a ‘crowded self’, inhabiting the texts she declares as exemplary, is one that permits us to ‘visualise a subject always already multiple, flexible and open to future metamorphosis … [one that] expands to include diverse, sometimes
contradictory, and occasionally even threatening points of view’ (2010, 47), rather than one that ‘consolidates its own identity by expelling unwanted others or defining itself against them’ (2010, 47). A ‘crowded self’ emerges when the ‘borders of self jostle against the edges of others and in this mediating position … the contours of each become more porous and flexible’ (2010, 47). This aids a reader to visualise a subject who is not a fixed entity, who is endlessly changing and adapting and, most certainly, as one that cannot be reduced to a stereotype. By extension, for Black a ‘crowded style’ will be found in texts that ‘invite us to meditate on how the process of conceptualizing social difference affects and is affected by the texture, tone, and patterning of their language’ (2010, 51). The crowded style of a text will provide evidence of how some writers ‘struggle toward ethics of border crossing’ (2010, 51). Invariably, a text that is inhabited by a crowded self will also display a crowded style whereby the crowded self is revealed within the crowded style of the text through its form, content and voices. These voices might be ‘from different cultural traditions’ as Black demonstrates in her examples of fictonal works (2010, 51) or used in the deployment of ‘parody, irony, flattening, or other distancing devices to force a wedge’ (2010, 51) between a creator’s own rhetoric and ‘ossified literary conventions of discursive domination’ (2010, 52). Crowded styles are those that challenge an authoritative voice, ‘provide an alternative to hidden identitarian assumptions’ (2010, 55), or adopt ethically nuanced forms of storytelling that explicitly contrast confining choices of rhetoric (2010, 57).

I will return to Black’s crowded forms in Chapter Three and Chapter Four in my examinations of two novels. But it seems fitting here to make note of how Black concludes her text with a plea for ‘conviviality’, for living together in local and planetary multicultures, that might benefit, she suggests, from literary imaginative projections that come through, rather than against, social difference (Black 2010, 66).
**Linguistic hybridity**

The creative component of the thesis is written primarily in English, but it incorporates terms and passages in the PNG language of Tok Pisin and hybrid English. The experimental use of English or other languages within a predominantly standard English-language novel may be viewed as risky because it might alienate a predominantly English-speaking readership. But language experimentation also has the potential to invite critical reflection on, or present a challenge to, notions of national and linguistic rootedness and their capacity for representing difference. Writers of fiction, such as Salman Rushdie, Marie Munkara and others, have variously adapted this technique in creating their worlds of difference.

According to Sisir Chatterjee (in Dwivedi 2008, 1), Rushdie in *Midnight’s Children* (2012), ‘Indianises[es]’ or ‘decolonises[es]’ the English language to destroy or interrupt ‘the natural rhythm of English language’ or to dislocate ‘the English and let other things into it.’ Omar Dwivedi suggests that Rushdie does this ‘firstly, to situate the novel in its geographic location … and, secondly, to subvert a language associated with colonial powers’ (2008, 1). Dwivedi also claims that Rushdie’s innovative use of language is ‘prompted by his desire to capture the spirit of Indian culture with all its multiplicity and diversity.’ The opening segment of my creative work is written predominantly in Tok Pisin or hybrid English, languages likely to be foreign to many readers. This language thus immediately plunges readers into a location of difference, challenging initial attempts to imagine my characters and their social,

---

31 Black provides an example of Amitav Ghosh’s novel *The Glass Palace* (2000), an historical novel set in Burma, Bengal, India and Malaya, in which Ghosh has embedded ‘a metafictional passage … on the problem of evoking multilingual speech within a single written language.’ When the text’s style is read as a response to this concern, ‘in light of particular language debates on the use of English that have shaped South Asian writing … Ghosh’s language of narration gains visibility as a crowded style’ (Black 2010, 53).
political and geographic positions. My hope is to encourage readers to experience and reflect on the difficulties of reorienting their subjective, linguistic and cultural perspectives to those of others.

For Maria Munkara language is a carrier of culture; culture is interwoven into language. In an essay about the politics of language in Indigenous writing in Australia, Munkara offers an explanation for including words and terms from her own Indigenous language in her writing:

To me, language is the distinctive but intangible voice of my soul, it is the voice of who I am and where I belong in the world and in relation to other people. (Bradley, Scott and Munkara, 2011, pp.55–60).

Similarly, my decision to use Tok Pisin and hybrid English has been driven by a desire to remind readers of the cultural diversity of my fiction’s characters and to provoke them to imagine other, unfamiliar locations and alternative ways of apprehending and articulating their place in the world.

Thus, following the leads of writers such as Rushdie, Munkara and others, my aim for the use of Tok Pisin and hybrid English in my fiction is to offer imaginative glimpses into other locations, cultures, and perspectives. The individuals who comprise the PNG community from whom I have drawn inspiration for my characters are mostly fluent in English but for them English is the formal or official language of public and professional life. Private and personal conversations mostly swing easily and without interruption across broken or hybrid English and Tok Pisin, and they commonly include words, terms and phrase in other (ancestral) languages (such as Cantonese). For me, this slippage across and between languages and, in particular, in and out of English, reflects the reality of the community’s place as it is socially located between the various social groups of PNG and the multiple origins of its members’ cultural histories, which have
come together in its contemporary (blended) form. By experimenting with language through the use of Tok Pisin and hybrid English the intangible voice of the imagined community becomes a way of representing other (non-English speaking) perspectives on the worlds created within the novel, to pose questions about those perspectives, and to suggest how they might challenge conventional knowledge or understanding.

Conclusion

Fiction begins with an unknown, imagined world inhabited by strangers (its characters). Through the creative efforts of the writer, this world and its characters may both be revealed to and remain distanced from a reader. All fiction forms can be considered as fundamentally concerned with difference. However, when a writer is interested in representing a more specific, on the subject of linguistic border crossing form of difference, for example, a marginalised community (such as the Rabaul Chinese and Mixed Race) the risk of doing discursive violence is increased (Hall 1997, 2000; Alcoff 1991). In a context of globalisation, there is an increasing need to explain and explore the complexities of human existence through fiction. Black’s ‘crowded selves’ and ‘crowded styles’ offer writers insights and possibilities for imagining the lives of others that take seriously the ethics of representation of alterity and that resist powerful tendency and temptation to co-opt or contain, fix or eradicate the other. In Chapter Three and Chapter Four, I will explore works of fiction that confront this challenge in provocative and productive ways.
Chapter Three

Ross Gibson, selective realism and the subjunctive space of fiction

In this chapter Ross Gibson’s novel *The Summer Exercises* (2008) is examined to explore how content and form are mobilised in unconventional ways in order to narrate the other. Gibson’s text has been described by its reviewers as ‘ugly’ (Robb 2009) and as ‘adorable, disgusting, mesmerising’ (Taylor 2008, 59). Inside its covers, ‘ugly’ and ‘disgusting’ images of dead bodies, murder weapons, and defiled spaces become simultaneously spiritual, ‘adorable’ and ‘mesmerising’, as they sit alongside the moving and poetic prose that reflects Gibson’s love for Zen poetry (Gibson 2009a). ‘They’re made for speculation’, said Gibson, speaking of the collection of crime scene photographs from which this innovative work has evolved. ‘Which is what fiction is about,’ he adds (Taylor 2008, 59).

An experimental compilation and curation of photographs and words, and of fragments of fact and fiction, *The Summer Exercises* gave its author what he called ‘a chance to croon a deep, sad love-song to my gorgeous, defiled town’ (Taylor 2008, 59): Sydney, Australia. A love-song by Gibson this novel may be, but it is about a Sydney of a bygone era, a Sydney no longer fully knowable. It is this past version of Sydney that constitutes the other for Gibson, and for a reader who finds her way to his novel.

I argue that as a consequence of Gibson’s choice to intersperse photographic images of crime scenes at specific points in a discontinuous narrative, *The Summer Exercises* represents its other as glimpsed through disconcertingly unrelated and indistinct traces that a reader retrieves from the images and words on successive pages. Thus, through Gibson’s technique of ‘extractive realism’ that I discuss below, whereby
disparate elements are selected and carefully placed within the text, a reader is encouraged (or more precisely, compelled) to recognise the other’s difference and open herself to other perspectives.

As a response to this exegesis’s search for alternative forms for representing other identities, cultures and experiences in a globalised world, my reading of *The Summer Exercises* identifies several important arguments emerging from Gibson’s highly self-conscious efforts in selecting, designing and positioning textual elements, the design of the text, and the effects of interweaving the real and the imagined. I argue that interpretation of the text is influenced by the ways words and images are sometimes read differently (Sontag 1977; Zelizer 2004). This in turn enables a manifestation of what Luce-Kapler calls a subjunctive space within the fiction, ‘a possibility, a place of “as if” that works in multiple ways with, through, and beyond the text’ (Luce-Kapler 1999, 267). This technique, one that stimulates the reader’s imagination, if deployed in fiction narrating the complexities of human life in a globalised context, might be seen to be encouraging Delanty’s (2009, 14-5) cosmopolitan imagination (explored in Chapter Two)—an openness to the other as a form of active resistance to the dehumanising forces of globalisation. My reading of *The Summer Exercises* contends that in Gibson’s creative efforts to be faithful to his ‘own historically informed understanding of the town’ (Taylor 2008, 59) and his narratorial choices of content and form, the ‘crowdedness’ of *The Summer Exercises* becomes salient. Thus *The Summer Exercises* refuses to privilege the author (there is no omniscient or authorial voice directing a reader’s response); instead, a reader makes meaning from the text by drawing from his or her own memories, experiences and (relative) knowledge of the city (past or present).

In my exploration, following a brief overview of the novel, I offer an interpretation of the aesthetic style and design of *The Summer Exercises* that provides
evidence of Gibson’s technique of extractive realism (Gibson 2009a). I then examine the effects of interweaving the real and the imagined in the text, and the manner in which this entwining encourages imaginative perspectives of the other in a way that contributes to the crowdedness of the style of the text as a literary approach to representing difference. I conclude by asserting that the techniques Gibson deploys in The Summer Exercises enable the imaginative and responsible representation of difference, otherness and the sometimes-elusive subjects of writing.

The novel

Sydney, 1946. World War Two is over. Life after wartime is returning to the city along with a slow trickle of its serving men and women, though the Americans have not yet gone home.32 The city is holding its breath, waiting to see what comes next. Over the summer of 1946, a chaplain is attached to Sydney’s Central Street police station. He will accompany Walter Machin, the sixty-four year old detective, ‘closing in on retirement’ (Gibson 2008, 15), on his daily rounds. The chaplain sets himself the task of undertaking Jesuit ‘exercises’ by recording his observations, five per day, over the summer.33 Some years later, refurbishment of a city building reveals a brown-paper wrapped, string-tied package. The package contains ‘a foolscap workbook marked “Summer Exercises—1946”’ (Gibson 2008, 29) and an envelope ‘containing hundreds

32 Ross Gibson and Kate Richards have collaborated in a suite of works that incorporate and utilise the crime scene photographs. One of the works of this suite is entitled ‘Life After Wartime’. See http://www.lifeafterwartime.com/html-content.html.
33 Gibson’s term ‘exercises’ is used by the Jesuits (members of the Society of Jesus) and the followers of St. Ignatius. ‘Spiritual Exercises are a compilation of meditations, prayers, and contemplative practices developed by St. Ignatius Loyola to help people deepen their relationship with God. For centuries the Exercises were most commonly given as a “long retreat” of about 30 days in solitude and silence. In recent years, there has been a renewed emphasis on the Spiritual Exercises as a program for laypeople. The most common way of going through the Exercises now is a “retreat in daily life,” which involves a month-long program of daily prayer and meetings with a spiritual director. The Exercises have also been adapted in many other ways to meet the needs of modern people’. See http://www.ignatianspirituality.com/.
of photographic negatives’ (Gibson 2008, 137). Eventually the package finds its way to a publisher who traces its journey from ‘a small fishing-town five hours south of the city’ (Gibson 2008, 230). Posted in 1975, the package was never claimed so the GPO’s Dead Letter Repository remained its resting place for decades. In the publisher’s efforts to trace the owner of the journal, it is discovered that there is no official reference to the chaplain’s time at Central Street. As the chaplain’s book is readied for publication, the publisher declares it as ‘a work of love rather than drudge, even though it’s smeared with so much of the trouble that love seems to seep’ (Gibson 2008, 172). The publisher reports that the chaplain’s journal contains ‘whispered confessions and low urgings he was hearing while roving about’ (Gibson 2008, 29). For the chaplain, ‘brevity was his creed’ (Gibson 2008, 29). The publisher’s research establishes that most of the photographs were ‘shot just after the war, by policemen who were instructed to capture details of people and locations deemed criminal or morally suspect’ (Gibson 2008, 137).

**Structure of The Summer Exercises**

Inside its covers, the pages of *The Summer Exercises* come in this order: a preliminary title page followed by a page that features a single image of a brown-paper wrapped and string-tied package, no label, bearing a remarkable resemblance to the package described by the publisher as containing a journal and photographs (mentioned above). I will return to this image in the next section, when I discuss the significance of structural choices. After this comes a full title page, a page of publication details followed by a list of contents with three headings (‘Director’s Note’, ‘The Summer Exercises’, and ‘List of Illustrations’). The Director’s Note comprises a foreword by Peter Watts AM, Director, Historic Houses Trust. This Trust manages the Police and Justice Museum and
the collection of crime scene photographs from which Gibson has selected but a few to feature in this novel.34 This is followed by a page displaying the words: ‘like chaos – stopless – cool’, under which appears the name ‘Emily Dickinson’ but no reference or explanation is provided (Gibson 2008, 9). The following three pages contain, on the first page, the first of the various streetscape images that appear in the book; on the next, the words ‘New Year’s Day 1946’; and on the third, the Jesuit declaration of ‘ad majorem Dei gloriam’.35 Next comes the first of The Exercises.

The Exercises are organised by Days, one through to twenty-nine—Day 1, Day 2, and so on—and diary-like notes (five per day, except for the last day) are recorded as 1.1, 1.2 and so on, then 2.1 and so on. The daily records, first-person observations of others as they pass across the narrator’s vision, are private meditations that vary in length: short and poetic verse, lists of crimes, reports or short forms of social commentary. The fictional publisher describes them as ‘ragged utterances’ in which ‘enigmas abound’. One example—‘Crack the brittle frame around sleep’ (Gibson 2008, 171). Each ‘Day’ has a title page featuring an image. Unlabelled images are also interspersed among the words of the Exercises, all stark shadowless black-and-white photographs. Brief sections, each entitled ‘Publisher’s Note’ written by the fictional publisher, are inserted in what reads as random order between the Days. The language is casual, befitting their description as ‘notes’. The notes reveal background information: how the journal and photographs came to the publisher and what has led to the publication of the material; interpretations of the material acquired; and contemplations

34 Gibson has used this material in various other works, particular his collaborative art installations with Kate Richards. See http://www.rossgibson.com.au/ and http://www.lifeafterwartime.com/.
35 The phrase ad majorem Dei gloriam translated from the Latin means ‘for the greater glory of God’. It is a prayer or a declaration that represents the belief that every thing said or done must be so. See http://www.ignatianspirituality.com/.
on the nature and motives of the untraceable author and the evidence within the chaplain’s jottings of his diminishing spirit and his moods.

The title page for Day 1 provides an example for all other title pages. The photograph representing Day 1 is black-and-white, as are all the images in *The Summer Exercises*. This particular one is snapped from the window of the upper level of a building, looking down (Gibson 2008, 13). At ground level can be seen two vehicles parked by the kerb and a small tree planted on the footpath. The footpath is bare but for a small collection of items near one car and the back view of a pedestrian walking away to the left. Across this image is printed Day 1. If the reader cares to look to the List of Illustrations at the back of the text, this image is listed as ‘p.13 Man killed by fall, Room 202, Hotel Metropole, Sydney City, 19 March 1954. FP08_0078_02’ (Gibson 2008, 262).

**The significance of structural choices**

I have deliberately taken time to describe the structural configuration and collation of this composite novel, a collection of disparate elements—some fictional (The Exercises and Publisher’s Notes), some apparently intended to be read as fiction (the photographs), and two elements from the real world (The Director’s Note and the List of Illustrations that frustrate any certainty about the fictional nature of the photographs). The various components that comprise *The Summer Exercises*—from cover design through layout, the language used, which words sit with particular images, and the inclusion of real world components (Director’s Note and List of Illustrations)—each speak of deliberateness. The paratext warns that every element of this novel contributes
In my reading, each inclusion is a diligent act in creating a particular aesthetic, carefully overseen to ensure this is not only a literary text but also another of Gibson’s explicitly interactive works of art. As such, it is presented so that a reader enters with curiosity and alertness: to begin a reading by indulging in the feel of the book’s velvety smoothness, to gaze at images, to contemplate its poetic words, and to ponder the purpose of its odd inclusions. Nothing is given lightly. In other words, a reader must participate in the reading (composing) of this novel or it is nothing more than a collection of photographs alongside discontinuous text, rather than a ‘set of intensely significant clues and a world of absences’ (Gibson 2009a).37

Subtle grey and black tones complement The Summer Exercises’ cover image: a man’s felt hat upon a stand, below which is carefully placed the author’s name and the title. Simple, uncluttered, understated, and yet its design emits a sense of mystery or drama. At the back of the novel, the List of Illustrations reveals the image of the hat is, like all other images in the novel, a crime scene photograph. On the back cover, two more images—an abandoned car and a woman’s face—are surrounded by text. The cover has a folded flap on which it is announced that this is ‘a richly imagined and experimental form of storytelling using 175 photographs from a collection …’, words to which I will return later.

36 According to literary theorist Gérard Genette, ‘paratext’ is the material that surrounds the author’s text, usually supplied by editors, publishers, designers and so forth and typically includes cover art, typography, and front and back matter (1991, 261). Paratext provides the means by which ‘a text makes a book of itself and proposes itself as such to its readers’ (1991, 275) as it provides ‘a service’ by suggesting a more ‘pertinent’ reading—that is, a more pertinent reading ‘in the eyes of the author and his allies’ (1991, 261).

37 Gibson researched the notebooks of First Fleeter William Dawes. This phrase taken from Gibson’s conversation about what the reading of Dawes’ notebooks demands of its readers (Gibson 2009a) also applies to this discussion about The Summer Exercises.
For now let us return to the image of page two, the first image of the book: the brown-paper wrapped package. This image fits snugly into the story of the fictional publisher’s acquisition of a similar package that contained the chaplain’s workbook and the negatives, an idea reinforced by the image’s prominent positioning on page two. That is, until the List is consulted. The List describes the image on page two as evidence of a crime involving a ‘bomb sent to private citizen CIB Headquarters, 1 July 1950’ with a reference of FB08_0161_002 (Gibson 2008, 262). The List, however, does begin with a disclaimer that may go some way to reconciling the disparity between potential readings:

originally produced in the course of police investigations in Sydney during the years after World War II, the photographs in The Summer Exercises evoke the fictional world of the text. They are deployed respectfully to generate mood and a sense of place. In reality, the characters and events and settings described in the text bear no relationship to the photographs (Gibson 2010, 262).

While the publication of The Summer Exercises most likely came about in the usual way—as a sum of many collaborations: author, editors, designers, and marketers—I see the production of The Summer Exercises as the ultimate representation of its writer’s choices made explicit. A careful and critical reading of the novel, one that notes how those choices work, offers a master class for creative writers reflecting on questions of how, as authors, they might represent the other. Gibson uses extreme restraint, as he enacts the edict of ‘say less’ (Gibson 2009b), ‘to spur rigorous
speculation rather than lock down singular conclusions’ (Gibson 2009a).\textsuperscript{38} This, to me, is Gibson acknowledging and respecting a reader’s capacity to make her own sense of difference, and asserts Black’s case for an innovative representation of alterity. It is Gibson’s technique of ‘extractive realism’ that enables him to achieve this unique offering (Gibson 2009a).

In the next section I investigate Gibson’s technique and explore the effects of Gibson’s selections on a reading of \textit{The Summer Exercises}, in which the interplay between words and images, fictional and real, create a space (a hypothetical or subjunctive space) in which instances of Black’s crowded style may be read.

**Extractive realism**

Extractive realism describes the method Gibson uses in all his art practices (film, installation and literature). It is:

a Lukácsian mode of realism …[when] … artists are determined to shuck away extraneous detail so they can learn how the \textit{relationships between essential elements} all cohere contingently to make the overall, dynamic experience that is everyday existence’ (Gibson 2009, 48–9; italics in original).\textsuperscript{39}

\textsuperscript{38} These words are used by Gibson to describe his approach to \textit{Seven Versions of an Australian Badlands} (Gibson 2002). In this text, Gibson claims, he ‘nudged the reader into asking questions by using all ‘these scrappy details to help people think about the absences and silences between all the pinpointed examples’ (Gibson 2009a).

\textsuperscript{39} To make his point, Gibson (2009a) enlists György Lukács’ essay ‘Narrate or Describe?’, in particular Lukács’ comparisons of Zola’s descriptive naturalism that ‘diffuses focus as more and more detail is added’, and the realism of Tolstoy’s narration that ‘draws out the definitive, structuring elements of the scene’ (Gibson 2009a, 48). In both examples, the question of focalisation—or ‘who sees?’—is relevant. For Zola, an observer sees events; for Tolstoy, the narrator is a participant. One is distanced, the other is at the heart of events. For Lukács, Zola’s fine description is ‘mere filler … events are loosely related to the plot and could easily be eliminated’ but the narration by Tolstoy represents ‘the crisis of a great drama … which provide a turning point in the plot’ (Kahn and Lukacs 2005, 110-1). Readers become a participant or, as Jerome Bruner observes (1986, 25), drawing from Wolfgang Iser’s notion of performance of meaning, the composer of the narrative.
Gibson (2009a) believes that by selecting and incorporating only the ‘essential’ or significant elements in works of art, moments of intensified perception and interpretation occur, not dissimilar to those invoked by three lines of haiku. The individual elements that constitute The Summer Exercises have already been noted (the paratext, the factual or real world texts of The Director’s Note and the List of Illustrations that envelope the fictional components of discontinuous prose labelled as The Exercises and Publisher’s Note and, inserted throughout, the numerous crime scene photographs). To consider the manner in which the elements work against and with each other to provoke the engagement of the reader, the Director’s Note provides a useful example.

The Director is in the real world head of the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales that readers learn manages the crime scene photography collection housed in the Police and Justice Museum and that also co-published this novel.40 The Director’s words thus carry some authority: clearly the Director possesses knowledge about the photographs, the content of the novel and its experimental form. The key phrase on the cover flap, mentioned earlier—‘richly imagined … and experimental form of storytelling’—is, a reader discovers, copied from the Director’s Note. Inclusion of the Note suggests that the Director’s words and the weight of his viewpoint might influence the reader’s approach to the reading. The Note offers this suggestion:

throughout the book the raw unpremeditated vision of the crime scene photographer insinuates its way into the story—punctuating, reverberating against, and commenting on the novel’s various plot-twists, themes and emotions’ (Gibson 2008, 7).

---

40 The paratext (cover flap) notes the collaboration between the University of Western Australia Press and the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales for publication of The Summer Exercises (Gibson 2008).
‘Punctuating, reverberating against the vision of the crime scene photographer’, the Director writes (Gibson 2008, 7), exploding assumptions, like schrapnel striking against each of the other (mis-aligned) elements that comprise the novel, the novel itself is a narrative bomb delivered to its reader. The several sections entitled ‘Publisher’s Note’ provide examples of the metaphoric bomb’s impact. If a reader has already suspended her disbelief sufficiently to imagine that the brown-paper package of page two contains the chaplain’s workbook and negatives of photographs shot ‘by policemen just after the war’ (Gibson 2008, 137) rather than the List’s ‘the bomb sent to private citizen’ (see above), perhaps she might also allow herself to imagine the fictional publication of The Exercises together with the photographs is represented by the published novel, *The Summer Exercises*. These and similar questions will foreground the text’s ambiguous status, encouraging the reader to ruminate further on the meanings and significance generated by the text.

Furthermore a fracture between image and word is opened: on the one hand, between the declared real of the photographs’ history—their purpose as evidential, their journey from the judicial system to a museum—and, on the other hand, their role within the text as part of the fictional narrative, part of the imagined world of the novel, that narrates a different journey—from Central Street police station to the Dead Letter Repository, to the publisher and eventually into the (fictional) published text. Thus, one and the same image may tell different, distinct stories that come together within the novel, and potential meanings are distended or delayed pending confirmation later, or perhaps not at all.

Most important, for this exegesis, is the point that extractive realism aids Gibson in creating the other of the past city as a ‘crowded self’ (Black 2010), a character that is not fixed or unchanging but, rather, difficult to grasp, within a text that displays a
‘crowded style’ (Black 2010), by the manner it demonstrates an awareness of its own risk of doing discursive violence in the representation of the difference between past and present. In the next section I turn back to Black’s work on ‘crowded’ literary forms (discussed in Chapter Two) to explore the manner in which Gibson has represented otherness in *The Summer Exercises*, with a specific emphasis on the second form, crowded style.

Crowded style

To explore the deployment of crowded style in this text, it is necessary to recall Black’s approach to interpreting contemporary literary representations of social difference. Arguing that selfhood and language are socially shaped and that self-knowledge is a fragile and often unreliable construct, Black suggests that the closer we look at such narratives, the more the boundaries between selfhood and otherness begin to blur (Black 2010, 35). She explains that border-crossing novels aiming for the ethical representation of difference portray a balance between the known and the unknown. These novels, according to Black, demonstrate an indebtedness to the other by expressing a self-consciousness about the limitations of any knowledge (of self, other, or world, for example). They also incorporate an expansion of selfhood and style. Black suggests that ‘in such an expansion, significant otherness counts simultaneously as part of what is considered one’s own and as a legitimate part of what is considered another’s’ (Black 2010, 40), wherein the act of imagining another requires re-imagining one’s own social location (Black 2010, 42). Drawing from Levinasian tradition, in which ‘admitting one’s inability to inhabit the perspectives of others sometimes enables the very breakthrough that allows for the encounter with significant otherness once considered impossible’ (Black 2010, 44), Black argues for such vulnerability to be modelled in the
texture and tone of subjectivity and style of texts (2010, 44). Appropriate creative choices can mean that this ‘vulnerability’ is displayed in works of fiction by a ‘generous dialogue between self and other’ (Black 2010, 45). Simultaneously, such texts present themselves in a way that can be taken seriously by a reader so as to encourage reader identification with the characters. Texts can thus ‘provide a reader with safe spaces in which to inhabit the perspectives of others’ (2010, 45). By diminishing their privileged dispersal of knowledge in this way, texts have the ability to undermine any sense of mastery that writing about others is often said to afford its authors.

I take these ideas into my reading of The Summer Exercises. I argue, first, in the next section, a crowded style is evident in Gibson’s restraint (a withholding of authority over knowledge of the past city that is the other) in selecting elements that reveal only traces of Sydney. Gibson offers not only disconnected and fragmented glimpses through the photographs but also opportunities for a reader to make sense of those traces through the limits of her own memories and experiences of the city. I also explore how a crowded style is produced by the juxtapositioning of selected photographs alongside Gibson’s unique prose. I argue that a reading of the text is influenced not only by the nature of the photographs’ subjects but also by the reader’s awareness of the photographs’ history and original purpose. I draw together Susan Sontag’s (1977) essays on photography and photographs and a discussion about the way the images are read by communications scholar Barbie Zelizer (2004) to argue that the style of The Summer Exercises creates a so-called subjunctive space that trafficks ‘in human possibilities rather than in settled certainties’ (Bruner 1986, 26; Luce-Kapler 2006). In turn, this stimulates (or more precisely demands) substantial use of a reader’s imagination in attempts at meaning making.
Authorial restraint

In *The Summer Exercises*, an author’s restraint is displayed specifically by the elements selected for inclusion by the author from his research material, mostly from the archive of photographs stored at the Police and Justice Museum, but also from other sources including those pieces he created from his imagination. Gibson seems to have chosen elements that not only limit any direct assertions about the past Sydney but also offer readings of the text open to multiple interpretations. It is apparent *The Summer Exercises* assumes a reader’s at least scant familiarity with the landmarks of Sydney. Thus, in the text, the known could be argued to be the recognisable images of architecture and monuments of today’s Sydney, which are featured in the crime scene photographs of the past. The barely changed bricks and mortar, glass and steel of such edifices as the Harbour Bridge or Central Station, or the appearance of renowned locations such as Bondi Beach or Circular Quay, provide a mnemonic link between present and past, between what is knowable and what has been lost in the passing of time and the evolution of a society. As Zelizer (2004, 159) points out, images help us remember the past by freezing its representation. What is recognisable as frozen reminders of the past city (or the one that resides in a reader’s memory) is, to return to Black, ‘a part of what is considered one’s own’ (Black 2010, 40) and what remains obscure, ‘part of what is considered the other’s’ (Black 2010, 40), where the other is the past city, a loss accentuated by elusive interpretations. Between these differences, a reader is invited to take up opportunities to discover her own understanding of the other that is the past city. This technique or style also demonstrates the border-crossing quality identified by Black as a decision not to enforce mastery over the other. The text, in this case, limits privileging either the author’s or the reader’s knowledge of a past Sydney. For a reader for whom Sydney is completely unknown, a search for clues of the
past city would see different significance in the elements available, but meanings would be equally ambiguous.

I argue *The Summer Exercises* may be read or understood variously, depending on how a reader finds a path through the discontinuous narrative and dissociated images. The images allow both author and (each) reader of *The Summer Exercises* to separately and independently engage in acts of observation and reflection (Black 2010, 54). Yet Gibson offers his reader only fragmented possibilities of a past Sydney and, as a reader combs the selected elements for relational connections, searching for understanding, those possibilities become inter-subjective. While there is no way for author and reader to acknowledge explicitly the other’s contribution in the process of writing and reading, the subject of writing becomes intermutually intelligible, if only to the extent that author and reader mutually agree that the past Sydney is not fully knowable. Thus, *The Summer Exercises* displays its inability to offer knowledge of a past Sydney, a quality that, according to Black (2010, 44), distinguishes exemplary visions of a crowded style (Black 2010, 53).

In the next section I explore more deeply the way images complicate reading of the text so as to encourage a reader to engage in more flexible interpretations of the other.

---

41 In Black’s use (drawn from an interview with American author Charles Johnson), one viewer observes something from one perspective and through language makes it visible to another. In Charles Johnson’s 1995 novel *Oxherding Tales*, a slave owner swaps places with his slave.

42 As explained, my focus in this chapter is on crowded style, but my reading also recognises in *The Summer Exercises* the protagonist (a partial representation of a past city, the emotions of its population and its mood in a particular moment in history: post World War Two) displays a ‘crowded self’. As a crowded style is encouraged by multiple interpretations so is a ‘crowded’ self or, as Black describes it, a self that is ‘always already multiple, flexible and open to future metamorphosis’ (Black 2010, 47).
Photographs, words and the subjunctive

Ross Gibson uses approximately 230 carefully selected black and white photographs … a fraction of the vast, historically significant collection held by the museum (Peter Watts AM, Director, Historic Houses Trust in Gibson 2008, 6).

The key to this novel may well be the crime scene photographs. As a curator at the museum, Gibson had thousands of glass-plate and acetate negatives to choose from, all removed from their original context through the absence of court reports that framed their meaning, except for pencilled notes scribbled on the envelopes that held them: mostly only crime, location and date of each photograph (the information of the novel’s List). Gibson (2009b) has explained that he was at once enthralled but also overwhelmed by the emotions he felt in response to the viewing the photographs. He admitted he had struggled for more than a decade to articulate them into the form of The Summer Exercises.43 What is remarkable is that (by way of his method of extractive realism) Gibson has recreated in The Summer Exercises the very same challenge of interpretability. I argue, referring to scholars who focus on the subject of photography (Sontag 1977) and on photographs’ role in memory (Zelizer 2004), that it is the very nature of photographs that has enabled this re-creation: the way photographs are perceived and read, particularly photographs such as these—the nature of their subjects, their judicial history and their life as museum artefacts. For example, the photographs are stark and shadowless, as befits their original purpose. Thus they resemble, as Susan

43 Gibson made this admission May 2009 when as Professor of Contemporary Arts at Sydney College of the Arts he conducted a masterclass at the Institute of Advanced Studies University of Western Australia, Perth.
Sontag explains in her discussion of similar photographs, ‘a virtue of plainness’ (1977, 7), as they expose the grim nature of their subjects and their serious purpose within the justice system. Furthermore, as crime scene photographs, they can be seen as ‘enrolled in the service of an institution of control … the police, as symbolic objects and as pieces of information’, as Sontag sees other photographs of similar subjects being perceived (Sontag 1977, 21). Later, when Gibson came to them at the museum, the institution that collects artefacts for their historical importance, they provided him, in each viewing, with what Sontag calls ‘a thin slice of time’ (Sontag 1977, 22). These original attributes of the photographs—their significance, the ‘weight’ of their content—contribute significantly to their interpretive potential in the novel.

However, the significance attributed to the events captured by the original act of photography and then, later, in the archiving of the images as a documentation of history is modified in Gibson’s work. In *The Summer Exercises*, the ‘disgusting’ (Taylor 2008, 59) photographs that obviously do not sit entirely comfortably with the prose are a means of halting assumptions, shocking the reader by the random and confronting images, so that she might pause or slow down in reflecting on their content in order to make meaning from them. Ultimately, within the photographs selected for *The Summer Exercises*, what is read is (again) exceptional restraint—extractive realism.

---

44 In her book *On Photography* (1977) Sontag remarks: ‘to photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed … what is written about a person or an event is frankly an interpretation, as are handmade visual statements, like paintings or drawings. Photographed images do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it, miniatures of reality that anyone can make or acquire’ (Sontag 1977, 4). ‘Each still photograph is a privileged moment, turned into a slim object that one can keep and look at again’ (Sontag 177, 18).

45 One of the museums under the control of the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales is the Police and Justice Museum. See http://sydneylivingmuseums.com.au/justice-police-museum). Ross Gibson served as curator at this museum for a period of time as currently does Dr Peter Doyle. Using the same forensic photographs that had captured Gibson, Doyle has curated an exhibition entitled ‘City of shadows: inner-city crime & mayhem 1912-1948’ and authored a book *Crooks Like Us*. The Police and Justice Museum has featured several exhibitions on particular themes also using the same forensic photographs including the numerous collaborative installation works of Gibson and Kate Richards.
in practice—and, with that restraint, a high degree of creativity in the selecting and ordering of photographs within the text. The other, a past Sydney, hovers like a ghostly shadow, never fully visible but, always, softly present; never fully articulated but open for reader’s contemplation and consideration. This is a demonstration of representational respect being offered to a subject that must be conceded to be neither fixed or unchanging, nor fully or ultimately knowable. Rather, this technique validates the subject as ultimately flexible, its representation constantly being adapted to satisfy the multiple interpretations that the (con)text demands. By shifting focus from crimes captured to a mood or feel of the past Sydney in which the crimes occurred, Gibson has blurred the boundaries between past and present, between events and location. The question that lies behind all understanding of the text is what is or can be known about the past city and what knowledge is irretrievably lost to the present. Inevitably, this blurring provides an excellent example of a text that displays a crowded style, from Black’s perspective.

As a specific example of such blurring, I offer Exercise 1.3 (Gibson 2008, 16), which appears to have been photographed from a balcony or through a window several storeys up. In the foreground is a stone parapet and, with the photograph’s focus on the foreground, the background, into which the city street retreats, is slightly hazy. This image is given, in the List of Illustrations at the back of the book, as ‘Suicide, “Herald” Building, Pitt Street, Sydney City, 23-10-52 FP08_0146_002’ (Gibson 2008, 262). However, on the page where the image appears, the text reads as follows:

1.3 This stifling day hits its zenith. Heat thick with humidity is lurking at the window-sills. Sweat is smudging every eyelid and lip. A few hours away, a downpour will come and rearrange the air. But it’s
lunch time right now, and the electric fans are blowing.

Nothing is moving (Gibson 2008, 16).

As the reader struggles with the ambivalence, the battle for meaning that this text demands, some ‘clues’ might be over-scrutinised, some connections forced, such as the one that might be assumed to exist between the haziness visible in the photograph and the words ‘heat thick with humidity’ in the prose. The precarity of such connections, at best only hinted at, destablises any sense of meaning as definitive. The words ‘a few hours away, a downpour will come’ might, for a reader familiar with Sydney’s weather, be explicit reference to the southerly changes that can bring instant relief to a humid city. But to another reader, the words might be understood as merely general fictive speculation about the weather on the day, nothing more. In this way, in *The Summer Exercises*, any connection between photograph and words continues to remain elusive and pending, waiting (always waiting) substantiation. Beyond these speculations, a multitude of other narrative possibilities are evoked by the photographer’s subject, the most obvious being those opened by the naming of the crime this particular photograph identifies as suicide. The suiciding character is not part of the scene captured by the image. Thus, only within the reader’s imagination can that story be told.

This crowded style makes demands on the reader’s interpretive efforts, as does the design and positioning of fragments of text within the narrative. Each Publisher’s Note is spliced between Exercises and contains snippets of information not available in the chaplain’s diarised meditations. However, some of this information is delivered late
in the progressive act of reading. What may appear to be useful knowledge, however, because of the timing of delivery, only brings more questions, more ambiguity. In a search for understanding, a reader is encouraged to adopt an heuristic approach, as she seeks to forge patterns and connections between the visual, the imaginary, the evidence of the real world found in the Director’s Note and List of Illustrations, and the fictional narrative. The reward from reading *The Summer Exercises* is therefore neither clarity nor resolution but, rather, a sense of something just out of reach, something to think about long after reading is finished.

The disjunction between the elements and the layered meanings of the images maintains a distance between reader and text, and in Black’s scheme for the representation of alterity, provides yet another way that the text offers itself as crowded. When Black looks to read crowdedness and suggests that this is achieved through sameness and difference, she also points out that these terms are never stable ones (Black 2010, 12). She also stresses the importance of the blurring of boundaries between selfhood and otherness, the avoidance of assumptions and residual essentialism, and the potential for the expansion (with a capacity for multiple perspectives) of selves and styles (Black 2010, 36). All of these privilege the implicit, rather than the explicit. Implicit readings are encouraged in *The Summer Exercises* through the ongoing interaction, and sometimes contest, between what is read in the prose and what is read in the images, which variously complicates a reader’s efforts to understand. In respect of the reading of the photographs, this is especially true. There is a conflict between the photograph’s denotative and their connotative meanings. In the crowded style of the text a subjunctive space is created where, according to cognitive psychology scholar Jerome Bruner, the reading becomes a site that traffics ‘in human

Exegesis 213
possibilities rather than in settled certainties,’ an ‘as if’ space that works ‘in multiple ways with, through, and beyond the text’ (Bruner in Luce-Kapler 1999, 267).46

When this understanding of the subjunctive is applied to the crime scene photographs of *The Summer Exercises*, as Zelizer (2004) argues in her work on photography’s role in stimulating memory, then although removed from their original purpose and production as evidence, a trace of the original ‘voice’ of each photograph remains. The photographs are unlabelled and links to their former role are not definitive since a reader can ignore the List of Illustrations.47 Yet knowledge of their former ‘important and official’ purpose as artefacts of a museum lingers in the reading of the images (Sontag 1977, 22). These contest the (different?) purposes and interpretations that come from their subsequent uses (such as the fictional world of the chaplain narrated as memoir or, later, in the real world, as an element of the novel Gibson has created). Meanings generated by these photographs are held open in the divergence between the implicit status of their original significance (official, recorded) and their understated and ambivalent function within the novel as relics attached to the chaplain’s exercises.

Crowdedness can also be read in *The Summer Exercises* through a cacophony of perspectives, beginning with those quasi-prespectives offered by the selected elements themselves through to the muted but always present perspectives of the criminals and other inhabitants of the past city making their appearances by way of the photographs

---

46 Bruner, with other scholars, especially Wolfgang Iser, argues that fictional texts are inherently ‘indeterminate’, and that this ‘relative indeterminacy of a text’ allows a spectrum of actualizations ‘...[whereby] literary texts initiate "performances" of meaning rather than actually formulating meaning themselves’ (Bruner 1986, 24–5). According to Iser, says Bruner, forms of discourse ‘must make it possible for the readers to “write” his own virtual text’. The many means by which discourse can keep ‘meaning open and performable succeed in doing so by “subjunctivizing reality”’ (Bruner 1986, 26; italics in original).

47 According to Zelizer, when the sources of referentiality of images are blurred, ‘spectators begin to ask not “what are we looking at?” but “what possibilities does this raise?”’ (Zelizer 2004, 163), thus creating a hypothetical or subjunctive space.
and the prose. This multi-perspectival complexity can be read as demonstrating Black’s view of crowdedness, that ‘no single perspective … will ever offer a fully complete account’ (Black 2010, 35). Multiple perspectives, according to Bruner, keep meaning open or ‘performable’ (1986, 26), yet another technique for subjunctivising reality. Bruner likens multiple perspectives to ‘beholding the world not univocally but simultaneously through a set of prisms each of which catches some part of it’ (1986, 26).

As the subjunctive encourages imaginative and multiple compositions of the fictional world, so can multiple perspectives provide opportunities to cross the boundaries of difference. If the past city of Sydney and the post-war era can only be recognised by traces, then it is only through imagination that the past can be recreated; only through visualising the possibilities of the other (the past city) that the differences between what is available to a reader and that which can not be fully known can be approached.

In Chapter Two I discussed the usefulness of imagination in narrating the diversities of human existence in a globalised world. I looked to Delanty’s (2009) call for a cosmopolitan imaginary that ‘is both a medium of experience and an interpretation of that experience in a way that opens up new perspectives on the world.’ As Gibson’s text has demonstrated, in the ‘as if’ space of the subjunctive mode this orientation is realised. Furthermore, the subjunctive mode, a style enabling the fictional border crossing Black envisages, as it leaves open understandings of the subject of writing, offers a creative writer a passage through the minefield of risks of doing discursive violence through representing the other. The subjunctive mode privileges the perspective of otherness, as a possibility that deals in difference and in sameness, as it
opens interpretation to the crowded style of many rather than dominant or singular versions of the world.

Conclusion

*The Summer Exercises* is a collection of many stories through which a reader is prodded to search for meaning by forging relational connections between its disparate elements. Through reading the selected elements of the text and the other of the past city made visible within the chaplain’s ‘summer exercises’, a subjunctive space is manifested, a space wherein meaning is open to several possibilities and that requires a reader’s own imaginative composition of the narrative. From the creative fragments of images and words, a Sydney of 1946 is recreated in fiction as an amalgam of open possibilities rather than as settled certainties. Not even this recreated past version of Sydney can be relied upon, for while the narrative is set in 1946, the photographs that aid the recreation are of crimes that were investigated over a twenty-year period (between 1944 and 1964) and less than five photographs relate to 1946. The possibilities for interpretation opened by the photographs are thus also temporal, extending the past into a reader’s present. This text not only makes a reader aware of how we read and how we feel when we read but also reminds us of the possibilities for evoking the other in works of fiction. Most importantly, by its ‘crowded style’, this novel directs us to recognise how the creative choices of writers serve to mobilise imaginative possibilities for representing the other.
Chapter Four

Lloyd Jones’s elusive subjects

There can, of course, be no reasonable and sustainable expectation that audiences and users as participants in the mediapolis can or should take responsibility for everything they see and hear on television or which they access on the internet … [but] each of the principal players in the process of mediation carries some of this responsibility (Silverstone 2007, 134).

The abstraction performed by fictional stories demands that readers and others project themselves into the represented events. The function of fiction can thus be seen to include the recording, abstraction, and communication of complex social information in a manner that offers personal enactments of experience, rendering it more comprehensible than usual. Narrative fiction models life, comments on life, and helps us to understand life in terms of how human intentions bear upon it (Mar and Oakley 2008, 1).

This chapter examines Lloyd Jones’s novel *Hand Me Down World* (2010) in order to explore the effects of multiple (unreliable) voices positioned in multiple locations on the reading and interpretation of a text in which the characters remain at some distance, are not fully knowable and where the narrative is located explicitly in a contemporary context of globalisation.
Following an overview of Hand Me Down World, I focus on the novel’s techniques for representing marginalised characters and for representing difference. Examination of these techniques is framed by an understanding of human diversity as it is mediated in the contemporary world and the need to tell the stories of diverse experiences of individuals rather than of collective identities or groups. We need, therefore, to be able to find ways to articulate the experiences of cosmopolitan ‘strangers’, whom Appiah (2006) claims we live alongside today. Fiction offers the means to break away from captive or restrictive modes of thinking about the other (Spivak 2003), as it also offers understanding (if only limited) of subjects that are beyond our complete understanding.

Hand Me Down World’s protagonist is a woman journeying from Africa through Europe to Berlin. On this journey, she makes brief appearances in the lives and spaces of the novel’s many diverse characters. A reader comes to know the woman’s story through the accounts of these various individuals, each version of the woman mediated by each narrator’s perspective which has been shaped by their individual circumstances, locations and histories. This is a migration story: a story of human beings moving from and through one location to another, and as they do so, encountering others different from themselves.

But it is also a story of today’s world. I argue that Jones’s technique of narrating multiple perspectives in Hand Me Down World serves to draw a reader’s attention to how the complex effects of migration are brought to our attention in the contemporary moment via the media, as they regularly violate the proper distance that media scholar and sociologist, Roger Silverstone (2007) advocates as an ethical orientation to the other. According to Silverstone, ‘proper distance preserves the other through difference as well as sameness’ (2007. 47). This chapter explores Silverstone’s position, linking it
to Black’s (2010) discussion of crowded selves. As I identify how crowded selves are realised in the characters of *Hand Me Down World*, I also hope to show how these literary forms resonate with Silverstone’s call for the imaginative re-construction of narratives and images in contemporary media.

Specifically, then, this chapter considers the imagined space of *Hand Me Down World*, a world inhabited by strangers in which individual characters display unique attributes, and possess identities, experiences and histories that reflect individual struggles for community, identity and place. These struggles as narrated in the novel mirror what Silverstone describes as the European experience of globalisation in a ‘fluid, liquid society’ (Silverstone 2007, 83). *Hand Me Down World’s* protagonist, Ines, remains throughout the narrative to the characters she encounters and to each reader ‘an intimate stranger’ (Fingerman and Blau 2009). As she passes through the lives of other characters of the novel, Ines seems to be only a temporary and momentary disturbance to each one’s daily habits and rituals; yet Ines represents a reminder of the world beyond the boundaries of each character’s individual and familiar spaces. For those she encounters on her journey, Ines’s presence thus draws attention to the changes that are occurring as a consequence of globalisation.

For a reader, however, Ines is a character who remains always slightly outside of our emotional and intellectual grasp, a quality that has the power to stimulate a desire to understand. When the text is read with Silverstone’s ‘mediapolis’ (the mediated appearance of the world) in mind, the novel’s nuanced representations contrast the static ones of the mediapolis that Silverstone draws attention to, as I illustrate below. Thus, a

---

48 The term ‘an intimate stranger’ evolves from the phrase ‘consequential strangers’ developed by Karen L. Fingerman and Melinda Blau (1977, 4) when they explored the significance of so-called ‘less weighty’ relationship in the development of more intimate relationships. In Chapter Two I use the term to refer to family and friends who inspired my creative work but, here, I use it to refer to the character Ines’s role within *Hand Me Down World*, an individual who is both outside and inside the worlds of those she encounters.
reader is provided with an opportunity to glimpse and re-evaluate the fragmented plurality of the world as well as fiction’s ability (through careful and considered selection of form and content) to represent difference. The techniques deployed in *Hand Me Down World* offer themselves as alternative forms that encourage understanding of the other without limiting representation to one view. They suggest a means to tell the stories of diverse experiences of not fully knowable characters, those crowded selves who can be recognised as not dissimilar to the distant human beings (cosmopolitan strangers) with whom we share our world and whose worlds we so often only encounter as other via the media.

My reading also recognises what I interpret as a narrative encouragement to reflect on how we speak about others, the problems of which have been teased out by Linda Alcoff (1991). Entwined in the seemingly benevolent conversations of characters are suggestions of attitudes and modes of speaking that might also be read as potentially damaging ways of speaking about the other.

What Jones achieves through the creation of his characters and the form chosen by him to narrate the story of Ines is a text that provokes readers to be self-reflexive about the ways we tend to make sense of the world of the other, whether via the media or as a consequence of dominant ways of thinking or speaking about others. Here, Black’s tools for interpreting texts enable a reader to see beyond the workings of narrative and plot to the creative endeavours of writers resisting discursive violence, and showing alternative approaches to telling the stories of others through fiction.

*Hand Me Down World*

*Hand Me Down World* is a retrospective account, narrated (as mentioned) through many voices, of a journey made by a female traveller, Ines, from Africa to Europe. The name
Ines, which the woman uses, is a borrowed one (her real name is never revealed). Ines, a former worker in a Tunisian holiday resort, is on a quest to be reunited with her son. The boy was conceived from Ines’s liaison with a guest of the resort and abducted soon after his birth by his father. The boy Daniel, his father Jermayne and Jermayne’s wife Abebi, live in Berlin. The path taken by Ines to Berlin and her experiences as she travels to find her son are recounted by a number of characters whom she meets along the way. These accounts are mostly (though not exclusively) witness statements collected by a police inspector as part of an investigation into the death of a woman Ines befriended along her journey. Also included in the narrative are the inspector’s own report and Ines’s recollections of events and people, and finally the contemplations of Abebi. The outcome of the investigation is Ines’s imprisonment.

No one description of Ines by those she encounters offers anything but a partial glimpse into her character, yet each is sufficient to move the story forward. Later, these first versions of Ines are retold or added to, mostly through her own testimony. The various revelations and counter-revelations (most of them retrospective and largely comprising subjective witness statements) influence interpretation of the text and fragment the story telling. However, taken together, these factors also provide texture and tension to the narrative.

Early in the novel, Ines is nameless, mostly only identified through personal pronouns, or as ‘the black woman’ (Jones 2010, 46), ‘African’ (Jones 2010, 50) or the black lady with ‘her expensive blue coat’ (Jones 2010, 70). The Parisian character, Bernard, in his account to the inspector well into the narrative, is the first to reveal her name: ‘At last I have a name. Ines’ (Jones 2010, 71). While many do call her Ines, later in the novel Ines admits: ‘my first lie was to the truck driver, I told him my name was Ines. I didn’t plan to. It just came out of me. Ines’ (Jones 2010, 202). This confession is
delivered to a reader as yet another small piece of evidence that anything claimed by others about the protagonist may not necessarily be true, that the ‘woman in the blue coat’ may or may not be as she is represented in first, second, or subsequent versions of her offered by others and, furthermore, that Ines’s own version may only be partial. It also leaves many questions (of Ines’s motives, her thoughts and feelings) unanswered. Why, for instance, that particular name?

A fellow employee of the Tunisian resort—the supervisor—is the first to offer her version of Ines. The supervisor uses fragments of her own life to provide background details and an outsider’s view of events leading to the birth of Ines’s baby and his subsequent abduction. Then a report by the police inspector is added to the narrative, with no explanation at this point of why an inspector might have something to contribute to the unfolding story. The inspector describes Ines’s passage from Africa to Europe by way of people traffickers and explains that ‘[t]o pay for her berth she had hotel sex with foreigners—counting the Dutchman who had taught her to swim’ (Jones 2010, 20). The inspector reports that the people traffickers Ines contracts to transport her from Africa to Europe drop their passengers at sea off the coast of Sicily. He describes Ines’s experiences as if he has witnessed them himself: ‘she has taken off her sneakers and is bending down to pick them up when a hand shoves her and she falls on her side into the sea’ (Jones 2010, 22). Later in the text, a reader learns that the inspector’s knowledge is secondhand—it has come via Ines’s own testimony to him. Though it is clear the inspector’s report and all the testimonies are retrospective, it is not until well into the novel that a reader realises Ines is already in prison when the storytelling begins.

In his matter-of-fact voice, the inspector’s report provides background information about the frequency, extent and tragic outcomes of people trafficking in the
Mediterranean region. ‘In May … The birds awaken from the tiny monuments of
winter. The flotillas from Libya and Tunisia resume their hazardous voyages … The
surveillance flights increase—and with depressing regularity come reports of Africans
in the sea’ (Jones 2010, 26). Thanks to her swimming lessons, Ines is one African who
survives and eventually reaches the shore. Out of the Mediterranean, Ines rises,
‘struggles up onto weakened knees … she forces a smile on her tight face … until she
leaves the last of the sunbathers’ (Jones 2010, 25). This is ‘her hotel face’ (Jones 2010,
25), practised throughout her years working in hospitality so that she might become
invisible (Jones 2010, 226). Eventually Ines finds refuge beneath an upturned ‘ribbed
hull’ of a boat (Jones 2010, 25). It is here in the darkness that her first European
encounter occurs. For both Ines and her ‘new friend’ (Jones 2010, 197)—Ines Maria
Dellabarca—this is a fateful meeting, for it is Dellabarca’s death that leads to Ines’s
imprisonment.

From Sicily, Ines travels north. Her destination is Berlin. Along the way, her
passing through locations temporarily interrupts the lives of others (many of whom are
also nameless). There is the truck driver, the elderly snail collector, the Croatian chess
player (with the Italian wife), and the Swiss alpine hunter and guide, his long-time
friend Paolo and the American food writer. Once in Berlin, others cross her path and aid
her survival: the African pastor of the Ibo order; a Parisian who calls himself
Millennium Three (but whose name is really Bernard); the woman known only as the
British film researcher; German Hannah and her blind ex-husband Ralf; the New
Zealand researcher Defoe; as well as Ines’s cellmate Ramona, and the inspector himself.

In Berlin, Ines also encounters other travellers, such as a motley group of Roma
who congregate at the train station. About her first encounter with Ines, the unnamed
British film researcher notes: the gathering ‘Roma … [who] moved like crows … the
way the crows accelerated towards new crumbs … that’s the general area where I saw her—observing the Roma as I might a cage of parakeets’ (Jones 2010, 76–8). In Berlin, like the Roma, Ines also scavenges, using her wile and determination to survive, often taking advantage of those who have entered her life, as she searches for Jermayne and her son, Daniel. Once she finds them, she puts pressure on Jermayne to allow her to spend time (in a park) with Daniel, though the time is costly because Jermayne charges her per hour for the privilege. Determined as she is to maintain access to Daniel despite her disadvantaged situation, she finds ways to pay the money he demands.

However, eventually the inspector’s investigation is complete and Ines is arrested and imprisoned. The outward demonstration of Ines’s determination—her forthright challenging of Jermayne, what she does to acquire the money she needs to pay Jermayne for visits, and her exploitation and use of those who have befriended her or offered her shelter—counter and complicate earlier impressions a reader may have formed of her as a passive victim.

Jermayne is one character not given a voice in the narrative, only known to the reader through recalled conversations by, or the observations of, others. These include those of Ines’s fellow worker who provides details of events in Tunisia involving Jermayne before and after the abduction of Daniel as a baby, or through Bernard who plays a strong role in supporting Ines in Berlin. Bernard attempts to persuade Ines to appeal to Jermayne’s ‘better instincts’ (Jones 2010, 256). When Jermayne stops setting visiting dates, Bernard physically intervenes, only to be badly beaten by Jermayne, the bruising, brutal results of which are narrated to each reader, not by Bernard, but (in keeping with Jones’s style where a character rarely speaks for themselves) retrospectively from prison by Ines (Jones 2010, 258–262). Ines’s version of Jermayne is followed, finally, by a brief appraisal of his character by his wife Abebi.
Abebi is the novel’s final narrator. Abebi, like each reader of *Hand Me Down World*, only encounters Ines through reading the Inspector’s collection of testimonies. As with Ines’s and the inspector’s, Abebi’s words are addressed directly to each reader, not as a witness testimony in an investigation (as most of the other narrators are). The novel concludes with Ines still in prison, Jermayne departed, and with hints from Abebi of some hope for Ines’s future. When Ines’s quest to find her son began in Tunisia, as the events leading to the beginning of that journey and beyond were narrated by others, a successful outcome for Ines had seemed highly unlikely. However, the novel hints otherwise in the closing passage narrated from Abebi’s perspective:

One day she will leave prison … I imagine other prisoners released that day as well … One by one they will drift off like dogs retrieved from the pound. Until all that is left is the woman. And then Daniel and I will come by. She will look up, surprised. She has been sitting there with heavy heart. Now she sees us—sees me and looks confused perhaps, yes, that is likely, but then she will see the boy and that’s when she stands up and the rest of the world melts away.

I don’t imagine the next part. I can’t bear to think about that part.

I’m getting there.

I’m just not there yet (Jones 2010, 313).

The book is about to conclude and still Ines remains an unknown, ambiguous character. But as *Hand Me Down World* is, after all, a series of tales of one character’s determination and focus to overcome seemingly insurmountable challenges in a variety of unexpected, inconclusive and confusing contexts, this conclusion is fitting. By conceding no definitive resolution, this tale exemplifies the argument of this chapter: in
order to represent the diversity, complexities and ambivalence of the globalised world and those that inhabit it, about which (likewise) there can only be ambiguity, fiction must find a place between difference and sameness to offer an ethical representation of otherness.

**Situating the narrative in a mediatised world**

It has to be said that arguing against globalisation is like arguing against the laws of gravity (UNO Secretary-General Kofi Annan 2006).

I came to *Hand Me Down World*, in the first instance, as a reader of fiction seeking to be held captive by its narrative tensions, to be swept along with its protagonist Ines on her quest, and to be left pondering over my interpretation of the work. But in my search for solutions to my own creative project, I also came to the novel as a creative writer with a specific intention: to read beyond the pleasures of fiction in an attempt to understand the novel’s structure, its techniques and its effects. In the borderlands between the two forms of reading, I discovered more than I had anticipated.

In my reading, the various characters and their circumstances as depicted in *Hand Me Down World* had seemed strangely familiar, not dissimilar to the many unnamed individuals that have over the years come to me via my television, or newsprint, or the internet. Last year, for instance, I came to ‘know’ or recognise a
group of ‘boat people’ who had landed in Geraldton, Western Australia.49 Their arrival was announced first (briefly) via television news but then in longer form in *The West Australian* newspaper on April 9, 2013 (Orr 2013). Boat arrivals such as this one had become a common occurrence in Western Australia.50 Whilst the reporter identified this group as ‘mainly Sri Lankans’, most reports had for me lumped all arrivals into one amorphous group—‘boat people’. Any information about the particular circumstances that brought the members of this specific group to board a ‘rickety’ boat ‘like no other boats usually seen in the area’ as reported (Orr 2013), was not forthcoming. As a consequence of the regularity of so-called irregular arrivals, I might not have given much thought to this event had it not been for the boat’s arrival in Geraldton, which is around 430 kilometres north of the state’s capital of Perth and one of Western Australia’s busiest regional ports. It is a city of farmers, fishermen and tourists, but for West Australians, Geraldton is sufficiently close to the main population base of Perth to

---

49 According to a research paper prepared for the Australian Parliament (Phillips and Spinks 2014), ‘the term “boat people” entered the Australian vernacular in the 1970s with the arrival of the first wave of boats carrying people seeking asylum from the aftermath of the Vietnam War. Over half the Vietnamese population was displaced in these years and, while most fled to neighbouring Asian countries, some embarked on the voyage by boat to Australia’. The Australian Government’s Department of Immigration and Border Protection define those who arrive by boat on Australian shores as ‘Irregular Maritime Arrivals’ or IMAs. See http://www.immi.gov.au/media/research/irregular-migration-research/_doc/placing-recent-sri-lankan-maritime-arrivals-broader-migration-context.pdf

50 Reporters Buckley-Carr and Butterly (2011) headline a piece on the arrival of ‘one of the biggest asylum seeker boats to arrive in Australian waters this year’ that appeared in the *West Australian* newspaper on November 14, 2011, with the words ‘More boat people arrive’, while ABC News online (“Boat arrivals broken record”, 2012) announces on July 30, 2012, that: ‘Department of Immigration figures show 6,765 people have arrived by boat in this year, topping the last record set in 2010, when 6,555 arrived.’ However, in October 2013, a little over a month after Mr Tony Abbott had been sworn in as the new Prime Minister, ABC Online reporter Emma Griffiths (2013) quotes Abbott from a press conference in Melbourne as saying ‘the number of people arriving on boats has plunged to just 10 per cent of the number under the previous Labor government. Under the former government in July, arrivals were at the rate of 50,000 a year.’ These news reports are supported by statistics accompanying a Parliamentary research paper, examples being 2,726 arrivals in 2009 and 13,108 by June 30, 2013 (Phillips and Spinks 2014). Five days later, Australian broadcaster SBS offered an AAP video and report wherein Prime Minister Abbott announces he is ‘very satisfied’ with the outcome of his government’s ‘Operation Sovereign Borders’ approach to boat arrivals, although he also warns it is not yet ‘mission accomplished’ (“Satisfied Australia Marks Six Months No Boatpeople” 2014). However, despite this satisfaction, the government does not currently supply any figures on arrivals or the turning back of vessels, demonstrating that withholding information is a significant element of this government’s strategy for border control. The individuals who ‘arrive’ are hidden within statistics.
be perceived as almost local (as opposed to other ‘landings’ that have occurred at remote locations such as Christmas Island), hence the flurry of media attention that inevitably caught my eye and led me to other thoughts.

At that time, I was struck by the contrasts between this public information and its personal relevance to me. The admittedly scant detail I gleaned from the news report enabled me to imagine these ‘others’ in the way I imagine the characters of a novel. Notwithstanding my scepticism about news circulated by the mass media, I drew on the journalist’s sketch of the ‘who’ and ‘what’ of this event a version of the ‘strangers’ who were at the heart of this drama. Yet they remained distanced from me, individuals who have been represented as illegal and perhaps threatening, but none of them accessible to me as human beings, with fears and desires, weaknesses and strengths, histories or embeddedness in a set of relationships and circumstances.

Silverstone argues that for most of us, it is only through the media that ‘the world and its players’ (2007, 30) do appear (as the ‘Sri Lankans’ who had arrived in Geraldton had made a mediated appearance in my life). This mediated appearance of the world he calls the mediapolis. For Silverstone, what is becoming increasingly apparent is that the nature of our being is defined by the relationships we have with others and those relationships are being shaped and influenced by the world’s media:

Insofar as they [the media] provide the symbolic connection and disconnection that we have to the other, the other who is the distant other, distant geographically, historically, sociologically, then the media are becoming the crucial environments in which a morality appropriate to the increasingly interrelated but still horrendously divided and conflicted world might be found, and indeed expected (Silverstone 2007, 7–8)
In a contemporary world of instantaneous global communication, we have become more and more aware of the ‘diversity of diversities’ (the term Silverstone (2007, 83) uses to describe the cultural complexity of our globalised world). However, as he acknowledges the media does have a role—a unique role—that provides a ‘screen’ (the media’s various modes of reception and dispersal) through which ‘the world in its otherness is at its most visible’ (Silverstone 2007, 10), what concerns Silverstone is that at an equal rate to the ‘scope and scale of global interdependence’, the world’s media will become ‘increasingly significant sites for the construction of moral order’ (2007, 7). Thus, he argues, it is important to remember that while the construction of our relationships to others is ‘intensely dependent on the media … the media trade in otherness, in the spectacular and the visible’ (2007, 47). He therefore makes a strong case for the need to take seriously how the unknown subjects we encounter are represented by the world’s media (2007, 8).

Silverstone’s interest is to investigate and, if possible, establish a morality for the media. He argues that an ethical orientation to the media would recast the other as the pivotal subject in the process of communication. In order to set up such an orientation, he develops the notion of ‘proper distance’ which:

- requires imagination, both from those who construct the narratives and images of the media, and those, the audiences and readers, who, more dependently, construct their own images and narratives based upon them (Silverstone 2007, 48).

‘Proper distance’ is about not only ‘a duty of care in our relationships to the other’ (2007, 47), but also about an understanding of the degree of proximity required to allow us to sustain a sense of the other’s difference and autonomy as we meet those obligations and responsibilities. According to Silverstone, ‘proper distance preserves
the other through difference as well as through shared identity’ and thus is ‘a component, and a precondition of plurality’ (2007, 47).

As fiction in some sense is an alternative media mode itself, it is arguably part of the mediapolis that Silverstone describes. Fiction can also be elitist and exclusive, partial in its representations. Alternatively, fiction might also serve to critique the contemporary mainstream media’s trade in otherness by demonstrating through its narratives the ‘proper distance’ that is, as Silverstone (2007, 48) argues, one that provides an appropriate degree of proximity for us to meet our obligations and responsibilities to others. Fiction’s ability to offer nuanced representations, as opposed to the often static or reductive forms of other media modes, enables it to enact such responsibility. As I will show below, *Hand Me Down World* can be read as engaging with the context of the mediapolis and the challenges of maintaining proper distance by provoking the reader to consider the other in terms of both difference and similarity. Many of its characters are flexible and changing, representing the crowded selves of which Black writes. These representations emerge from the author’s creative choices for form and content.

Silverstone (2009, 27) also points to the inequities inherent in the mediapolis. Folded into the narrative of *Hand Me Down World* are various mediated appearances of the world, which demonstrate the vast differences between who is privileged for inclusion and who is not. These appearances occur when events in distant locations are casually mentioned in the narrative. One example comes via the character of the Pastor of the Ibo order who is temporarily in charge of the Berlin African Refugee Centre. The pastor talks offhandedly of the ghost stories of American movies, of which ‘we

---

never see the consequences’ (Jones 2010, 62). As his conversation wanders on to other matters the reader can infer a connection with those displaced human beings who end up as ghosts who ‘disappear’ from places such as ‘around the horn of Africa. Sierra Leone. Senegal. Gambia. Ivory Coast. The Western Sahara … But then the multinationals’ arrive and ‘there is nothing left … but [to] leave’ (Jones 2010, 62). The pastor laments the deaths of Africans at the hands of people traffickers: ‘twenty, thirty, fifty thousand black people…Well, it is too big a figure to contemplate. It is apocalyptic. It is a sandstorm blowing across the African continent as fortress Europe nails down it shutters’ (Jones 2010, 63). They merely ‘disappear at sea’ (Jones 2010, 62), and yet the deaths as a consequence of ‘a Danish ferry capsizing in the North Sea is a calamity. It is international news. Fifty-one souls lost. A tragedy’ (Jones 2010, 63).

There are at least two ways the inclusion of these moments in *Hand Me Down World* can be read in respect of Silverstone’s mediapolis. The first satisfies Silverstone’s wish for our awareness of the power and effects of the mediapolis. Here, each reader of *Hand Me Down World* is subtly made aware of the broad span of the media’s influence. There is also the potential for a reader to be reminded, as they read, how they too learn of the world largely via the media. Out of a reader’s own media-saturated life might come memories of mediated experiences of locations or events: something read in the local newspaper or a book, or an image recalled from a television documentary, as I connected my reading with the mediated report of the Geraldton arrivals. In this way *Hand Me Down World*, on the one hand, replicates for a reader a sense of the ‘normal’ (and perhaps even normative) western experience of a globalised world, as a tourist or as a media-informed voyeur. However, the second way the mediapolis may be read in the novel comes about because the novel comprises mostly reported narrative, actions witnessed or received secondhand, as in a mediated report.
This reading occurs when its othering vision is disrupted by means of proper distance, by bringing the reader to an appropriate proximity with the other. In the various testimonies, reports and contemplations, Jones’s narrators speak at varying degrees of distance. By his choice of form, Jones has created a means to sharpen a reader’s awareness of the sense of proper distance and its disruption, reminding us not only of our proximity to but our inevitable distance (difference) from the other. Choice of form, namely multiple narrators, also creates characters who display the ‘crowded selves’ that Black explores as a literary device for the ethical representation of difference.52

**Multivocality, intersubjectivity and crowdedness**

In *Hand Me Down World*, the multivocality that comes through the many narrators reinforces the sense of crowdedness. It is demonstrated when, through dialogue or actions, the characters reveal that any understanding of the world they possess is inextricable from the experiences of other characters. This is particularly so for the character Ines, who moves between positions as the protagonist subject and the other of the novel. In other words, by its form and content, the text acknowledges a perception that all experience is intersubjective. Furthermore, this interweaving of multiple voices in *Hand Me Down World* can be read as constituting an imaginative enactment of Silverstone’s proper distance, ‘preserv[ing] the other through difference as well as shared identity’ (Silverstone 2007, 47). Below I examine two instances to demonstrate the manner in which such disruption is effected within the narrative.

---

52 Black draws on Donna Haraway’s concept of ‘significant otherness’, which emphasises the commonalities and differences between disparate species. According to Black, Haraway uses this phrase ‘both descriptively, to indicate many kinds of possible alterity, and normatively, to envision encounters that “are accountable both to their disparate inherited histories and to their barely possible but absolute necessary joint futures”’ (Black 2010, 3).
The first instance is a re-telling by the inspector of Ines’s experiences at the hands of the people traffickers:

The slowing of the boat made everyone sit taller … She watched a black face scramble and clutch a buoy at the side of the boat. The man was still hugging it as the boat pulled away… An older man sitting further along the gunwale quietly announces he cannot swim … no one turned to look at the splash he made (Jones 2010, 21).

This account, although offered second-hand (or perhaps even third-hand), is subjective, emotive and empathetic. As a re-telling of Ines’s view of events aboard the people traffickers’ vessel, the double distancing of the account of the inspector (the narrator) is apparent in two ways. While it is evident the inspector is repeating Ines’s description, the tone and tenor of narration reveals his emotional response to events, such as by repeating or enhancing the finer details of the (hypothesised) original telling, as if he feels a need to emphasise each individual’s suffering:

They sit with their bundles of belongings. They sit on top of their emptied bowels. They haven’t eaten for hours … They have been advised it is better that way (Jones 2010, 21).

But it is also clear that Ines herself is both participant and witness. As the latter, she cannot speak for her fellow travellers about their own experiences. Nonetheless, the re-telling by the inspector, and the manner he does so, invites a reader to imagine the desperation of those on board, to feel each individual’s sense of helplessness. Each reader also learns that Ines, soon after witnessing this event, follows the non-swimmer into the sea. Through Ines’s (even if second-hand) observations of those who went overboard before her, a reader is drawn closer to understanding the experiences of Ines who, despite revelations of this kind, remains only partly knowable. The last sentence of
the excerpt above is poignant. As those near enough to the action to witness the doomed individual’s entry into the sea turn away from it, a reader is reminded of a collective tendency of the rest of the contemporary world to turn away from similar realities.

The other instance comes via the inspector’s perspectives on the subject of people trafficking around the Mediterranean included in his report. On this occasion he is not re-telling Ines’s story but, rather, reporting now generally common occurrences. He notes that with ‘depressing regularity come reports of Africans in the sea, popping up like corks, Africans clinging to wreckage, arms slung over debris, they cling on, wait’ (Jones 2010, 26). Jones’s choice of language for the inspector narrator provides a distance between speaker and the events being narrated, as if to suggest that drawing too close would cause the character to suffer. Muted in this account is the invitation for a reader to comprehend the trauma experienced by the ‘Africans’. What those words do serve to create within the narrative is a sense of the inspector’s vulnerability to such dreadful stories, his sense of futility and the weight of sadness he feels for the victims. For a reader the word ‘regularity’ compresses the trauma of the many; the collective noun ‘Africans’ also intensifies the sense of human suffering on an enormous community scale. Here the individual is lost in the group, the ‘they’. The arms slung over the debris are objectified body parts, not individual humans fearful for their lives. Obliterated in this account is the opportunity for a reader to appreciate the visceral horrors experienced by the ‘Africans’. Each abandoned being is as lifeless as the corks referred to within the excerpt, lost in the regularity (or frequency) of such events. Nonetheless, the final word of the excerpt—‘wait’—hints at the hope that only a human subject can experience.

While the two instances—the inspector’s retelling of Ines’s account and his reporting of the asylum seeker tragedies—work in different ways, both achieve a
similar effect within the narrative. In the first instance the author’s choice of words is a technique that provokes a reader’s emotional response, not only to Ines and the terrible events she has undergone, but also to all other (nameless and too often unreported) victims of the people traffickers in whom they have placed their trust, and those powerful states who regularly treat vulnerable people as unwanted others to be excluded. The second instance uses language resembling that found in mainstream media (newspaper reporting in particular), objectifying and othering the victims. However, in both instances, the inspector’s report aids the construction of his character as empathetic, sensitive to the predicament and suffering of the other, a character with a crowded, expansive selfhood. As the inspector is developed as someone who is aware of the differences between himself and the others (the many Africans who have attempted to cross from Africa to Europe), otherness has been ethically represented, according to Black’s account, not by the language used, which I have already claimed mimics the reductive language of the media, but because Jones has created a character that admits ‘one’s inability to inhabit the perspectives of others’ (Black 2010, 44). This aspect of the inspector’s character becomes relevant later, as readers deepen their understandings of the imagined world of Hand Me Down World and the inspector’s role in it, particularly his relationship to Ines.

However, in both instances discussed above, while the dreadful events remain distanced and unresolved, by the choice of language and style of narration, readers can comprehend the experiences of even anonymous victims as contrapuntal.53 Any understanding of the other has been formed at an appropriate proximity as suggested by

53 I have used Silverstone’s term ‘contrapuntal’, which draws from Arendt’s ‘possibility of a shareable difference’ (Silverstone 2007, 85) and Said’s experiences as an exile. ‘The contrapuntal signals the ever and necessary presence of the other, the stranger, in time and space, as a point of reference and as an irredeemable contribution to the significance of the present, of the here, the now and the self’ (Silverstone 2007, 86).
Silverstone, neither too close nor too far. Put another way, as Jones positions the
inspector at a proper distance from the other, the crowdedness of this character’s
selfhood is revealed. In her discussion of the character as a crowded self, Black remarks
that which is revealed in such a character is a desire to ‘see the world as another does
without wholly letting go of their own original vision’ (Black 2010, 3). This character
might display openness to others’ situations, predicaments or circumstances and
demonstrate some kind of understanding of another character despite the yawning
differences between them.

**Ines as a crowded character**

As I have already shown, the character of Ines is constructed by the many diverse
accounts of her: the other characters’ testimonies, the inspector’s report and her own
reflections. Each account is affected by the peculiarities of a given narrator. Location,
experience, circumstances and the manner in which Ines enters an individual character’s
world all influence the witness (narrative) statements provided to the inspector. In the
case of the truck driver, for example, guilt for having forced oral sex from Ines in
payment for his time might account for his version of the encounter that paints him in a
positive light. Ines offers her own view of the episode from prison, and from it, the
reader might infer that hers is the more honest account as she also admits her
shortcomings without excuses. About his encounter with Ines, the truck driver reports to
the inspector that:

> she wrestled with me. She bit my hand. I thought my hand was in the
> jaws of a dog. She broke the skin (Jones 2010, 35).

Ines’s account delivers a different version:
After a while I forgot about my head in the driver’s lap. I forgot about his penis in my mouth. Then I felt my hair tugged and held, and my head was moved up and down under the pressure of his hand … He reached over and punched the side of my face … Next thing my door opened and he pulled me out and I landed on the roadside. When the sun came up I was still lying there (Jones 2010, 204).

The different accounts are also somewhat mitigated by Ines’s admission:

He told me to stroke his penis. So I did that. I closed my eyes and … my hand was a salt-shaker or a pepper-pot. It didn’t matter. With every kilometre I was that much closer to Berlin (Jones 2010, 203).

Through the accounts of the various narrators and through Ines’s own recall, Ines is represented as an expanded self with the capacity ‘to include diverse, sometimes contradictory, and occasionally even threatening points of view’ (Black 2010, 47). Ines’s selfhood is displayed as fluid, provisional and constantly undergoing change.

There is no single perspective on who or what she is, or how her responses and actions may be definitively explained or understood.

One other example is the hotel supervisor’s account that begins the novel. As Ines’s work colleague, her view of Ines is delivered through her own perspective of the world. As she narrates her own path from birth to the hospitality industry, it is easy to imagine this has also been Ines’s path, whether or not there was any similarity. Yet, even to the supervisor, with whom Ines shares a room sleeping ‘a few feet away from one another’ (Jones 2010, 4), Ines remains only partly known. The supervisor tells the inspector:
I cannot tell you her middle name, or her last name, or the name of the place she was born. Her father’s name was Justice. Her mother’s name was Mary. I cannot tell you anything else about where she came from (Jones 2010, 4).

From the supervisor’s narrative account, Ines is constructed as a relatively passive and rather naïve character, who allows herself to trust a house guest and then be duped by him, as the supervisor’s account moves the narrative forward by providing the story of the liaison between Jermayne and Ines, the birth, the abduction, and all events leading to Ines beginning her journey to Berlin. By contrast, in Ines’s own account later in the narrative, her relationship with Jermayne is shown as having been, in some sense at least, intimate and reciprocal, one that enabled Ines to locate Jermayne within the city of Berlin:

Thanks to the man with the computer it turned out to be easy to find Jermayne John Haas. John was his father’s name. His father was an American soldier. Jermayne took his mother’s maiden name for his own after John returned to Detroit (Jones 2010, 228).

Later versions show Ines as driven, clever, and sufficiently aware of others’ perceptions of her to manipulate them and use them to her advantage. She is represented as a character so determined to spend time with her son she steals and sells the possessions of blind Ralf for whom she works. She then has sex with Defoe to stop him from informing Ralf of her crimes and she also misleads Defoe about her reason for needing money. In this way, Jones has created Ines as a multifaceted and complex character. The reader is invited to reflect on her dynamic selfhood, situated in a text that
crosses the borders of social difference in its representation of alterity. *Hand Me Down World*’s characters are delivered as subjectivities that are open to multiple interpretations and provoke the reader to reflect on possibilities for the mediation of otherness.

Through a specific mode of characterization and, importantly, through multivocality adopted in *Hand Me Down World*, ethical questions relating to representation are raised by the creation of the crowded self. Indeed, as Black points out:

If the novel brings a burdensome history to the problem of representational ethics, it also lays claim to certain rhetorical advantages … Given its capacity for multivocality, the genre of fiction is also well suited to the task of considering diverse and even conflicting perspectives simultaneously (Black 2010, 9).

Notwithstanding the manner in which this text calls attention to its own representational dilemmas and invites readers to question assumptions about identity and imaginative projections, out of the multivocality of this narrative, a sense of the everyday, the familiar, is conveyed. Out of the disparity between characters’ accounts of what happens and how and why things happen arises a sense that this text represents the contradictory ‘real’ that we all may recognise.54 Difference is emphasised and yet simultaneously presented as ordinary. Difference is narrated to project a sense of

---

54 This idea recalls Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of dialogism, which posits that we do not speak in a vacuum, that all language (and the ideas which language contains and communicates) is dynamic, relational and engaged in a process of endless redescriptions of the world. According to Bakhtin, ‘Truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born *between people* collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction’ (Bakhtin 1984, 110; italics in original).
intersubjectivity: what is subjective and unique to a character or narrator becomes intersubjective through its interpretation by an other.

Throughout *Hand Me Down World*, as in the examples discussed above, the narrative, the novel’s characters, and readers’ interpretations are all based on statements made by one character (to another about another). Each narrator is thus revealed as not fully reliable; in the act of speaking for others, a character is shown to make assumptions, reveal their prejudices or speak with an authority that carries weight over other views. This calls to mind Alcoff’s argument about the dangers and the impacts of speaking for others.

**Reconsidering assumptions and prejudices**

It is not always the case that when others unlike me speak for me I have ended up worse off and that when we speak for others they end up worse off. Sometimes … we do need a “messenger” to advocate our needs’ (Alcoff 1991, 22).

A novel typically attempts to ‘speak for’ its protagonist(s). But when a protagonist is represented as a marginalised character, or when a novel involves the representations of marginalised groups or cultures, the challenge is heightened. Alcoff refers to various discourses, such as anthropology, through which the risks of speaking for others have been acknowledged. In *Hand Me Down* World, there is a distinct anthropological tone to the alpine hunter and guide’s account of an encounter with Ines, which exposes the problems of such an apparently forensic examination of the other:
We send the dogs ahead and fan out. Very soon there is a commotion. The dogs have banded together. So it is not a partridge. Perhaps it is a rabbit. Leo has a wonderful recipe for rabbit but it requires that someone, Paolo, climb up to the ridge and gather wild herbs. Or else it is a phantom. Dogs are the nerviest of creatures. We are threading our way through the brush when we hear a woman’s voice. Paolo runs ahead. We can hear a woman shouting at the dogs. The dogs are barking. Paolo is being quite rough with them, cursing them, kicking them away.

As we come through the brush there is the black woman. She is wearing a blue coat. That’s the first thing that strikes me. How odd to be wearing a coat like that up in the hills. No. That is the second surprise. The first surprise is undoubtedly the woman. An African woman. Once, many years ago, we thought we had stumbled on bear shit. We stood around it, photographed it. Another time we saw two parakeets. Probably domestic—escaped. We have seen the odd soul—hikers—on the tracks through the hills leading down into the first valley of Switzerland. But never a black woman. Never an African. She has her arms up in surrender. A plastic bag hangs from her hand (Jones 2010, 50).

The narrator hunter’s self-assured assessment of the stranger, his description of the encounter with the black lady in the blue coat, and his presumption about her origins, speak of his apparent authority and certainty, and implies a privileged position for the speaker that reinforces his capacity to make definitive interpretations. The hunter’s casual linking of the African woman with other discovered objects, such as
bear shit and two parakeets, also reveals his own prejudices. For Trinh T. Minh-ha, too often such attempts by anthropologists become:

mainly a conversation of ‘us’ with ‘us’ about ‘them’, of the white man with the white man about the primitive nature man … in which ‘them’ is silenced. ‘Them’ always stand on the other side of the hill, naked and speechless … ‘them’ is only admitted among ‘us’, the discussing subjects, when accompanied or introduced by ‘us’ (Minh-ha in Alcoff 1991, 2).

In the excerpt cited above, the collective ‘we’ (the hunter and his companions) that the speaker represents have decided that the woman who has invaded a private party is ‘African’. This assumption that Ines must be African might be read to emerge from two other assumptions. First, in the eyes of the hunting party, the black woman in a blue coat has invaded a place considered their own, if only because these men regularly make similar excursions into the territory near the Swiss border. Readers learn that perhaps this group see this space as theirs via a claim implied by their recollections of past visits when in this place they have only seen ‘the odd souls—hikers’ (Jones 2010, 50). The group’s perception of this space ‘belonging’ to them would see Ines’s presence as most certainly an incursion. Implied in their responses is an assumption that the unexpectedness of the intrusion grants them the right and the power to define Ines as they will. Second, the appearance of Ines’s body offers each member of the party the opportunity to construct an identity for her based exclusively on her physical attributes—her black skin, her visible otherness—that offer them the opportunity to make stereotypical assumptions and thus Ines is defined as ‘African’. Indeed in one sense she is ‘African’ but those same physical attributes could well belong to someone
who has no connection whatsoever with ‘Africa’, or to someone whose body does not lead to similar stereotypical conclusions but who may wish to be identified as ‘African’. Consequently, the term ‘African’, in this use can be interpreted as pejorative, an outmoded or reductive racial term. In this passage above, readers are provided an opportunity to recognise that the hunter’s account is an ‘undesirable’ manner of ‘speaking about’ (Alcoff 1991). But when this reading is framed by our understanding of the othering effects of the mediapolis, the ethical or moral need to find a proper distance, and the literary options provided by the concept of crowded selves, we are then able to ironise the hunting party’s responses.

Between the many voices and perspectives of *Hand Me Down World* is constructed a space in which the imagined characters reside, a lived-in world that readers recognise but are encouraged to review and reconsider their own perceptions and responses. Consequently, the crowded style and its questioning of the ways we sometimes speak of those who are strangers provokes us to ask questions of ourselves about our own approaches to or assumptions about unknown and unfamiliar others, and the labels we bestow on them.

**Conclusion.**

My reading of Lloyd Jones’s *Hand Me Down World* shows how, through the multivocality of the novel’s diverse characters, is represented a global cast of strangers, each staking their claim to a place in a complex contemporary world. Jones has created in *Hand Me Down World* a rich representation of diversity, by means of which readers are invited to reflect on their own assumptions and manners of speaking about or viewing of strangers or unknown others, near and far. When Jones concedes both the humanity and the ultimate unknowability of his protagonist, Ines, he offers his readers
an opportunity to contemplate the significance and impacts of living alongside others in a rapidly and ever-changing globalised world. The characters represent crowded selves who exceed the otherness arising out of categories of significant social differences, such as nationality, ethnicity, religion, gender, language, and so on. The technique of interpellating multiple narrators, each speaking from individual perspectives and different contexts, highlights the tensions and contradictions between the various testimonies. The content of the testimonies, the doubling-back and re-telling of the same events in different ways, ensures omissions or inclusions or disparities become salient, as they are told through the biases, particular circumstances, locational influences, and limited perspectives of each narrator. By thus developing characters as crowded selves, the text invites readers to become aware of how difference might be re-defined and understood, resisted or acknowledged, and of the risks of speaking about the other (Alcoff 1991). Simultaneously, through these techniques, the representation of differences is permitted in a manner that reminds us (particularly through the protagonist Ines) that the stranger, and the stranger’s life, can never be fully known. Human diversity underwrites the fragmented stories of diverse individuals, not collective identities or groups, as the narrative of Hand Me Down World shows. In this novel, readers are invited to consider the risks of misrepresenting those we do not understand, those whose bodies and behaviours challenge our capacity to represent them in other than stereotyped ways.

Most importantly, Hand Me Down World can be read as rendering through an imaginative and critical lens our lived-in world, and the nearness and distance of events that come to us through processes of mediation. In this way, the techniques deployed in the novel also give voice to those who so often are objectified or dismissed in the glib terms of a news report. As innovative as these techniques are, they also prove
themselves to be especially effective in the representation of marginalised and unknowable characters, asserting a space beyond familiar forms of difference.
Chapter Five

Conclusion

This thesis has concerned itself with the challenges facing a creative writer in the representation of alterity in a contemporary context of globalisation. These endeavours are neither new nor simple. I have approached the task from a writer’s perspective, one that acknowledges that in today’s world, our encounters with the other are complicated by globalising forces. In this context there is an increasing and urgent need for human society to represent and reflect on its rapidly changing relationship with others, near and far, particularly as conflicts between ‘us’ and ‘them’ become ever more violent, as people are forced to move across borders out of their home spaces of comfort and security, and as our sense of anxiety is heightened by living in a state of precarity. This thesis has argued that through their creative choices writers might productively imagine and navigate such complexities.

The other is never fully knowable but this should not mean that writers can essentialise or stereotype the other. Thus, representing cosmopolitan strangers is fraught with risks, as the various theorists whose work has informed this project have demonstrated. Hall and Alcoff draw our attention to the perils of representing and speaking about or for others. In response, Black’s work suggests how writers can move past reductive ways of representing alterity to create representations that allow readers to think across difference so that it is not erased, made invisible or silenced. The works of fiction offered as exemplars in the thesis can be read as mobilising Black’s concepts of crowded selves and crowded styles, encouraging us to think otherwise of the other.
Furthermore, as Silverstone suggests in his work on media representations, approaching others from a proper distance helps preserve the ‘dignity of difference’ (Silverstone 2007, 187); a similar stance adopted in the writing and reading of border crossing fiction represents a distinctive inflection to the declaration that while we are like you, we are not you (Silverstone 2007, 187).

In an environment flooded with media sound bites and snapchat images, fiction affords a space for critique and reflection, an opportunity to explore and trace the texture of lesser known, or unknown, stories. Inspired by the works of Gibson and Jones, I have aimed for this potential for my own work of fiction (‘Aibika Leaf’). Like Gibson and Jones’s work, my fiction seeks to encourage a reader to both engage with and look beyond the narrative, to the possibilities of another history for PNG, perhaps one not so familiar but one that includes some recognition for the Rabaul Chinese and Mixed Race who see PNG as forming their identities, and to see the differences between their own experiences and those of the characters of the fiction dissolving or evolving, but never entirely settling into a state of being fully knowable.

I have argued that, through the creative selection of form and content, works such as my own and the two examined can be read as provoking imaginative potential: cosmopolitan responses to the dehumanising effects of globalisation, and specifically literary responses to Delanty’s orientation of openness to the other. Fiction is not a substitute for politics or the contemporary news media. But perhaps fiction can help us resist the often reductive representations of otherness generated by mainstream politics and popular news media, and help us reconsider our real and imagined encounters with and responses to others.
References


Appendix A–Family trees 1 & 2 of Seeto family

Seeto family tree 1

Seeto family tree 2
Appendix B—Timeline

1873 Johann Cesar Godeffroy and Sohn and Hersheim and Kompagnie establish trading posts in the Bismarck Archipelago, both on Matupit Island and Friedrich Wilhelmshafen (Madang) on the mainland. Loi Fook arrives on Matupit Island near Rabaul.

1878 Submarine volcanic action causes the rising of Vulcan Island, producing vast amounts of pumice that blocked seaways.

1884 Under the auspices of the Deutsche Neuguinea-Compagnie (New Guinea Company) the German flag flew over Kaiser-Wihlemsland (Bismarck Archipelago and the German Solomon Islands).

1893 Koti Pereira leaves Ambon and marries Josef Pereira in Hollandia.

1894 Josef Pereira travels to Friedrich Wilhelmshafen, German New Guinea, to work and dies of fever in the mosquito-ridden tobacco fields.

1899 The German Government takes over civil administration of the colony from unprofitable Neuguinea Kompagnie. Government headquarters are established at Herbertshöhe (Kokopo), New Britain; Koti Pereira arrives in Herbertshöhe (Kokopo) and is employed by the Schultz family as housekeeper.

1905 Tramway constructed from wharf to various stores; Schultz family and employees move to Simpsonhafen (Rabaul), New Britain.

1914 Britain declares war on Germany; Battle of Bita Paka between Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary force and German East Asiatic squad over a wireless station; Australian military administration of German New Guinea begins under the League of Nations; Heinrich Schultz Junior returns to Germany.

1915 Planned uprising of the remaining New Guinea Germans uncovered.

1918 War ends.

1919 Germany signs the Treaty of Versailles and cedes all claim to sovereignty over New Guinea; Australian government’s seizure of German properties, which enables individuals such as Loi Fook to acquire plantations (using covert means and paying Australians to act as his agent), despite restrictions upon non-indigenous natives (Chinese) regarding land ownership.

1920 Australia began administration of Mandated Territory of New Guinea (formerly German New Guinea) under the League of Nations.
1930  Loi Fook travels to China and returns with Seeto Wei (Leo) and Seeto Chun-Yuen (Stephen)

1931  Japan invades Manchuria

1937  Japan invades China; Chinese Communist and National nominally unite to fight Japanese; volcanic eruption destroys Rabaul and evacuation of civilians to Kokopo

1939  A letter from Germany tells of Heinrich Schultz’s death; Germany marches into Czechoslovakia and Poland; Prime Minister of Britain declares war

1941  (December) Japan occupies Manila and attacks Pearl Harbour; USA declares war on Japan; Rabaul identified as next target; European women and children evacuated from Rabaul

1942  (January 4) Japanese bombing of Rabaul begins; Chinese community bury their valuables and make two camps outside of Rabaul: Ratongor for the Catholics and Vunakambi for the Methodists; (January 21) four enemy cruisers sighted near Kavieng heading to Rabaul; Civilians instructed to ‘carry on with normal duties’; (January 23) the fall of Rabaul to Japanese occupying forces; (February 8 to 15) Battle of Singapore; (June) Montevideo Maru with 845 POWs from Rabaul on board lost at sea on supposedly route to Japan

1943  Aboard the vessel Azikazi somewhere between the ports of Kavieng and Rabaul, brutal executions of several civilian POWs enacted

1945  (May) VE day (end of European war); (August) A-bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki; Japan surrenders

1946  Australia begins administration of two separate territories: Territory of Papua & Mandated Territory of New Guinea under United Nations treaties

1949  Communist Party takes over China; Nationalists flee to Taiwan; Chinese of Rabaul with Kuo Min Tang allegiances no longer free to travel to homeland

1957  Stephen’s Chinese bride, Mei Yee, arrives from China accompanied by her brother Tak Tam; talk of independence grows; some Rabaul Chinese individuals granted Australian passports

1959  Maria marries Patrick; Mei Yee returns to China

1975  (September) Papua New Guinea gains independence

1994  Volcanic eruption covers Rabaul deep in ash

Exegesis 255